

Bohumil Kafka *Jan Zizka monument*

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Bohumil KAFKA, *Jan Zizka* monument

Victor VERNEY

The sculptor represents the transition from one pose to another ... In his work we still see a part of what was, and we discover a part of what is to be.

—Auguste RODIN

On July 14, 1420, Jan Zizka, the iconic Czech military hero of the religious wars that marked Bohemia's Hussites Revolution, led an unlikely defence of Prague against Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund and 80,000 knights intent upon destroying the city and its residents. The key battle occurred on Vitkov Hill, a long, high, narrow ridge between the city's present-day Karlín and Zizkov neighborhoods. For the past six decades, the most visible reminder of Zizka's legacy has been an enormous bronze statue of the one-eyed general watching over Prague from atop the hill — an artistic representation of medieval military history with continuing contemporary resonance, emblematic of the full sweep of modern Czech history.

Czech journalist Christian Falvey vividly articulates why this is not just another statue of “some grand-looking fellow with a suave beard in full regalia, trotting out of battle into history on his stately steed.” Rather, he notes, Zizka “is poised in a moment of murderous discretion, a deadly Slav glaring down some poor crusader with his one good eye as he brings his mace to bear.” Its four legs firmly planted, Zizka's war-weary horse, veins jolting out of its muzzle and legs, gasps before its next onslaught. “The monument is so kinetic and realistic,” he adds (slyly referencing the prevalent irreligiosity of today's Czech Republic ¹), “that you almost find yourself waiting for its seventeen tons of bronze to ... start tearing down the hill to massacre the heathens in the bus station below.”²

The world's third-largest bronze equestrian statue, it stands nine meters tall on a thirteen-meter-high pedestal.³ Zizka's head alone weighs 109 kilograms, and a contemporary

photograph shows its sculptor, Bohumil Kafka, working inside the horse's head seated on a bench and accompanied by an assistant.⁴ Although Kafka was no relation to his contemporary, the famed writer Franz, the story of this statue's creation — a tortuous, sixty-eight-year ordeal — could serve as material for an absurdist novel of bureaucracy run amok.

First conceived in 1882, thirty-one years passed before any serious action was begun. In 1913, competitive proposals were solicited for a Zizka monument. Results were inconclusive: no first place was awarded, and second place was bestowed on three proposals, none of which were even partially used. Preliminary construction began in 1920, but subsequent competitions in 1924 and 1927 also failed to yield a winner.

During this time, veterans of the Czechoslovak Legions who had fought with Russia against the Austrians during World War I began lobbying for a national monument in their honour to serve as a backdrop to the Zizka memorial. Rudolf Medek, a prominent Legionnaire, played a key role. On November 8, 1928, the tenth anniversary of Czechoslovakian independence, the memorial's cornerstone was laid, and it was completed three years later. Proposals were again solicited for a Zizka statue, and Bohumil Kafka was among those responding.

Kafka was born February 14, 1878 in Nova Paka. After studying sculpture and stonemasonry, he worked as a stonecutter and ornamentalist in Dresden. Kafka attended Prague's Academy of Arts and Crafts and then studied at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, also in Prague. In 1904, the young sculptor went to Paris and fell under the influence of Auguste Rodin. After sojourns in Rome, Venice, Strasbourg, Milan, Zurich, and London, he returned to Prague in 1916, where he was appointed professor at his alma mater. Although his early work was distinctly Art Nouveau in style and spirit, his statues took on an increasingly traditional character. This would create prob-

lems with Medek and others in the artistic elite, who favored a distinctly Czech expressionism. Medek, who considered himself an art connoisseur (His father-in-law, Antonín Slavíček, was an important Czech painter), was effectively Czechoslovakia's cultural czar. However, the Cubist and Expressionist proposals he and the culturati favoured were overwhelmingly rejected by the Czech middle class, which much preferred traditional realism.⁵

Kafka drew inspiration for his design from paintings of Zizka by Mikoláš Ales, a beloved Czech artist. Despite Kafka's credentials, talent, and the suitability and popular appeal of his source material, progress remained fitful. His proposed design received lukewarm approval from Medek's committee, which did not want a baroque statue resembling those in Berlin and Vienna. After consulting historians and hippologists, Kafka had completed a full-size scale model by 1937. However, Medek then abruptly told him to cease work, due largely to Frantisek Udrzal, who had been minister of defense and prime minister during the 1920s and '30s. Udrzal's Agrarian Party lost power in 1932 and reformed as the Republicans. Three years later, Udrzal entered the Senate, considered a repository for politicians at the tail-end of their careers.

Nonetheless, Udrzal still wielded influence—especially with Medek, whose career he had advanced as his former boss. Udrzal protested that the

horse sculpted by Kafka was a Noric, an Austrian breed—incendiary demagoguery in a country only recently freed from three centuries as a vassal state of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.⁶ Udrzal blithely ignored the historical fact that Zizka and his troops routinely used captured Austrian and German steeds.⁷ This was, in all likelihood, a manufactured pretext: the Republican Party included many Catholics who did not want any statues built honouring Zizka, a hero of the early Protestant Reformation. However, Udrzal died the following year, Medek reversed his decision, and Kafka was allowed to continue working.⁸

He had the mould ready by 1941, finishing just as Czechoslovakia was overrun by the Nazis. As a symbol of anti-German Slavic nationalism, the mould became the object of a vigorous search by the Gestapo. It and the scale model were cut into pieces and successfully hidden in a variety of locations around Prague, including coal cellars. After World War II, the pieces were put back together, and the statue was cast. Kafka would not see his completed work in place, passing away after a long illness on November 29, 1942.⁹

Kafka's statue was ceremoniously erected on July 14, 1950 within a far different ideological context than that of its initial conception. Following their 1948 coup d'état, the communists commenced an Orwellian rewriting of Czech history. Stalin's party line was amenable to Zizka as a secularized symbol of Pan-Slavic



Bohumil KAFKA, *Jan Zizka* monument, ca. 1950. The statue itself is 9 meters high; height including pedestal is 22 meters. Prague. Photo: Victor Verney.



brotherhood; the official Marxist interpretation posited Zizka as the leader of a proletarian revolution and the Hussites as communists *avant le mot*. In 1953, Klement Gottwald, Czechoslovakia's first communist president, died. The Monument was given a macabre Soviet-style twist, becoming a venue for the public display of Gottwald's (poorly embalmed remains and those of two successors. Bas-reliefs celebrating class warfare in the approved socialist-realist style were added to the building's massive doors.¹⁰

After communism's fall in 1989, Vitkov Hill and Zizka's statue languished as little-visited reminders of the recent totalitarian past. The remains of Gottwald, *et al* were reburied elsewhere. Nonetheless, an aftertaste lingered. Most adult Czechs could not consider the Monument without thinking of Gottwald's horrifically mummified body, while the bas-reliefs made it one of Prague's most hated landmarks. Minor renovations were undertaken in the 1990s, but the monument's future use and ownership remained murky.

In May 2007, the Czech National Museum, which had taken possession of the Vitkov memorial site seven years earlier, began a massive Can\$10 million, two-year reconstruction project. Prague temporarily lost one of its dominating features as restorationists dismantled the weather-beaten statue. According to Karel Ksandr, the National Museum's deputy director, its inner construction



was very badly damaged due to specifics in the original design. "There are two problematic areas," Ksandr explained, "first, the horse's legs, which contain support structures, saw a lot of condensation and freezing of water over the years, cracking the sculpture's surface. The other is that the statue itself is made up of thirty-nine separate bronze plates, joined by steel screws from 1950 which are now heavily rusted." After repairs, Ksandr said, the statue is to be returned to its appointed spot.¹¹

On October 8, 2005, Czech Prime Minister Jiri Paroubek held a ceremony at Zizka's statue marking the 581st anniversary of the Hussite general's death. His remarks suggested a new ideological context for Zizka's victory. Paroubek expressed concern about government corruption, shady business practices, and organized crime plaguing the Czech Republic following the disappearance of communism. Paroubek held up Zizka as a moral exemplar who fought selflessly against institutional greed and immorality. "We Czechs, who have an unshakeable Hussite belief in human brotherhood, dignity and social justice in the very foundations of our traditions," declared Paroubek, "must stand up to ... aggressiveness and malice impelled by the thirst for money."¹²

Vitkov's transformation is to be marked by an opening ceremony planned for October 28, 2009, the 91st anniversary of Czechoslovakia's independence from Austria-Hungary. As a frontispiece to an envisioned "Museum Mile" featuring national, railroad, and military

museums, Kafka's creation and Zizka's legacy will be reintegrated into the larger context of Czech history—as freely constructed by the Czechs themselves. ←

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NOTES

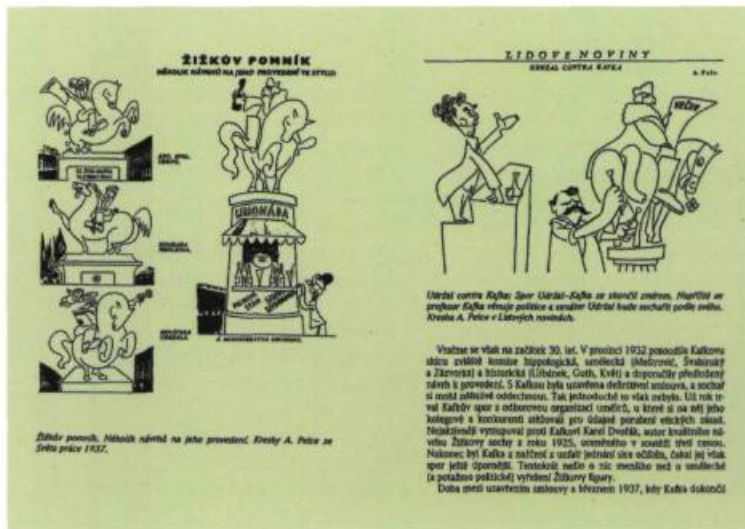
1. According to a 2001 census, 59% of Czechs considered themselves agnostics, atheists, nonbelievers or unaffiliated with any organized religion. The 2005 Eurobarometer poll found that 35% of Czechs stated they did not believe in God, spirit, or life forces and only 19% claimed to believe in God, surpassing in Europe only Estonia's 16%. These statistics are distinct from Slovakia, where 69% of the

population identify themselves with Roman Catholicism.

2. Christian Falvey, "Things to Think About on Vitkov Hill", Radio Prague, Feb. 22, 2009.
3. John Sherrill Houser's *Don Juan de Oñate* in El Paso (c. 2007) and Enrico Chiaradia's *Victor Emmanuel II* in Rome (c. 1906) are both over 11 meters high.
4. Zdenek Hojda and Jiri Pokorny, *Pomníky a Zapomínky* [Monuments and Forgettings] (Prague: Paseka, 1996), 155.
5. Marie Klimsová, "Czechoslovak Public Sculpture and its Context from 1945 to the 'Realizations' Exhibit, 1961," in *Figuration/Abstraction: Strategies for Public Sculpture in Europe 1945–1968*, ed. Charlotte Benton (Farnham: Ashgate, 2004), 35–6.
6. Oklahoma State University, Department of Animal Science, "Noric," <http://www.ansi.okstate.edu/breeds/horses/noric/index.htm> (accessed Apr. 17, 2009).
7. Christopher Gravett, *German Medieval Armies 1300–1500* (Oxford: Osprey, 1985), 16.
8. Jaroslava Gregorova, "Bohumil Kafka," Radio Prague, Feb. 23, 2006.
9. Kimberley Ashton, "New Life Planned for Vitkov Hill," *Prague Post*, May 30, 2007; "National Memorial at Vitkov," Prague.net, <http://www.prague.net/vitkov-monument> (accessed Dec. 4, 2008).
10. Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia: A Czech History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 276–7.
11. Jan Velinger, "Vitkov Memorial to House Museum Dedicated to Czechoslovakia's Turbulent History" July 31, 2007.
12. Kristina Alda, "Praguescape: Monumental Transformations," *Prague Daily Monitor*, Nov. 13, 2007.

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Billboard detailing the the Vitkov monument's renovation. February 22, 2008. Prague. Photo: Victor Verney.

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Soviet-style bas-reliefs were removed from the Vitkov monument's doors as part of the site's renovation. Prague. February 22, 2008. Prague. Photo: Victor Verney.



Artist Antonin PELC mocked the endless arguments by Czechoslovak politicians about what Bohumil Kafka's statue should look like. On the left, he satirizes the self-interested suggestions of Jiri Strimby (using it to promote his own business) and Konrad Heinlein, and he ridicules Frantisek Urdzaf's preference for a saintly Zizka carrying a Bible. The larger cartoon on right sarcastically suggests that the Minister of Commerce might instead prefer a statue that could serve as a money-making refreshment stand. From: *Pomníky a Zapomínky*.