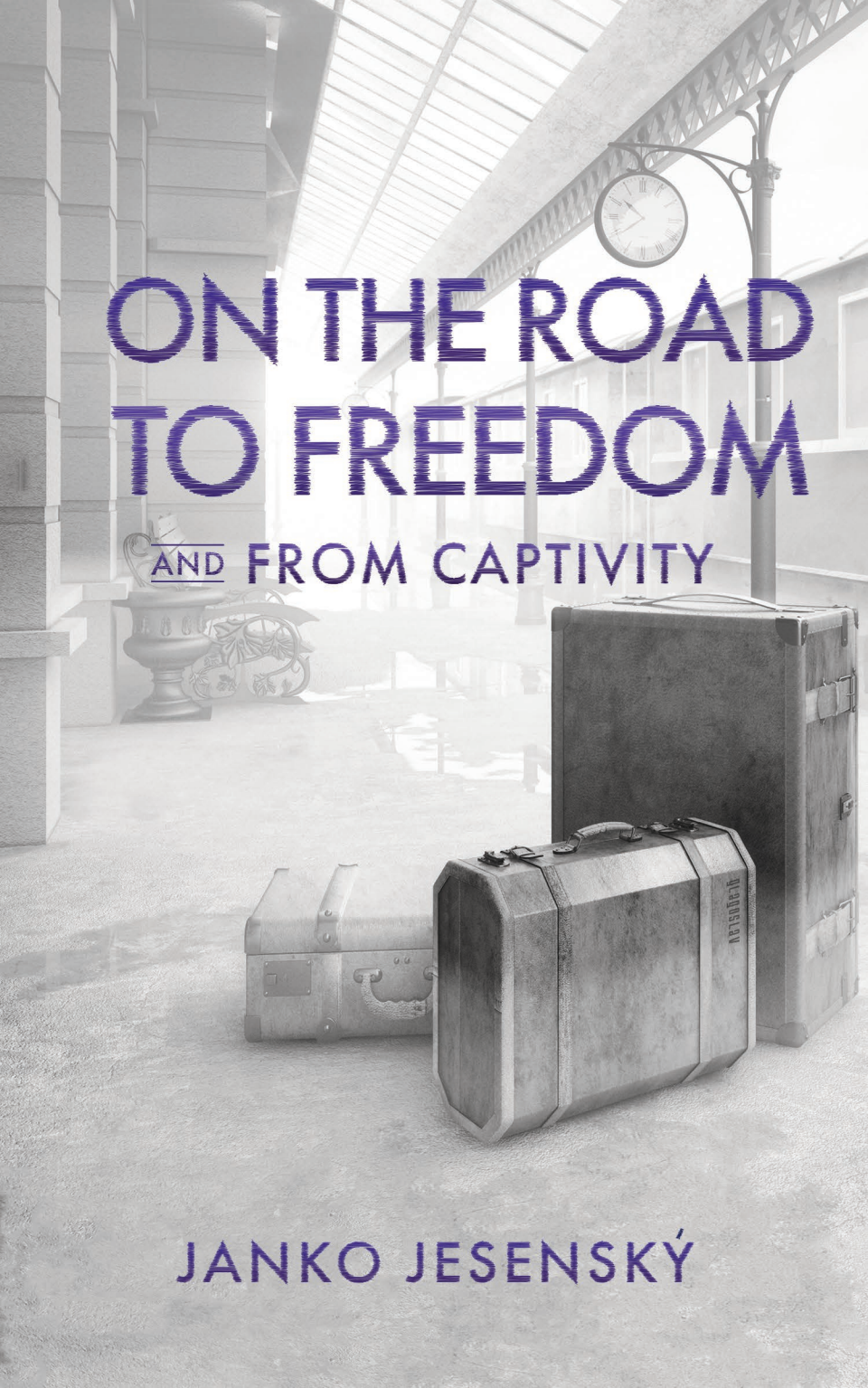
ON THE ROAD
TO FREEDOM
AND FROM CAPTIVITY
JANKO JESENSKÝ

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# ON THE ROAD TO FREEDOM

## AND FROM CAPTIVITY

Slovak
Literary
Centre

# ON THE ROAD TO FREEDOM

*Followed by* From Captivity

by Janko Jesenský

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Translated from the Slovak and introduced by Charles S. Kraszewski

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# ON THE ROAD TO FREEDOM AND FROM CAPTIVITY

TRANSLATED FROM THE SLOVAK AND INTRODUCED BY CHARLES S. KRASZEWSKI

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

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# INTRODUCTION

## On the Road to Himself: Janko Jesenský's Memoirs and Poems from Russian Captivity

*Charles S. Kraszewski*

The story of the Czechoslovak Legions, of which Janko Jesenský's *On the Road to Freedom* [Cestou k slobode, 1933] is one of many eyewitness accounts, is a foundational myth of the modern Czech and Slovak states. I use 'myth' here in the original sense of the word – meaning an account of a heroic truth expressing a community's core significance, intended to remain in the consciousness of that community and inform, with pride, subsequent generations of their identity, preserving in them the ideals of those enshrined in the myth. Books like *On the Road to Freedom* are important, especially since myths are no less susceptible to the whims of those in power, who often twist their meaning, eviscerating the truth they present to suit their own purposes.

For example, one of the proudest moments of the Czechoslovaks' anabasis through Russia, briefly mentioned in Jesenský's memoir, is the Battle of Zborów in Galicia (now Zboriv in Ukraine), which took place on 1–2 July 1917. The gallantry of the volunteers was so great – indeed, they were fighting for their lives[1] – that Kerensky's government au-

[1] In Wadowice near Kraków (the birthplace of Karol Wojtyła, later

thorised the formation of additional Legions under direct Czechoslovak command, autonomous of the Russian Army. This saw their numbers swell to between thirty and sixty thousand soldiers.[2] Following the war and the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic, it was from here that, with the help of the officials of the Republic of Poland, a Czech Legionnaire was exhumed and transferred with honour to Prague, where his remains were laid to rest in the chapel of the Old Town Hall on the Staroměstské Náměstí as the first Tomb of the Unknown Czechoslovak Soldier.[3] I say 'first' because soon after the Nazis occupied the Czech lands in 1939, the tomb was dismantled, at night, and the remains disposed of in an unknown location. Jan Galandauer surmises that they were unceremoniously dumped into the Vltava.

Following the Second World War, another soldier was exhumed and transported to Prague, with more difficulty this time, as Zborov (the Czech name of the village) was now located within the borders of the Soviet Union, and the Soviets did not look too kindly upon the Legions in Russia, who had fought most of their battles, on their roundabout way

Pope St John Paul II), two Czechs who had fought in the ranks of the Russian Army were executed for treason in December 1914. Four years later, near the end of the war in June 1918, thirty-nine Czechoslovak Legionnaires captured by the Austrians on the Italian front were put to death. See Petr Jokeš, *Czesi: Przewodnik po historii narodu i państwa* [A Guide to the History of the Nation and the State] (Kraków: Avalon, 2020), p. 268.

[2] A (rather outdated) *Area Handbook for Czechoslovakia,* eds. Eugene K. Keefe, et al. (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), p. 38, suggests the lesser number; Jokeš (p. 267) puts their number at sixty thousand in Russia alone.

[3] This, and all information concerning the Unknown Solider and the Memorial on Vitkov, I take from Jan Galandauer, *Chrám bez boha nad Prahou. Památník na Vítkově* [A Cathedral Without God. The Memorial on Vitkov Hill] (Prague: Havran, 2014).

home, against the Bolsheviks. And anyway, the Memorial on Vitkov Hill, with its towering equestrian statue of Jan Žižka, was soon diverted from its original use – a memorial to the Czechoslovak Legions – into a rather ghoulish mausoleum for Communist dignitaries, the centrepiece of which was a glass coffin in which the poorly embalmed corpse of Klement Gottwald was displayed until nature and politics had their way and his mortal remains had to be removed and cremated.

Today, in the independent Czech Republic, the Monument on Vitkov has been returned to its original purpose. At its centre may be found the tomb of the unknown soldier and a memorial in honour of the Czechoslovak Legionnaires, including 'rings' of earth from each battlefield where they shed their blood in sacrificial devotion to a state that was just being born, with difficulty.

Monuments surround us. The memorialisation of the past is one of the things that sets us humans apart from other animals. They range from the communal to the personal, from monuments to the Slovak National Uprising of 1944, for example, of which there are at least two here in Banská Štiavnica, one of them literally metres away from where I am writing these lines, to the personal, and for most people insignificant – such as the birth certificate of my grandmother, for which I wrote just the other day to the records department in Spišské Vlachy. What they all have in common – the celebratory and the mundane – is that they are testimonies to the truth. This particular person came into the world in this particular town on this particular day; these particular people accomplished this significant achievement, and where and when.

Horace suggests that, in his poems, he has 'built a monument more durable than brass.'[4] This has certainly been

[4] Horace, Ode 30, Book III: *Exegi monumentum aere perennius.*

proven true in his case, and should be true in the case of all literary monuments testifying to the truth, such as Janko Jesenský's *On the Road to Freedom.* The crucial importance of these seemingly flimsy, yet stubbornly enduring, monuments, which are books and other scraps of paper, was made evident to me today, by chance.

It was during a walk up Kalvária here in Banská Štiavnica. To the right of the path, on the slope as you approach the first church, lies a little grave. It's easy to miss, unless a wreath or some flowers have been left upon it to catch your eye. I noticed it before but never went over to have a closer look. Today, coming back down, I walked over and read, on the tasteful granite slab with the elaborate state symbol of the old Czechoslovak Republic, that this was the grave of František Brož (1897–1919), a Czech soldier of the 94th Czechoslovak regiment, 'who died defending Slovakia.' This chance meeting with the grave of a hero of the Czechoslovak Legions brought vividly to my mind a passage from the latter chapters of Jesenský's book, in which, after the establishment of the Provisional Czechoslovak Government in Prague following the end of hostilities in Western Europe, with the Russian Civil War still hanging in the balance, some of Jesenský's comrades began to grumble:

> 'All of the Allied states have acknowledged all lands occupied by Slovaks to form an integral, indivisible part of the one Czechoslovak state. This being the case, the Hungarian government had no right to declare any such armistice as would bind the Slovak regions. The borders of the Czechoslovak and Magyar states shall be determined at the peace conference.'
>
> There you go! And here we are, stuck here, instead of settling our accounts at home with the Magyars.[5] A peace

[5] Slovaks and Magyars (called 'Hungarians' in English, although in

conference has been called for the beginning of the new year, and here we are spilling our blood!

For the surrender of the Central Powers, whatever that meant for faraway lands such as Great Britain or the United States, was only an intermission of sorts for those old nations, becoming established as new states, carved from the empires of Prussia, Austria-Hungary, and Russia. Here, hostilities did not necessarily end, as armed forces more often than plebiscites began to determine where new borders, supposedly redrawn according to ethnic data, were to be placed.

The elaborate Catholic shrine of Kalvária, a pious goal of pilgrims in Banská Štiavnica, occupies one of the higher hills overlooking the town. It is in this context – Czechoslovak resistance to the incursions of the Magyar troops of Béla Kun's Magyar Soviet Republic – that František Brož met his death. Along with another soldier, Brož was stationed in one of the towers of the lower church on 6 June 1919 as a lookout, when a missile fired by the Magyar troops impacted the tower, killing him outright and gravely wounding his comrade.[6]

Following the successful defence of Banská Štiavnica by Czechoslovak troops under the command of Jozef Šnejdrák, the troops were soon called to Zvolen, and for this reason, perhaps, Brož was hastily buried on the slopes of the holy

the past this term was applied to all inhabitants of the Habsburg Kingdom of Hungary: Magyars and Slovaks, Croatians and Romanians) share a long and, since the nineteenth century at least, contentious history. For an account of this from the Slovak side, see Ľudovít Štúr, *Slavdom. A Selection of his Writings in Prose and Verse* (London: Glagoslav, 2021).

[6] Anonymous, 'Banská Štiavnica – Kalvária,' <https://kriz.epocha.sk/banska-stiavnica-kalvaria> [accessed 4 December 2021]. The name of the wounded soldier, who died later, is not recorded in any of the sources I consulted.

mountain.[7] Things became complicated in 2015 when, for reasons unclear, the former Slovak ambassador to Russia, Jozef Migaš, a left-leaning and rather controversial figure in Slovak politics, arranged for the grave – which up until then had been merely a mound of grass marked with a cross – to be covered with a simple granite slab identifying the remains below to be those of an 'Unknown Soldier of the Red Army, Our Liberator'[8] crowned by a bright red star. This, obviously, was a shock to many of the longtime residents of Banská Štiavnica, who remember quite clearly that the grave had been there long before the Red Army 'liberated' that portion of Czechoslovakia near the end of the Second World War. Valéria Bernáthová, who has lived in the town since her birth in 1927, recalled visiting the grave with her mother as a child and placing flowers on it in memory of her own uncle, who died in the war on the Yugoslav front. Ľudovít Dupal, who photographed the burial of all Red Army soldiers who fell during the battle for Banská Štiavnica in 1945, was even more vociferous in his objections to the supposition of a Russian buried in the grave on Calvary: 'I'll take poison if there's a Red Army soldier buried there.'[9] Dupal's testimony is among the most interesting offered in Daniel Vražda's article on the question of the soldier's identity:

[7] Martin Macharík, cited by Daniel Vražda, 'Z neznámeho vojaka urobili Migaš s Rusmi červenoarmejca' [Migaš and the Russians Turned the Unknown Soldier into a Red Army Soldier], *Denník N* (9 July 2015), <https://dennikn.sk/182872/z-neznameho-vojaka-urobili-migas-s-rusmi-cervenoarmejca/> [accessed 4 December 2021].

[8] *Neznámy Vojak – Červenoarmejec – Osloboditel.*

[9] *Na to zoberiem jed, že tam neleží červenoarmejec.* This, and all other quotes from the residents of Banská Štiavnica, are taken from Daniel Vražda's article, op. cit.

> My father always said that a soldier from the First World War lay here. I remember him saying to me once, 'Look – the same thing might have happened to me' […] But you know what's interesting? All the while the Communists were in power [in Czechoslovakia] there was no such [Red Army] memorial there.

Oľga Kuchtová is another resident of the town who remembers her father speaking of the fallen soldier as a Czechoslovak killed during World War One:

> I stamped my foot [when I saw it]; I was covered with a cold sweat; I couldn't believe my eyes. To change the identity of any deceased person and to disgrace such a sacred place is simply not right. They ought to take this shameful thing in hand and return the grave to its original appearance. And I also think an apology is in order.

One can only imagine what Brož himself might have thought of the desecration of his grave. He, who fought against Bolsheviks and indeed died at the hands of Communists, was now identified as a Red Army soldier! That granite slab must have lain heavy upon him indeed.

Justice was finally done in early 2017, when the false (sacrilegious, in both a religious and a historical sense) grave slab was removed, to be replaced by the present one, testifying to truth. This truth was only arrived at due to the determined labour of Daniel Vražda and his colleagues, who, by patient and dogged research at archives, military and civilian, in the Czech Republic, were able to certify that indeed, this was no Red Army soldier, but František Brož (vel Brosch), from the village of Mnichovo Hradiště, in the Mladá Boleslav region of north-west Czechia, a Czechoslovak Legionnaire who fought against the Bolsheviks in Russia and died at the hands of their Magyar Communist allies

in Banská Štiavnica. His resting place is now covered by a granite slab bearing the great seal of the Czechoslovak state he helped into existence, with all of its historical regions of Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia, Silesia, and Carpathian Rus represented.

Such an importance little slips of paper in village archives may have.

## CENTRAL EUROPE AND THE IDEA OF HEROISM

The English-speaking reader who takes this book in hand is sure to contextualise it with the literature of the First World War with which he or she is familiar. These include the youthfully enthusiastic poems of Rupert Brooke – a much, much better poet than his familiar 'The Soldier' ('If I should die, think only this of me: / That there's some corner of a foreign field / That is forever England') would lead one to believe, Wilfred Owens' familiar, bitter 'Dulce et decorum est' and Robert Graves' similarly sardonic *Goodbye to All That*. The greatest American work of the World War One years is certainly E.E. Cummings' good-humoured memoir *The Enormous Room.* Every nation that participated in the great slaughter has its literary fruits, most of which, one reckons, the authors wish they never had never been given the occasion to write – to mention just one more from the 'other side,' anyone interested in the literature of that period ought certainly to look into the war poems of the great Austrian expressionist, Georg Trakl.

But what sets apart the great majority of writings from Czech and Slovak authors of the period, and this includes of course, the present book, is the unfeigned distaste of authors like Janko Jesenský and his erstwhile companion in the Czechoslovak Legions, Jaroslav Hašek, to the Habsburg regime, to which as soldiers of the Austro-Hungarian forces, they had sworn their fealty. Jesenský has no stake in the

government at Budapest, to say nothing of Vienna; when he becomes separated from his unit during one of the only firefights mentioned in his book, he doesn't spend much time wondering *if* he should desert, but *when* would be the most propitious moment for doing so. In Hašek's short story 'Osudy Pana Hurta' [Pan Hurt's Destiny], published in the legionnaire journal *Čechoslovan* in 1916 before the author's *second* desertion to the ranks of the Bolsheviks, we read the account of a Czech unit of the Austrian army crossing the lines to captivity:

> Before he knew it, he intimated the sad truth. His brigade was disengaging from the enemy, and the remnant of his company was to remain and keep on firing until… He didn't finish his thought, because Cadet Holava completed it beautifully for him: 'And our job is to stick around and let them kill us.'
>
> After a long, long time had passed, and it all grew quiet again, Cadet Holava spoke up once more. 'You know what, boys? Each of us is supposed to be issued a hundred more cartridges. But if we just set them aside, and lie down, and not shoot, the Russians'll let us alone.'
>
> This was much to Pan Hurt's liking. How long he slept, he didn't know. However, when he heard the thunderous cry 'Hurrah!' from before and behind, he grabbed his gun and crawled out of his hiding place.
>
> Suddenly, he was face to face with a Russian soldier and his bayonet. To his great surprise, the smiling soldier addressed him quite good-naturedly in Czech: 'Set that popgun aside, mate, or I'll give you what for.'
>
> And whenever Pan Hurt would speak of his time in captivity, he always began with the words, 'So I set my popgun aside… and we marched off to Russia. I caught up with Cadet Holava and said, "So then, we've been

captured," and he replied, "Obviously. I've been waiting on this for three whole months.'"[10]

The account is a fictional one, and yet it is plausible, since the Czechs – at least since 1620 the nation in the empire most inimical to Vienna – and the Slovaks – who had even more reasons to disengage from Magyar-dominated Budapest – saw the war as their best chance at freeing themselves from 'foreign' oppression and establishing an independent state. They had few qualms, if any, about deserting the ranks and seeking a better lot with their Russian 'brethren.' As Slovak journalist Milan Getting put it:

> The long-awaited time had come when something was to happen. What this something would be no one dared to express in words, but in the heart of every loyal Slovak there was a feeling that this something would be done by the Russians… From the very first day of the war our sympathies were on the side of the Triple Entente Powers.[11]

The Czechs and the Slovaks, unlike their kindred nation, the Poles, traditionally looked toward Russia, the 'big Slavic brother' in the East, as a potential protector and liberator from the German and Magyar majorities that stifled their national aspirations at home. While the architect of the modern Polish state, Marshal Józef Piłsudski, aligned his volunteers with Austria against the Russians (Poles have long known what 'brotherhood' with Russia signifies), the rather naive

[10] Jaroslav Hašek, 'Pan Hurt's Destiny,' in *The Secret History of my Sojourn in Russia* (London: Glagoslav, 2017), p. 63.

[11] Milan Getting, cited in Blanka Ševčík Glos and George E. Glos, *Czechoslovak Troops in Russia and Siberia During the First World War* (New York: Vantage, 2000), p. 9.

traditions of Pan-Slavism were quite popular in the Czech and Slovak lands. When the morning comes, and Jesenský finally determines on crossing over to the Russians, he does so, crying out: 'Don't shoot! I'm a Slav!' – which perfectly encapsulates the attitude of most of his Pan-Slav comrades: genetics trumps politics; the Russians are better, 'righter,' because they are 'mine,' while the Austrians are to be rejected solely on the basis of their foreignness. It is, of course, one of the ironies of history that, had the successor to the Habsburg throne, Franz Ferdinand, not been murdered in Sarajevo, he, and his morganatic Czech wife, might have reformed the Empire to Jesenský's liking, as Franz Ferdinand, murdered by Slavic nationalists, was (unlike his uncle Franz Joseph) rather inimically inclined to the Magyars, and fairly pro-Slav.[12]

## *KDE DOMOV MÔJ?* WHERE (INDEED) IS MY HOMELAND?

Speaking of the Staroměstské Náměstí, or Old Town Square, in Prague, the tourist standing at the Prague Meridian and gazing up at the Mariánský Sloup, or Marian Column, that acts as a gnomon casting the shadow whereby 'Prague time' was measured by astronomers since 1652, might suppose that it has always stood where it soars today: between the bastion of mediaeval Catholicism which is the Church of our Lady Before Týn and its contradiction; Vladislav Šaloun's over-

[12] For this, see David Fromkin, *Europe's Last Summer: Who Started the Great War in 1917?* (New York: Vintage, 2007): 'According to […] informants, it was the belief of the conspirators that Franz Ferdinand advocated 'trialism': he intended to make the Slavs full partners in government along with Austro-Germans and Hungarians [*i.e. Magyars.*… And yet the Serb Gavrilo] Princip, who killed Franz Ferdinand, did so for a muddle of misinformed reasons. Although the Archduke was the most pro-Slav member of the Habsburg hierarchy, the youth believed that he was anti-Slav.' (pp. 122, 261.)

large monument to Jan Hus across the way. And yet what we see there today is but a fairly exact modern replica of the original Baroque image set up and consecrated on 15 August 2020 to replace the original, which had been torn down on 3 November 1918 by a mob led by Franta Sauer (1882–1947), an anarchist from Žižkov with a moustache unfortunately similar to that made infamous by Adolf Hitler. In her *Prague Panoramas*, Cynthia Paces describes Sauer's motivations in this way:

> The destruction of the Marian Column was nonetheless a creative act. Sauer-Kysela wanted to make Prague a truly new capital city, free from the icons of the former regime […] New life also involves death. The peaceful, even anticlimactic Czechoslovak independence movement lacked the cathartic bloodshed Sauer-Kysela admired from his French and Russian revolutionary heroes; thus, he symbolically invented the destruction and rebirth of Prague […] Sauer-Kysela gave no address in Old Town Square, but let the monuments send his message. Fallen and shattered, the Marian Column said that political Catholicism would no longer be tolerated; it was of the old world, and its fragments belonged in a museum. Towering now over the square alone, the Jan Hus Memorial, emblem of the Hussite movement long admired by Czech socialists for its tolerance and egalitarianism, proclaimed the message of the social revolutionaries.[13]

Whether or not bloodshed can ever be 'cathartic,' or the iconoclasm of any group of ideologues 'admirable;' whether or not 'new life' necessarily demands 'death'– these are questions

[13] Cynthia Paces, *Prague Panoramas. National Memory and Sacred Space in the Twentieth Century* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), p. 94.

we needn't go into now, as they are beyond the scope of our present essay. But despite the academic Newspeak so familiar from the most recent outbursts of righteous indignation directed at granite and bronze,[14] Paces' comments succinctly reveal the motivations behind the Czechs' destruction of the Marian Column in particular, and their distaste of all things Austrian and Catholic in general. Although the Czech lands had formed a part of the Holy Roman Empire since the Middle Ages, and for a short time in the fourteenth century Prague had even been the seat of Emperor Charles IV, tensions between Czechs and Germans, Hussites and Catholics, local nobility and the emperor, had been seething since long before the decisive battle of White Mountain in 1620, which cemented Habsburg rule in Bohemia and Moravia until the fateful year of 1918 and the establishment of the independent First Czechoslovak Republic. People's memories are both long and selective. It is just such ancient grudges that animated Jaroslav Hašek – Jesenský's Legionary comrade and

[14] Of course, every generation and every ideology has a tendency to take a hammer to the monuments of their predecessors. In my own beloved Kraków, from my student years I remember well the monument to the Red Army that used to stand near St Florian's Gate and the plaque set in the wall of a building along Szewska Street, indicating where Lenin had rented a room once when passing through the city. No trace of these remain today. Contemporary discussions concerning such things basically revolve around how the removal of memorials from the public square will skew how history is taught in the future. A more interesting quandary is posed by the reestablishment of statues once toppled, and the effect their reappearance may have on art and history created in the interim of their absence. For example, since the Marian Column is again standing in the Old Town Square, will any future readers catch the allusion to its absence in the long poem *Půdorys města* [City Plan, 1968] by the Czech Catholic poet Rio Preisner? 'Ale jestli ztrácíš rovnováhu, Mařenko, / z té výškové stavby beznaděje…' [But if you lose your balance, Mařenka, / atop that soaring structure of hopelessness…]

Sauer's drinking buddy – to construct the initial thrust of his comic masterpiece *The Good Soldier Švejk* as a literary battering ram directed at the two 'foreign' pillars of Austrianism and Catholicism, and Sauer himself to literally knock down an actual column that – unlike the definition he gave it – had nothing to do with Austrian Counter-Reformational triumphalism over Slavic, Czech Hussitism, but was rather a votive offering set up in thanksgiving for Prague being spared an invasion of the Swedes during the 'deluge' of the mid-seventeenth century. Although modern migration patterns and the overexuberant multiculturalism of the European Union is challenging the idea of the European nation-state, we have grown so used to the Wilsonian map of the continent as to be startled at the freshness of Petr Jokeš' assessment of the situation of the Czech nation in the Empire at the outset of the war:

> The Czechs weren't quite in love with the monarchy, but at the outset of the war, no one in the Czech lands seriously considered separation from it. Austria-Hungary was a state in which the Czechs were well capable of functioning. Czech politics at the time sought to improve the nation's situation within the framework of the existing state, not to shatter it. This attitude was made all the easier by virtue of the fact that, practically speaking, the entire Czech nation was found within the borders of the monarchy, and so the Czechs – in contrast to the Poles, (and Romanians and Serbs for that matter) – were not faced with solving the problem of reuniting a nation divided between several powers.[15]

[15] Jokeš, p. 262.

Why, indeed, were the Czechs so eager to punch out of Austria? It's a question well worth asking. Histories both old and new suggest that the breakup of Austria-Hungary in 1918 was far from predetermined. 'The Austrian Emperor [Blessed Karl I Habsburg], in an effort to stabilize conditions […] declared Austria a federal state in which the Czechs and Slovaks, as well as other minority groups, were granted autonomy. Revolutionary action, however, had progressed too rapidly and too far to accept anything less than full independence from Austrian control.' Thus the authors of that 1972 *Area Handbook*.[16] Nearly half a century later, the Czech author Petr Jokeš writes in a similar vein:

> Right after assuming the throne, Karl committed a faux pas in regard to the Czechs. Under pressure from István Tisza, the prime minister of Hungary, he had himself quite swiftly crowned King of Hungary, while never accepting the Crown of Bohemia. The Czechs read this as a clear signal: the monarchy is going to continue to give preference to the Magyars. If at the beginning of the war practically no one gave serious thought to separation from Austria-Hungary, as the war progressed such ideas began to appear with ever greater frequency in the Czech lands. Karl I had a chance to change this – but he did not take advantage of it.[17]

Once the centripetal force was set spinning, it was impossible for the centre to hold. And so, in the words of that (so anomalous a phenomenon!) Austrophile Czech poet Rio Preisner: 'Throughout its entire existence the Austrian monarchy was bound to the preservation of the cultural and political integ-

[16] Keefe, et al., p. 38.

[17] Jokeš, p. 266.

rity of Central Europe, in opposition to Germany and Russia. Its tragedy was that both the Germans and the Russians understood, and to a certain extent respected, this task of hers, whereas the nations that constituted Austria did not.'[18]

It would be unforgivably flippant, and supremely ignorant, to suggest that early twentieth-century Czech tendencies for independence from Vienna were based on hurt feelings. But although one can draw up a balance sheet of sorts, setting advantages versus disadvantages, and pose Jokeš' insightful *cui bono?* and even *quantum bonum?* in regard to Czech independence, in the case of Janko Jesenský's Slovakia, the matter is more clear-cut. That Hungarian crown worn by the Habsburg emperors signified an ethnic mix even more complicated than that of the Germans, Poles, Czechs, and Slovenes in Austria. Here, Slovaks, Serbs, Romanians and Croats co-existed with Magyars, the dominant ethnic group even more determined than the Germans in Austria to impose their language and their culture on the state.

The Magyars had arrived in Central Europe in the early Middle Ages, around the ninth and tenth centuries, from Central Asia. The Magyar language – like Turkish and Finnish – is not related to the Indo-European group. Assimilation with the Slavs and other European peoples came about quickly; the Magyars converted to Christianity, and an early king, Stephen I (c. 975–1038) is a national saint especially venerated in both Hungary and Slovakia. Although the Magyar language was greatly influenced by Slavic loan words (especially in the areas of agriculture and terms associated with permanent settlement), the language itself continued to be cultivated, and by the nineteenth century had become the distinctive determinant of ethnic identity. At the risk of

[18] Rio Preisner, *Až na konec Česka* [Unto the Very End of Czechia] (London: Rozmluvy, 1987), p. 238.

over-simplifying matters, one might say that, given centuries of living side-by-side, worshipping the same God and engaging in common political and cultural activities, a certain amalgamation of peoples occurred in the Hungarian Kingdom, and adherence to the Magyar language and other cultural distinctions became a matter of choice, if not to say opportunism, for many. For example, the architect of the modern Hungarian nation-state, Lajos Kossuth (1802–1894) came of Slovak Lutheran stock and, while he himself was inveterately opposed to Slovak tradition and nationality, his uncle Juraj Košút (1776–1849) was a Slovak patriot.

By Jesenský's time, Magyar demands had grown to an oppressive head. Not only was the Magyar tongue forced through in mid-century as the administrative language of the Kingdom,[19] replacing the earlier compromise of Latin, but a series of restrictive policies were enacted throughout Hungary tending towards the Magyarisation of the entire population. And whereas Kossuth made some concessions toward the Romanians and Croats, he refused to even recognise the Slovaks, among whom the policies of Magyarisation were most fiercely directed, in both civic and ecclesiastical spheres, in an attempt to stamp out Slovak language and culture. As Ľudovít Štúr argues in his 1843 article 'Jazykový boj v Uhorsku' [The Language Battle in Hungary]:

> The Slavs do not complain that the Magyar language was elevated to the administrative language, replacing Latin; they are sorely pained only at the arbitrary results that arise from this, such as the officials of the administration using Magyar also in their relations with the Slavs who

[19] In effect, the imposition of the Magyar tongue, spoken by 2,000,000 citizens, on the 5,000,000 non-Magyar population of the Kingdom. See Ioan Lupaș, 'The Hungarian Policy of Magyarization,' *Bulletin of the Center for Transylvanian Studies,* Vol. 1, No. 1 (1991), p. 7.

> know no other language save their mother tongue, and how the courts and all matters related to legal issues are executed only in Magyar even in regions that are entirely inhabited by Slavs. The result of this – as anyone can easily understand – will be absurd, awkward, and messy for the Slavs. In a country where there are many millions of Slavs, they wish to completely ignore the Slavic tongue in courts, and accept no petitions composed in Slavic![20]

Paranoid Magyar policy[21] went so far as even to ban a popular children's periodical, the *Noviny pre naše dietky* [Newspaper for Our Children] as a 'harmful' publication that 'tries to nip in the bud love and loyalty towards the Hungarian homeland.'[22] Behind this rather comic absurdity lies the chilling reality of policies which, however 'gentle,' can only be described in categories of ethnic cleansing. In 1874, the very year of Janko Jesenský's birth, the government of Hungary enacted an official policy of forcibly relocating orphans and children deemed impoverished from their families to 'pure Magyar districts.'[23] It is no wonder that, in the fateful year of 1848, during that 'Spring of the Peoples' when the Magyars sought

[20] Ľudovít Štúr, 'Jazykový boj v Uhorsku,' in his *Diela* [Works], ed. Rudolf Chmel (Bratislava: Kalligram / Ústav Slovenskej Literatúry SAV, 2007), p. 45.

[21] Raymond Pearson speaks of a 'psychological disposition' among the Magyars 'towards what might be tritely called "insecurity-based aggression."' Seamus Dunn and T.G. Fraser (eds.), *Europe and Ethnicity: The First World War and Contemporary Ethnic Conflict* (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 89.

[22] Eleonóra Babejová, *Fin-de-siècle Pressburg: Conflict and Cultural Coexistence in Bratislava 1897–1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 202.

[23] Gilbert L. Oddo, *Slovakia and its People* (New York: Robert Speller and Sons, 1960), p. 145.

to establish their own independence from Vienna, Slovak volunteers rushed to the (Austrian) colours in the hopes that their loyalty to the crown would result in autonomy from a Budapest that sought to re-engineer their souls out of their native ethnicity; it is no wonder that the Slovaks of the early twentieth century held fast to the ideals of the *národné obrodenie* [national revival] movement of the previous century, which bade them turn their eyes both to the west – toward political unity with their close kin, the Czechs – and to the east – to the great 'Slavic' empire of Russia, as possible rescue. The former of these tendencies was to result in success; as to the latter – Jesenský's *On the Road to Freedom* and the poems from the volume *Zo zajatia* [From Captivity] provide a record of his hopes and disenchantment.

This Magyar-Slovak tension is what we should keep in mind when we read the entertaining account of Jesenský's 'first case,' sparked by the furore he gave rise to at his ultra-Slavic appearance in Bánovce:

> What the?! What's with the Pan-Slav! Instead of saying *kissaszonka* for 'little miss,' he says *slečna!* For 'I kiss your hands' he pops off with *ruky bozkávam* instead of *kezítcsókolom*; calls himself *služobník* for 'your humble servant' and not *alászolgája*, and when you say 'Praise the Lord,' *dicsértesék*, he comes back at you with *naveky ameň*, 'for ever and ever,' just as he should, but… in Slovak!

Humorous, for sure. A good sense of humour is characteristic of the tone of *On the Road to Freedom.* But this is much more than a funny story. Jesenský causes a fluster not on account of *what* he says, which is all right and proper – and which should be the only important thing, – but *how* he says it, in Slovak, and not in Magyar. That's what gets him into trouble. It's senseless – just as senseless as the division of people into separate communities (which is probably inevitable) and mu-

tually inimical ones (which should never happen) on the basis of a different ethnolect. It is an irony of history that the first printing of *On the Road to Freedom* took place in the fateful year of 1933 – when the Nazis came to power in Germany; men who were about to precipitate the worst continent-wide slaughter in modern history on the basis of this very faulty syllogism: You do not speak the same language I do, therefore, you are different from me, and thus we are enemies.

The same concentration on the folk – given great impetus in the early romantic period by the Slavophile German author Herder, which resulted in the preservation of so many indigenous cultures in a Europe dominated by great empires – was weaponised in the twentieth century, by men of the same nation (and others, too) as elements in 'racial' warfare.

Despite the fact that certain initial symptoms of the coming conflagration were already perceptible during the period covered by Jesenský's narrative – the fledgling Polish state was fighting successful border wars on an ethnic basis in both the west (the Great Polish Uprising) and the east (the Polish-Ukrainian War), and armed conflicts between Slovaks and Hungarians, such as the aforementioned battle of Banská Štiavnica were underway – the great bloodbath was still far in the future. So far, as a matter of fact, that – again, irony of history! – one of the Hungarians in the group of notables at Bánovce who 'distanced himself from the local attorney Dr. Janko Jesenský, later a famous Slovak writer, known in those times as "a public Pan-Slav"' was none other than the local priest – later Monsignor – Josef Tiso (1887–1947), head of the collaborationist Slovak Republic following the collapse of Czechoslovakia in 1939.[24]

[24] Aliaksandr Piahanau, 'A Priest at the Front. Jozef Tiso Changing Social Identities in the First World War,' *Revue des études slaves*, Vol. 88, Issue 4, p. 737.

That said – and this is a point I believe worth dwelling on, later – there is very little ethnic animosity to be found in Jesenský's writing. Although he notes down a conversation with his Magyar fellow-POW Geréb to exemplify the basic intransigence of Magyars toward the very idea of Slovak autonomy, the conversation is recorded in measured, friendly terms, and Jesenský himself does not cease to fraternise with Magyars – even, after some hesitation (because of his own sense of inexpertise), teaching them Russian. When 'racial' expressions raise their head in Jesenský's narrative, they do not arise from any pseudo-scientific prejudice or hatred, but rather descriptively:

> I was pinched by an inner discord. There was this kind of general grumbling inside me – like Jews at prayer in a synagogue. This one bellows, that one bellows back, and again the grumbling. The noise grows. The voices increase, and the gesticulations are ever more numerous, ever faster, until you think they're going to start tearing at each other's hair…

We, who live after Auschwitz (and after Monsignor Tiso, whose collaborationist regime sent so many thousands of Slovak Jews to their deaths there), wince when coming across passages such as these, of which there are several in *On the Road to Freedom*. But Jesenský is not indulging in what we might term racist speech here; he is reaching for a metaphor – one that may seem to us as inappropriate as it is vivid – but nothing more. It may be difficult for us to process such speech today, but it was widespread at the time – 'Such a village-market Jew he is,' the Russian Timofei Ivanich exclaims to Jesenský in reference to another Russian, in reference to his stinginess – and as unpleasant as it may be to some readers, we cannot bowdlerise texts in the same way as we tear down (and put back up again) the

monuments that decorate, or befoul, our public squares. Although our times are more sensitive to any sort of speech that stereotypes other groups of people and we strive to eschew it ourselves, we should not judge the thoughts or speech patterns of people who predate our sensitivities by the measure of our own times. Likewise, in reference to another identifiable minority in the Slovakia (or Hungary) of his days, the Roma, or 'Gypsies,' Jesenský employs another stereotype as he twists and turns on his prison cot wondering how he might make some extra money in the camp: 'What good is a lawyer's education here? If only I were a cobbler or a tailor, or at least a Gypsy musician. There's a pass to the good life, with boots… A fee for sewing trousers – and music for the sobbing soul is always in demand.' The reference to 'Gypsy musicians' is a stereotype, and perhaps again, one such as the more sensitive among us in the third decade of the twenty-first century might wish to avoid. But it must be admitted that it is not a denigrating stereotype, and Jesenský would probably be surprised at anyone taking offence at it. After all, on the ocean passage from Siberia, he too is the object of a similar stereotype, when an Italian officer is 'miffed' at the Czechoslovaks, suggesting that 'we should be ashamed of ourselves that none of us savages played any instrument, and we from a nation so famed for its musicians!'[25]

It is often said that books are windows onto other worlds. The truth of this statement becomes vividly apparent when we consider writings such as Jesenský's memoirs, which predate, almost by a hundred years, our rapidly expanding multicultural society. If we keep in mind the explosion of access to information from all over the world that has resulted (for

[25] This is not just a reference to Dvořák and Janaček. There is a (stereotypical) saying: 'Co Čech to muzikant' [Every Czech's a musician], which is similar in meaning to the (stereotypical) Polish saying: 'Wherever two Poles gather, there are three opinions.'

good and not so good) from the technological revolution of the late twentieth century, the immediacy with which we can access, not just words, but images – sounds and moving pictures – from all over the world, and add to that the frequency with which so many of us travel the globe, I reckon that we can muster some understanding for a man in 1918 travelling beyond the immediate borders of his country for the first time – and because of a war – gaping at sights he never dreamed that he would see. Consider his description of the pier at Yokohama, as the Italian liner Roma drops anchor:

> Until they let us disembark, we walked around, gazing at these [people] and at the shore. The port was a model of cleanliness. Rows of delivery vans constantly rolled up. Japanese with some sort of loops on their backs, in blue caftans, unloaded the goods with a fantastic alacrity. Japanese women stood near the sacks with needle and thread in hand to stitch up any that had been torn. Others, dressed in brighter colours, with high hair-dos, in wooden clogs, most of them carrying children, strolled about the shore. They kept their hands plunged into their broad sleeves and seemed unapproachable. But they looked at us, and we looked at them, both with curiosity.

This is description, not evaluation. Before we wag our heads at Jesenský for indulging in exoticism, it is good to remind ourselves of the fact that this *was* exotic to him; for concentrating on the differences between people – that these differences exist, and were even more striking back then than they are now, due to the context in which the writer found himself. Before we shake our finger at the (now) dead white European male for gazing at the Japanese as if he were visiting a zoo, we ought to remind ourselves of the fact that cage bars are transparent both ways: *they looked at us, and we looked at them, both with curiosity.*

In short, considering the particular cultural context of Slovak-Magyar antagonism that we describe above, Janko Jesenský's *On the Road to Freedom* is remarkable for how little (anachronistically speaking) 'racist' speech is to be found in it. That there are, however, hints of the coming age of catastrophe, and that he senses them, is obvious. Two of the most blood-curdling examples of this occur during the so-called anabasis of the Czechoslovak Legions, when, freed of both POW camps and Russian oversight, they are on their way to Vladivostok along the trans-Siberian railways. The first:

> Some of our echelons were at the station in Chelyabinsk. They were supposed to head east. There were also some trains there with Austro-Hungarian POWs, the majority of whom were Magyars and Germans; these were heading west. One of these POW trains was already speeding away, when one of the POWs threw a piece of iron at one of our volunteers and hit him right in the head, as a result of which he fell down, stunned. Our men stopped that train and made the POWs hand over the guilty party – whom they killed on the spot in their anger.

This episode is so fraught with horror, and sorrow, that it's difficult to say anything that would rise above the risibly gratuitous comment. What was the intent of the Austro-Hungarian who threw that piece of iron? Was he intending to hit the Czech volunteer he 'stunned?' Was it tossed blindly, or with premeditation to harm? Did he mean to kill, or was it a – admittedly horrid and stupid – joke? Was the volunteer merely 'stunned,' i.e. did he come back to his senses, injured as he was, and heal, or was he killed? And so, did the punishment – if a lynching can be called punishment – fit the crime (if the result of a bad, split-second decision, perhaps taken out of anger, perhaps not, can be called a crime?) It's hard for me to express the feelings I experience when dwelling

on this passage. If I (as a reader) suspend my disbelief and insert myself into the scene on the platform, of course I feel sorry for the lad who was struck by the metal, especially if he was badly injured. But what horror, what sorrow I feel for the guilty party. What must he have felt when he realised that the train was being stopped, people were searching for him, people were handing him over, and he was made to march – helpless, whatever he deserved for the stupid thing he did – to face the angry mob that was about to tear him limb from limb?

If I am not mistaken, this is the only example of racial, or ethnic, violence in the book. Again, whatever we think about right and wrong and justice, this is a lynching, and the lynching occurs because one of 'them' – undefined 'Austro-Hungarians' – hurt one of 'ours.' Here the coming age of Nuremberg Laws and Hans F. K. Günther begins to tint the horizon.

Now, I am not equating the Czech Legionnaires here with Nazis. What I am seeing is anger exacerbated by tribal sensitivities, something that also plays a role in the second example I offer below:

> One day, an echelon of German prisoners was passing through the station. Our boys threw themselves upon them, stripping them of their money, their clothes, their bedclothes and coverings, their underclothes, packages and crates – whatever they had – all the way down to shaving mirrors and leather straps. There was a haggard, bony officer in command of our echelon. He himself strutted about with a pouch slung round his neck and urged on the looting. Some of the Germans tore their banknotes to pieces before his eyes; if they weren't to keep them, he wouldn't get them either. He had these men taken away and shot, not far from the station. I saw their bodies and was ashamed of this bestiality. But I said

nothing; I didn't dare get mixed up in that, or they would have shot me, too.

Once more, there is a lot that happens here, but one recoils from commenting out of a fear of treating so horrendous a scene in what can be nothing but an offhand, trite manner. Again, two groups, and mob behaviour in which national identity plays a significant role. 'Our boys' have at the 'German prisoners,' egged on by the 'haggard, boney officer.' The fact that Jesenský offers the 'save my own skin' excuse for non-involvement (before we blame him, let us reflect on how we might have acted in his place) says something important, not only about human nature, but about how the entire experience of the war, of captivity, and the return home, with all its shining aureoles and all its deep darknesses, as here, shaped him. For what Jesenský sees here is not the triumph of one nation, or ethnicity, or race, over another, but the even more frightening realisation of the corruptive nature of power. The behaviour of the officer in the face of the actions of the German soldiers destroying the banknotes of which they were being pillaged, is, one imagines, not something that he would necessarily engage, in the 'normal' world. But here he finds himself in a situation where *he* makes the rules, and as is the case with most people, due to our corrupt, postlapsarian nature, those rules will be savage. But let us move on. What more can be said?

## LAND OF PUSHKIN, LAND OF LERMONTOV

The point of this sonnet, written in the first days of his Russian captivity, is the disconnect, the alienation, that Jesenský suddenly felt upon finding himself in the land he had always admired from the descriptions found in the writings of his favourite poets. The discrepancy between his old daydreams, back reading 'in his cosy room' and the 'cold

flagstones' he now reclines upon is jarring. One of the main themes of *On the Road to Freedom* is the abyss that yawns between the rosy ideal – the beautiful language of Russia's greatest Romantics – and the prosaic reality – the 'bellows' of the prison guards. Can this be the same language? Jesenský's *On the Road to Freedom* can be read as a record of the author's successive loss of illusions, which will pare him down to that inner, real core of humanity that we reference above. One of the first illusions that disappears is one of the most important: that of 'mother Russia,' so dear to the hearts of the innocent Pan-Slavists, whether Czechoslovak or not.

The closest that Jesenský comes to racial, or ethnic-attitudinal speech occurs during the first period of his captivity, on a prison train, in a wagon with a group of bitching and moaning Magyars, cursing everyone and everything for their present fate, including their progenitors:

> Their endless swearing offended me, but I let them carry on, in the assumption that our fate is in God's hands, and if it weren't for fathers and mothers, we'd be seeing neither war nor Russia. But when they started berating the Russians and making fun of them, the blood in my Slavic heart began to boil. And it was thus that I learned that my ardour for Russia hadn't completely cooled.

It would cool quickly enough – as witnessed to by the sonnet 'Russia,' one of the first penned during his captivity in Kharkiv. The poem ends with this pained address to the country he once dreamed about:

> Then, my feet trod your dusty roads, it's true;
> passing through mountains, woods of birch and larch,
> with madly beating heart I rushed to You,
> my fetters burst, smashed through the prison bars –
> I shall be free!…

In a quaint barracks yard,
For you…
greet me with prison fetters too.

It is no different after liberation. As he begins to fill various roles in the nascent bureaucracy of the Czechoslovak National Council Branch in Russia, he is called to Petersburg. And there:

> We went off to Liteiny Prospekt. Nevsky flashed, intersecting it: a straight, broad, big-city street, but naked, without any trees. I had been expecting something awesome, wide, beautiful, with side-paths shaded by trees and pavements of devil knows what sort of material; sparkle, flamboyance, luxury, and here – nothing of the sort. No different from a hundred other big-city streets. A so-so effect. But Pushkin himself strolled about here! Gogol writes about the Nevsky Prospekt! Here Lermontov strutted… Has my heart grown so hard?

In the very first line of his biographical sketch of Janko Jesenský, Józef Magnuszewski presents him as a Romantic epigone.[26] That may be true, but if there is any Romanticism to Jesenský, it is that of Krasiński's Count Henryk, when the scales finally fall from his eyes and he beholds the 'maiden of poetry' to be what she actually is – the rotting corpse of a whore the devils have been using to draw him away from the real world and his responsibility to his wife and child,[27] or that of Jesenský's beloved Tatyana, when she ponders the

[26] Józef Magnuszewski, 'Literatura Słowacka' [Slovak Literature], in Władysław Floryan (ed.), *Dzieje Literatur Europejskich* [The History of European Literatures] (Warsaw: PWN, 1989), Vol. 3/1, p. 854.

[27] See Zygmunt Krasiński, *The Undivine Comedy*, in his *Dramatic Works* (London: Glagoslav, 2019).

library of the absent Onegin to discover in him a fraud – Harold in Muscovite dress.[28] And what an interesting context for Yokohama! The rapture he was expecting in the northern city is proven to be a figment of his imagination, while contact with the real world of the exotic east fires him with enthusiasm.

But it is neither the reality of what loping across no-man's-land to the arms of his Slavic 'brethren' turned out to be, or the deflation of the Romantic dream-world of Pushkin and Lermontov to the grey embankments of the frigid Tsarist capital that cause his beautiful Russian illusion to fall away as much as it is his experience with the Bolshevik revolution. Not freedom is the result, but anarchy:

> Instead of dispersing the screaming, 150-headed hydra of a mob, the militia cautioned the citizenry not to irritate the demonstrators.
>
> Kronstadt declared itself an independent republic, defying the provisional government, arresting its officials and holding them in dungeons, sending off a cheekily defiant ultimatum to the council of ministers.
>
> The army was an 'undemocratic establishment.' Nothing but superior officers, chiefs, commandants, differentiations, and ranks, ranks, ranks. One star, two, three, and the rest were just to heed what they say. Where do you have equality amongst people here? Equality is a laughing stock in the army, just like fraternity, just like democracy.
>
> And now one began seeing the gentleman officers themselves walking about with mess tins in search of rations. Standing, waiting in line along with all the other soldiers until their turn came. And the common

[28] Cf. Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, which Jesenský translated into Slovak in 1942.

soldiers would laugh at them, making them the butt of their jokes.

At the front, there were even murders. The soldiers there had started killing their own superior officers.

For the reader interested in history, perhaps just as intriguing as the account of the Czechoslovak anabasis is Jesenský's eyewitness account to the Russian revolution. Citation after realistic citation could be piled up here to counter the most effusive propaganda of any *Ten Days that Shook the World*. We will offer just one more, about a practical matter, that can lead to an absurd, but no less real, imprisonment:

> There was money; you might stock up, but what was it all worth since bread was not to be had, a hunk of cheerful bread was even out of one's reach. You couldn't eat your ham or your sausage without bread, and if you couldn't eat, why, there was no sense in drinking, either. The bread they gave us made your whiskers stand on end – black it was and as hard as a frozen clod. Only furtively, somewhere at a tram stop or a train station, could you perhaps get some real bread for 100–200 roubles, but you had to be careful lest they grab you and toss you in the slammer along with the peddler.

The unspoken truth here is contained in that last sentence. Communism didn't *become* totalitarian under Stalin. Any system that sees speculation in the selling of bread, and is willing to toss both baker and consumer into the can for trading on the staff of life, is totalitarian from the get-go.

Jesenský has little love for the Bolshevik government, but Russia is another story. Whether or not it was painful or disappointing to see his idealistic dreams of the great 'Slavic empire' vanish into thin air, his respect for, and later longing after, the Russian people is a strong current that runs through

the book. One of the more touching scenes concerns his former landlady, her daughter, and a boarder friend seeing him off at the train station as he is leaving Voronezh for points west:

> It was then that I was summoned to the office of the regional military commandant, where I was informed that, at last, the *bumaga*[29] had arrived, according to which I was to be transferred to Kiev.[30]
>
> Madame Nagurskaya boiled some eggs for me to take on my journey; she also gave me compote, rolls and salt. Then, along with Mmlle Marusia and the teacher Pustovalov, she escorted me on my way.
>
> Not only death separates us from others forever – life can, too.
>
> 'We'll hardly see each other again, however long we live, O my dear Russian souls!' I thought, and even said something like that when I thanked them for taking such care of me. 'Come see us, when the war is over!' I called out to them at parting.
>
> 'And you come back here!' they replied.

A lot is to be found in that one sentence, 'Not only death separates us from others forever,' – so much understated love, regret, and fondness. And once more we see a peeling away of the layers of human veneer to draw closer to a core lesson that will only intensify as the story continues: nations, politics, religions – all of these are mere accidentia – the only thing that is really important, the only thing that, in the end,

[29] Russian: Document.

[30] Spelling according to the accepted transliteration current at the time of the composition of the Slovak original.

is real, is the individual person; the only true faith that which is preserved by one human being in regards to another.

In an early review of Jesenský's novel *Democrati,* Andrew Valuchek says that 'he does not spare the representatives of democracy, the great and small office-holders, and indicates that systems do not change men basically, but only give them something different to growl about.'[31] This insightful statement can probably be used to sum up the reduction to the human core that is the main thrust of *On the Road to Freedom*. For as we have already stated, *Cestou k slobode* is a record of the successive loss of illusions: in the multinational Austro-Hungarian Empire, through Russia, through – not independence or the Czecho-Slovak idea itself – but Czechoslovakia as an ideal. Jesenský's time spent in the rarefied atmosphere in proximity to the founding fathers of the state, such as Tomáš Masaryk and Milan Štefaník, does not knock them off their pedestal (we can't seem to free ourselves from that leitmotiv of monuments and their destruction!) but they are de-bronzified. As great as Štefaník may be, he can also be calculating, petty, and vindictive; Masaryk is a jolly old grandfather, benign, but also, if not obtuse, at least harbouring a pooh-pooh-ish attitude towards individual squabbles that get in the way of great politics. Both Štefaník and Polák he treats as boys engaging in a 'soldiers-will-be-griping-soldiers' quarrel, and he seems to see the Legions in Russia not as individual men longing to get home to their families, but rather as pawns that he can move about at will on the chessboard of the Versailles negotiations.

Now, Jesenský embarks on his long journey home in the company of several other men gathered together as a 'dele-

[31] Andrew Valuchek, '*Demokrati* by Janko Jesenský,' *Books Abroad*, Vol. 11, No. 4 (Autumn, 1937), p. 500.

gation,' including Josef Patejdl and František Polák. Like all groups of friends, no matter how close, quarrels will erupt when nerves are frayed by constant commerce with one another, especially in the cramped quarters of a ship sailing halfway around the world. Petty squabbles and sniping erupt time and again in the last chapter of the book, as the patience of the 'delegates' begins to wear thin. But as soon as they drop anchor in Italy and learn that Štefaník is aiming to extract a humiliating pound of flesh from Polák for a (perceived or real) slight received of him, all of the irritation and petty animosity in the little group disappears, and they gather around their friend. Summoned into Masaryk's presence upon their return to the new capital of their state, Prague:

> We had an audience with the President.
>
> Smiling and gracious, he had us sit down. Patejdl began with the memorandum we'd composed on the ship and had all signed, concerning Polák.
>
> 'Is this your work, Doctor?'
>
> Patejdl nodded in agreement.

The very first order of their business is an act of opposition to Štefaník, the national hero of Slovakia, in defence of their friend. The fact that it is Patejdl who takes the initiative here, and affirms that this is 'his work,' is telling indeed – for Patejdl, as the leader of the group, had himself been the target of most of their ire and disappointment as the seemingly endless trip kept dragging on. And although the chapter, and the book, ends with Jesenský leaving Prague for Slovakia, with our knowledge of the career in government service he was to shortly assume, this scene does not have the feeling of an ending, but rather a beginning. And a hopeful beginning at that, because there is no firmer foundation upon which a state can be built than simple human solidarity – and that, indeed, is the lesson that Janko Jesenský comes away with

here. It is the individual person, not the faceless state, or the still more faceless system, that is important. Period.

## JESENSKÝ THE WRITER

As an engaging and valuable testimony to a dramatic period in the history of Europe and the world – World War One, the chaos of post-Revolutionary Russia – *On the Road to Freedom* is an important addition to the political history of East and Central Europe, and a foundational text of the Czechoslovak state. The same can be said for many other eyewitness accounts of the Czechoslovak Legionary epic, including the much different texts of Jaroslav Hašek. It is also the work of a talented writer with an eye for striking detail. His description of the Siberian winter betrays a real writer's enthusiasm for his subject, which is powerful enough to overcome the harshness of a biting cold that few of us have experienced:

> The bright, starry Siberian nights once more began to gladden my eyes with their huge moons, as did the pleasant winter mornings – green at dawn, then grey, becoming still and sunny days with the temperature hovering between 12 and 15 below; and the surrounding hills, grey with frost like Russian *papakha* […] At the start of December the winter turned sharper. The temperature dropped to 27–30 degrees below zero. The dawns could be magnificent, for they glowed with a rose-coloured light, and the mountain summits were as white as if coated with lime.

If there is anything to the theory of poetic inspiration, the notion that real writing is not just a craft perfected by creative muscle memory, as it were, but an almost material inter-melding of the artist's soul with nature, there is no better place to look for proof of it than in such passages. To speak

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Janko Jesenský** (1874–1945). Poet, prose writer, translator and Slovak statesman. Jesenský was the scion of the noble Slovak family Jesenský z Horného Jasena. Like his father, Jen Baltazár Jesenský-Gasparé and brothers Fedor and Vladimír, he was active in the propagation of Slovak culture and language during the difficult years of the Habsburg Empire, when Slovakia was subjected to strong Magyarising pressure. Jesenský is well known as a poet, having published nine collections of verse, including *Zo zajatia* [From Captivity, 1918], which chronicle his four years as a Russian prisoner of war and member of the Czechoslovak Legions, two plays (unpublished in his lifetime) and eleven works in prose, including his memoirs *Cestou k slobode* [On the Road to Freedom, 1933], an important eyewitness account of the First World War, the establishment of the Czechoslovak Legions and the Czechoslovak National Council, the Russian Revolution and subsequent Russian Civil War. His translations from Russian include Alexander Pushkin's masterpiece *Eugene Onegin*. In the newly established First Czechoslovak Republic he served as county governor (*župan*) in Rimavská Sobota and Nitra, and later in the regional-national government in Bratislava, eventually becoming Vice President of the Regional Government for Slovakia. During the Second World War, at the breakup of Czechoslovakia and the establishment of the collaborationist Slovak Republic of Monsignor Tiso, he retired from public life but continued to compose anti-Fascist poetry, much of which was broadcast from the free Czechoslovak radio service in London.

# ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

**Charles S. Kraszewski** (born 1962) is a poet and translator, creative in both English and Polish. He is the author of three volumes of original verse in English (*Diet of Nails*; *Beast*; *Chanameed*), and two in Polish (*Hallo, Sztokholm*; *Skowycik*). He also authored a satirical novel *Accomplices, You Ask?* (San Francisco: Montag, 2021). He translates from Polish, Czech and Slovak into English, and from English and Spanish into Polish. He is a member of the Union of Polish Writers Abroad (London) and of the Association of Polish Writers (SPP, Kraków). In 2022 he was awarded the Gloria Artis medal (III Class) by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Poland. In 2023, he was awarded the ZAiKS prize for Translation into a Foreign Tongue by the Polish Author's Association (ZAiKS).

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More to come . . .

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"'Brother, you have another pair of boots,' Jaroslav Hašek said to me, grabbing me by the sleeve. "How do you know?" "Yesterday you were in army boots, and today you've got civilian ones on. I'd buy those army boots off you." And in this way my high-laced boots, which I was given by the Austrian Red Cross way back in Beryozovka-za-Baikalom, came into Hašek's possession. It was a silly thing to do. Not because I should have known that I wouldn't get a kopeck out of Hašek in exchange for them – at bottom, I did know that – but as a former soldier, I should have thought about reserves. Life is a war and in this war, sometimes boots become casualties.' Thus ruefully muses Janko Jesenský, Slovak poet and politician, in the pages of his *On the Road to Freedom*. This book, newly translated into English by Charles S. Kraszewski, is unique among the memoirs that came out of the First World War, as it chronicles not desperate charges or trench warfare, but the daily life of Austrian prisoners of war taken into Russian captivity at the very outset of the conflict. Of course, the reader will find more than one exciting passage in *On the Road to Freedom,* from eyewitness accounts of the Soviet Revolution in Kiev and Saint Petersburg to the heroic and bloody route cut by the Czechoslovak Legions through Red Army forces as the former POWs make their way across Siberia to Vladivostok and the long steamboat journey home, where they will aid in establishing the newly independent Republic of Czechoslovakia. But the most engaging aspect of *On the Road to Freedom,* and the poems that Jesenský composed during his Russian captivity (a generous selection of which are appended to these memoirs), is the palpable experience of the daily life of the POW – far from home, cold, and hungry, one of the 'ants [who] / Roil the yard with mess-plates in their hands – / Like hungry beasts for fish-soup from the kitchen.' Besides their value as literary texts, Janko Jesenský's wartime writings in verse and prose are a welcome addition to the English library of early twentieth century history. They provide a fresh, Slovak perspective on the 'Great War,' the Russian Revolution, the establishment of the Czechoslovak state, and the situation of the smaller Central European nations on the chessboard of politics dominated by great powers.

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