

# David Sinclair - Czech Republic. November 2018

Dr Zigmunda Wintra 746/15

160 00

Praha 6

Czech Republic.

[DSinclair@churchofscotland.org.uk](mailto:DSinclair@churchofscotland.org.uk)

Dear Friends

Exactly one year ago, Mary and I arrived in Prague. So this may be a good time to reflect a little on its story – and the current ‘centenary’ events provide an appropriate context.



Smetana's grave,  
Vyšehrad

Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> October saw the celebration of 100 years since the formation of Czechoslovakia. There were big performance stages in the Old Town Square and Wenceslas Square – and smaller ones dotted around the city. There was a military parade very near where we live, with thunderous flypasts shaking our flat as they flew low (very low) over us. There were fireworks in the early evening. And it rained all day – and in Prague, in our experience, it never rains all day.

We were inside, in the Smetana Hall, for the ‘Concert for the Republic’, a performance by the Prague Symphony Orchestra of Smetana’s monumental patriotic work, *Má Vlast* (My Country). It blends Czech folk music, and legends, and Hussite hymns, to evoke the image of a country owning its history and its destiny, and rising in glory to be the nation of its dreams.



Monument to Kafka

Of course, when Smetana wrote the music, ‘his country’ was a nation only in its dreams; it was in reality a small part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, governed by the impenetrable Hapsburg bureaucracy which so influenced the writing of Kafka. The Czech language was not the language of the future; only (it was presumed) of the past. The first Czech dictionary was compiled, it was thought, as a historical document. The future, ‘everyone’ thought, belonged to those who spoke, and who (like Kafka) wrote, in German (and Prague had its own distinctive version of that language).

*Má Vlast* was part of the cultural challenge to that way of thinking. Today,

the second movement (*Vltava*) is known all over the world, played loudly on practically every boat on the river here (and in other places); and the opening chords of the first movement (*Vyšehrad*) are what precede every announcement in the main railway station. *Má Vlast* is the only possible piece of music with which to celebrate the great occasions. The performance, every seat in the hall occupied, was memorable.

Of course, as many here have pointed out, there really is no centenary to celebrate. Czechoslovakia no longer exists – and there was much careful use of language to try to ensure that the celebrations did not completely ignore Slovakia. Those 100 years, as our minister said at the beginning of morning worship, encompass an existence as Czechoslovakia, as part of a Nazi

121 George Street, Edinburgh, EH2 4YN

T: +44 (0)131 225 5722

E: [world@churchofscotland.org.uk](mailto:world@churchofscotland.org.uk)

Scottish Charity Number: SCO11353

# PARTNERPLAN

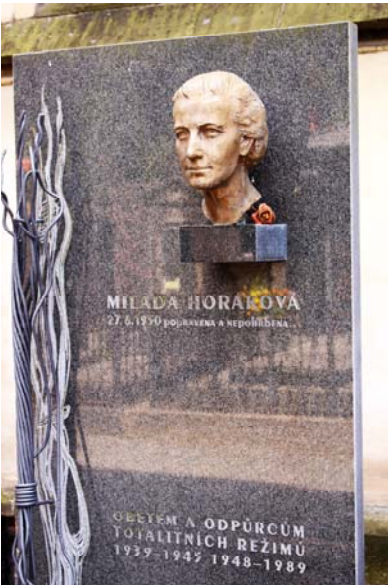
'protectorate' (at least for Bohemia and Moravia), as the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, and as separate Slovak and Czech Republics. It has been a century laced with trial and tribulation, punctuated by heartache and grief.

The vibrant and thriving Jewish community, such a prominent part of the Prague Smetana knew, is but a very faint shadow of its former self. The ghetto has gone, but so have its people, snuffed out in holocaust hell, driven out by a persisting communist antisemitism. Most of the synagogues are now museums, visited by thousands of tourists whose appetite for Jewish history, Golem and all, is unquenchable. It took Prague a long time before the city decided to commemorate Kafka, who was part of that Jewish community, and who wrote in German. Now, however, Kafka is everywhere.



Memorial to the children of Lidice

Living with successive Nazi and Soviet dictatorships has produced other memorials. The empty space of Lidice marks the place where a village once stood, a village totally wiped out in 1942, along with every person in it (men aged fifteen or over were executed on the spot, women and children were sent to concentration camps), as collective punishment for the assassination of the Nazi governor. Those children considered suitable for Germanisation were given to SS families.



Memorial to Milada Horáková

The disintegrating man at the foot of Petřín Hill captures corrosion and corruption as the memorial to the victims of communism. The cemetery at Vyšehrad is where Milada Horáková, from the ECCB, is remembered, but the whereabouts of her human remains remain unknown. She had been imprisoned by the Nazis, threatened with execution, but it was a communist show trial that finally ended her life, thinking to silence her; but her words of freedom and responsibility are still with us.

In January, we will mark 50 years since the self-immolation of Jan Palach, another member of the ECCB, in Wenceslas Square. He was not protesting about the Soviet invasion of the previous year, an invasion that stamped out the tentative steps toward liberalisation and freedom of expression known as the Prague Spring. His protest targeted the acquiescence of the people, their lack of fight, their too easy acceptance that there would, after all, be no spring in their collectivised step. He wanted, he said, to set the nation alight. It would take twenty years of the remembrance of his death before 'the change': the Velvet Revolution that propelled Václav Havel to the presidency.

Everyone remembers that hopeful time (if they are old enough), and many speak of it. But the nation also remembers, or some do, and some speak of it, a time when it let itself down – when, in the aftermath of the Second World War, it expelled all Germans from its territory to the then West and East Germanies. This was described shockingly at the time by President Beneš as a 'final solution' to the German problem. It was a solution, a spasm of revenge eventually officially regretted, that involved the loss of tens of thousands of lives to violence and hunger – and all this after the war was officially over. (Edvard Beneš, ousted from office by the Munich Agreement of 1938, and reinstated in 1945, was again removed – this time by the Communist takeover of 1948.)

Today, 100 years after Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk negotiated the creation of the country he would then lead with distinction and grace, the Czech nation still struggles with identity. The identity of a

121 George Street, Edinburgh, EH2 4YN

T: +44 (0)131 225 5722

E: [world@churchofscotland.org.uk](mailto:world@churchofscotland.org.uk)

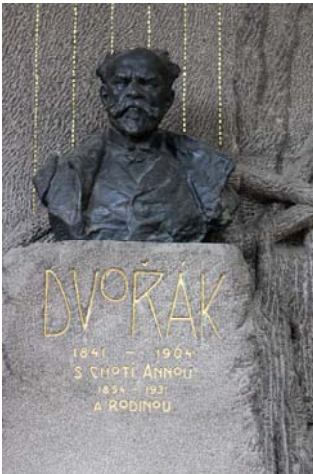
Scottish Charity Number: SCO11353

# PARTNERPLAN

'Christian nation' is still used, in the most secular country in the world, as a sword with which to fend off those of other faiths who might come here as refugees; while Jan Hus is known as a martyr, and as a supporter of the Czech language, but not so much for the content of his radical preaching.

Some today wonder about identity in the context of membership of the European Union, a membership concluded in 2004 under the presidency of the 'Thatcherite' and Eurosceptic Václav Klaus, wondering if that identity is diluted while hopes of EU prosperity are seen as unfulfilled. Some may still agree with Klaus that, having shaken off the yokes of Vienna, Berlin and Moscow in 100 years, they have now yoked themselves to Brussels. (We are asked about Brexit: what do we think, where will it leave us? We have no idea where it will leave us, but we do know what we think!)

The current President, Miloš Zeman, who won a second five-year term in 2018, has spoken, in words that echo words spoken elsewhere in the world, of standing for the 'majority' against the 'international elite' of Prague, who are in the process, he seems to think, of losing the country its identity. Prague did not, and does not, support him; he was elected, by the rest of the country (with 52% of the vote) so the division in understanding and outlook he identifies may, in fact, be real.



Dvořák's grave, Vyšehrad

So this country, like other countries, has spent a long time trying to find its place in the world, debating what it wants that place to be. That debate is not over, here or elsewhere; perhaps it is becoming ever more intense. Being a nation does not avoid the labour of becoming one.

In December, the ECCB will mark its own centenary (the occasion for part two of this reflection). The church has been rather better than the nation at acknowledging the mistakes of the past, and seeking to come to terms with them. It has placed itself firmly in the camp of those who look to a society that is open, welcoming, inclusive, and generous. On that occasion, we will be back in the Smetana Hall, again with the Prague Symphony Orchestra, this time to play not Smetana's *Má Vlast*, but Dvořák's *New World Symphony*. Perhaps the different choice of music is significant; perhaps it is a choice that seeks to point outward and forward, to a new (and better) world – even if the *New World* of Dvořák's title is currently having its own struggles with identity.

**David & Mary**