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# HISTORY OF FREEMASONRY IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC

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*Extracts from:*

*“Czechoslovak Freemasonry in London during World War 2” by Prof. Ota Gregor †,  
and from “Prague-International Masonic City” by Jaap Sadilek*

The area of Central Europe formerly known as Czechoslovakia and divided since 1993 into the Czech and Slovak Republic comprises essentially two different cultures; i.e., the Western, mainly Czech or Bohemian, and the Eastern, essentially Slovak, with Moravian influence sandwiched in the middle.

There have, of course, been other ethnic and cultural influences including those from Germans, Ukrainians, Ruthenes and Magyars. Sharing common frontiers with Germany, Poland, Russia, Hungary and Austria, this region has often been a tempting target for its neighbours.

Like pieces in a jigsaw puzzle, therefore, parts have at times been added to or taken away the area moving from one sphere of influence to another. Lacking a sufficient social and cultural homogeneity, religious and ethnic differences have unfortunately played a major role in the area's development, history sadly showing its tragic consequences when a nation is so divided.

As a result, Freemasonry has often found itself both an unwilling spectator and/or participant in these historical events.

The earliest inhabitants of what is today the Czech Republic appear to have been Celts, in time being pushed aside by various Germanic migrating populations together with increasingly more important Slav influences. The Bohemian-Czech portion has traditionally leaned culturally and spiritually toward Austria while the Eastern Slovakian portion leans culturally towards Hungary. Spiritually, the Czechs have sometimes been anti-Rome, while the Slovaks have been devoutly Catholic, the religious issue adding yet another barrier to good relations. The Moravian portion, lying somewhere in the middle, shares both languages and cultures.

The area's ensuing history, like most of Europe, has been one of continuing military, political, ethnic and religious conflicts. In 1415, for example, the reformer Jan Hus, a Wycliffe supporter, was condemned and then burned at the stake in Prague as a "heretic" for his opposition to the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, thus beginning the Hussite Wars which ran from 1419 to 1433. It was during this period that the Bohemian Brethren merged, their principles grounded on "pure and ancient Christianity" and the doctrine of the original equality of men.

The movement was dramatically suppressed during the Thirty-Years War, their last Bishop being Jan Amos Komenský (Comenius – °1592 - †1670), a name still highly revered among the Czechs. As a consequence of their persecution, a number of the Bohemian Brethren emigrated to England, Hungary, Poland and the Netherlands during the beginning of the 17th century. The Reformation had swept through many parts of Europe and at the Peace of Libeň in 1609, Emperor Rudolph II had granted religious freedom to the Protestants.

Believing their rights were in peril from Austria's Ferdinand II, however, the Protestants felt compelled to resist.

As a result, the Thirty-Years War began in 1618 running until the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. In 1620, Maximilian of Bavaria, allied with Ferdinand II, led the Army of the Catholic League and prevailed over the Protestant forces, Bohemia went under the iron rule of Ferdinand and the Jesuits and Catholicism was imposed. With the exception of the enlightened Joseph II, and briefly under Leopold II, the Austrian Government has since had a history of opposition to the Craft.

The history of Freemasonry throughout Central Europe is a complex story.

Suffice it to say that as the Craft spread from the British Isles throughout the Continent, it developed in differing ways as it moved from country to country. One particular difference was the original three degree system sometimes seemed inadequate and the Craft often became molded along philosophic, esoteric and chivalric lines with additional Orders and Degrees being instituted.

Due to political alignments, there also arose a fairly close relationship between Czechoslovak Freemasonry and its German, Austrian and Hungarian counterparts.

The date of the first Masonic Lodge in Prague has long been debated and remains a controversial and emotional subject. 1726, the often alleged date of the foundation of the first Masonic lodge in Prague, is however a Masonic myth which originated as follows. In 1888 Josef Svátek, a Czech journalist and non-mason, who had published a historical novel entitled "*Hrabe Sporck*", wrote in the periodical «*Zlata Praha*» (Golden Prague) that Lodge «*zu den drei Sternen*» (Three Stars) had been founded by count Sporck on 26th June 1726 ; but no explanation was given how he had come to that conclusion. This whimsical claim was blindly repeated, without any evidence or

any reference whatsoever to historical sources, in the «*Geschichte der Freimaurerei in Österreich-Ungarn*» a work published in 1890 by Masonic author Ludwig Aigert 'Abafi'. Extensive historical critical research was carried out by Bros. Dr. Josef Volf, Oskar Posner and others during the 1930's but not a single document was found seriously relating Sporck and Freemasonry.

The first documented freemason from Bohemia was Philip Count Kinsky. He spent 12 years in London as Imperial Ambassador and upon his return became the highest Chancellor of Bohemia in Prague. In November 1731, during his stay in England, Count Kinsky was initiated together with Sir Robert Walpole, at Houghton Hall, Norfolk, by Lord Lovell.

There is also archival evidence, pointing to Lodge "zu den drei gekrönten Sternen" (Three Crowned Stars) in Prague, celebrating its 50th anniversary in 1791. And, in 1742, a military lodge "La Sincérité" was founded at Litomerice (Leitmeritz) in Northern Bohemia. The German-language Strict Observance ritual used by this military lodge in the 1770's is still available.

What is interesting here is that the documented existence of these two early Masonic lodges in the Czech Lands corresponds with the joint occupation of Prague (1741) by Saxon and French troops during the Austrian War of Succession.

Among the reputed Masons in Prague in 1741 were the well known Brother Count von Rutowsky (1702-1764), Military Governor of Prague, founder and Past Master Lodge «*Aux Trois Aigles Blancs*» in Dresden (1738), who had been elected Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Saxony in 1741.

Next there was Brother Ch. L. Aug. Fouquet de Belle-Isle (1684-1761), French Ambassador to the German Holy Roman Empire, Commanding Officer of the French troops in Prague, founder and Master of Lodge «*l'Union*» in Frankfurt am Main.

Another illustrious Mason present in Prague at the time was the famous French marshal Maurice de Saxe (1696-1750), who led the daring but victorious assault at night against the Vyšehrad fortress. In Freemasonry, Bro. Maurice de Saxe is especially remembered as one of the two candidates who stood for the office of Grand Master at the 1743 elections of the Grande Lodge of France.

It is therefore, no accident that the 1745 membership lists of the two lodges show a significant number of French, English, Scottish, Irish, Dutch and German military officers.

The Papal Bull of 1738, and subsequently that of 1751, had not been recognized by the Habsburg Monarchy. At that period, the War of the Austrian Succession, the Pragmatic Sanction and Maria-Theresa's succession to Charles VI undoubtedly concerned Austrian thoughts more than Vatican politics.

While the Empress Maria - Theresa, Queen of Bohemia from 1740-1780, initially tolerated Freemasonry, pressures exercised by the Roman clergy later caused her to prohibit the Craft. Interestingly, Francis I, Duke of Lorraine and later Holy Roman Emperor, who married Maria-Theresa in 1736, was made a Mason at the English Embassy at the Hague by Désaguliers himself in 1731. He was raised a Master Mason either later that same year in England or during his stay in Holland, confusions existing on this point due to meager records. The 1713 Treaty of Utrecht had added Belgium to the Austrian Empire and Francis was making the rounds on a “political good-will” trip at the time of his Initiation. The significance of his entrance into the Craft lies not in his personal Masonic activity, but rather the fact of his initiation which served as a beacon for other prominent persons all over the European continent to follow his example. Some authorities indicate it was his influence which caused the Papal Bulls not to be published in Austria, while some indicate that Maria-Theresa, being intensely jealous of her prerogatives, resented Papal influence in temporal matters. In truth, it was likely a bit of both.

The continuing political dissensions of the era were a constant factor in the Craft’s development and there arose a faction determined to seek freedom from Austria’s rule even using military action if necessary. Finally, the Army of Charles Albert, Elector of Bavaria, reinforced by French and Saxon troops, occupied Bohemia and on November 26th, 1741, Prague was taken. However, Austrian troops mounted a counterattack, and liberated Prague in December of 1742.

Freemasonry in Bohemia however had been born and it pursued its own course.

Maria-Theresa’s son Joseph II, named co-regent in 1765 and then her successor, ruled from 1780 to 1790. It can be safely said that Joseph II exerted significant power even during his tenure as co-regent thus giving him an effective span of control of about 25 years. As an “enlightened” ruler, Joseph II was an advocate of Imperial reform and, with a view of modernizing the Empire, issued decrees designed to improve the peasants’ life and to reform conditions in the civil, legal and artistic arenas.

Although not a Freemason, Joseph II was well disposed toward the Craft permitting it to function rather openly, particularly after a 1781 decree acknowledging the activities of the Austrian lodges. Lodges were founded in 1770, 1778, 1780, a Bohemian Provincial Grand Lodge came into existence in 1782 and in 1783 three more lodges were founded. Freemasonry in Bohemia had entered into a reasonably healthy period. The first Viennese lodge “*Aux Trois Canons*” existed only from September 17th, 1742, to March 7th, 1743, when it was dissolved by the police. There are indications the lodge continued to meet secretly for several years, perhaps into the 1760s, but specifics are vague. It is also indicated that Illuminati influence began to be felt in lodges, a factor the Church would not have countenanced, but a development Joseph II is said to have intended to make political use of.

Between 1750-1760, “Écossais” High Grades were gradually introduced into the Austrian empire with the Clermont System initially being used. In time, it was replaced

by the Strict Observance Seven Degree System based on Templar tradition. This united Austrian and German lodges into a single ritual working and the Bohemian lodges using the Clermont System converted to the Strict Observance about 1764. The Jena Conference of 1764 resulted in the Strict Observance, with its Templar Provinces, gaining increasing popularity in Bohemia. Duke Ferdinand von Brunswick was elected Superior of the Order in 1772.

The Masonic Order reached its peak of glory in 1775 when no less than twenty-six reigning German princes, Dukes and Counts attended the Strict Observance Convent.

After the 1782 Wilhelmsbad Convent, however, the Strict Observance went into an irreversible decline although in Prague and in the Austrian Empire it continued to be the main Masonic rite until the end of the century.

In 1773, the Prague Freemasons founded and financed the Prague orphanage of St. John the Baptist, demonstrating their dedication to charitable activities. The initiative was taken by Caspar Herman Count Kunigl, Worshipful Master of lodge “*zu den drei Sternen*” (The Three Stars) in Prague. His father was Sebastian Count Kunigl, an active member of old Bohemian lodges like “*zu den drei gekrönten Säulen*”

(The Three Crowned Columns) in Prague and « *Sincerity* » in Litomerice. Caspar Herman, continued his father’s Masonic work, was member of the « *Three crowned stars* » lodge in Prague, and later founded the lodge « *At the nine Stars* ». Empress Maria Theresa, donated a palace to the orphanage, where the lodges also met. In addition to charitable institutions, several prominent Freemasons in Prague were the driving forces at the roots of important institutions like for example the National Museum, the Academy of Sciences and the National Gallery.

Between 1780 and 1785, there were eight lodges in Vienna, at that time a city of some 300,000 inhabitants and a Mecca for artistic achievement. In that the Papal Bulls were not then in effect and, therefore, not legally binding, Catholic subjects felt no obligation to obey them. It should be noted, too, that during this period lodges in Vienna and other European cities also counted clerics among their members as well as the leading figures in literature, science and art.

Among the famous artistic talents of the era was musical composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (†1791). While considering himself a good Catholic and attending Mass regularly, Mozart had no hesitation in joining what he considered a beneficial and enlightened society and indeed Freemasonry played an important role in the remainder of his life. He was initiated in the Strict Observance “*Benevolence Lodge*” (*Zur Wohltätigkeit*) on December 14th, 1784. Later, his father also joined the Craft. Mozart was a frequent visitor to Prague and on several occasions he attended meetings of Lodge “*Wahrheit und Einigkeit zu den drei gekrönten Säulen*”. Most of his friends and connections in Prague were prominent aristocrats and Freemasons.

The late 18th century was the golden age of masonry in Prague : more than 600 freemasons were active, which would have been about 1% of the population at the time. Frederic II of Prussia had been Initiated in 1738 and became the Royal Patron of the lodge “*Aux Trois Globes*” founded in Berlin in 1741, which later on developed into the Grand Lodge “*Zu den Drei Weltkugeln*”. Although Frederic II died in 1786, there is speculation that Joseph II had for some time been concerned that Frederic II wanted to use Freemasonry to influence politics in the Habsburg sphere of power. There is, therefore, uncertainty on Joseph II’s real motives in his relationship to the Craft but it is definitely known that there were Masons among his Ministers and Senior Advisors.

On the other hand, while membership was increasing, candidate selection seemingly became lax, the Craft accepted men who damaged the Order’s reputation, sometimes through unwarranted political incursions, and a crisis loomed. When apprised of the situation, possibly as a means of protecting the Craft or possibly because he felt threatened by the Masonic principles of opposition to absolutism, Joseph II felt it necessary to take action.

In 1784, the Provincial Grand Lodge in Bohemia and other lodges, except those of the Austrian Netherlands, were unified under the Habsburg Empire into six Provincial Grand Lodges. These comprised Austria, Bohemia, Galicia, Austrian Lombardy, Siebenbürgen (Transylvania) , and Hungary. One of Joseph II’s objectives by having a central Grand Lodge with its headquarters in Vienna was definitely to free the Order from possible foreign control. Further, in 1785, he limited the number of lodges in each Provincial capital to three and placed Freemasonry under government control. By the end of Joseph II’s reign, other than the Austrian Netherlands, there were only about nine lodges remaining in the Empire. Leopold II, Joseph’s successor in 1790, was somewhat tolerant of the lodges hoping to use them for political purposes. His reign, however, was a brief one lasting only from 1790 to 1792, being succeeded by his son Emperor Francis II.

While Emperor Leopold II had shown an inclination to adopt a “middle course” between Joseph’s reforms and Church demands, emperor Francis II was staunchly anti-Masonic and was persuaded that all secret societies, including Freemasonry, were working against him. Given this climate, lodges voluntarily closed in 1794 in Prague and the Craft was formally suppressed by edict in January 1795.

The ideas of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution were being propagated throughout the continent and the crowned heads of Europe were increasingly nervous. It is also interesting to note that during the same general period as Joseph II’s reign, Empress Catherine’s attitude towards the Craft in Russia was initially benevolent although she later took a more hardened position. Within the Austrian Empire, there were also reported “alliances” of Freemasons and Jacobins and the continual unease resulted in Francis II arresting several Jacobins in 1794-95 on the grounds of treason. Accused of being unduly favourable to the French Revolution, the Jacobins were said to constitute a danger to the Monarchy. Some were executed, some were imprisoned and

some later granted amnesty in 1802 but Freemasonry's image suffered a severe blow through the supposed Jacobin association.

The 1848 Revolution in the Empire caused Prince Metternich to flee and retire from politics to his countryside castle at Kynžvart (Königswart), near Mariánské Lázně (Marienbad). This is by the way the very location where our Lodge "*Goethe v údolí míru*" (*Goethe zum Tale des Friedens*) meets today.

Ferdinand I abdicated and Francis (Franz) Joseph ascended the throne, but he continued the ban against Freemasonry.

Politics always at the fore, through the Compromise of 1867 in Austria and Hungary more or less separated into two kingdoms, but with only one ruler, the Craft's situation was different in the two nations. There being no laws in Hungary against Freemasonry, the Hungarian Symbolic Grand Lodge of St. John was established on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1870 followed by a Grand Orient of Hungary in 1871. Curiously, therefore, if the King of Hungary (Franz Joseph) permitted the Craft in that nation, because of the differing laws the Emperor of Austria (Franz Joseph) did not.

In 1870 and 1872, Prague Freemasons formed "non-political" societies composed of members of Craft lodges and in 1909 a Bohemian Lodge "*Hiram zu den drei Sternen*" (Hiram at the Three Stars) was formed in Slovakia under the Symbolic Grand Lodge of Hungary which had been established March 21st, 1886, through a merger of the two Hungarian Grand Bodies.

While the authorities apparently knew of the lodge's existence, they tolerated it due to its benevolent activities. In Prague, while another "non-political" society was formed,

Bohemian Freemasons nonetheless participated in the Craft largely in Hungary or Germany. In the period immediately preceding World War I, a number of candidates from what would eventually become Czechoslovakia were initiated in the so-called "*Grenzlogen*" (Border Lodges). So Prague brethren, who became masons in Hungary or Germany or elsewhere, were eventually able to establish Hiram Lodge in Bratislava in 1909.

The aim of the founders was to unite brethren from all nationalities and religions in one Prague Lodge. Czech, German and Jewish masons would jointly build Hiram.

There were 42 founders, most of them initiated in Viennese lodges operating in Bratislava. Others had become masons in Saxony and Bavaria. There was also Bro. Siegmund Bohm, who was a member of Manchester Lodge No 179 in London and Bro Gustav Steiner, who was a member of Divigo Lodge No 30 in New York. The Craft being forbidden, these "Grenzlogen" had to remain located near the Border.

They counted about three-hundred Bohemian members by 1914.

Crown Prince Franz Ferdinand, the heir presumptive to Emperor Franz-Joseph was assassinated at Sarajevo on 28<sup>th</sup> June 1914, by a disgruntled Bosnian Serb and soon storm clouds and gunfire echoed over Europe. His castle and estate located at Konopiště (Konopischt) near Benešov (Beneschau), 50 km south of Prague, was transformed after the war into a museum and has become ever since a popular historical excursion destination for tourists visiting Prague.

World War I was a rather chaotic era for Czechoslovakia. In brief, it was a highly difficult period politically, culturally, and Masonic ally as well because after the war broke out, the death penalty was decreed by the Austrian military authorities on anyone discovered to be a Freemason. The sentence however remained theoretical and was never carried out.

The 1918 yearbook of the Supreme Council, AASR, of Italy (*Supremo Consiglio dell'Italia e sue Colonie*) headed by Sov. Gr. Com. Raoul V. Palermi 33° proves that already before the end of the 1914-1918 war hostilities a Scottish Rite Rose-Croix Masonic Body had been constituted as « *Capitolo Boemia no.77* » in Prague.

Under the then applicable administrative rules of the National Grand Lodge of Italy (*Gran Loggia Nazionale A.L.A. Massoni d'Italia*), the members in countries where Freemasonry was prohibited were not entered in the central register in Rome and lodges were identified by a number only.

The secret Italian lodge in Prague was known simply as lodge no. 40.

At the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian empire, fifteen Czech Brethren, who were members of border Lodge « *Hiram zu den drei Sternen* » in Bratislava (Preßburg, Poszony) decided on 26th October 1918 to create a Masonic lodge which would work in the Czech language and they choose the name “*Jan Amos Komenský*” (*Comenius*) for the lodge in honour of the famous 17th century Czech thinker and national hero.

The Republic of Czechoslovakia was born two days later !

The armistice ending World War I was signed on 11th November 1918.

About that time as well, German language Masons living in Karlovy Vary (Karlsbad) obtained a charter from the Grand Lodge «*Zur Sonne*» in Bayreuth on 28th October 1918 to constitute a Masonic lodge which they named « *Munificentia* ».

The Czech language Lodge “*Národ*” (Nation) was officially constituted in Prague March 28th, 1919, by Bro. Ugo Dadone, an Italian Scottish Rite Mason and admitted on the roll of the National Grand Lodge of Italy (Piazza del Gesù) on April 20th 1919.

In May 1919, Lodge “*Jan Amos Komenský*” (*Comenius Lodge*) received a letter from the Grand Orient of France in Paris informing that its application for membership had

been approved. The official charter was delivered on 28th September of that year at the hands of Ill. Bro. René Henry Besnard, 33°, French Senator who had been French

Minister of War from 1915 to 1917. Bro. Alphonse Mucha who had been initiated in Paris on 25th January 1898 but was still a fellowcraft twenty years later had been the Brother behind this achievement ...

Simultaneously, the group of German speaking brethren, who already had operated the fraternal circle «*Harmonie*» since 1870 in Prague and similar Masonic groups in Zatec (*Saaz*) and Liberec (*Reichenberg*) for half a century approached and obtained successively four charters of constitution from the Grand Lodge of Saxony (*Große Landesloge von Sachsen*) in Dresden.

On 15th December 1919, five more Czech lodges were created under the National Grand Lodge of Italy and on 29th December the six existing Czech lodges of Italian origin proclaimed the creation of the National Grand Lodge of Czechoslovakia (*Národní Velká Lože Československá*).

A number of Czech brethren who were under the Italian Scottish Rite Supreme Council then on 12th January 1920 proclaimed the constitution of the Supreme Council of the 33<sup>rd</sup> and last degree of the A. & A.S.R. for Czechoslovakia.

On 23rd October 1920, with eight founding lodges, the German language lodges erected their own Grand Lodge under the name "*Lessing zu den drei Ringen*" (*Lessing at the Three Rings*).

It is in this chaotic environment that Freemasonry was born in Czechoslovakia. Several Masonic Grand Bodies, were operating simultaneously in the same territorial jurisdiction, they were working different rituals in seven different languages, and there were constant frictions between the various rival Masonic groups. This situation was compounded by the complex aggregate of the new state and the several ethnic groups which composed it. Although the Czechs were in the majority, the country contained also large elements of Germans, Slovaks, Poles, Hungarians, Ruthenes, Jews and Gypsies, all with their own cultures and own languages.

The Supreme Council of the A. & A. S. R. for Czechoslovakia led by world famous art-nouveau painter S.G.C. the Ill. Bro. Alphonse Mucha 33°, was admitted at the Lausanne Conference and it was recognised on the 8th June 1922 by all the Supreme Councils of the A. & A. S. R. present or represented in Switzerland.

Lodge « *Comenius* » resigned from the Grand Orient of France in 1922 in order to join the National Grand Lodge of Czechoslovakia the status of which was regularised by its solemn consecration on 27th October 1923 by the "*Grand Lodge of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes "Yugoslavia"* » thus paving the way for worldwide recognition.

Grand Lodge « *Bohemia* » a small Grand Body chartered by the Grand Lodge called "*Freimaurerbund zur aufgehenden Sonne*" (*Masonic Union of the Rising Sun*) located in Nürnberg and 4 independent Slovak Lodges formerly under Hungarian jurisdiction joined Grand Lodge Lessing zu den drei Ringen.

Remarkable in the history of Freemasonry in Czechoslovakia is also the little known creation of several mixed gender lodges under the Dutch Federation of the Droit humain, among which in 1922 Lodge «*Dobrovský*» the only Masonic lodge in the world having ever been working in Esperanto.

Worthwhile mentioning in this respect also is the creation in 1931 of a short lived «*Grand Orient of Czechoslovakia*» which was absorbed in 1935 by the National Grand Lodge of Czechoslovakia.

The irregular status of Czech Freemasonry in its beginnings was progressively regularised. In 1930, the “*National Czechoslovak Grand Lodge*” was recognised by the United Grand Lodge of England with effect going back to 1923 i.e. from the date of its consecration. From the 1930’s onwards the Grand Lodge “*Lessing zu den drei Ringen*” and the National Grand Lodge of Czechoslovakia started to move closer and worked in mutual amity.

Between the two world wars, twenty six lodges were established by the National Grand Lodge of Czechoslovakia with some 1,500 members, while the Grand Lodge «*Lessing zu den 3 Ringen*» eventually had 35 lodges and a similar membership.

Total Masonic membership in Czechoslovakia had reached about 3,000 in 1938.

In August 1938, under the clauses of the Munich Pact, but without any consultation whatsoever with the Czechoslovak government, France and Great Britain handed over the Czechoslovak Sudeten border region to Germany hoping that this territorial concession would appease the appetite of German Chancellor Hitler.

As a result of this tragedy and fearing the worst for its future Czechoslovak Freemasonry went voluntarily into darkness in October 1938.

President Edvard Beneš, the Czechoslovak head of state, who was a prominent Freemason, resigned his office immediately after the Munich humiliation and went into exile to London, taking along with him the National Grand Lodge of Czechoslovakia, which was given a fraternal asylum by the United Grand Lodge of England and was allowed to meet at Great Queen Street during of World War 2.

Despite the solemn promises made by Nazi Germany in Munich only six months earlier, on 15th March 1939 Hitler attacked, invaded and had the remainder of the Czechoslovakia militarily occupied and governed by the German Army.

A fascist pro-nazi puppet government was installed in Slovakia, while a so-called protectorate was proclaimed by Germany over Bohemia and Moravia (*Böhmen und Mähren*) resulting in the de-facto integration of the Czech Lands to the third Reich.

Since the Gestapo had infiltrated our ranks and had managed to get hold of Czechoslovak Masonic membership lists, many Brethren who had remained in Czechoslovakia, were immediately arrested and imprisoned for being Freemasons.

Among those was M.W. Bro. Jiří Syllaba, professor of medicine, and son of Grand Master Ladislav Syllaba, who was held in captivity till the end of the war under unspeakable conditions at **Terezín prisoners of war who had attempted in escaping from POW camps**, (*Teresienstadt*) which had been turned by the Nazis into a prison and concentration camp for Jews, Gypsies, political prisoners, and

Of the total number of approximately 3,000 pre-war members of both Grand Lodges 34 percent are known to have been deported to Nazi prisons and concentration camps and over 17 percent died as the direct result of their detention. The number of Czechoslovak Brethren who succeeded in escaping Nazi persecution by reaching foreign countries (France, England, USA) is estimated at approximately 200 only.

On May 16, 1941 Brethren from twelve lodges under the jurisdiction of the “National Grand Lodge of Czechoslovakia” who had escaped in England, elected unanimously M.W. Bro. Professor Vladimír Klečanda as their Grand Master in Exile.

He authorised the creation of a new Czechoslovak Lodge in England to be constituted under the name “*Czechoslovak Comenius in Exile Lodge*”.

The leading representatives of the United Grand Lodge of England showed full understanding for the situation of the exiled Czechoslovak Masons. They therefore granted exceptional arrangements which in the history of English Masonry had never happened before. There had never been another Sovereign Grand-Lodge allowed to operate on the territory of the Grand Lodge of England.

On July 21, 1941 Great Britain formally recognised the Czechoslovak Government in exile in London headed by President Edvard Beneš. Two months later, i.e. in September 1941, the United Grand Lodge of England formally recognised the Czechoslovak Grand Lodge in Exile and its newly elected Grand Master Bro. Professor Vladimír Klečanda.

The first ritual meeting in Freemasons Hall in Great Queen Street took place on August 28, 1942. Twenty wartime meetings were held in Freemasons Hall in London. At one of the meetings of the Comenius Lodge in Exile over 70 visitors were present, many of them high ranking officers of English, Scottish, Irish and other constitutions.

Among the guests of the Comenius Lodge in Exile the Czechoslovak Brethren in London had the pleasure of meeting R.W. Bro. Sir Sydney A. White, KCVO, Grand Secretary of the United Grand Lodge of England.

Masonic lectures were regularly delivered in the Comenius Lodge in Exile, one of them at the meeting of March 12, 1943 with the title “Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk a Mason without Apron ?” Masaryk was the founder of Czechoslovakia in 1918 and was the first President of the Czechoslovak Republic. T.G. Masaryk, though not a member of our Order, had always shown much sympathy to its work and its aims. His son, Jan Masaryk, the foreign minister of the Czechoslovak Government in Exile in London, was an active Freemason.

According to both Masonic Journals, "*The Freemasons Chronicle*" and "*The Masonic Record*" in their issues in the years 1943, 1944 and 1945, the English Brethren admired the Czechoslovak ritual, especially the Opening and Closing Ceremony as well as the mystic chain during which one Brother addressed the Brethren in the chain. Another striking and peculiar feature noted by the English Brethren was when the Most Worshipful Grand Master was received in advancing to the Throne. In accordance with Czechoslovak Masonic tradition, he deliberately walked across the "tapis" or tracing board, an honour which he alone possessed. In Czech lodges, a piece of cloth upon which various Masonic emblems are depicted lies on the floor as is usually done in continental European lodges. The cloth is folded in half when the Lodge is not at labour.

Another interesting feature of the Czech ritual is that the lights of the Master and Wardens are lit with special ceremonial and the enunciation of the respective attributes Wisdom, Strength and Beauty. Many in England had the occasion to remember gratefully the inspiring example of fortitude in adversity and Masonic enthusiasm shown by the Czech exiled visitors and the valuable contribution they made in return for the hospitality offered by a number of demonstrations in English of the Czech old ritual offering stimulating interest in Masonic research and symbolism.

The mutual fraternisation and the friendship which so splendidly stood the test during the dark hours of the War yielded a rich harvest in the years after the war which has lasted until today. The exemplary Brotherly Love with which the English Brethren had come to the aid of the Czech Brethren would indeed form one of the most outstanding chapters in the annals of the English Craft" (cf. *The Freemasons Chronicle*, 30 Oct. 1943).

In the U.S.A. in parallel, 15 Czechoslovak Brethren in exile founded a Masonic club named "*The New World*" in 1941 with the approval of the Grand Lodge of New York and the permission of Grand Master Klečanda, while affiliating collectively with "*Golden Rule Lodge no. 770*" and "*Elbe Lodge no. 393*" in New York.

In addition, it is worth mentioning that the National Czechoslovak Grand Lodge in exile was recognised by the Grand Lodge of New York in 1943.

It is also necessary to underline that, after the war, in 1946, generous Masonic support came from the Grand Lodge of New York, the Grand Lodge of Louisiana and the Masonic Service Association to help the war-devastated Czechoslovakia.

Particular support in these dark days came from Ill. Bro. John H. Cowles, Sovereign Grand Commander of the Scottish Rite, Southern Jurisdiction, U.S.A, who had traveled on several occasion to Prague before World War 2.

American Masons arranged for packages of food, clothing and money totaling 10,000 US dollars to be sent. One of the very active masons in post war Prague was Pavel

Korbel, the uncle of United States Ambassador to the United Nations and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright (born Marie Jana Korbelová in Prague).

A first General Meeting of Czechoslovak Freemasons took place on 11<sup>th</sup> May 1946 in liberated Prague with the purpose to draft a new constitution and in the conviction that Czechoslovak Masonry had never ceased to exist both at home and abroad, but the Grand Lodge officially resumed its activities in Prague only a year later.

The constituent re-consecration of the Grand Lodge of Czechoslovakia took place on 26<sup>th</sup> October 1947 in the historical Colloredo-Mansfeld Palace in Prague, exactly on the anniversary of the day when the first Czechoslovak Lodge John Amos Comenius was founded in Prague just before the end of the first World War.

This General Meeting elected as new Grand Master the M.W. Bro. Bohumil Vančura, as well as two Deputy Grand Masters and 31 other Grand Officers. Among them were Brethren who had been imprisoned during the Nazi occupation, the Former Grand Secretary of the Grand Lodge of Czechoslovakia in Exile in London, the former Chairman of the Czechoslovak Masonic Club in New York, the first W.M. of the Comenius in Exile Lodge and others.

A minute of respectful silence and was then observed by the General Meeting to honour the memory of the Brethren who had passed to the Grand Lodge above, especially those who had sacrificed their lives from 1939 to 1945 in the struggle for the liberty or had fallen as victims of Nazi persecution.

The revived Grand Lodge voted to drop the “National” from its name in an effort to please the Slovakian Brethren and finally a motion was unanimously carried to transfer the « *Comenius in Exile* » Lodge from London to Prague.

The development of the reconstituted Grand Lodge was short lived because already in February 1948 a coup d'état secretly engineered in Moscow took place.

One of the unfortunate victims of this new tragedy was our Brother Jan Masaryk, the son of first Czechoslovak President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk who had been the Czechoslovak Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1940 till his death in 1948.

When his dead body, still dressed in his night pyjamas, was found on 10<sup>th</sup> March in the courtyard of the Foreign Ministry below his bathroom, the official 'investigation' concluded that he had committed suicide. Persistent rumours spread immediately after his death, that he had not killed himself but had instead been murdered by agents of the Soviet Secret Police, the dreaded M.G.B. (*Министерство государственной безопасности*) on direct orders issued from the Lubyanka Headquarters in Moscow.

And indeed in 2004 fresh crime forensic research was conducted by police, concluding that Jan Masaryk was indeed murdered. This was further corroborated in 2006 when Russian journalist Leonid Parshin revealed that it was Russian intelligence officer Mikhail Ilich Byelkin who had thrown Minister Jan Masaryk out the window.

At first Masonic lodges were allowed by the new Red rulers to continue to assemble, but progressively all activities of private citizens and associations were put under strict surveillance of the State Security Services (*Státní Bezpečnost* or StB).

Within months, anti-Masonic propaganda was distributed by so-called revolutionary committees sponsored by the Communist party. Freemasons were again vilified, some were arrested and jailed. Those who could, escaped to the West.

In 1949 the ordinary Grand Lodge annual communication had to be postponed due to increasing difficulties with the Communist regime.

A compromise was finally reached whereby the political commissars would remain outside the temple during the ritual opening and closing, but would be present during the remainder of the proceedings, which would take place while Grand Lodge would be at refreshment for the administrative reports, discussions and the elections.

On 20<sup>th</sup> March 1951 the Stalinist oriented politburo announced that Masonic lodges in Czechoslovakia not voluntarily closed by 1<sup>st</sup> April 1951 would be suppressed by the government, under a new decree prohibiting all "bourgeois" clubs, which were to be replaced by new organisations fully at the collective service of the proletariat.

An extra-ordinary Grand Lodge communication was called and by unanimous vote the Grand Lodge of Czechoslovakia was declared dormant and all lodges dissolved.

By the time of this sad event, which was only 3 years after its post WW2 revival, as the Grand Lodge of Czechoslovakia was forced again into darkness, Masonic membership in Czechoslovakia had increased to about 800 members.

Czech Masons who managed to flee the country and could emigrate to the United States after 1948 created various local masonic organisations over there.

The most important of these was the Czech Masonic Club of Chicago which alone had over 300 members at one time.

Two Masonic lodges were chartered in Germany under the GL AFAM especially for Czech émigrés during this period, Lodge « *Thomas G. Masaryk no. 957* » in Bonn and Lodge « *zu den drei Sternen no. 969* » (*U Tří Hvězd*) in Munich. The two lodges worked the standard A.F.A.M. ritual but in Czech language. Lodge T.G. Masaryk is still active in Bonn, but Lodge 3 Stars has moved to Prague.

When the Communist regime collapsed forty years later in 1989, there were only 28 Czechoslovak Masons still alive in the home country, but they had clandestinely maintained contacts during the whole period not only among themselves but also with the United Grand Lodge of England, via the GL of Finland, some of whose senior members took the risk to visit Freemasons living in Prague on several occasions.

In March 1989 a public appeal in favour of Freemasonry was published in the Prague newspaper “*Mladá Fronta*” containing a postal address at rue Cadet in Paris.

Over 2,000 letters of reply were received by the Grand Orient of France.

In September 1990, the first Masonic initiation in Prague, following the end of the communist era, took place during an occasional lodge, under the auspices of the Grand Lodge A.F.A.M of Germany, held at the Neo-Renaissance Žofín Palace, on Slovanský island, presided by W. Bro. **Oldřich** Stasiewicz, a Past Master of « *T. G. Masaryk* » Lodge in Bonn, and supported by 160 Czech Freemasons living in exile, who had traveled especially all the way from as far as Norway and Argentine.

This event was followed shortly afterwards by the re-constitution in Prague of Lodge «Comenius 17.XI.1989 » by the Grand Orient of France on 14<sup>th</sup> November 1990.

Three days later, on 17<sup>th</sup> November 1990, the Grand Lodge of Czechoslovakia was officially revived in Prague, receiving recognition from the Grand Lodge of England at the end of that same year and then from other Grand Lodges around the world. Prof. Dr. Jiří Syllaba, who had been initiated in 1926, had been detained in camps by the Nazis during the whole duration of World War II and had also remained in the mother country during the whole of the communist era, was elected Grand Master of the re-awakened Grand Lodge of Czechoslovakia.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> November 1991 the required number of Czech Brethren having been duly invested with the 33<sup>o</sup>, the Supreme Council of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite for Czechoslovakia was reconstituted by the Supreme Council of the United States, Southern Jurisdiction, together with the Supreme Councils of Finland and Italy.

In 1993, serious political difficulties caused Czechoslovakia to be partitioned into the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic. The Grand Lodge of Czechoslovakia was subsequently renamed into the Grand Lodge of the Czech Republic.

Later during that same year, on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1993, the Grand Orient of France constituted its three existing lodges in the country into a new sovereign Grand Masonic Body, the “*Veliký Orient Český*” (Czech Grand Orient).

The Grand Lodge of the Czech Republic on the other hand, which had historically been exercising effective and unchallenged exclusive territorial jurisdiction over Czechia and Slovakia since the birth of Czecho-Slovakia in 1918 continued to cover Slovakia without interruption after the 1993 political partition.

Being the prelude to full Masonic sovereignty, a District Grand Lodge of Slovakia holding under the Grand Lodge of the Czech Republic was constituted in March 2008.

In March 2008 as well, as the result and coronation of 5-year long discrete and patient efforts, a solemn Masonic ceremony was held in the presence of many international guests, including the Grand Masters of Germany, Austria and Poland, during which the

Grand Lodge of Czechoslovakia integrated the five lodges formerly holding under the Czech Grand Orient, plus one Slovak lodge which had worked till that date under the authority of the Grand Orient of France.

This long desired unification of Czech Freemasonry, resulting in the successful merger of the Czech Grand Orient into the Grand Lodge of the Czech Republic received general international approval and widespread Masonic congratulations, including from the United Grand Lodge of England.

The last important event in our recent history has been the constitution of the Grand Lodge of Slovakia on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2009 conducted jointly by the Grand Lodge of the Czech Republic, the Grand Lodge of Austria and the United Grand Lodges of Germany in the presence of over 20 foreign delegations and a dozen Grand Masters.

The United Grand Lodge of England had already approved the recognition of new Grand Lodge of Slovakia at its Quartely Communication on 11<sup>th</sup> March 2009, with effect on the date of its constitution.

Excluding Slovakia, which is now no longer under our jurisdiction, the Grand Lodge of the Czech Republic, counts now about 450 Brethren spread over 18 lodges.

The Grand Lodge of the Czech Republic maintains currently fraternal relations with 218 regular Grand Lodges on a total of about 250 regular Grand Lodges worldwide.

A further step towards improving its international relations and promoting the ideal of universal Freemasonry was achieved during the first quarter of 2010 with the approval by the Grand Lodge of the Czech Republic to establish of fraternal relations with the 36 members of the Confederación Masónica Interamericana (C.M.I.) and with 30 Prince Hall Grand Lodges in the USA, Canada and the Caribbean.

Convinced that the ideals of Freemasonry remain today as appealing as nearly three centuries ago and that many more young men in this country are worthy to receive the light of initiation and to benefit from the privileges of the Masonic Order, our main objective will now be to develop and expand Freemasonry in the Czech Republic.

Jacques Huyghebaert, Hon. G.M.

Grand Secretary for External Relations

Grand Lodge of the Czech Republic