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## Czech Artists who Fled to France during the Second World War and their Cultural Resistance in Paris\*

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From the mid 19th century, Czech artists, like those from many other countries, saw Paris as a mecca for modern art. Art world contacts between Prague and Paris were many and varied, deepening after the creation of the Czechoslovak Republic (which owed a debt of gratitude to France for its independence), and lasting throughout the 1920s and 1930s. These ties were sustained primarily by Czech artists who had settled in France, like František Kupka (1871–1957) and Josef Šíma (1891–1971). This fact made it all the more disappointing, and for some traumatic, when France signed the Munich Agreement in 1939, which not only opened a chasm between the Czechs and the French, but split French cultural and intellectual circles into what were known as pro-Munich and anti-Munich camps.

As the Second World War began, France remained for many Czech artists, despite this disappointment, a key location from where they believed they could actively help to regain Czechoslovak independence. Paradoxically, however, the French soon saw the active anti-fascists as undesirable foreigners who should be interned. I shall endeavour here to show the activities through which these Czech figures endeavoured to engage, the response which their efforts met, and, no less importantly, how these extreme times were reflected in artists' work.

After the German army occupied Czechoslovakia on 15 March 1939, giving rise to the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, many artists were forced to flee their country, due to the dangers of remaining on the

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territory of the former Czechoslovakia. Many had made no effort in the preceding years to hide their anti-fascist stance, openly and categorically condemning the rise of fascism and the Nazi regime. Such were the cases of the caricaturist and writer Adolf Hoffmeister (1902–1973) and the caricaturist and painter Antonín Pelc (1895–1967), both of whom attracted the attention of the German authorities not only through their work, but also through their friendships with German anti-fascist artists who had escaped Nazism by fleeing to Prague and showed their work in exhibitions organised with the help of their Czech counterparts. They had to leave Czechoslovakia very quickly after its occupation, or risk arrest. Like many Czech francophiles, they believed that France would again become a centre for the struggle for Czechoslovak independence, as had been the case in the First World War, and departed for Paris without hesitation.

When they were there, they endeavoured to continue supporting Czech culture, and, through cultural resistance, to contribute to the liberation of their country. Soon after his arrival in Paris, Adolf Hoffmeister met with representatives of the International Association of Writers for the Defence of Culture. At a meeting that included Ilya Erenburg, Jean

Cassou, René Blech, Jean-Richard Bloch and José Bergamin, it was decided that a House of Spanish Culture and a House of Czechoslovak Culture should be established in Paris. These would be cultural centres founded to support two cultures that were under immediate threat from fascism. Both were to become part of the network of Houses of Culture that had been springing up throughout France since 1936.

Adolf Hoffmeister and the writer Franz Carl Weiskopf (1900–1955), the manag-



1. Adolf Hoffmeister and Antonín Pelc in Paris. Spring 1939

ing editor of the gazette *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*, who had moved to Paris from Prague in 1938, were given the task of organising the House of Czechoslovak Culture. It was originally designed for literary writers, but these failed to arrive in Paris, and so artists and journalists were co-opted for the project. The art historian Jean Cassou (1897–1986) was made official chairman of the House of Czechoslovak Culture. Its permanent residents moved in in August 1939. They were Adolf Hoffmeister, the painters Antonín Pelc (1895–1967) and Maxim Kopf (1892–1958), the teacher and journalist Rudolf Šturm, the slavacist Klement Šimončič (1912–2010), the journalist Lenka Reinerová (1916–2008), and the violinist Jan Šedivka (1917–2009) (Fig. 1). The House became a cultural centre where the Czech cultural élite gathered in Paris. Visitors included the composer Bohuslav Martinů (1890–1959), the painters Rudolf Kundera (1911–2005), Alén Diviš (1900–1956) and Imro Weiner-Král (1901–1978), the journalist Egon Erwin Kisch (1885–1948), and the literary authors František Langer (1888–1965) and Egon Hostovský (1908–1973).

Although Adolf Hoffmeister stressed in a letter informing the Czechoslovak president-in-exile Edvard Beneš of the House of Culture project that everything he was doing was apolitical, in fact the plans hatched in the House not only pertained to a panoply of cultural events, but propagandist undertakings as well. Hoffmeister talked with a French publisher about starting a series of proscribed Czech works from the Protectorate Index. The House's residents set out to start their own magazine, aimed to establish a workers' theatre for the 45,000 Czech and Slovak workers in France at the time, and planned to publish all manner of materials, and organise lectures and other events. Hoffmeister endeavoured to start a radio broadcast from France targeting the Protectorate, to keep his countrymen informed of the work of Edvard Beneš. In short, the House of Czechoslovak Culture had ambitions to play a role similar to that played by the Masaryk House on the rue Bonaparte in Paris, where Czechoslovak independence had been born during the First World War.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For more on the House of Czechoslovak Culture and the context of its establishment, see:

The Paris-based Czechs welcomed France's entry into the war on 3 September with relief, gratified that they would finally face their common foe together. Their hopes for liberation grew. Czech artists joined the fight with whatever means available. Immediately after France entered the war, the Group of Czechoslovak Fine Artists, led by the painter František Matoušek (1901–1961), was established. The two groups joined forces, and on 6 September 1939 sent a letter inviting other Czech and Slovak artists in Paris to a meeting at the House of Czechoslovak Culture. What ensued from the meeting held on 7 September 1939 was a joint artists' proclamation addressed to Edvard Beneš in London, the Czechoslovak ambassador in France Štefan Osuský, and the former minister of national propaganda Hugo Vavrečka, seeking the immediate establishment of a propaganda office to which the members of both organisations could lend their experience and talents.

Before they could be carried out, however, these large-scale plans were thwarted by the French police, who had become suspicious of the goings-on at the House of Czechoslovak Culture. Basing themselves on the mistaken impression that the House was actually the headquarters of the Central Committee of the Czech Communist Party in exile, 17 police officers burst in on 18 September 1939, searched the House, and took all its residents into custody. Subject to the same punitive measures as the French communists after the signing of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact, the residents spent several months in La Santé, Paris' strictest prison.

After the residents of the House of Czechoslovak Culture were arrested, their propaganda efforts were taken up by the Group of Czechoslovak Fine Artists, whose members, apart from the chairman František Matoušek (1901–1961), included its secretary, the painter Rudolf Polák (b. 1910), and the painter Švasta-Bělohorský, who printed propaganda graphic sheets (Fig. 2). After the House of Culture was closed, however, their activities became more cultural than propagandist in nature.

A. Pravdová, *Zastihla je noc, čeští výtvarní umělci ve Francii 1938/1945* (Caught by the Night: Czech Artists in France between 1938 and 1945), Prague, 2009, pp. 39–73.



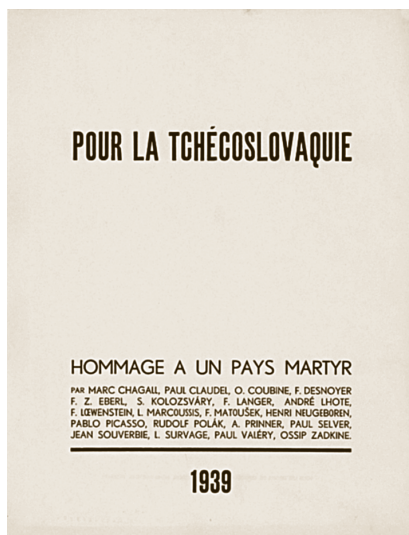
2. Josef Švasta-Bělohorský. Propaganda graphic sheet no. 11: Czechoslovaks, Get Ready. 1939

In late 1939, the Group spearheaded the publication *For Czechoslovakia: Tribute to a Martyred Nation*,<sup>2</sup> produced by illustrious figures in the Paris art world, such as Pablo Picasso, Marc Chagall, Ossip Zadkine and others, expressing their support for occupied Czechoslovakia (Fig. 3). The publication consisted of 16 graphic sheets, with a foreword by František Langer, a brief wish from Paul Claudel for the recovery of Czechoslovakia's nationhood, English translations of the poems 'Prison' by Viktor Dyk and 'Psalm 1938' by Paul Valéry, expressing their sorrow for the silenced voice, trampled freedom and

lost dignity of the nation. Like the textual component, most of the fine art was thematically tied to Czechoslovakia, or a symbolic expression of its 'sacrifice' for European peace. For example, Marcoussis used a crucified hand, an archetype of suffering, in his engraving, and Souverbie used a young maiden, representing the 20-year-old republic, strapped to a swastika. Chagall metaphorically depicted the disappearance of Czechoslovakia from the map of Europe, to survive only in the artist's memory. Picasso, in a linocut, expressed a mournful cry, and the despair, darkness and brutality of war.

Other sheets expressed the hope for Czechoslovakia's rebirth. The Hungarian painter and composer Henrik Neugeboren (1901–1959) etched a hand making the 'V' sign. André Lhote used the metaphor of a burning bush, its flame, the current catastrophe, not destroying the land, but letting new buds spring to life.

<sup>2</sup> *Pour la Tchécoslovaquie, Hommage à un pays martyr*, Paris, 1939.



3. The title page of the publication *For Czechoslovakia: Tribute to a Martyred Nation*. 1939



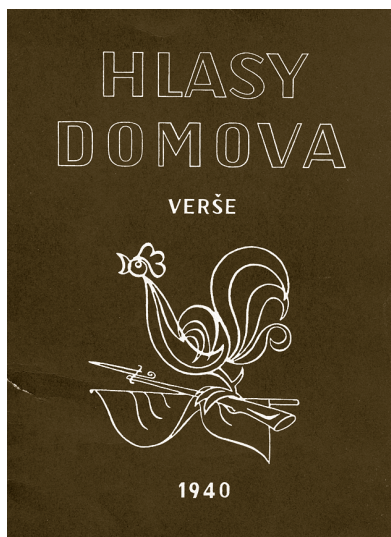
4. Jean Souverbie, sheet XI from the album *For Czechoslovakia: Tribute to a Martyred Nation*, Paris 1939

The collection had a print-run of 60 copies. The proceeds from sales were used to support poor artists, and to evacuate Czechoslovak children from Paris.<sup>3</sup> Very few copies survive, as almost the entire print-run was allegedly destroyed during the bombing, making rarities of the copies that do exist (Fig. 4).

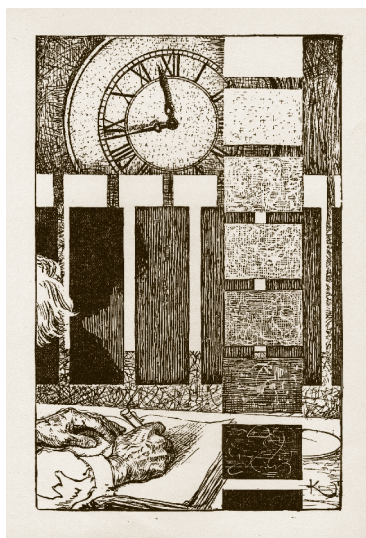
In May 1940, a collection of resistance poems by the most prominent Czech poets was collected in the Protectorate by the translator and poet Josef Palivec and published in Paris. The poems had found their way to Paris via an employee of the French embassy in Berlin, and the book came out under the title *Hlasy domova* (Voices from Home) (Fig. 5). Adolf Hoffmeister probably designed the cover before his arrest with other residents of the House of Czechoslovak Culture on 18

<sup>3</sup> Pocta umělců Československu (An Artist's Tribute to Czechoslovakia), *Československý boj*, vol. 1, no. 35, 23 December 1939, p. 3.





5. The cover of the collection of resistance poems *Hlasy domova* (Voices from Home). 1940



6. František Kupka. Illustration for the collection of poems *Hlasy domova* (Voices from Home). 1940.

September 1939. He was named in the masthead of the collection, even though he had already been detained by the French authorities for nine months when the book came out.

The illustrations accompanying the poems were provided by Czech artists in Paris. Like the poems, with the exception of those by František Eberl (1887–1962) and František Kupka, were published anonymously. František Kupka's contribution is of great interest: the first of his drawings illustrates the poem *Do zbraně* (To Arms!) by František Halas, and shows a young man with a rifle about to throw a grenade. A victorious lion bathed in the sun's rays roars above his head. Darkness engulfs a swastika in the lower left corner of the drawing. The second of Kupka's drawings accompanies Josef Hora's poem *Kronikář* (The Chronicler): a clock and the hand of the chronicler holding a pencil emerge from a geometric composition (Fig. 6). Both drawings relate clearly to the poem they illustrate, and were composed especially for the

occasion. Here, Kupka, who made no effort to hide his anarchist leanings, once again acts on behalf of his nation (he was active in the fight for an independent Czechoslovakia during the First World War), even at the cost of abandoning his abstract painting work, in which, as a pioneer, he had been working for nearly 30 years, and returning to traditional depictions. He also did this in the picture in which he captures the Czechoslovak ambassador refusing to relinquish the Czech embassy building to the Germans, who insisted it be handed over after their occupation of Czechoslovakia. In the collection's second drawing, he nevertheless endeavoured to connect his politically engaged approach with the geometric renderings of his most recent pictures, making this drawing unique in the context of its creation.

Although he was prevented by his advanced age, Kupka would also have liked to join the Czechoslovak army that formed in France. Hence his offer in a letter of 15 September 1939 to Ambassador Osuský to at least head the Czechoslovak 'historiographic division', which was to consist of artists who would depict glorious moments in Czech and Slovak history, in this way encouraging the spirit of resistance. The division was never formed, but Kupka himself made a few drawings for Osuský, depicting important events in Slovak history.<sup>4</sup>

When *Hlasy domova* came out in May 1940, the period of relative calm called the Phoney War, a time during which France spent nine months at war without engaging in battle, was coming to an end. As the German army advanced, France was first beset by crowds fleeing Belgium and heading south. They were followed by French civilians, and with them Czech artists who had been active in Paris until that time. Some managed to escape to England (František Matoušek), others, such as the sculptor Jan Vlach (1904–1962), and the painters Josef Šíma and Imro Weiner-Král, stayed to fight with the French resistance. The latter strolled the streets of occupied Paris with his sketchbook, recording the movements of the German army, under the guise of painting landscapes.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from František Kupka to Stefan Osuský, 15 October 1939, Hoover Institution Archives, Osuský Collection, box 22/49. The original letter is in French.





7. Jan Vlach. Stamps for the French resistance organisations the F.F.I. and the F.T.P.

The sculptor Jan Vlach rejoined the resistance from the French countryside, lending his talent for sculpture to the resistance organisations the F.F.I. (Forces françaises de l'intérieur) and the F.T.P. (Francs-tireurs partisans), for which he made the first stamps for resistance documents (Fig. 7).

But even before the German army's occupation of Paris, the arrested residents of the House of Czechoslovak

Culture had been released from prison. After they had spent nearly six months in La Santé prison, the charges against them were dropped for lack of evidence. Despite the decision of the military court, however, they were not given their freedom. The police continued to deem them a danger, and refused to release them. The group of Czech and Slovak artists and intellectuals was transferred from the prison to the Roland Garros Stadium near Paris, which had been turned into a camp for undesirable foreigners. Finally, on 15 March 1940, they were transferred to a labour camp in Damigny near Alençon in Normandy, where they spent several months. Some surviving drawings by Hoffmeister and Pelc capture their time in the camp (Fig. 8).

A complex journey took them to the south of France, and from there to Morocco, where they were interned once again. Almost a year later, they finally made their way to New York, travelling via Martinique, to which they sailed on the same boat as André Breton, Claude Lévi-Strauss and other famous French figures fleeing France.

The four painters remained deeply scarred by everything that had happened to them from the time of their imprisonment in La Santé to their arrival in America. The trauma of their imprisonment was manifest in their work. They all concurred that, aside from the physical deprivations, what was most difficult during their time behind bars was finding a way to kill time, which dragged interminably from reveille at six o'clock in the morning until they were ordered to their straw beds at eight in



8. Adolf Hoffmeister. *Internment camp in Damigny*. Illustration for the book *The Animals Are in Cages*. 1941

the evening. 'I began to look for something to do, something that would occupy me, some work that would save me from cracking up. I began to study the signs on the wall,' Max Kopf wrote in his memoirs.<sup>5</sup>

Adolf Hoffmeister also occupied himself with these unrefined and raw drawings. As a caricaturist, able to capture the character of a face in just a few strokes, he saw in them a brilliant encapsulation of the prison experience and prisoners' destinies. The book of reminiscences about his time in the Paris prison,<sup>6</sup> which he began to write while he was in cell number 10 at La Santé, but which came out several years later, was

<sup>5</sup> M. Kopf, Odpusťte, že žiju (Excuse me for Living), *Revolver Revue*, 2002, no. 49, p. 230.

<sup>6</sup> A. Hoffmeister, *Vězení* (Prison), Prague, 1969.



10. Alén Diviš. *Cell Walls. A Prisoners' Calendar*. 1940s



9. Alén Diviš. *Abbyss of Anguish*. 1941

‘illustrated together with the author’s fellow prisoners’, that is, the graffiti Hoffmeister copied from his cell walls.

The interest of most of the artists, however, was not limited to merely reproducing prison drawings. For some, the cell walls became an implement, a source of inspiration, a sheet of paper or canvas. Alén Diviš studied the walls most intensely; they were permanently imprinted on his imagination. Diviš wrote of his prison work:

The cell walls were dirty and dingy, cracked, covered in stains and mould. I looked at them for hours on end, entire days and nights. When one looks at them for a long while, they come alive, they become figures, clouds, landscapes, rocks and waterfalls, fighting giants, flying monsters, dancing elves. Stains made up entire pictures, which I made more intelligible with a piece of plaster;

with a stone thrown at the wall, I dug and clawed out shapes and outlines, so that the stains came to resemble people, animals and landscapes more clearly.<sup>7</sup>

The drawings on the wall that he traced or drew became a key source of inspiration for his work after he regained his freedom. In America, he painted many canvases inspired by his prison experience, some of which were 'replicas' of the graffiti that had adorned the walls of his cell in La Santé (Figs. 9, 10).

After arriving in the United States, Adolf Hoffmeister recorded his reminiscences of the vicissitudes of his time in France in the book *The Animals are in Cages*, published in New York in 1941,<sup>8</sup> and, together with Pelc, resumed his propaganda work for the good of Czechoslovakia.

The fates of other Czech artists who sought refuge in France after the occupation of Czechoslovakia were also remarkable and diverse. Each of the artists responded differently to the complex situation in their lives, but most of them quickly became engaged in activities aimed at attracting attention to the tragic fate of their country. Some of them paid with their lives, such as Edita Hirschová (1909–1942), well known as Tita, a member of the Surrealist group active in occupied Paris, who was arrested in the spring of 1942 and deported to Auschwitz.

This period of Franco-Czech relations provides evidence of the willingness of Czech artists, who drew so extensively from the France of the 1920s and 1930s, to join the French struggle against the occupiers, either in the ranks in units of the Czechoslovak army forming in France, or in the Resistance.

<sup>7</sup> A. Diviš, Vzpomínky na pařížské vězení Santé (Memories of the Paris Prison La Santé), *Revolver Revue*, 1991, no. 17, pp. 81–100. Jaromír Zemina and Vanda Skálová have dealt in detail with the impact of this painful prison experience on the work of Diviš. Zemina wrote several articles on the topic that were printed collectively in *Revolver Revue*, 1991, no. 17, pp. 41–80. Vanda Skálová, see: T. Pospiszyl, V. Skálová, *Alén Diviš 1900–1956*, Prague, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> A. Hoffmeister, *The Animals are in Cages*, New York, 1941.



Anna Pravdová

## Čekų dailininkai Prancūzijoje ir jų kultūrinė rezistencija Paryžiuje Antrojo pasaulinio karo metais<sup>9</sup>

### *Santrauka*

Straipsnyje per čekų dailininkų gyvenimą Prancūzijoje 1938–1945 m., į kurią jie pasitraukė vokiečiams okupavus Čekoslovakiją, aptarti čekų ir prancūzų kultūriniai ryšiai Antrojo pasaulinio karo metais. Atskiri čekų menininkai savaip suvokė ir vertino savo padėtį, tačiau dauguma jų beveik iš karto ir net aktyviai įsitraukė į kultūrinę veiklą, kurios tikslas buvo atkreipti pasaulio visuomenės dėmesį į tragišką jų tėvynės likimą. Tarp kitų pavyzdžių išskirtas karikatūristo ir rašytojo Adolfo Hoffmeisterio (1902–1973) ir tapytojo bei karikatūristo Antonino Pelco (1895–1967), priverstų bėgti iš Bohemijos ir Moravijos protektorato į Paryžių dėl savo antifašistinių pažiūrų, atvejais. Jie abu atvyko į Paryžių 1939 m. pavasarį. Hoffmeisteris gavo užduotį įsteigti Prancūzijos sostinėje Čekoslovakijos kultūros namus. Pastarieji tapo čekų kultūrinio elito susirinkimų centru, ir čia gimę veiklos planai aprėpė ne tik įvairius kultūros įvykius, bet taip pat ir propagandines akcijas.

1939 m. rugpjūtį Čekoslovakijos namuose įsikūrė jų nuolatiniai gyventojai, tačiau jau rugsėjo 18 d., pasidavę klaidingam įspūdžiui, kad šie namai iš tikrųjų yra Čekijos komunistų partijos egzilyje būstinė, į pastatą įsiveržė septyniolika prancūzų policininkų. Jie atliko kratą ir suėmė visus gyventojus. Apkaltinti šnipinėjimu suimtieji buvo nuteisti šešioms mėnesiams kalėjimo ir uždaryti iš pradžių Paryžiaus kalėjime La Santé, o paskiau internuoti keliose skirtingose koncentracijos stovyklose. Suimtųjų menininkų kūriniai perteikia įkalinimo traumą.

Vos tik Prancūzija įsitraukė į karą, Paryžiuje buvo įkurta čekų dailininkų grupė, vadovaujama tapytojo Františko Matoušeko (1901–1961). Grupės iniciatyva išleistas grafikos albumas *Pour la Tchécoslovaquie: hommage a un pays martyr*. Iliustracijas albumui kūrė pasaulinio garso menininkai: Pablo Picasso, Marcas Chagallas, Ossipas Zadkine'as ir kiti, taip parodydami, kad palaiko ir remia okupuotą Čekoslovakiją. Vokiečiams okupavus Prancūziją, kai kuriems čekų dailininkams pavyko pabėgti į Angliją (Františkas Matoušekas), kiti, kaip skulptorius Janas Vlachaš (1904–1962), tapytojai Josefas Šíma (1891–1971) ir Imro Weiner-Krális (1901–1978) liko Prancūzijoje ir įsiliejo į prancūzų rezistentų gretas. Kai kurie dailininkai, aktyviai veikę okupuotoje

<sup>9</sup> Straipsnio versija buvo išspausdinta lietuviškai; žr. A. Pravdová, „Čekų dailininkų Antrojo pasaulinio karo pabėgėlių Paryžiuje kultūrinė rezistencija“, *Naujas židinyš-Aidai*, 2011, nr. 4, p. 232–235.

Prancūzijoje, kaip Paryžiaus siurrealistų grupės narė Edita Hirschová (1909–1942), areštuota 1942 m. pavasarį ir deportuota į Osvencimą, užmokėjo už tai gyvybę.

Šis prancūzų ir čekų ryšių laikotarpis, be kitų dalykų, pateikia įrodymų, kad čekų dailininkai, daug perėmę iš Prancūzijos trečiame ir ketvirtame dešimtmetyje, karo metais noriai ir aktyviai įsitraukė į prancūzų kovą prieš okupantus arba stojo į Čekoslovakijos kariuomenę, kuri formavosi Prancūzijoje ir dalyvavo Pasipriešime.