

POLITICS

As a teenager one awakes to the social conditions of ones surroundings and becomes aware of national and international politics. In times of minimal change in social institutions and of political stability, the public takes very little interest and is content to leave matters in the hands of its Government. Which is the same as saying that if the public is content, then it sees no reasons for change.

In the period 1930 - 35 there was a reasonably stable government in Czechoslovakia. Economically, the country had recovered remarkably well after the dislocations caused by the First World War though it did get caught in the world economic crisis at the beginning of the 1930s. There was a genuine effort on the part of the Government and its peoples to work together and to eradicate eventually ethnic animosities. I felt ^{compelled,} as part of my awakening political consciousness, to support and to develop genuine democracy in the Republic.

A different picture presented itself on the international scene. The democracies of the West (England, USA, France) were on the defence against the dictatorships of Germany, Italy and Russia - to a lesser extent of Salazar's Portugal and after 1936 of Franco's Spain. England was disarming, the dictators were re-arming or were about to do so. No matter how democratic the régime in Czechoslovakia was, one needed no power of clairvoyance to realise that if the Western democracies and the dictatorships came to blows, little Czechoslovakia would go up in smoke.

This outer threat helped the Czechoslovak Government and the peoples to improve democratic institutions of the country - with the exception of the German ethnic group of 3.5 millions, representing about 25 % of the total population. In 1934/35 it became clear that there was an enemy within which was bent on the destruction of Czechoslovakia.

Internal and international politics got completely mixed up henceforth. Every aspect of life became a political issue.

Many of us studied avidly the causes of the first world war; the formation of the Czechoslovak Republic; the way the Western Allies had supported its creation and economic development, in the hope of finding a clue how they might react in another conflict. How would Bolshevik Russia act? We studied the German collapse and galloping inflation there in the 1920s

and the later efforts of the Western Allies to blow new life into the tottering German economy by cancelling the crippling reparation payments which had been imposed on Germany at the peace of Versailles. We tried to understand the psychological reasons for the flamboyant forms of fascism in Italy and the Iberian peninsula and the emergence of fascist parties in England and in Austria. Was there any chance that England could become fascist? We made ourselves familiar with the separatist movement in India and the deeper economic, social and ethnic reasons for conflict in every corner of the globe. Was the world drifting into an other armed conflagration? How successful would the budding League of Nations be when it came to the crunch and could it prevent a world war? The Pan-European movement, founded by Count Coudenhoven-Calergi (of whom Bela Szemzo was a prominent supporter), tried to gather support for the idea of a United Europe. The Esperanto movement tried to bring peoples from different countries together. We sensed that desirable as all these peace efforts were, the dictators had other ideas which they knew how to propagate. They created the war hysteria which we saw especially in Germany.

I read profoundly in all these subjects and realised that the Russian Communist revolution was the key to the political instability in Europe. Hitler would never have become so powerful and reckless had it not been for his anti-Russian stance. That just before the outbreak of the Second World War he concluded a non-aggression pact with Stalin does not invalidate that view. Both Stalin and Hitler knew that the pact would be broken but it gave both sides a breathing space to prepare for war.

Where stood Czechoslovakia in all this?

Trying to understand the country's recent history and studying the world political scene gave us initially a naive hope that we, the young generation, might influence the course of political events. But by about 1935 we had realised that there was little hope left. Yet even then we were not resigned to the inevitable; there was no apathy amongst us and our endeavours were channelled into practical preparations for the future. Initially these were vague but from 1936 - 39 they became clearer and more purposeful. The stark alternative was to fight for democracy or to emigrate. There was conscription in Czechoslovakia and several of my friends were called up (Eric Glaser, Feri Schultz, Leslie Egerton amongst them) and willingly joined the forces. Had I been older, I too would have willingly joined up. Yet simultaneously preparations for emigration went ahead. I was 17 when I started to go to the Berlitz school with the two Munks and Peter to learn English. Some families moved funds to Switzerland and other safe havens. Contacts were made

in foreign countries and a very few emigrated already then.

MASARYK

I have already mentioned a school subject called Heimatkunde or Vaterlandskunde (Fatherland study). This we had for two periods every week throughout all forms in the primary and secondary schools, though it was not a Matura subject. It introduced us to the social and political institutions. The general idea was to imbue us with the ideals of democracy and tolerance and by and large it succeeded. A dilemma arose, however, with some of the teachers when the Sudeten German question, stirred by Hitler, presented them with conflicting loyalties. This also applied to some of our fellow class mates. The dilemma grew in proportion with Hitler's aggressiveness. In the end the ethnic German teachers and our ethnic German class-mates hardly disguised the fact that they were in favour of breaking up democratic Czechoslovakia.

Vaterlandskunde was different from history which was a separate subject and dealt mainly with European countries and to a lesser extent with non-European areas. In Vaterlandskunde we did a little local history, but this was minimal. The emphasis was on the constitution and how Government works. We learned about great men and leaders of the Czech and Slovak nations. There was Mach after whom the speed unit is named. Gregor Mendel who crossed sweet peas and discovered the heredity laws. The educator Komenský better known as Comenius and others mostly unknown in the West.

By any standards Thomas Garrigue-Masaryk, Czechoslovakia's first president, was the "greatest" Czech then alive. To make sure, his photograph was in every class room, Government office, bank, café, theatre foyer, on most stamps and banknotes.

I possess a little booklet which was distributed at school when I was still a child. It carries a number of photographs of the president with enlightening captions. It contains the following prayer which we knew by heart. I am translating freely from the German:

"Dear Mr. President
We children of the Czechoslovak Republic
Wish you a long life
Good health and God's blessings.
We solemnly declare
That we will work diligently,
Always defend the truth
And pass on the State Flag
Without blemish
To future generations. "

This is clearly propaganda, but I did not object to it.

Masaryk did not encourage personal adulation and flattery. He was very informal, hardly ever dressed up in military uniform and was accessible. After all, he had lived in England and in the USA and his wife was American, a Miss Garrigue and he adopted her surname in his full name. He genuinely believed in truth as I will illustrate below by some of his actions. It was he who coined the republic's motto TRUTH PREVAILS. He was well regarded in the West and he consciously had the USA as a model when he drew up the multi-ethnic constitution of Czechoslovakia. He spoke fluent German, English and French and he was well versed in the German mentality.

Masaryk was born on 7th March 1850 in Hodonin (Göding in German) in Moravia, about 60 m from Bratislava. I never forget his birthdate. On the occasion of his hundredth birthday in 1950 (later Sir) Robert Birley, at one time headmaster of Eton, gave the centenary oration at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies at the University of London. I possess a copy of the address. (By a strange co-incidence I attended the first Sir Robert Birley Memorial lecture on 27th March 1984 at the City University, given by Lord Grimond of Firth. The Third Sir Robert Birley Memorial lecture is being given on 18th March 1986 by the Rt. Revd. Trevor Huddleston).

Masaryk's father was a Slovak and worked as a coachman on an imperial estate. His mother was German speaking and young Thomas lived the life of a village boy. He learned German from her. He left school at 12, though the official school leaving age was then only 10. He worked for a while as a blacksmith's apprentice, then as a pupil-teacher in another school and through his ability and friends got into a gymnasium (i.e. grammar school) in Brno (the town where I took my first exams) at the age of 15. He took his Matura when he was already 22. He became a student at Vienna university reading classical philology and then philosophy. Plato was his favourite and it was Plato who advocated to have a philosopher at the head of a state. Masaryk became assistant professor at the Czech university in Prague. His interests lay largely in sociological aspects of philosophy. But Masaryk was not an academic living in an ivory tower. Politics was in his blood, nurtured by awaking nationalism and the injustices his father had experienced as a virtual serf. In 1891 he entered the Reichsrat (a sort of parliament) in Vienna. It had been an enlightened step on the part of the Emperor to allow Czech and other minorities to be sent to the Reichsrat. The Czech

language had by then obtained official status and was used at the Czech university in Prague but of course not in the Reichsrat. Masaryk remained a member of the Reichsrat for 4 years and then served again from 1907 until the outbreak of the war in 1914.

Masaryk's formative years show that Austria and Bohemia were rather more tolerant than is generally given credit. For a penniless boy of a minority nation to become professor and sit in the parliament could not have happened in many another country. Though part of the ^{Empire} same, there was no such tolerance in Hungary and Slovakia.

As a member of the Reichsrat he had an opportunity of making many contacts and friends who helped to form his political views. There were several groups representing different political opinions from the Communist left to the extreme right wing nationalists. Some of these groups were less honest in the pursuit of their aims, than others. Some were more tolerant in listening to the views of others, some less so. Two instances in the life of Masaryk show where he stood.

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The Czechs, Slovaks and other minority ethnic groups in the monarchy were increasingly attaining national consciousness, especially after 1948. Evidence of old literature was used to underpin the historical claim to nationhood. But there was no old Slovak literature at all and any Czech literature more than 300 years old was suspect. A man called Hanka had unearthed in the mid-19th century Czech poetry of an early period. This had a tremendous effect on the national pride of the Czechs. Hanka was looked upon as a great patriot - until Masaryk proved that the poems were a forgery. Masaryk was regarded by many as a traitor of the national cause. Well known scholars rallied round Hanka and defended the manuscripts but Masaryk realised that he was face to face with a momentous betrayal. It took him a long time to recover his standing as a national leader.

Masaryk's second struggle was in defence of a Jew Hilsner, "a worthless young man" who was convicted in 1899 on no proper evidence of the murder of a young peasant girl. The prosecution suggested the crime was a Jewish ritual murder. Masaryk brought all his skill as scholar and writer to the support of the defence. His intervention saved Hilsner from the death sentence, though he could not obtain a reversal of the verdict. It brought Masaryk into violent collision with both the authorities and the students of his university and for some time he was forced to abandon public lectures.

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When the war broke out in 1914, Masaryk was leader of the Realist party and was regarded by the Czechs as their spokesman. But there were other contenders for the leadership, notably Kramář, the leader of the Young Czech Party. Masaryk began organising resistance to the war in Bohemia. He travelled to Italy in December 1914 to meet representatives of the South Slavs. He intended to return to Prague but was warned that he would be arrested, when he was on his way back in Switzerland. In May 1915 he was in London, in good time for the autumn term and was appointed to a professorship at King's College. Later he travelled widely in West Europe and the USA, organising the future Government of Czechoslovakia and seeking support from the Allies. Czech and Slovak soldiers in the Austro-Hungarian forces crossed the trenches into Russia, Italy and France. The Czechoslovak army or Legionaries came into being, fighting on the side of the Allies. Initially Masaryk did not envisage a separate Czechoslovak Republic, only autonomy and self-determination within a transformed federal Austro-Hungary. Only towards the end of the war, when the Allies' victory looked certain and encouraged by President Wilson's politics (The Fourteen Points), did he work for a separate republic. After Czechoslovakia had declared its independence, Masaryk made a triumphal entrance into Prague on 18th December 1918. The restoration of law and order, the organisation of the new state, the negotiation of the peace treaties, the establishment of parliament and the tug of war between the opposing political parties and antagonistic ethnic groups gave him and the new Government plenty of work. It was very largely due to his powerful personality and perseverance that Czechoslovakia became a democratic state with a free press and freedom for its minorities to speak their languages and develop their cultures. When Masaryk's powers were beginning to fail, he resigned in 1935, despite of having been appointed president for life. He handed over to his friend and staunch supporter Eduard Beneš. Masaryk died on September 14th, 1937, 87 years old and just a few months before Austria's Anschluss (annexation) in March 1938 at Hitler's command. In October of that year Hitler's soldiers occupied parts of Czechoslovakia and thus started the break-up of the republic. Had Masaryk been alive, it would have broken his heart. Masaryk's state funeral was for us an omen of the beginning of the end. Masaryk had four children. His son Jan, born in 1886 was Czechoslovakia's foreign secretary when the Government was in England in the last war and continued to hold the post after the Government returned to Prague. He was murdered during the Prague Communist putsch in 1948.

Masaryk's youngest child Olga accompanied him to Italy in December 1914 when she was 23 years old. She came in May 1915 to London with her father. They lived in Platts Lane, Hampstead. After the first world war she married a Swiss doctor and took the name Revilliod-Masaryk. As a widow she returned to Britain during the last war. She had two sons, neither of them survived her. One of them died while flying with the RAF. She did return to Czechoslovakia but came back to England for the third time an exile when in her 80s. She died on September 12, 1978 at the age of 87. With her death the direct line of the Masaryk family became extinct.

Benes was a very different personality from his mentor. Born in 1884, he was 34 years Masaryk's junior. He was a professional politician and an excellent negotiator at international conferences but he had not the same humane ideals as Masaryk and was imbued with Czech nationalism. One of his achievements, when foreign secretary under Masaryk, was the creation of the Little Entente between Czechoslovakia, France, Yugoslavia and Romania. This was instrumental in maintaining the peace in Central Europe during the difficult years from 1920 - 26. He headed the Government in exile in the last war in London. He returned to Prague after the last war to resume the presidency from which he resigned in June 1948 after the Communist putsch. He died on 3rd September 1948.

How did we view the political climate in the period 1930 - 35 ?

Two of the Little Entente partners were badly run Monarchies with more economic problems and political and ethnic opposition than their kings could cope with. Hungary's regent Horthy was right wing and smarted still from the decision of the peace treaty signed at the Petit Trianon palace in Paris, to give up the southern part of Slovakia. Poland felt threatened by its powerful neighbours, Germany and Russia and despite of Pan-Slav sentiments was suspicious of democratic Czechoslovakia. Germany became enemy number 1. Of all the neighbours we had the best relationship with Austria.

Of countries farther afield the USA and France were trusted friends. England, the most powerful nation on earth, was too busy to run the Empire to have much time left for little Czechoslovakia. The reduction in the size of the Royal Navy and the general sentiment for disarmament played into Hitler's hands and we did not like it. Yet, there was the belief that if it came to the crunch only England could resist an aggression from Hitler. Views on Russia were divided. There was an active communist party

especially in the Czech and Moravian industrial towns who supported Lenin and later Stalin uncritically. The idea of Pan-Slavism was still alive but limited now to the Communists and with a different slant. As Hitler's power grew, more and more people followed the communist view that only Russia was capable of resisting German militarism. These people - and by no means only communists - thought that Russia was our strongest bastion in the fight for independence - though at the expense of having to exchange democracy for Stalinism - an idea which was not cherished by me. Others - and I believe the great majority of the people - were equally anti-Hitler as they were anti-Stalin and I was one of those.

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Much more clear-cut was the division of opinions about Hitler Germany. The ethnic Germans supported any of Hitler's actions. Some of them by intimidation rather than by conviction. But there were honourable exceptions amongst German Communists and Social Democrats, though their number was small. The Czechs, Slovaks and Jews were anti-Hitler.

I was steeped in German culture. I went to a German school. I read all the classic and contemporary German authors and poets. I had read Shakespeare, Walter Scott, Upton Sinclair and other English and American authors in German. I was more at home in German philosophy than in any other.

I read daily the excellent German language newspaper the PRAGER TAGBLATT which had a syndicated page with The Times and which supported the Government against Nazism, as the editorial staff was largely Jewish.

I began a mental process of differentiating between the best of past German culture and the new Hitlerite Germany. I have retained my appreciation of good German literature and other cultural achievements but the Hitler period has revealed to me the real nature and true character of the Germans. Hitler became German chancellor (prime minister) on January 30, 1933.

Gradually his Brownshirts and Stormtroopers infiltrated every sphere of life. He rearmed, breaking the peace treaty of Versailles - the DIKTAT as he called it. He started to build up his navy, army and air force. Schacht, his economics minister, strengthened the Mark. The strategic Autobahnen were built and the Volkswagen - the peoples' car - was launched. The first laws discriminating against the Jews were promulgated and in "Mein Kampf" (My Struggle) Hitler gave an approximate time table of his planned territorial annexations. The Germans who felt humiliated after 1918 wore their heads high again and urged and expected Hitler to fulfil his promises to lead the Herrenvolk to victory. My ethnic German class-mates were much affected by all this. Gradually even the moderates could not resist

Hitler's blandishments. We knew that they held meetings outside school and very likely organised themselves clandestinely into para-military troops on the German model. Konrad Henlein became leader of the barely concealed Nazi party in Czecho , though it was not called that. By 1935 there was an unbridgable abyss between "them" and "us".

As a result, our support for the Government grew, even amongst my parents' generation, who initially were rather luke-warm if not hostile to the new Republic. It had taken our parents 17 years to change their loyalties completely. They had deeply resented the defeat of the Imperial forces in the first World war. In 1935 the Czechoslovak Government was virtually the only bulwark against Hitler's determination to annex the country and exterminate the Jews.

In this respect we had an advantage over the Austrian Jews. There was no one prepared to stop Hitler marching into Austria.

The same applied to the German Jews where virtually all non-Jewish Germans actively or passively supported Hitler's policy of exterminating the Jews.

Under the circumstances it was out of question for me to go to a German university in Czechoslovakia in 1935. This is only one example how politics affected my and many others' lives. I had to learn Czech to go to university.