
Karl Popper Lecture, Prague 1994

Mr. Rector, Mr. Dean, Ladies and Gentlemen.

To the 3rd Faculty of Medicine of the Charles University and its Dean, Professor Hoeschl, and all of you who have come here today, I wish to express my deeply felt thanks for the great honour which you are conferring on me.

To be in Prague again, after 60 years - and those were difficult years for everybody): - this is a great experience. I visited Prague from Vienna in 1912 and 1913, before the First World War, and also several times during the war. And it was at the latest in 1934 that I decided that Prague was the most beautiful city in Central Europe. This has not changed. But everything else has.

60 years ago, there lived in the Hradcany Tomas Garrigue Masaryk, the great founder of the Republic of Czechoslovakia, and its Liberator President. I deeply admire Masaryk. He was one of the most important pioneers of what I have called, one or two years after Masaryk,s death, the Open Society. He was a pioneer of an open society, both in theory and in practice; indeed, the greatest of its pioneers between Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill.

Of the successor states of the Austrian Empire, now defeated and impoverished, Masaryk,s creation, the Czechoslovak Republic, was the only successful one. It was a financial, an industrial, a political, an educational and a cultural success; and it was well defended.

Never was a new state - after all, the result of a revolution - so peaceful and so successful, and so much the creative achievement of one man. And all this was not due to the absence of great difficulties; it was the result of Masaryk, s philosophy, his wisdom and his personality in which personal courage, and truthfulness, and openness, played so conspicuous a role. He described his own philosophy as a critical realism. This is indeed what it was. But humanism, or humanitarianism, also played a dominant role.

Masaryk,s extraordinary life has, I expect, been closely studied by historians. Nevertheless, I have come to Prague in the possession of two stories, or anecdotes, that are, very probably, quite unknown to all his biographers. Both stories may, I believe, still be testable, at least partly, by someone interested in researching the documents that may still be extant.

The first is the story of the strange circumstances under which I first heard Masaryk,s name mentioned, in the winter of 1915-16, during the First World War, when I was 13 years old.

My father was a lawyer in Vienna, and a family by the name of Schmidt, with their three sons and a daughter, were close friends of our family. One son was a professional army officer, another, Dr. Karl Schmidt, then in his late twenties, was a lawyer; and the third, Oscar, was a pupil in my class at school. Dr. Karl Schmidt frequently came to see us, and he often stayed for dinner. On one of these evenings, dressed in his war-time uniform of an officer of the Austrian Imperial Army, he told us that his present duty in the army was to investigate cases of high treason and prepare for the military court proceedings against the traitors. He told us of a most interesting case which he was then pursuing: the case of a Professor of Philosophy at the University of Vienna, Dr. Tomas Masaryk, then 66 years old, currently in England or in the United States, one of the main leaders of the Czech and the Slovak Movement for National Independence and, most obviously, a man guilty of high treason. But, he continued in strictest confidence, a wonderful man. - Schmidt told us that he was reading Masaryk,s book, especially a book about Russia,s relations to Europe, which he found most impressive. Warming to his subject, Schmidt gave us a lecture on this incredible traitor a man of the highest learning and culture, a leading philosopher, a teacher of ethics, a great liberal, and a man prepared to risk his life to achieve the freedom of what he regarded as his people. Schmidt later told us also of the Czech Army which Masaryk was organising against Austria and Germany with Czechs living abroad, in France, England, Russia and the United States, and also from Austrian Czech soldiers who had become prisoners of war in Russia.

This was an extraordinary experience, and it is vividly before me after 78 years. It could have happened, I now think, only in Austria. Imperial Austria was then at war and ruled by a law that applied to special conditions that made parliamentary control impossible. It was ruled by its prime minister, Count Sturgkh, who exerted dictatorial powers, under martial law. And yet, the liberal atmosphere of the pre-war period was still alive in Vienna. Here was a lawyer, at the same time an army officer, appointed to pursue treason - and he was, obviously, committing treason himself by telling us, ordinary

civilians, in confidence, on each of his occasional visits, about the progress of his investigations, and about his admiration for a traitor! Yet he had, clearly, no fear at all. He knew he was safe: safe in spite of the dictatorship and the state of martial law. What a difference from the situation that started a year later in Russia and that led to that horrible thing that we may now call "modern dictatorship"!

So this happened in 1916, in Vienna.

But locally in some of the provinces, in the regions of Austria in which the state authorities were facing irredentist nationalism, state terror ruled. The bureaucrats, the pocket dictators, were unaffected by the liberalism of the cities - and they were afraid. They ruled by secret terror, and even torture: and I learned it all from the same extraordinary source, from the recurring visits of Dr. Karl Schmidt.

Schmidt told us all about the movements of Masaryk, his hero against whom he was preparing a legal case that was bound to lead to Masaryk's execution, should victorious Imperial Austria ever get hold of him. But by 1916 it had become clear even to me that this would never happen: that the central powers had lost the war.... What I did not know was that even members of the Government of Austria wished to give in, and that Austria continued with the war largely for fear of a German invasion.

This is the end of my first story.

Almost twenty years later, when Chancellor Schuschnigg was the dictator of Austria, I happened to hear again something very personal about Tomas Masaryk. At the University of Vienna I had been a pupil of Professor Heinrich Gomperz, the Greek scholar, and we had become friends. After the murder of Chancellor Dollfuss by a troop of Austrian National Socialists, Schuschnigg had taken over, and had demanded from all persons employed by the state, or by local governments, including all teachers and professors, that they join an organization which he called the Patriotic Front, an organization that admitted as members only people who signed a declaration that they were opposed to the Anschluss, the unification of Austria and of Germany. Germany was then under Hitler's dictatorship. All university professors signed, (and especially those who were Nazis). There was only one exception: Professor Heinrich Gomperz whose family came from Germany and whose cultural background and Greek scholarship made him partial to a union with Germany where Greek scholars abounded. He himself was of Jewish descent and he was well aware of Hitler's terroristic ethnic theories - and his terroristic practices. But he had faith in the high civilization of Germany, and he looked upon Hitler as a political freak, certain to disappear soon. Gomperz, I think, found it below his dignity to take much account of Hitler. In most of this, Gomperz was sadly mistaken. However his failure to sign up with Schuschnigg's Patriotic Front led to the dismissal of Gomperz from his professorship with total loss of his income: and censorship prevented this from ever getting into the papers. Nobody heard of this dismissal. No rumour reached me, until one day he rang me and we met. Then he told me what had happened and that after his dismissal he had decided to emigrate to the United States. But he had not the money to pay for the costly journey. So he went to Prague, to ask his old colleague and friend Masaryk for a loan. Masaryk gave him the money from his own personal savings as a gift, rejecting a loan and explaining to Gomperz that he did not wish to use any kind of official funds for this purpose because the political element in it might make it look as a pro-German act, and even as pro-Hitler... And Gomperz told me how wonderful and moving his meeting with Masaryk had been.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have always admired Masaryk as one of the two great statesmen and heroes of twentieth century Europe: I mean Masaryk and Churchill.

Masaryk's Czechoslovakia was, I do not doubt, the most open of all societies ever to develop in Europe. It lasted for only twenty years. But what difficult and what marvellous years! In the shortest time, this open society had built a solid economy and the most solid military defence system in Europe. Then Masaryk's Czechoslovakia was destroyed by the two older of the European open societies- by Britain and France, under the governments of the appeasers, who co-operated with Hitler in destroying Czechoslovakia. And we might speculate that, had Masaryk still been alive, it is improbable that the appeasers could have helped Hitler in the Destruction of Czechoslovakia. Hitler was still bluffing, and Masaryk, I believe, would have called the bluff.

But there was from the beginning an unnecessary weakness built into the structure of the Czechoslovakian open society. I am alluding to the so-called Principle of National Self-Determination, a principle that had acquired an almost absolute moral authority in the West (and it has not lost this authority even now) - although just a very little thought should have told us all that this "Principle" is totally inapplicable in Europe, where even islands like Great Britain, Ireland and Cyprus are each populated by several so-called nationalities with political leaders claiming National Self-Determination. And Masaryk's open society was unable to give these claims a deeply considered moral and political reply. It was only quite recently that your country came again under this pressure, and that it had no well thought out theoretical and moral defence. And so it had to split. What the consequences will be, nobody knows.

No doubt, a homogeneous population that speaks one language has a tremendous advantage for the purpose of industrial collaboration; but where do you find this in Europe? Europe just is not like this, except in very few countries where it has been brought about, by political and educational means, to suppress minorities or dialects. This holds

especially for Germany and France. But even these two have now important minorities, and indeed all countries have. The exception left in Europe is Iceland (and, possibly, Malta).

I think that all lovers of peace and a civilized life should work to enlighten the world about the impracticability and inhumanity of that famous - or shall I say it notorious? - Principle of National Self-Determination, which now has degenerated into that ultimate horror, ethnic terrorism.

We must fight against such horrors. We must not fall prey to the cynical view that history is just violent and horrible, driven by the lust for gold and oil, for wealth and domination. This cynical interpretation of history is not true. European History begins with Solon,s peaceful revolution that reformed the Constitution of Athens. By it, he freed those slaves that had been free citizens but had lost their freedom to their creditors whom they were unable to pay. Solon,s revolution prevented this from ever occurring in Athens again. It was a long way from there to America and to Abraham Lincoln who fell as the last of the 600,000 white soldiers in a most terrible war that succeeded in freeing the negro slaves in the southern Confederate states.

These are not just two exceptions that happened in an otherwise endless history of greed and violence. Rather, these are some of the important successes - admittedly not very frequent successes - among the many defeats and set-backs we have suffered, often through our own mistakes, in our ceaseless struggle for freedom and justice.

And now, when we are again suffering some of these set- backs, we must think of our very latest success: South Africa. And we must keep fresh before our memory such incredible achievements of the spirit of freedom, openness and humanity, as that of Churchill,s seemingly hopeless resistance to Hitler, after the fall of France, and of Masaryk bringing back his valiant soldiers, an army of 60,000 men, through Siberia and Vladivostok, and across the Pacific Ocean and the American continent in order to found a great republic, an open society, strong enough to rise again after many a violent death.