

I am lying in bed, one might say on my deathbed, for I am ninety-three years old and taking stock of my life. I read old newspapers and books on history and politics. These topics have interested me since my youth. Now I finally have more time for them.

My name is Jaroslav Novák, and I was born just fourteen days before the beginning of the 20th century. Of course, I had no idea what awaited me and what would surround me. And that was a good thing, because if I had known, I would certainly have fallen into a deep depression. Without ever leaving my hometown, I experienced two world wars, even fighting in one of them, a cold war, executions, concentration camps, three great empires and their fall, the rise of a fourth empire, classical democracy, fascism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, socialism with a human face, communism and its fall, the restoration of capitalism, and the collapse of a state that had been so difficult to create. That's really a lot for one human life; probably not many people in human history will experience that much.

I was struck by an idea from Palacký, whom I read from time to time, that the history of the Czech nation is in many ways more instructive and interesting than the history of many other nations. This stems from the fact that the Czech lands are located in the center and heart of Europe, and so for many centuries the Czech nation became a center where diverse

elements and principles of the new European national, state, and church life met and united, not without struggle. There has been a long dispute and mutual interpenetration of Roman, German, and Slavic elements. When I read this as a young man, I thought he was exaggerating a little, but now I see that he was certainly right.

I came from a family with strong national feelings connected with support for everything Czech. The creation of Czechoslovakia was a great event for them, the fulfillment of the dream of previous generations. It is precisely at the time of the anniversary of its creation that I usually wonder whether what I have experienced is a coincidence or whether it is determined by something else. Whether there are any laws or regularities in history and politics, and of course in Czech history and Czech politics. Is there something relatively constant and decisive, repeatable and necessary, are there any internal forces of movement and specific laws, or is it a random, chaotic, and disorderly movement? The more I think about it, the more I believe that such laws do exist. Palacký and then Masaryk established the philosophy of Czech history. Kollár, Palacký, and Masaryk believed that history is not random, but that it reflects a certain plan of Providence. But how was this philosophy influenced by the creation of Czechoslovakia and the twentieth century? How would they view it today? I often think about this. I don't know if we can talk about Providence. It's probably not very relevant today. But I think that certain laws certainly exist here. In my opinion, political relations do not form a random, chaotic whole, but are organized in a certain

way and also develop in a certain way. They form a comprehensive, richly structured system that arises, develops, and disappears, driven by internal hidden forces. I believe that history repeats itself over and over again, that nothing is new, that everything has already been here before. In that case, history and the political past can help us shape future history and successful practical politics. I also wonder whether someone is controlling the course of the world, whether there are perhaps some hidden groups doing so. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

What can be seen as the unifying meaning of Czech history? In encounters, clashes, and intermingling with the Germans, as František Palacký claimed, or in national existence itself and its defense, as Josef Pekař believed, or in universal humanity and democracy, as Tomáš Masaryk believed, or in the desire for freedom, according to Karel Stloukal, or in the desire for social justice, as Zdeněk Nejedlý was convinced? Or in something else. And does history have any meaning at all? Is this a meaningful question? There is probably something like national consciousness, which changes with developments; when we were a great power, and we really were one in the past, it was different than when we were a small state. But it is certainly significantly influenced by that past. And how did the creation of Czechoslovakia influence all this?

I was born in Karlín, which was a village in the immediate vicinity of Prague, which was only promoted to a city in 1903.

Karlín was not incorporated into Prague until 1922. Until then, it seemed as if Prague was not very interested in incorporating it, because the possibility of incorporation had already been discussed in 1848, but the people of Karlín ultimately rejected it on the grounds that Karlín was economically important enough to exist independently. It gradually began to function as a self-sufficient, prosperous city, with a relatively large concentration of industrial plants with advanced technology and good transport links. At the beginning of the 20th century, it was one of the most modern and architecturally interesting locations.

I was born in a place that Ivan Hlas later sang about in his song Karlín: In front of the church, I pray to God that these dark dizzy spells will pass. In the corner of Karlín Central Park, a little girl spins around on her heel, singing tip-ta-dy-da... As a little boy, I also ran around the park, as well as the nearby Vítkov, and probably sang too, but I don't remember that. Perhaps one could agree that it was Karlín's Central Park, but if I were to use a similar comparison, it was more like Karlín's Times Square. It was the real center of Karlín, a key location for my parents' tailor shop on this central square. The windows of the apartment and the shop offered a nice view of the park and the church a few meters away. It was built about fifty years before I was born. The reason was that the Catholic faith in Karlín, which had a population of 12,000 at the time, was somewhat in decline, and people had to travel to the rather distant village of Svatý Roch, then called Volšana, for spiritual services. Today, it is a church in the center of Prague at the Olšany Cemetery. From the stories of older people, I learned

that it was a great celebration because Karlín had the honor of having Emperor Franz Joseph I himself lay the foundation stone, which was a rare occurrence, and he spoke Czech as well as German. He was accompanied by two archdukes and his young and charming wife, Sissi.

At that time, there was a relatively strong national sentiment in Karlín associated with support for everything Czech and rejection of everything German. So even in our family, there was an effort to give children Czech names. The eldest son, as was customary at the time, was named after his father, Vojtěch. And in those days, he was not only named after him, but also often inherited his profession. When choosing a name, it was certainly not insignificant that Saint Vojtěch was the Bishop of Prague, a martyr, and, among other things, the author of the well-known song *Hospodine pomiluj ny* (Lord, have mercy on us), and is considered the second patron saint of the Czech lands after Saint Wenceslas. He was said to be a zealous promoter of abstinence, which I personally did not find very appealing.

The second child was a daughter named Marie. It used to be very common to name firstborn daughters Marie, regardless of the mother's name.

The parents wanted their third child to become a priest, which was a prestigious position at the time. It was something like the later secretary of the Communist Party. That is why they named him Bohumír. Somewhat paradoxically, it was not the Slavic Bohumil, because Bohumír was the Slavic translation of

the German name Gottfried, which translates as "God's peace" or "peaceful world." His parents probably did not realize the German origin at the time, otherwise it would certainly have been Bohumil.

Well, as the youngest, I was given a name that was very popular among the Czech population at the time, Jaroslav. This name is purely Slavic. However, it has nothing to do with celebrating spring, as is sometimes thought. The word jaro (spring) was invented and created by Jungmann to replace the previously used vesna. It comes from the word jarý, which in Czech and other Slavic languages meant vigorous, lively, fierce, but also unyielding and strong, hard and strict, energetic. That is why Jungmann used it to describe the season for which it was most suitable. And slav did not mean celebration, but glory, strength, power.

The most famous Jaroslav in history was probably Jaroslav the Wise, who lived in the 11th century and was known as a unifier and became the most powerful man in Rus as Grand Prince of Kiev. The name was also widespread in the Czech lands in the Middle Ages. One well-known example is the infamous royal governor Jaroslav Bořita of Martinice, who was thrown out of the windows of Prague Castle by a hundred Czech nobles on May 23, 1618.

The Roman Catholic Church previously required that only names corresponding to a saint be used. However, there was no saint behind Jaroslav, and the name was therefore in danger of disappearing. Václav Hanka had a decisive influence on its

revival with his *Rukopis královédvorský* (The Dvůr Králové Manuscript), because the great hero and victor over the Tatars was named Jaroslav. This, together with the fact that at that time the insistence on the names of saints had ceased, resulted in a rapid increase in the popularity and use of this name in the mid-nineteenth century.

There were four children in our family, which was not unusual at the time. Some statistics show that at the beginning of the 20th century, families had an average of five or more children. Women gave birth to a larger number of children due to high mortality rates. Many women died in childbirth, and one in five children did not survive their first year of life. Children largely served as a labor force, especially in rural areas, where they helped on the farm. It is interesting that the next generation, with a much higher standard of living, had only one child. My wife also came from a family of four children. When they grew up, like me and my siblings, they mostly had one or two children at most.