30th Anniversary Gala Award Reception in La Grange, Texas

On Saturday, November 16, AFoCR celebrated the 30th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution with a gala award reception in La Grange, Texas, located in Fayette County, known as the "Cradle of Czech Immigration." The event, starting at 4 p.m. and attended by more than 130 guests, was held at the newly renovated Historic Casino Hall. The program, led by AFoCR President Tom Dine, included music by the famed Czech-born pianist Dr. Karolina Syrovátková, a video depicting the 1989 revolution, and remarks by Czech Ambassador Hynek Kmoníček and AFoCR benefactor Michaela Bakala. The highlight of the celebration was the presentation of the AFoCR Civil Society Vision Award to honor the founders of two major Texas-Czech institutions, who were introduced in specially-made videos.

Retta Slavik Chandler, a teacher by education and profession, founded the Texas Czech Heritage and Cultural Center in La Grange. In 1995, Czech-related organizations launched a statewide effort to create a center to preserve and promote the history, heritage, and culture of Texans of Czech ethnicity. The center began as just a single desk, but under Mrs. Chandler’s unflagging leadership grew into today’s sprawling complex, including the Main Center building with offices, a gift shop, conference rooms, a library, and a museum. All are surrounded by the ever-expanding Czech Village and amphitheater. In 2007, the center was honored with the Gratias Agit award presented by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The late Effie Rosene and her husband Bill founded the Czech Center Museum Houston. Effie Marie Sojak, a nurse by profession, was born to Czech immigrant farmers in the Rio Grande Valley and married Bill Rosene in 1953. Growing up, Mrs. Rosene knew little about her Czech heritage, but as an adult, she developed a passion to create an organization to showcase the historical achievements and heritage of Americans of Czech descent. The Czech Center Museum Houston was incorporated in 1996, and Mr. and Mrs. Rosene, working tirelessly, raised more than four and a half million dollars toward its construction and development. The museum, built in a beautiful baroque-style, was completed in September 2004 as the gateway to Houston’s Museum District. The museum provides unique educational experiences based on authentic objects, art, music, stories celebrating the lives of Czechs, Slovaks, and people of other cultures. In 2003, the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs honored the museum with the Gratias Agit award.

In his remarks, Ambassador Kmoníček emphasized the importance of the Czech diaspora to the Czech nation. Czech immigrants to America, as well as to Australia, comprise about 17% of the total Czech population. Texas contains a large number of descendants of Czech immigrants, and their extraordinary achievements are a source of pride to the Czech Republic. A true kinship flourishes between Texans of Czech descent and Czech citizens in the homeland. The Ambassador also emphasized the many positive developments since the Velvet Revolution of 1989. While the immediate expectations of young people involved foreign travel, jeans, and rock and roll, all have discovered that democracy is not a straight line but an ongoing process of development. The Czech Republic is flourishing on many fronts, but challenges remain. In concluding his remarks, as an illustration of the strong economic growth of the Czech Republic, he noted that the job of the Czech Ambassador had shifted from getting U.S. companies to invest in the Czech Republic to helping Czech companies that are now investing in the U.S.

Mrs. Bakala, who at the age of 18 years took part in the Velvet Revolution, spoke movingly about how that event had opened up a lifetime of possibilities and opportunities for her and her husband. Growing up, she could never imagine that she would be able to travel throughout the world and speak at an event in central Texas. While Mrs. Bakala rejoices in the progress so evident in her native country, she believes that the path towards full democracy in Central Europe remains challenging. There are still goals to be pursued with passion and commitment.

As the Casino Hall had no piano available, Dr. Syrovátková performed on an electronic keyboard. Yet, she rose magnificently to the occasion, first playing the national anthems of both countries and later delighting the guests with a recital of short Czech compositions.

Before a raffle of prizes, including a signed copy of former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright’s most recent book, AFoCR Director Robert Doubek made a short presentation on the history and achievements of AFoCR and the importance to its success - and to U.S.-Czech ties - of financial support from Americans with Czech roots.

The Czech-themed food for the event, in the form of delicious, hearty hors d’oeuvres, was prepared by acclaimed local chef, the Czech-born Pavla Vandaříková, and wine was provided by the Majek Winery of Moravia, Texas. The following companies and individuals provided financial sponsorships: USSI, Y Soft, Virginia and Mike Leech, Brian and Joan Vanicek, and Wellington Management.

AFoCR Executive Vice President Phillip Kasik led the organization of the event, and Brian Vanicek, Honorary Consul of the Czech Republic to the State of Texas, provided essential on-location assistance.
Serious scholarship concerning 20th century political change, international relations, and war, particularly in Europe, is a steady industry. Books concerning the re-evaluated past come off the presses as if they were part of a parade.

Five historical categories of perspectives predominate: 1) The causes of World War I and helpfulness of the Versailles Treaty; 2) the 1917 Russian Revolution and the role of Lenin; 3) the manifold but dithering approach of weakness in international relations as displayed at the Munich conference in 1938; 4) the Churchill-Roosevelt relationship in the conduct of the democratic alliance against the Axis powers in the Second World War; and 5) the rise of the United States as the globe’s preeminent power after 1945.

These top-run topics continually consume the interests of well-read citizens everywhere, particularly academics, journalists, commentators, and governmental decision makers.

For those of us serious about fostering close, strong bonds between Washington and Prague in the fields of allied security, economics, and diplomacy, we need to constantly reflect why western politics and diplomacy, especially that of British, French, and Czech leaders, failed Czechoslovakia in 1938, capitulating to Hitler’s demands in the name of “peace.” History’s meanings are to be studied.

Books on “appeasement” and “Munich” are multiple. American friends of both the Czech and Slovak Republics are well-versed in events of September 1938, in which Neville Chamberlain and Edouard Daladier tried buying off the aggressor Hitler, along with Mussolini — with territorial concessions in the name of avoiding war in Europe, or so they thought. And, bien entendu, that strategy failed tragically for Czechoslovakia and, less than a year later, for Poland, the Baltics, Russia, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, and France.

Having bought and quickly devoured a fresh study of this critical historical moment, I recommend The Bell of Treason: The 1938 Munich Agreement in Czechoslovakia by P.E. Caquet. A trained historian, fluent in English, French, German, Czech, and Slovak, and senior member of Hughes Hall at Cambridge University, Caquet's monograph contains newly discovered source materials from archives in Paris, Berlin, and Prague.

The appeasement narrative is well known. Both the British and French prime ministers, capitulating to the German chancellor at the four-party conference in Munich, returned to their respective homes to jubilant, welcoming crowds relieved that the threat of another European war had been contained. Chamberlain told the British public that he had achieved “peace with honour.” He went on, “I believe it is a peace for our times. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts. Go home and get a nice quiet sleep.” Opposition leader Winston Churchill rejoined, “You have chosen dishonor, and you will have war.”

Those of us intimately involved with Czechoslovakia yesterday and today know how on target Mr. Churchill was — and how futile it is to appease expansionist dictators, for example, in allowing present-day Putin of Russia to occupy Ukraine’s Crimea and Donbass areas.

What distinguishes Caquet’s exploration of events surrounding the agreement and the devastating aftermath of Nazi occupation of the Czech and Slovak lands, plus the death of democracy, is that the author looks at events not from a diplomatic point of view, but from the perspective of the Czechoslovak peoples and institutions. According to Caquet’s research, Chamberlain ignored the fact that Czech and French armed forces and intelligence services had secretly prepared together against a Nazi German invasion following the Anschluss (the Nazi annexation of Austria) in March 1938. In the summer of 1938, Germany was not as strong as the Nazi propaganda machine boasted and the Czechoslovaks, in concert with the French, were prepared to resist any invasion militarily. Both foreign ministries, led by the Czech ambassador to London, Jan Masaryk, assessed that the German armed services were becoming strong but had not achieved the level that they would two years later in invading the Soviet Union.

Most critically, the Czechoslovak army was stronger and grittier than was commonly thought. Based on a host of newly found documentation, Caquet provides details and charts of how extensively the Czechoslovak military, in concert with its French counterparts (and the Soviet Union), was prepared against a surprise attack by the Wehrmacht. He details the amount of land-based weapons systems, positioning of artillery units along the borders, stocked fortifications, reserve units mobilized, and the first-class armament industry in Pilsen and elsewhere. For instance, the Skoda works alone nearly matched the British arms output.

Both the British and French military attaches in Prague reported to their capitals in mid-September 1938 that the “Czechoslovaks (would) be able to hold the German army at bay for a substantial length of time, running into months.” Caquet summarizes, “While the British cabinet tended to be dismissive of Czechoslovak military capabilities, (Premier) Daladier and the French chief of the general staff... were of different opinion, and both men valued Czechoslovakia as a strategic asset.”

Examine Prag’s and Paris’s combined quantitative army strength just before the Munich disaster: Infantry – regular divisions, 55 versus 36 for Germany (France alone could deploy larger forces than the Reich); infantry – reserve divisions, 35 versus 36 for Germany; infantry-motorized divisions, 8 versus 4; armored or rapid divisions, 6 versus 8; cavalry divisions, 5 versus 1. Caquet adds that “Germany remained in 1938 only halfway through its rearmament effort.” A strong sentiment throughout Czechoslovakia, including Silesia, was: “We made the weapons, let us use them!”

In September 1938, however, key people in important positions of power in Europe accepted illusions of Czech weakness as fact. Authorities in Prague, Caquet shows, were Cassandras in their own country. They were the only ones who could see Hitler’s threat for what it was, particularly after the successful Anschluss in neighboring Austria, and they recognized appeasement as the disaster it proved to be.

The past often sheds light on the present; I believe that what Russia’s Vladimir Putin and his henchmen are doing today with monetary buy-offs of local leaders, character and bodily assassinations, election tampering, plus a wholesale program of informational distortions and disinformation in Central and Eastern European countries, is so dangerous that a concerted Churchillian pushback to the Kremlin is required by the U.S. and all of our NATO allies.

Otherwise, the bells of appeasement — treason — will ring again and again.
The Gibian Freedom Lecture was tailored to commemorate the momentous events of November 1989. Entitled “30 Years of Czech and Slovak Freedom,” the lecture featured both prominent Slovak and Czech speakers, an ideal way to celebrate the Velvet Revolution.

The Honorable Katarina Csefalvayová, member of the National Council of the Slovak Republic and Chairwoman of its Foreign Affairs Committee, provided profound insights into the diligent work required to create and sustain democracy in a post-authoritarian society. Stressing the importance of European and Trans-Atlantic ties, she provided insight into the challenges and successes achieved in Slovakia thus far. She emphasized the importance of the long-standing U.S.-Slovak and Czech-Slovak relationships.

The Czech speaker, Šimon Pánek, is co-founder and Executive Director of the Prague-based non-profit organization People in Need. As a student leader who was integrally involved with Václav Havel and others in leading the Velvet Revolution, he delivered a first-hand account of both the planning and unfolding of the demonstrations that led to the downfall of Communist rule in Czechoslovakia. Having played such a prominent role in this pivotal historical event, he allowed the audience to experience the intricate discussions of the revolution’s leaders. We heard how events unfolded rapidly, and we felt the tension and intrigue when considering the risks of such uncertain, momentous events. Pivoting his focus to recent decades, Mr. Pánek reminded us that democracy and society-building moves Czechs onto a difficult road that requires diligent attention to protecting freedom and democracy.

Since 2000, the Freedom Lecture has been annually sponsored by American Friends of the Czech Republic and Friends of Slovakia, with further support from the Czech and Slovak Embassies. As in the past, the Wilson Center in Washington, D.C. graciously hosted the event.

Jiri Maly Joins AFoCR
As New Director

AFoCR is happy to announce that Dr. Jiri Maly has joined the organization as a Director. Jiri is a senior business executive with over 20 years of operations, finance, M&A, and capital projects experience, successfully building, leading, and growing businesses in the defense, infrastructure, utilities, industrials, and natural resource sectors.

As President and CEO of a $100 million, 600 employee division with a diverse set of projects in the defense, energy and transportation sectors, that span the United States, Europe and the Middle East, Jiri has implemented comprehensive organizational transformations involving significant restructuring, consolidation of offices, and implementation of enterprise resource planning (ERP), health and safety, and financial management systems.

Prior to joining Louis Berger Services, Jiri served as an Expert Principal at McKinsey Company for sixteen years before transitioning to Managing Director of Global Infrastructure for CIBC Capital Markets. Jiri has worked with numerous clients to deliver multibillion-dollar capital projects while functioning as an integral part of senior leadership teams.

Jiri holds a Ph.D in Physics from the University of Chicago, as well as Bachelor of Science degrees in both Applied Mathematics and Chemical Physics. He also serves on the Transformational Infrastructure Advisory Board for the BuildCoin Foundation.

Visegrad Ambassadors Meet in Houston

Four ambassadors from the Visegrad countries met in Houston in November to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution and the fall of the Berlin Wall. The V4 Group is a cultural and political alliance of four Central European states – Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland –established for the purposes of advancing military, cultural, economic, and energy cooperation to further their integration in the European Union and NATO.

At the first conference, “Berlin Wall: 30 Years After the Fall,” sponsored by the World Affairs Council of Houston, Ambassador Kmoníček and his V4 colleagues spoke poignantly of their vivid memories from 1989 and the path toward democracy since that time. The second conference –“Energy in Central Europe: Conversation with Visegrad 4 Ambassadors” – was sponsored by the Center for Energy Studies, Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy. The four ambassadors engaged in a vigorous discussion about the importance of strategic cooperation in assuring supplies of natural gas for their countries, as well as the need to further develop energy-efficient nuclear power as an alternative to fossil fuels.
La Grange, Texas Gala and Award Presentations – November 16, 2019
(Photos by Jennifer Klanika)

AFOCR President Tom Dine with Czech Honorary Consul Brian Vanicek

Awardees Bill Rosene and the late Effie Rosene

Michaela Bakala, Marlene Malek, and Zdenek Bakala

Marilyn Kothmann, Kristyna Pellouchoud Driehaus, and Barbara Gibian

Clarice Snokhous, Robert Doubek, Mary Kasik, Phil Kasik, Patty Stack, and Joan Vanicek

Joan Vanicek, Janis Hrncir, Cathleen Noska, Marilyn Kothmann, and Brian Vanicek

Czech Ambassador Hynek Kmoniček

Susan Chandler, Grace Ann Wilhelm, Awardee Retta Chandler, Sarah Wilhelm, and Sean Ryan

Chef Pavla Vandivar

Michelle Olson and Marlene Malek

Mark Hermes, Manager of Texas Czech Heritage & Cultural Center, gives demonstration of old printing press to AFOCR visitors.

Marlene Malek, Clarice Snokhous, and Cecilia Rokusek
On September 26, the Václav Havel Library Foundation (VHLF) and the Bohemian Benevolent and Literary Association (BBLA) jointly sponsored a gala at the Czech Center in New York celebrating “30 Years of Freedom” since the Velvet Revolution in 1989. The special focus of the evening was the awarding of Ambassador Craig Stapleton and his wife, Debbie, with the Václav Havel Civil Society Award for their deep contribution to the enhancement of civic life. Craig Stapleton served as ambassador to the Czech Republic from 2001 – 2004, a difficult political era following upon the events of 9/11. His superb service in the Czech Republic was followed by his appointment as ambassador to France, a position he held from 2004 – 2008. Ambassador Stapleton has been a stalwart supporter of VHLF, as well as of AFoCR. The inclusion of Debbie Stapleton in the award gave formal, and overdue, recognition to the fact that an ambassadorship is almost always a two-person job, so vast and time-consuming are the responsibilities. Debbie supported cultural and civic life in both the Czech Republic and France and focused particularly on sharing American art with local citizens. She also sought to support children’s cultural development, particularly in art and music.

The gala was attended by AFoCR Directors Kristyna Pellouchoud Driehaus, Patricia Stack and Jan Smilek, along with their spouses, John Pellouchoud, Jack Stack and Angelika Smilek. The director of BBLA, Josef Balaz, is also a director of AFoCR. It is the goal of our sister organizations to be mutually supportive. The New York event was an enjoyable and successful step in that direction.

The recent exhibition at the Spurlock Museum of Work Cultures at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, presents a selection of paintings by the Czech and Moravian-Slovak artist Joža Uprka (1861-1940), whose work documents the folk life of Southern Moravia. This selection of paintings is on loan from the American collector George Drost, a director of AFoCR, who also serves as Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the National Czech & Slovak Museum & Library in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Drost, who lives in Arlington Heights, Illinois, was born in Brno in the Czech Republic and has been collecting Uprka artwork since the 1990s. He has amassed a significant collection in the United States.

The exhibit is presented as a collaboration between Drost, Lyric Theatre at the School of Music, Illinois Theatre, the Russian, East European, and Eurasian Center, and the Spurlock Museum. Active from the 1880s until his death in 1940, Joža Uprka is considered an artistic chronicler of the Slovácko region in southeast Moravia. According to Dr. Nicholas Sawicki, Associate Professor of Art and Architectural Design at Lehigh University, Uprka’s work has helped shape Moravia’s understanding of its identity and history. In his essay “Joža Uprka’s Modern Traditionalism”, Sawicki says, “Uprka took lifelong inspiration for his work from the ethnographic details and folk traditions of the Moravian countryside.”

Sawicki goes on to explain that throughout his career, Uprka experimented with a looser style of painting than his training at the Prague Academy of Fine Arts had allowed. As such, he became part of the first wave of Czech artists to employ these newer techniques. Along with several of his peers at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, Uprka formed an association for Czech artists in 1885 known as Škreta, which promoted a more creative and modern approach to artistic thinking. Uprka became known for his utilization of a bright and rich color palette. He used this to capture the beauty of Slováčko’s culture and dress, particularly the bright colors of the traditional folk costumes worn for Sunday worship, feast days, and festivals. Uprka also used his work to shine a light on the physically demanding nature of rural labor. Uprka’s art continues to stand out for its ability to combine respect for the traditions and history of Slováčko with modern artistic thinking.
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