Great Stories in Czech History

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Praha 5 - Jinonice

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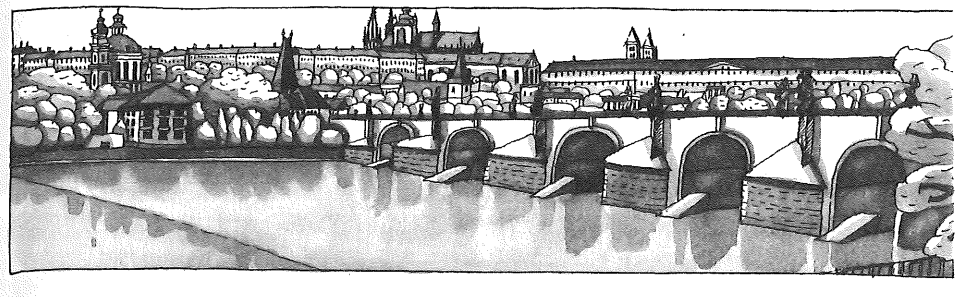
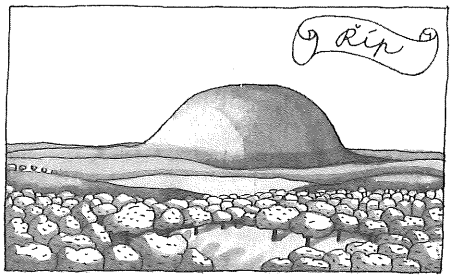
Content



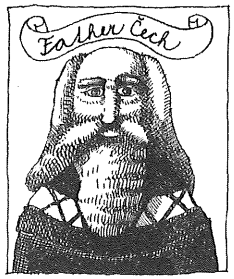
Why, When and How Did Prague Come into Existence?

The ravishing panorama of Prague Castle with the Gothic Charles Bridge in the foreground, regarded as one of the most beautiful views on the whole world, has become the calling card of the city and the whole Czech Republic. There can be few tourists whose stay in this small country in the heart of Europe does not include a visit to the capital and a walk across the River Vltava to admire the captivating scenery. The appearance of the city today is the result of the work of generations upon generations of architects, builders and simple masons, but what did Prague look like at the beginning of its life as it began to take form? To answer these questions we need to immerse ourselves, at least for a moment, in the mists of the long gone past, in a world of myths and legends, and also consider the archaeological research that has been seeking to piece the fragments together and reconstruct the origins not just of Prague, but of the whole Bohemian state. For Prague and the Bohemian state are closely bound together, and one could not have existed without the other.



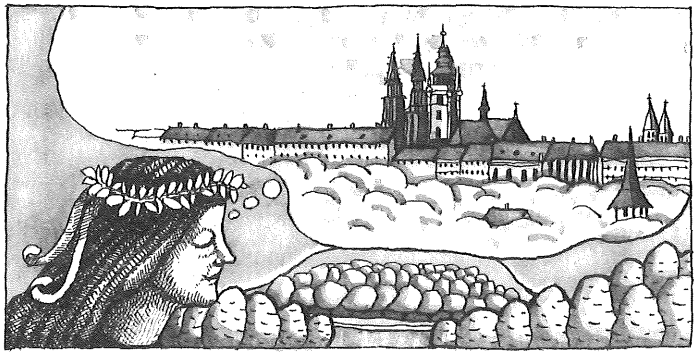
An old legend, dating from the beginning of the 12th century at the very latest, tells that in Pre-Christian times a people led by a primal patriarch called Čech (Bohemus) came to an empty land on the edge of Germania, and on Čech's advice

settled in the plains around the Mountain of Říp. This mountain, or rather hill, is a striking basalt volcanic formation that dominates the countryside north of the confluence of the River Labe (Elbe) and the River Vltava (Moldau), while a little further north the River Ohře (Eger) flows into the Labe. It was supposedly after the mythical primal father that the newly settled land came to bear the name Bohemia (in Czech Čechy). In fact everything was rather different. The Slav tribes who arrived in the course of the 6th - 7th centuries did not find an unknown and empty land, but an area populated by the predominantly Germanic population which had replaced the Celts roughly around the turn of the millennium BC/AD. The area began to be known in Latin as "Bohemia", after the Celtic tribe of Boiehomani. The Germans either retreated in the face of the Slav influx or over time merged into the Slav population, which meant that up to the 13th century the territory of Bohemia and Moravia was occupied almost exclusively by ethnic Slavs. Initially the Slavs probably did indeed originally settle what was roughly a circular territory around the sacred Mountain of Říp, which was evidently used for pagan ceremonies. But this was well before the development of a Czech state.



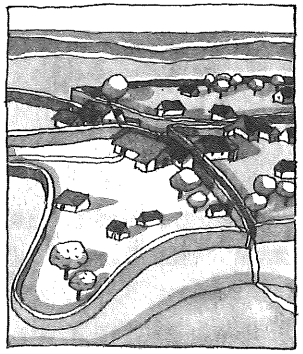
The actual birth of the state is the subject of another charming legend, which tells that the Czechs were once ruled by a woman called Libuše,

a pagan prophetess and sooth-sayer. Female rule, however, found no favour with the men who demanded a strong hand and the sober judgment of an energetic prince. Libuše told them that a suitable candidate was living in the North Bohemian village of Stadice. He was a ploughman by the name of Přemysl. He married Libuše and became the first Czech prince and founder of the dynasty that ruled the Czech state up to 1306. The new state needed a political and governing cen-



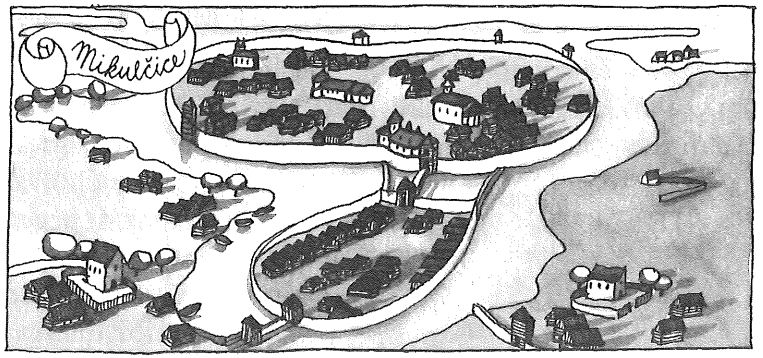
tre, and so with her prophetic gifts, Libuše went into a trance and identified a suitable place, which was a rocky, wooded ridge shaped like a dolphin above the Vltava. Přemysl and Libuše sent their people up to the hill, where in line with the prophecy they found a man carving a wooden threshold. There they founded a castle on the rocky ridge, and since threshold in Czech is *práh*, they called the new castle *Praha*, a name gradually extended to the settlement that grew up under the castle.

The core of the original legend, in which Libuše does not yet have a name (and appears just as a soothsayer), but which includes Přemysl and Praha, can be dated back through written evidence to the end of the 10th century, but it had almost certainly been handed down by word of mouth before. One persuasive modern scientific approach is to see the legend as a variant of a basic myth developed to explain the birth of the state. Libuše represents the period of the mother- or virgin goddess, identified with sexuality and nature, while Přemysl (as his very name suggests since *přemýšlející* means *thinking* in Czech), is the type of culture hero who brings progress, in this case the state as a form of civilised society. The Czechs are thus taking their first steps away from barbarism. The establishment of a central castle or stronghold, the equivalent of the cities of antiquity that were missing in Early Medieval Bohemia and Moravia, is another step on the path. Its culmination would be the acceptance of Christianity, with which the Bohemian state more or less caught up with the more advanced regions of Europe. Or at least this is how modern scholars interpret the meaning of the medieval legends.



With the arrival of Christianity we fortunately find ourselves on firmer ground. We are sure of the name of the Czech ruler who first accepted baptism and stuck to the new faith despite opposition from

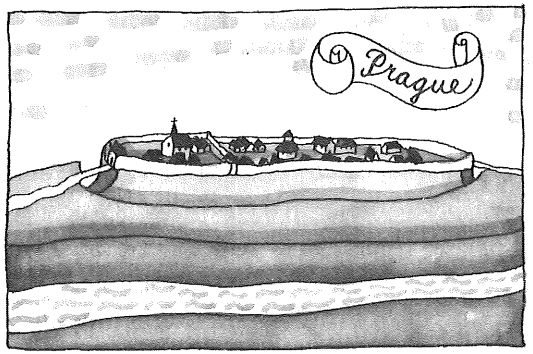
relatives, friends and subjects. This was Prince Bořivoj, first mentioned in 872, who died some time in the years 888 - 890. This first historically recorded Czech ruler maybe already derived his origins from the mythical Přemysl as a way of strengthening a power position for the moment limited to Central Bohemia. Bořivoj decided to adopt Christianity not from inner conviction but under the pressure of social convention. The Moravian ruler Svatopluk had allocated him an undignified place at a ceremonial feast because he was a pagan, and made him sit on the floor among unimportant people, allegedly swineherds. The Czech prince could not endure such a humiliation and preferred to accept the Christian faith immediately, together with his whole entourage. We also know that Bořivoj married Ludmila, who was later canonised, and that he founded the first two known Christian shrines in Bohemia - St. Clement's Church at Levý Hradec (north of Prague) and the Church of Our Lady at Prague Castle, which



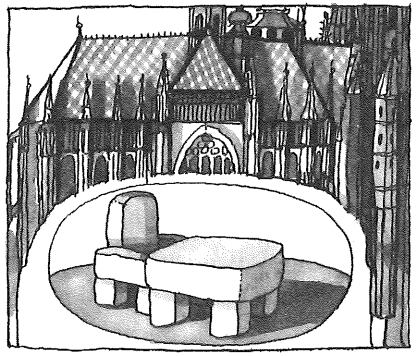
has been archaeologically excavated although it is covered by newer buildings. Neighbouring Moravia had been Christianised from the beginning of the 9th century, and so there were several times more church buildings there at the time. The foundations of small Moravian churches can be seen for example at the stronghold of Valy by Mikulčice or Uherské Hradiště.

The major role played by Prince Bořivoj in the formation of the Czech state has led some historians to believe that he also founded the Castle of Prague, i.e. what is today Prague Castle, under which artisan and merchant settlements, the germ of the later Prague towns,

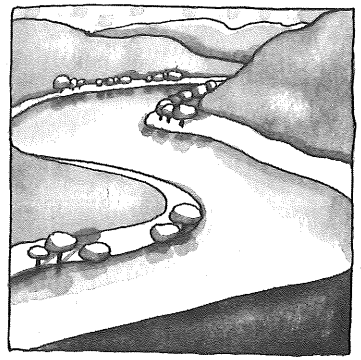
started to grow up on both banks of the Vltava. According to calculations, this is supposed to have happened in 882 - 885. If the hypothesis is correct, then Prague and the Czech state came into existence at almost the same time.

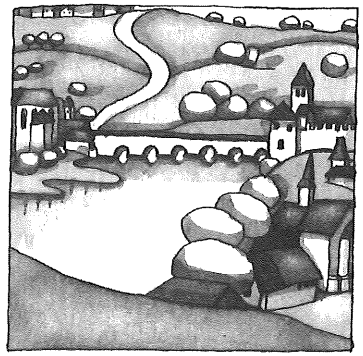


It is a seductively neat theory but one that has been undermined by archaeological research systematically conducted in the Prague Castle Complex. Excavations have shown that there was a Slav settlement right back in the 8th century on the plateau just north of the Castle, while findings in the castle precincts go back at least to 850. At this time the rocky promontory over the Vltava was already surrounded by a quite deep ditch, but not by continuous fortification walls. We can only guess what and whom the ditch guarded. One possibility is that a place of pagan cult significance, called Žiži, was situated in the middle of the central area of the future Castle. Another is that the stone throne on which (as we know from later evidence) the Czech princes would take their place after the assembly of leading men had confirmed thm in office, was already standing there earlier. We shall probably never know for sure. The mysterious place is evidently located under the presbytery of the Gothic Cathedral of St. Vitus.

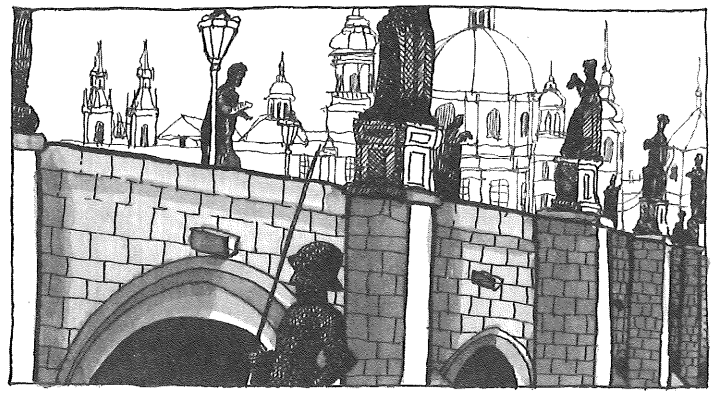


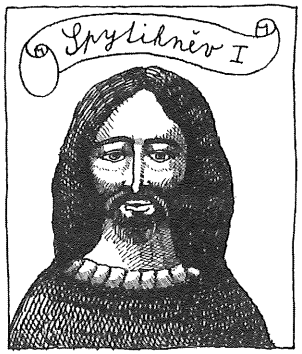
In any case, the promontory on which Prague Castle grew up was of great strategic importance. From this high point it was possible to guard and control the ford across the Vltava, which could be crossed without much difficulty at several points in the area now covered by modern Prague. South of the Prague basin the river flowed for several





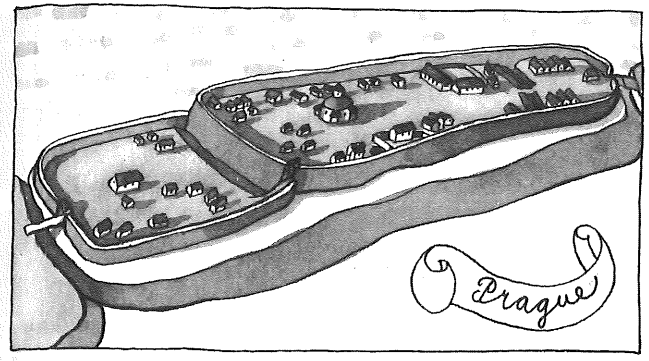
tens of kilometres through a long narrow canyon, and so the Prague fords represented one of the few opportunities for merchants, warriors and other travellers to get to the other side. In other words you would expect to find a stronghold and trading centre springing up here, and archaeologists have provided increasing support for this theory of "spontaneous" development. Their findings show that the first merchant and artisan colony did not exist, as it was thought until recently, on the Right Bank of the Vltava (in the area that is now the Old Town) but on the Left Bank. A relatively large and fortified settlement with a large marketplace was functioning on the site of the present-day Lesser Town shortly before the mid-9th century and was rapidly increasing in importance. As early as the first half of the 10th century the marketplace under Prague Castle was connected with the Right Bank of the Vltava by a wooden bridge, replaced in the 12th century by the Romanesque Queen Judita Bridge and after 1357 by the Gothic Bridge of the Emperor Charles IV.





From the archaeological research it therefore follows that Prague was founded neither by the mythical husband and wife Libuše nor by Prince Bořivoj, the first historically recorded Czech prince and member of the Přemyslid Dynasty. In any case, not even the earliest written testimony, from the end of the 10th century, contains any suggestion that Bořivoj built Prague Castle or the settlement below it, even though only a hundred years had passed since Bořivoj's death and the state was ruled by Prince Boleslav II, who would certainly not have hesitated to mention his great-grandfather's merits in founding Prague if he had actually done so. The beginnings of Prague castle and its undercastle settlement thus probably go back to the mid-9th century. Bořivoj appeared in history several decades later. As enthroned prince he undoubtedly gained control over the Prague basin and consolidated his power by accepting Christianity.

Bořivoj's work was continued by his sons, especially Spytihněv I. During the latter's reign a system of strongholds guarding the original Přemysl domain, the core of the Czech state with its centre in Prague, was completed in a circle roughly 30 kilometres from Prague. We can therefore say that at the latest from the end of the 9th century Prague was the unchallengeable political and cultural centre of the Czech state and after the establishment of a bishopric in 973 the seat of

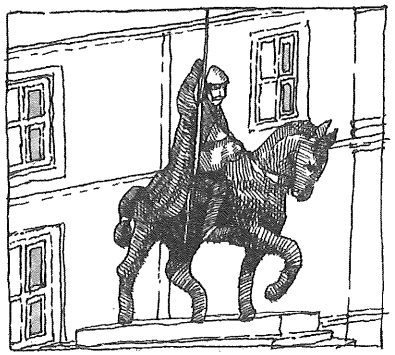


ecclesiastical government as well. It fulfils these functions to this day. In terms of sheer continuity, no European capital can compare with it. Libuše's vision of a great city whose "fame would touch the stars" has been fulfilled, although the city has had its share of suffering too. In one detail, however, the prophetess was mistaken. Experts now believe that name *Praha* does not derive from a wooden threshold, *prah*, nor with rapids, *prahy* on the Vltava. Probably it was derived from the Czech adjective *vyprahlé* i.e. bare or arid place, since the rocky ridge on which the castle is built undoubtedly fitted that description even if its northern slope was covered with mixed forest.

Bořivoj and Spytihněv's Prague scarcely resembled the modern metropolis. The original Prague Castle was surrounded by massive earthworks, and did not acquire stone fortifications until the 12th century. The princely palace differed from the other log houses only in size and furnishings, although the Church of Our Lady may have been entirely in stone, at least after Spytihněv's alterations. Prince Spytihněv I was buried in the church in 915, and three years later his wife, whose name we do not know, was laid beside him. The bodily remains of Prince Bořivoj, the first historically recorded Czech ruler, have not yet been identified. Ibrahim ibn Jakub, a Jewish trader from the fawaray Iberian Peninsula, has left us some unique impressions of Prague from the mid-10th century. According to Ibrahim Prague was smaller than a Spanish town, but bigger than a village. This was soon to change.

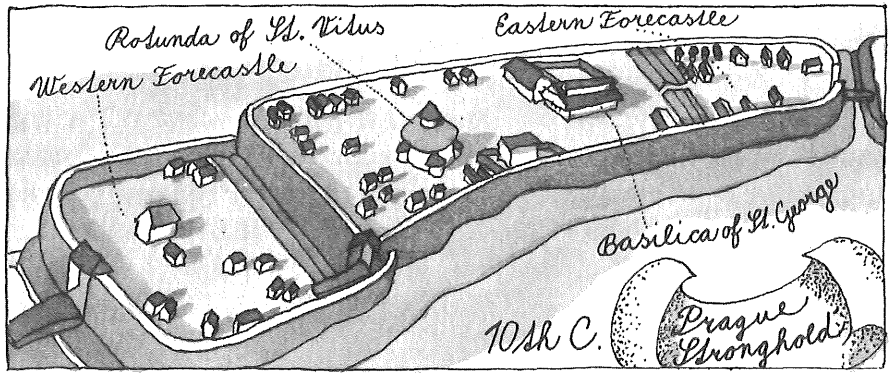
The Death of St. Wenceslas

In the centre of Prague on a long narrow square more like a Parisian boulevard than a square, stands an equestrian statue of the prince and saint Wenceslas, guarded by four other patron saints of the Bohemian state. It is not the first monument to Wenceslas to have adorned the square, since in 1678 J. J. Bendl had produced a Baroque equestrian statue that had stood at the opposite, lower end for a full two hundred years. Important meetings had often been held beneath it, including the mass that set off the tumultuous July Days of the Revolution of 1848. The present statue, from the workshop of the famous sculptor J. V. Myslbek, was erected in 1912 - 1913 in the upper part of the square, which had been renamed Wenceslas Square in 1848, and become the venue for political meetings in its turn. It was under the majestic statue of the Czech saint that enthusiastic crowds greeted the birth of the independent Czechoslovak state on the 28th of October

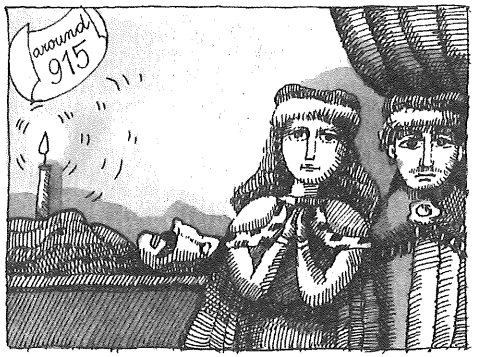


1918, and even in era of totalitarian Communist rule the monument would be covered in wreathes and bouquets each year on the anniversary of Wenceslas's death. It was near the statue that in January 1969 student Jan Palach set light to himself (dying some days later) in protest against the Soviet occupation, and some of the great anti-communist demonstrations of 1988 - 1989 also took place there. In short, the inhabitants of Prague have experienced many of their great historic moments, both joyful and tragic, under the eyes of the price, whose name is associated with an old medieval chorale which contains the moving appeal, prayer and hope for better times, "Saint Wenceslas! Do not let us perish nor future generations!"

To understand the popularity and importance of Prince Wenceslas, we need to go back deep into the past, to the early 10th century when the Czech state was still in the process of formation but already had



a political and cultural capital in the form of Prague. The Czech prince already had his seat at Prague Castle, still more like a fortified settlement, which contained his palace and several churches. Prince Vratislav I, founder of the Church of St. George, died around 915 leaving two sons not yet of age: Wenceslas (Václav) and Boleslav. A fierce struggle developed between the widowed princess Drahomíra and



her mother-in-law Ludmila, grandmother of the two boys, for control of the orphaned kingdom and the upbringing of the two boys. Drahomíra was victorious, coolly ordering the murder of Ludmila in the latter's stronghold of Tetín above the River Berounka. Her orders were carried out

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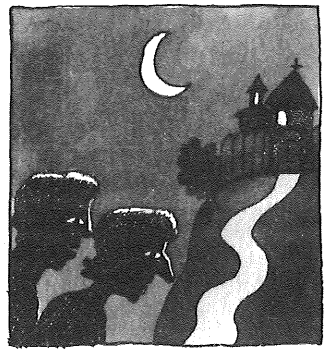
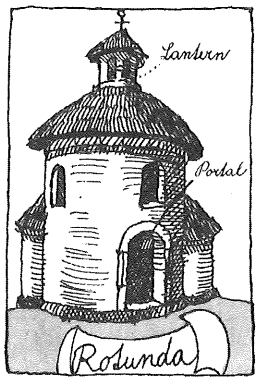
by two Viking warriors in her service, named Tunna and Gomon, who strangled the old woman in the night of 15th - 16th of September 921. Later embellishers of the legend claimed that they chose this method to ensure that Ludmila (later to be canonised) should not have a claim to sanctity on the grounds of having shed her blood for the Christian faith.



When Wenceslas, the eldest son, took over the reins of government, he had Ludmila's body brought to the Church of St. George at Prague Castle, where it still rests. Modern anthropological research has shown that Ludmila was a sturdy and unusually tall woman, and her robust genes influenced the physical appearance of several subsequent generations of the ruling Přemyslid dynasty. Male members of the line reached the then above average heights of 177 - 190 centimetres and their bodies were unusually robust, which in itself made for a degree of respect.

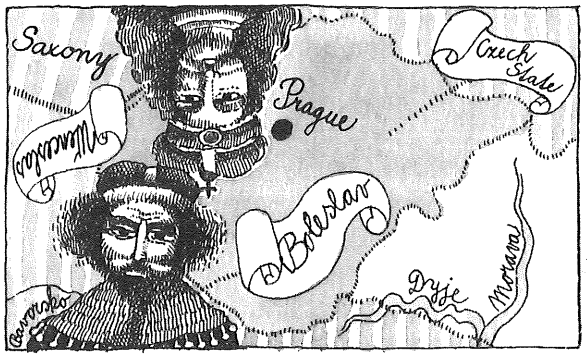
Detailed direct testimony about Wenceslas's style of government is lacking, and the legends compiled several decades later are not entirely reliable, since their aim was to depict the prince as an exemplary Christian, almost an ascetic, whose deeds prefigured his elevation to sainthood. Nonetheless, from the few scraps of evidence we have, the picture emerges of a prince who had a significant level of education, who sought to strengthen the position of the Christian faith and Christian religion in what was still a predominantly pagan environ-

ment but who had no hesitation about taking up arms to enlarge and consolidate Přemyslid holdings. He made a major about-turn in foreign policy, abandoning the traditional orientation of the Prague princes to Bavaria for an alliance with Saxony, at that time ruled by King Henry I, founder of the famous Ottonian dynasty. In fact Wenceslas had little choice in the matter; Henry forced him to co-operate by military intervention. It was as a sign of the new alliance that Wenceslas had the newly

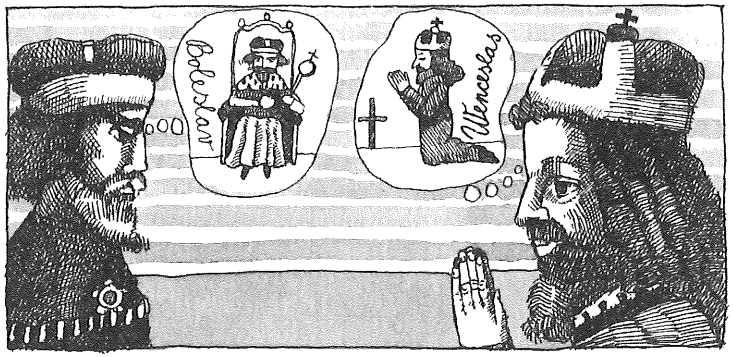


built church at Prague Castle (a rotunda with more than one aisle) consecrated to Saint Vitus, a saint particularly revered in Saxony at the time. He also received a precious relic from Henry as a symbol of alliance - an arm that had allegedly belonged to St. Vitus.

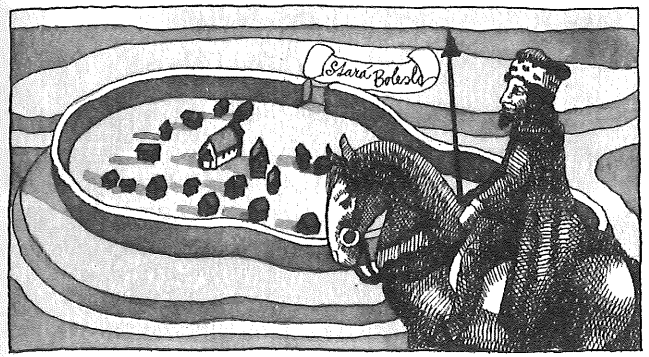
The reasons for the dispute that broke out between Wenceslas and his younger brother Boleslav, who controlled the area around the confluence of the Rivers Labe and Jizera, remain obscure. One possible explanation is that Boleslav disagreed with the change in foreign policy and continued to favour the Bavarians. This theory receives some support from his later behaviour, since after Wenceslas's death he waged a fourteen-year war with Saxony, although in the end he still had to submit to the King and later Emperor Otto I. There



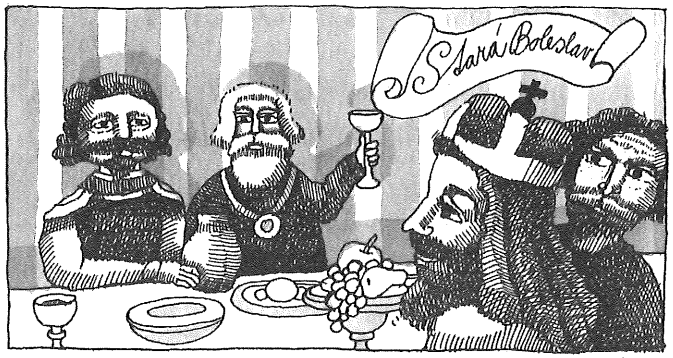
is no serious foundation at all to the old theory that Bohuslav represented the waning forces of paganism while Wenceslas stood for victorious Christianity. From the end of the 9th century all the Bohemian rulers were Christians. It is more likely that Boleslav was hungry for power. Wenceslas was only a few years his elder and Boleslav had very limited prospects of inheriting the stone throne of the Czech princes in the course of nature. As a final probable factor we should also mention the interests of Boleslav's friends and the members of his military entourage, who knew that if their lord came to power they would immediately get more powerful and prestigious social positions, offices, and opportunities to amass wealth. It is easy to imagine them adroitly fanning the fires of the natural tension and rivalry common among brothers.



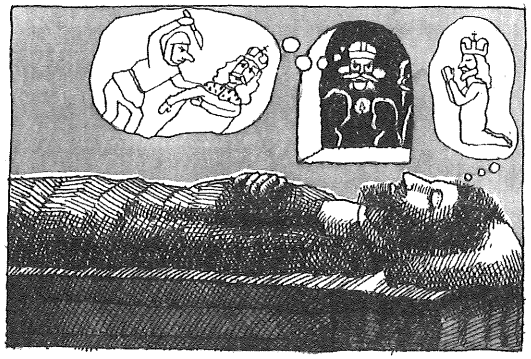
Whatever the motives, the disputes came to a head on Monday the 28th of September, probably in the year 935 according to most historians today, although we cannot entirely exclude the possibility that it



was 939, the year given in many recorded legends from the last years of the 10th century onwards. Probably on the 22nd of September, Boleslav had invited Wenceslas to his stronghold (now Stará Boleslav), to join him in celebrating the Feast of St. Cosmas and St. Damian, the Christian martyrs to whom the local church had been consecrated. The prince accepted, despite the fact that he may have suspected a plot (as some legends suggest), and possibly this was one reason why he set out for his brother's accompanied by militarily adept members of his entourage. On Sunday the 27th of September a grand banquet was held at Boleslav's stronghold. The plan had been for Boleslav's people to make a surprise attack on Wenceslas and his companions while the feast was still going on, to kill them all and above all the prince himself. This was foiled because while Wenceslas dined

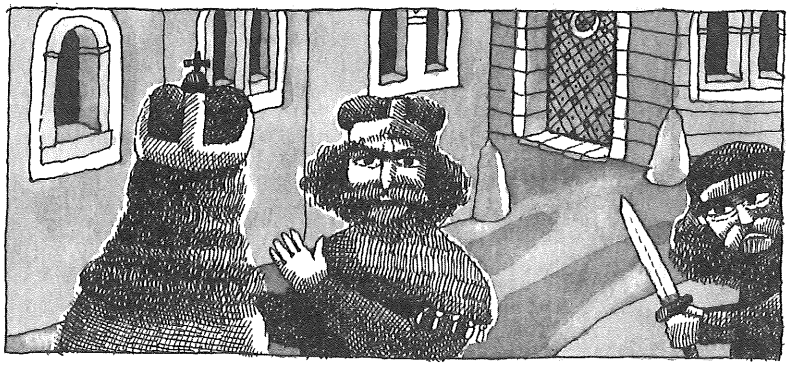


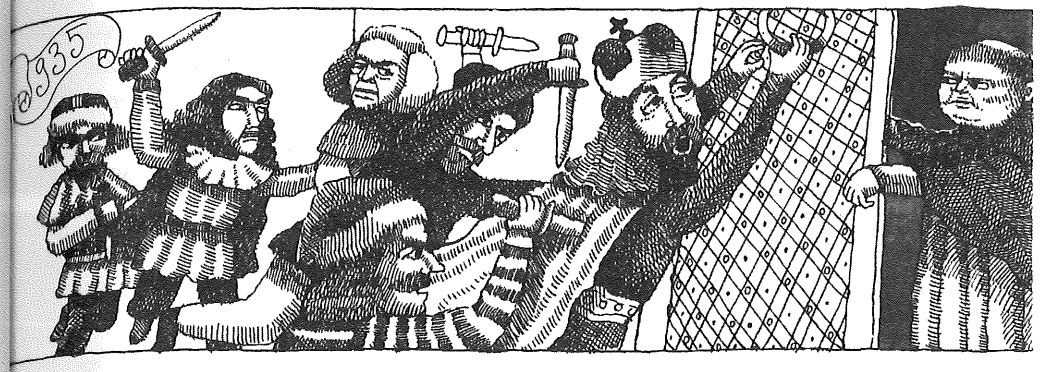
and proffered toasts, his entourage behaved with unexpected restraint and remained sober, so providing no opportunity for an assault. It is another detail suggesting that news of the conspiracy had



already reached Wenceslas's ears. The conspirators had now to change their strategy. When Wenceslas had gone to bed, Boleslav called a secret meeting, which was evidently attended by his chaplain as well. They all knew that the Czech prince liked to attend the morning service regularly, and laid their new plans accordingly.

Scarcely had the bells rung from the castle church in the early morning, than Wenceslas left his bed and hurried to the shrine, although it was not yet fully light. Boleslav met him on the way. An apparently ordinary, polite conversation suddenly turned into a quarrel, and Boleslav drew his sword. At the critical moment, however, his nerve failed him and he could not bring himself to run his brother through. Wenceslas exploited the moment of hesitation and fled, while Boleslav called up his men, who were hidden in a nearby corner. Wenceslas vainly sought sanctury in the church, believing that the assassins would not defile a holy place with murder. If we are to believe the later colourful accounts, he was cruelly mistaken. The



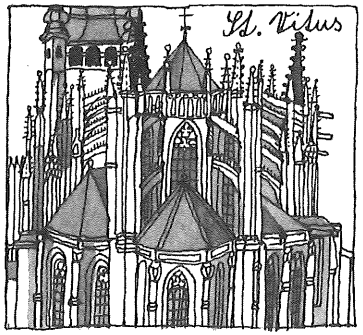


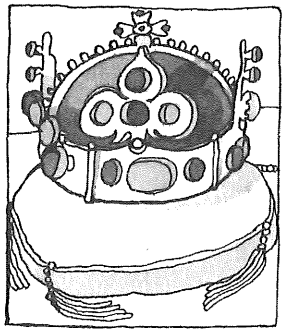
priest, who was involved in the plot, slammed the door in his face, and Wenceslas, outnumbered, perished by the church wall, bleeding from the wounds inflicted by Boleslav's henchmen. With the prince dead, their task was still far from over. They immediately had to slaughter the members of Wenceslas's entourage, his friends and intimates, including children. The reason was simple. Despite official Christian principles most of the inhabitants of Bohemia at the time considered the blood feud to be the usual means on non-judicial revenge, and the victors feared a spiral of murder if they left anyone alive.

Although tainted with fratricide, Boleslav proved a capable ruler. He married his daughter Doubravka to the first historically known Polish ruler Mieszko, another of his daughters Mlada founded the first Czech convent at the Chruch of St. George on Prague Castle, and the prince himself helped Otto I to stem the onslaught of the nomadic Hungarian tribes. Boleslav was ostentatious in his expressions of regret and penitence for the death of his brother. Three years after the

murder he had Wenceslas's remains brought from Boleslav and buried in the Church of St. Vitus. Later, when he was obtaining a bishopric for Prague, a patron saint had to be chosen for the diocese and the choice fell on Wenceslas, who was proclaimed a saint for the occasion. We do not know whether this happened in 973, when the Bishopric of Prague was set up just a year after Boleslav's death, or shortly beforehand. It was precisely at this period that several legends appeared in honour of the new saint, whom the inhabitants of the Czech state started to venerate as a heavenly protector and patron, the eternal ruler of the Bohemian Lands and guarantee of their survival. From the 10th century Wenceslas's face and figure appear on Czech coins and later on the seals of the Czech princes and kinds as well, while from the 12th century the Chorale of St. Wenceslas became in effect the Bohemian state anthem.

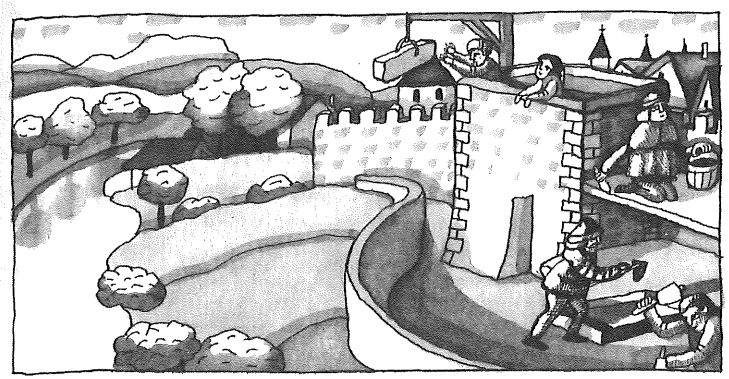
In the 14th century Wenceslas was to find a powerful supporter in the King of Bohemia and Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV, who inherited Přemyslid blood on his mother's side and was originally christened with the martyr's name. Replacing the older church, the great monarch raised the massive Gothic Cathedral of St. Vitus, centre of what was now the Archbishopric of Prague, over Wenceslas's tomb. He then had the saint's skull placed in a jewelled casket, placing on the brow the new Crown of St. Wenceslas, diadem of the Kings of Bohemian Lands. Henceforward St. Wenceslas would be considered the eternal ruler of the Bohemian state, and the true owner of a crown that he merely lent to his successors on the throne. It is a thought worth remembering for a moment when we step into the dazzling Chapel of St. Wenceslas in St. Vitus's Cathedral.



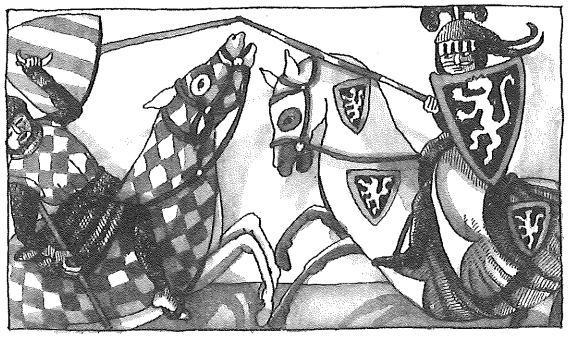


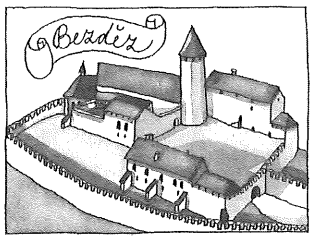
The Rise and Fall of Přemysl II Otakar

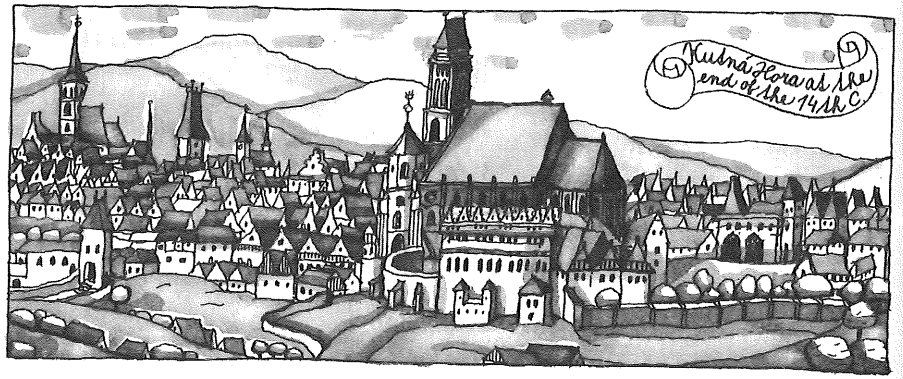
From the beginning of the 13th century the Bohemian state was making great strides towards becoming a country as advanced as its western neighbours. Colonisation of its large and untouched woods was underway, and the monarch, nobility and church were founding



towns as centres of crafts and trade. Tens of thousands of Germans were flowing into Bohemia and Moravia, driven Eastwards from their homeland by population pressure, while the culture of chivalry was taking root in elite society, and finding expression in the building of stone castles. This unprecedented transformation, which for centuries determined the character of the Czech Lands, was funded by abundant deposits of silver in the belt between the town of Jihlava and the more famous Kutná Hora, founded somewhat later. It was





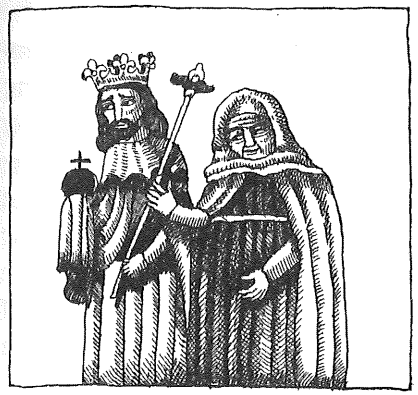


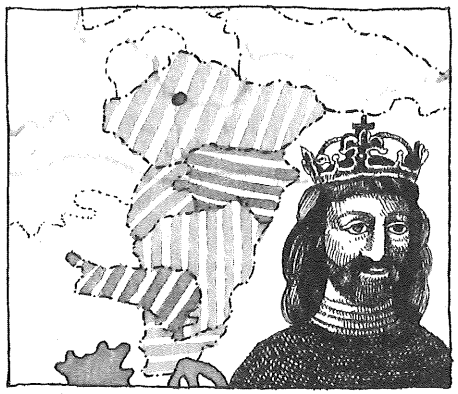
thanks to silver, too, that the Bohemian state developed major ambitions as a regional power. The first step was a matter of formal prestige and legal status. The Czech princes of the Přemyslid dynasty were dissatisfied with the position of mere prince, and thanks to the efforts of Přemysl I Otakar in 1198 - 1212 they managed to obtain the hereditary title of king. As one of the youngest European kingdoms, the Bohemian state then looked for more material ways to advance its interests and expand its influence.

Přemysl II, known outside the Slav world like his grandfather under the name Otakar, was the very embodiment of this self-confident trend. In the chronicles he appears at the age of fourteen, in line with the period's idea of coming of age. There would be nothing remarkable about the fact if the energetic youth, governing Moravia from 1247, had not lent his support to a rebellion of discontented Bohemian noblemen against his own father, King Wenceslas I. The king overcame the rebels after a few months and taught the young Přemysl a hard lesson, isolating him for several weeks in one of his strong castles.

Long-term hostility between the king and prince was impossible, however, if only because

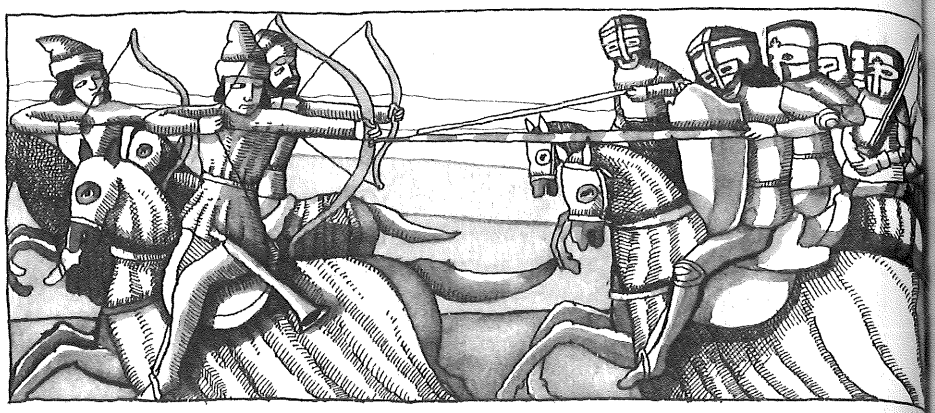
Přemysl remained the only heir to the crown of Bohemia. The ageing Wenceslas I also saw in his son a way of acquiring the Austrian Lands, where the male line of the old ruling family of Babenbergs had just died out. As a royal son Přemysl had to make a personal sacrifice and at nineteen marry the very much older Duchess Margaret of Babenberg. In this way he legitimated his control of the Austrian Lands, where he had shortly beforehand forced the nobility to acknowledge his overlordship by military might. After his father's death in 1253, Přemysl assumed government in the Kingdom of Bohemia as well, but his taste for aggressive military exploits was undiminished. On the other hand,





he first had to strengthen his international image. An essential part of his skilful self-promotion was the organisation of a crusade to the Baltic Lands, where the Prussian tribes were continuing to resist the Christianisation. Here, in East Prussia, Přemysl founded a town that he called Königsberg, in Czech Královec. Today it is Kaliningrad, situated on a strategically important territory that since 1945 has been part of the Russian Federation.

Přemysl II had his eye on Styria, likewise part of the Babenberg inheritance. The Hungarian King Béla IV, the Bohemian king's greatest rival in Central Europe, had acquired control over this Alpine dukedom but the Styrian nobility and the nobility of the surrounding Alpine regions resented Hungarian rule and joined their hopes with Přemysl. War between the Bohemian and Hungarian monarchs was inevitable. In July 1260 its result was decided by the Battle of Kressenbrunn on the Austrian side of the lower reaches of the River



Morava. Centuries later this event can still serve as a textbook example of the chivalric organisation and perception of battle, since the two rivals agreed on the conditions of engagement and genuinely intended to keep to them. Přemysl's Czech and Austrian warriors allowed the Hungarian troops to cross to the Right Bank of the Morava, where the opposing armies were supposed to take up their positions against each other and fight according to binding rules. On neither side, however, did it prove possible to control the passions of men thirsty for a fight, and so the battle started as a spontaneous clash between troops of the Czech nobility and the Hungarian light cavalry and spread from there. According to a legend of the time the Czech patron saint Wenceslas appeared in the sky above the Czech advance guard and ensured victory by assisting with his own weapons. Přemysl II Otakar added Styria to his holdings and later, despite a continuing war with the Hungarian Lands, took Corinthia and Carniola (the greater part of what is today Slovenia with the town of Lubljana). In the region of Pordenone in Italy his holdings symbolically reached the sea.

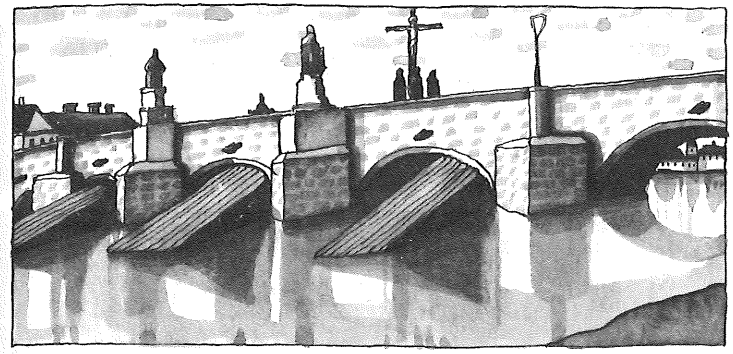
The Bohemian monarch, whose military might and wealth led chroniclers to nickname him "king of iron and gold", now held sway over a huge area from the Krkonoše Mountains through the Alps to the Adriatic. His chance of maintaining these lands depended not just on their internal cohesion and the international configuration, but also on one important but rather overlooked condition. The king needed a legitimate male heir who could continue in his work.

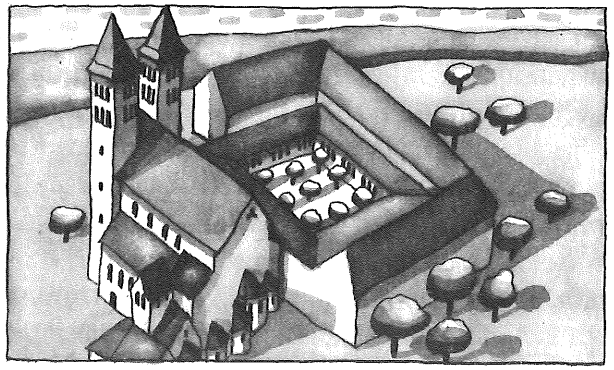
Otherwise it would take only an unforeseeable illness, a fall from a horse or death on the battlefield, and the laboriously accumulated territories would instantly fall apart. Unfortunately, for a long time, the question of begetting an heir was a sore point with Přemysl, and indeed a nightmare. Since success was out of the question with the elderly and infertile Margaret of Babenberg, she allowed him to live with her court lady Agnes of Kuenring. The girl, who attracted attention with her unusual hairstyle, produced several children in quick succession, among them a son Mikuláš who later

became the Duke of Opava (von Troppau, Troppauer), but could not of course become King of Bohemia. Clear proof of Margaret's infertility forced the Pope to dissolve her union with Přemysl. The Czech king then took as wife the young, beautiful and

passionate princess Kunhut, grand-daughter of Béla IV, although this failed to achieve a stabilisation of relations with Hungary and an heir to the throne was born only after ten years of marriage. He was christened Wenceslas.

At the time of the heir's birth, Přemysl's star was at its zenith. In 1271 there was no power in Central Europe to threaten the position of the King of Bohemia, although the new King of Hungary Stephen V certainly tried. Přemysl's apparently unshakeable position was enhanced by the way in which he fulfilled the contemporary ideal of the king-knight. Although the king was not a tall man (he measured around 168 centimetres), his contemporaries admired his strong athletic figure, physical resources, authoritative manner and his royal court, closely linked to German language culture. His patronage of numerous minnesingers, singing the praises of Přemysl's chivalric virtue and systematically contributing to his positive image, was not simply the result of the political linkage of the Bohemian and Austrian Lands. German culture, through which the cultural stimuli of France and Italy reached Central Europe, had been fashionable in the circles of the Czech social elite for several decades. Furthermore, there was an expanding German speaking population in Bohemia and Moravia, especially in the new established Bohemian and Moravian towns, even if this was not always to the delight of the original Slav ethnic community. The birth of new towns, castles and monasteries was sometimes dictated by the necessity to create trade and political links between Bohemia and Moravia. The town of Písek (with the oldest surviving stone bridge in Bohemia) was founded on the route from Prague to the Danube, for example, as well as the town of České Budějovice, which still boasts the largest of Bohemian squares, significantly named after Přemysl. The foundation of the Cistercian monastery of Zlatá Koruna [Golden Crown], near Český Krumlov is also associated with the king.



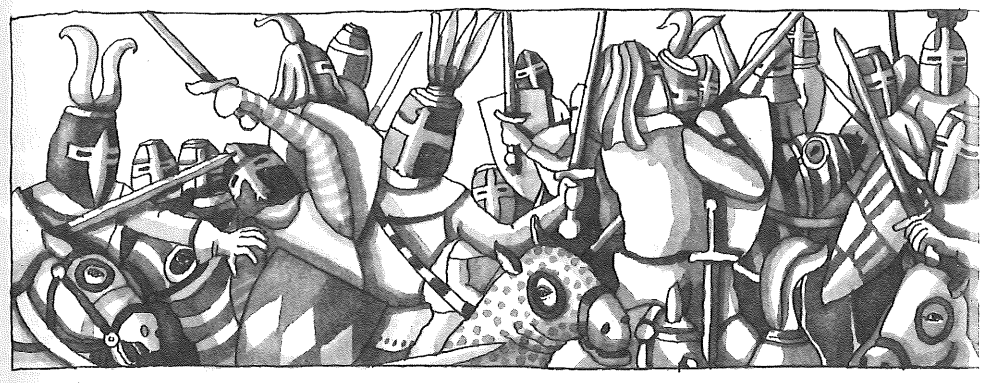


At the summit of his fame it became clear how much Přemysl needed the crown of the King of the Romans, which would legitimise his path to imperial office and consolidate his international authority. The Bohemian king had cautiously sounded out this possibility several times, but had always discovered that the Rhineland electors, the

majority in the seven-member collegium, would not give their votes to a candidate from the eastern reaches of the Empire, still regarded as relatively uncivilised. Since the mid-13th century there had been no ruler in the German area capable of imposing more order on political life, and this was one of the main reasons why the sphere of influence of the Bohemian King had grown so huge and extended to the Austrian and Alpine Lands. An authoritative Holy Roman Emperor would scarcely have permitted such a development.

This became apparent as early as the autumn of 1273, when the elecors chose as new King of the Romans Count Rudolf Habsburg, a tall, stringy and elderly man, whose family possessions lay on what is today the French-German-Swiss borders and in Switzerland. Přemysl was galled by the choice, and wrote to the Pope that the electors had chosen a "pauper", and made a mockery of the royal majesty and the Empire. Perhaps he sensed that in fact Rudolf was the kind of authoritative antagonist whose earlier absence had been a condition for his rise. One of the first measures Rudolf took was to issue a decree in which he demanded the return of all lands and goods that had not been granted to their holders in fief by the Holy Roman Emperors since 1245. This move was aimed principally at Přemysl. The King of Bohemia was supposed to return the Austrian and Alpine Lands to Rudolf as well as Chebsko (Egerland). When he refused to comply, the Habsburg issued an anathema against him. (Acht)

Rudolf's bold and skilful approach undermined Přemysl's position. In a relatively short time most of the nobles in the Alpine and Austrian areas had rallied behind the Habsburg. The King of Bohemia was unable to avoid a humiliating scene when in November 1276 and in May 1277 he had to give up all his territorial gains if he wanted to keep his rights to rule the Czech Lands. The proud monarch, against whom a section of the Czech nobility was rebelling as well, was not reconciled to the defeat. He embarked on a life or death struggle.

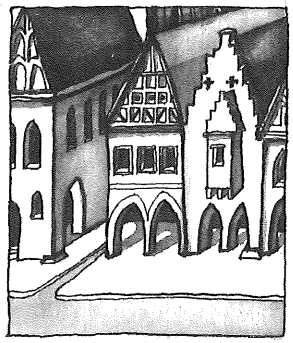


He waged his last battle on Friday the 26th of August 1278 by the Austrian village of Dürenkrut on the Moravian Field. Against his Czech warriors stood Rudolf's forces from Austria, the Alpine lands, Southern Germans and reinforcements from Hungary. Although Rudolf fell from his horse in the course of the fray, he could rejoice in victory. The result of the battle was decided by the attack of a group of knights from the reserve, evidently in breach of the rules of knightly warfare. At that moment Přemysl knew that all was lost. The life of the wounded Czech king was ended by the blow of a sword or axe. It split the ruler's skull almost precisely in two. The Battle of the Moravian Field determined the fate of Central Europe for centuries to come. It halted the expansion of the Bohemian state towards the south once and for all, while the Habsburgs now held the Austrian Lands, Corinthia, Carniola and Styria right up until 1918.

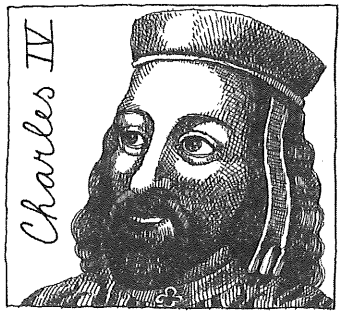
After the battle all kinds of legends appeared, as they always do. In Bohemia it was said that some nobles had betrayed Přemysl II Otakar, and this version still lives on, although it is contradicted by the historical facts. The victor Rudolf was irritated by a tale that the Bohemian King had not perished, and so had his rival's embalmed remains publicly displayed. In December 1976, when scientists opened Přemysl's Gothic tomb in St. Vitus's Cathedral, they were amazed to find the king's bones and split skull with a funerary crown wrapped in material. Most of the skull had disintegrated into dust, demonstrating the force of both the mortal blow and the old wisdom on the fleeting nature of temporal glory.

The Four Wives of Charles IV

On Friday the 14th of May 1316, in one of the fine houses on Prague Old Town Square, royal parents were blessed with the birth of a boy who was to become the most famous European ruler of the Late Middle Ages. On the wishes of his mother Eliška (Elizabeth)



Přemyslovna and the Bohemian nobility, he was christened Václav (Wenceslas). It had been the name of Eliška's father and her brother, whose death on the 4th of August 1306 had extinguished the ruling Přemyslid dynasty in the male line. The winner that had emerged from struggles over the Bohemian throne lasting several years was Eliška's husband John, son of the Count of Luxembourg and Holy Roman Emperor Henry VII.



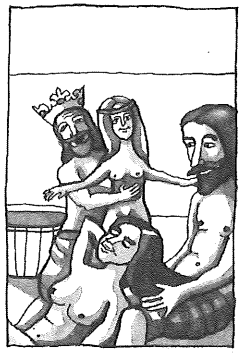
The temperamental and very short-sighted John of Luxembourg, four years younger than his bride, had come all the way from Paris where he had grown up at the royal court, to a distant, unknown country, rough and unsophisticated by French standards. He didn't know the language of most of the inhabitants, Czech, but he could speak German, which sufficed at least in Prague and the larger towns. Despite this, he never got used to life in his kingdom. He often resided in Luxembourg, which he also ruled after his father's premature death, and never ceased to feel the pull of Paris, its glories and life at

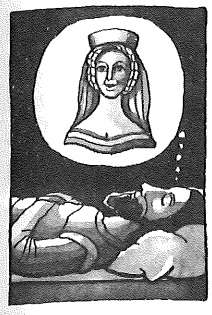
the French court. Nor did he make any attempt to control his taste for warfare. He was a devotee of knightly tournaments and various small-scale wars. He failed to get on with his wife, and the long-term tension between them culminated in 1360 in a major quarrel. John had three-year-old Wenceslas taken away to the Castle of Křivoklát, deep in the woods west of Prague, and there the young prince was brought up under the supervision of his father's trusted advisors until he was seven.

It was now time for the prince's real education to start. King John held to the tradition of his family, believing that what had been good for him and his father had to be good for the heir to the Bohemian throne. In April 1323, Wenceslas was packed off to Paris. He was not being dispatched to entirely unknown people, since the French Queen was his aunt, Marie of Luxembourg, but he could not have known that a new name was awaiting in him in Paris, and even a bride. On the wishes of the French king he received the name Charles at

his confirmation, and it is under this name that he has gone down in history. Henceforward he was heir, in terms of name, to two great historical traditions: the name Charles was a reference to Charlemagne, who had revived the Western Empire, while the name Wenceslas referred to the prince's Přemyslid origins and the heavenly protector of the Czech state. At the French court the Czech prince was introduced to a girl of his own age, Marguerite de Valois, known as Blanche. John of Luxembourg and the French king agreed that the children should be married. It was not a bad match. The princess's half brother Philip was the heir to the throne of France.

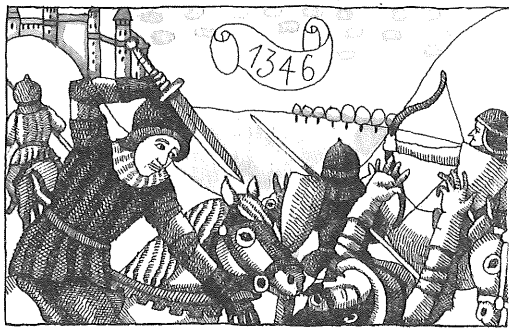
Charles and Marguerite-Blanche got used to each other. In any case the young Luxembourg quickly adapted to Paris, although at first he was homesick. From the beginning he showed unusual intellectual gifts and an aptitude for languages and his teachers were amazed at the breadth of his interests and knowledge. In his twelfth and thirteen years he was already attending lectures at Paris University, but in the spring of 1330, just before his fourteenth birthday, he was summoned

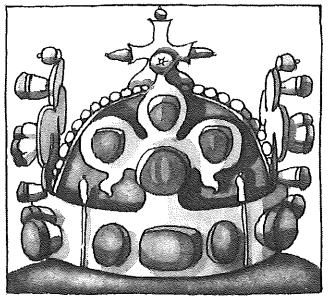




to Luxembourg by his father, who wished to show him the family duchy and introduce him to the duties of a statesman. Marguerite-Blanche was by his side, and they started to live together as man and wife. Their happiness was not to last long. In March 1331 Charles had to follow John to Northern Italy, where he spent more than two years. In the Italian mountains he gained more valuable experience and the spurs of a knight, but also hit a deep psychological crisis. John of Luxembourg was a pleasure-loving widower who made full use of his privileges, and he swept his son into a life full of beautiful and compliant women. Charles' pangs of conscience over a string of infidelities only abated when he had a purifying dream in the village of Terenzo and then returned to his native land, where he was invited at the beginning of the autumn of 1333 by some of the Bohemian nobility. After a year the prince was joined in Bohemia by his wife, who unlike John's second wife Beatrix de Bourbon quickly became a favourite with Praguers.

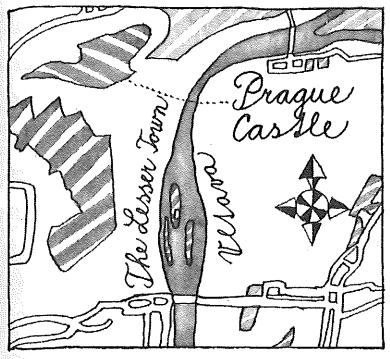
With his insider experience of the culturally advanced regions of France and Italy, Charles embarked on an ambitious renovation of the Bohemian state. He was not yet king but he more or less acted as one, although it was only much later, in 1341 that he officially became John's younger co-regent. Thanks to his friendship with Pope Clement VI, in 1344 he managed to get the Bishopric of Prague raised to an Archbishopric. It was an elevation Charles wanted to symbol-



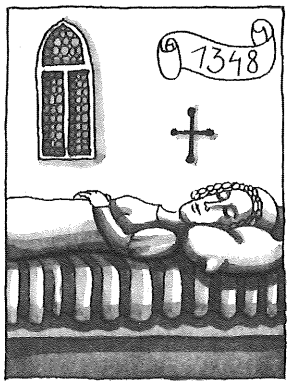


ise by building a new Gothic Cathedral of St. Vitus at the Prague Castle, conceived both as a place of coronation and the final resting place of the rulers of Bohemia. A grand royal palace had already grown up close beside the Cathedral, but the now blind John rarely resided in it. John died on the 26th of August 1346 in the Battle of Crecy, where together with Charles he was fighting at the side of his French kinsmen in the war with England. With his death Charles, not long before elected King of the Romans (the first step to becoming Holy Roman Emperor) became King of Bohemia as well and could start on the full realisation of his ambitious plans.

In September 1347 he took the first ceremonial step in this programme; the dark-haired Luxembourg received from the hands of the Archbishop of Prague a royal Bohemian diadem in the form of the new Crown of St. Wenceslas. In 1348 Charles turned to acts of foundation designed to turn Prague into a worthy seat for the master of the Holy Roman Empire. The Prague New Town was planned and laid out on the Right Bank of the Vltava, and at the King's instigation



a university, the first such institution to the east of the Rhine and north of the Alps, was established in the capital of the Kingdom of Bohemia. The town of Hradčany grew rapidly around the Prague Castle. The Bohemian State, to which John of Luxembourg had attached Upper Lusatia (Oberlausitz) and Silesia, was now constitutionally transformed into an entity with the official title of the Lands of the Bohemian Crown.

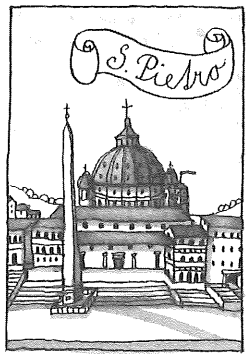


Political successes rarely go hand in hand with happiness in personal life. On Friday the 1st of August 1348 Charles wife Marguerite-Blanche died at the young age of thirty-two without having given her husband an heir to the throne, and became the first to rest in the new royal tomb in St. Vitus's Cathedral. The widowed ruler had been strongly emotionally attached to his first wife, who had diverted herself with embroidery during her husband's long absences. He had talked to her in her maternal language and for years had continued to reproach himself for his infidelity in Italy. Visiting France for the last time near the end of his life, in January 1378, he was to meet Blanche's sister Isabel, whom at first he failed to recognise. The two old people then fell into each others arms and wept as they remembered old times.

In his first widowhood Charles took an entirely pragmatic line with regard to a new marriage, approaching the matter on the basis of cool political calculation. Less than a year after his first wife's death, as early as the beginning of 1349, he picked out a suitable bride in the form of the twenty-year-old, supposedly charming

Anne of the Palatinate, a member of the Wittelsbach family that had been vying with the Luxembourgs since 1340 for power in the Holy Roman Empire. With this marriage Charles deftly caused a split in the Wittelsbach camp and not long afterward won general acceptance as King of the Romans. Once again, however, political profit was not balanced by family good fortune. In 1350 Anna bore a son Václav (Wenceslas), but the child died shortly after his 2nd birthday. Charles evidently grieved more for the death of his first-born son than for the early death of his second wife, in February 1353.

He did not remain single for long. In later July 1353 the thirty-seven-year-old king married the fourteen-year-old Anna von Schweidnitz, giving him hope of controlling the Principality of Schweidnitz, which was the only part of Silesia not yet belonging to the Lands of the Bohemian Crown. Of course the main task of the inquisitive and mischievous Anna was to give Charles a son and heir. For this the couple waited almost a full eight years. Meanwhile the King of Bohemia and the Romans acquired more titles, honours and dignities. The most important was undoubtedly his coronation as emperor, which took place in St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome on Easter Sunday, the 5th of April 1355. Charles was the first King of Bohemia ever to become Holy Roman Emperor, and his young wife was crowned beside him as empress, the Cardinal Pierre de Colombiers placing a mitre on her loose golden hair. After the ceremony the imperial couple proceeded to the coronation feast in the Lateran Palace, while



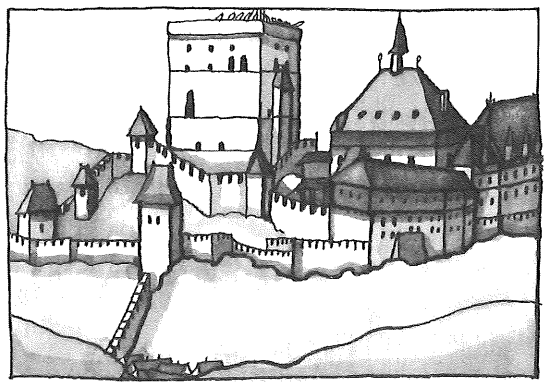
Roman senators led their horses by the bridle, held the hems of the coronation robes and raised a brocade and silk canopy over the couple's heads.

Charles and Anna perhaps experienced equal happiness on the 26th of February 1361, when the longed-for son was finally born to them in Nuremberg (Nürnberg) Castle. This child was also christened Václav (Wenceslas - and was later to become King Wenceslas IV.) and to the joy of his parents proved strong and lively. The arrival of the new heir strengthened the position of the Empress Anna, an exceptionally intelligent women interested in the work of the famous poet Francesco Petrarch, but soon she met the fate so common for women of the time. During the birth of her next child in July 1362 both she and the baby died. The emperor had lost a wife for whom he had felt a love that combined an almost paternal affection with the passion of an older man experiencing one of his last genuine amours.

He certainly did not have the same kind of relationship with his fourth wife, Elizabeth of Pomerania (Elizabeth von Pommern), granddaughter of the King of Poland

Casimir III. All the European rulers knew that the marriage, made in 1363 in Cracow, was designed to open up the Luxembourg path to the Polish crown. Charles was not even particularly concerned about fidelity to his wife, who was thirty-one years younger than him. On a visit to Avignon in 1365 in he had an affair with a Frenchwoman of whom we know little, and nine months later she gave birth to a son called Guillaume. At the end of his life the emperor honourably acknowledged paternity and provided his illegitimate son with material security. Elizabeth of Pomerania, the mother of his sons Sigismund and Jan and his daughter Anna (later married to King Richard II of England), seems to have been more devoted to the emperor than he to her. She tried to be a support to her husband, joined in negotiations on financial and political matters, and showed an interest in religious problems, On Charles's second visit to Rome in November 1368, Pope Urban V crowned her empress.

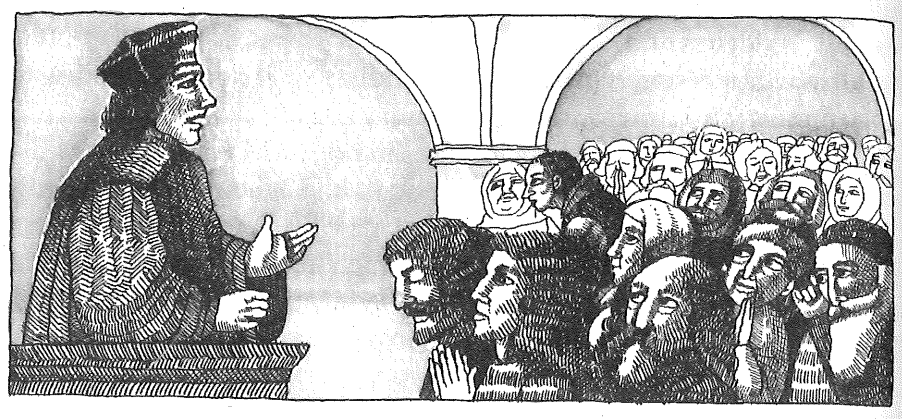
In common historical memory, however, Elizabeth is mainly remembered for her unusual physical strength. Allegedly she could snap new horseshoes and strong knives, and could tear armour, although only at Charles's request. The emperor had her depicted several times, most famously on the mosaic of the famous Golden Gate, the original entrance to St. Vitus's cathedral. Unlike Anna of Schneidwitz, however, there is no portrait of her at the Castle of Karlštejn, where she often stayed. Charles IV, who founded Karlštejn, gave the castle a grand and unique function. The Chapel of the Holy Cross in the large tower housed the imperial crown jewels and relics,



the instruments of Christ's martyrdom, guarded by a hundred and thirty painted saints, the victorious army of heaven. No one was allowed to "lie with a woman" in this sacred place, even if it was his lawful wedded wife.

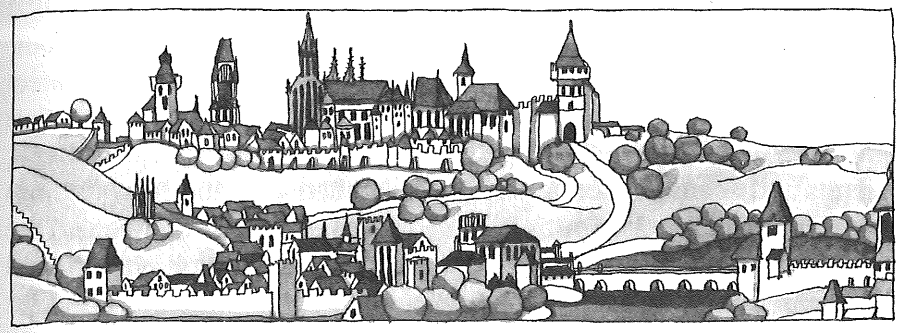
Elizabeth of Pomerania was Charles's last wife and survived him. When the great emperor died on Monday the 29th of November 1378 she was only thirty-one years old,. She did not, however, live to see the wreckage of Charles's work of state-building when Hussite storms overtook the Kingdom of Bohemia in the 15th century. On the eastern facade of the Old Town Bridge Tower, which he built, history has been kinder and left the face of Charles IV relatively untouched. Enthroned, together with his son Wenceslas, he looks down in full majesty on the crowds of tourists.

Master Jan Hus



Just a few steps from the busy Národní třída [National Boulevard], in a quiet corner of the Prague Old Town, the chance visitor is surprised to see a large asymmetrical chapel with Gothic windows and high roof. Even at just a glance, it is clearly a modern building, one that has merely imitated Gothic style and combined it with elements of modern architecture. Why was this unusual object built here in 1948 - 1954? The answer is simple. It was the site of the Bethlehem Chapel, in which Master Jan Hus, who in many respects prefigured Martin Luther and other Great European religious reformers, was a preacher for more than ten years. Fate was cruel to the original building, demolished in 1786. The new Bethlehem Chapel is not a faithful reproduction of its predecessor, but more an act of symbolic homage to a man

who undoubtedly belongs in the gallery of great figures in Czech and European history and whose contribution to the Christian heritage has even, somewhat belatedly, been acknowledged by John Paul II and the Roman Catholic Church.



The Bethlehem Chapel, consecrated to the Holy Innocents (i.e. the infants murdered on the orders of King Herod), was built in 1391 as a place where the word of God could be preached in the Czech language. The emphasis on Czech was no accident. In the mid-13th century the ethnic German community had been strongly represented in the Prague Old Town, but by the end of the century the Czechs were already in the majority. The Bethlehem Chapel was built to meet their needs, and could hold up to 3,000 people. It was revealing that the preacher was appointed by a committee made up of representatives of the Old Town Corporation and masters of the Czech nation at Prague University.

On the 14th of March 1402 Jan Hus, a master of the free arts at Prague University who was around thirty years old and had only recently been ordained a priest, was appointed preacher and administrator at the Bethlehem Chapel. It was to prove a turning-point in the history of Prague and the Bohemian state. Nobody dreamed how famous Hus would

become. Nobody knew that he would make the Bethlehem Chapel the cradle of a movement that aimed to reform the church and the whole of Christian society in the spirit of the law of God, as contained in the Bible and in accordance with the model of the Apostolic and early church.

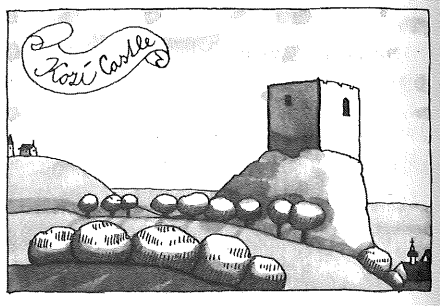
Up to this time there had been nothing particularly special about Jan Hus. He had been born into a simple family, probably in Husinec near Prachatice, although some people believe it may have been the Husinec on the northern edge of Prague. Many of the preacher's friends and acquaintances came from Prachatice or the surrounding area, which makes the South Bohemian Husinec the more likely. The tradition that he was born here (and tourists are still shown the alleged house of his birth) goes back a long way, to the later 15th century. Equally old is the story that Hus's mother, a pious woman, knelt down seven times to pray for her son when accompanying him to Prachatice School. If Hus did indeed attend Prachatice School, then he would have developed a good knowledge of a town on the celebrated Golden Road, along which salt was imported to Bohemia from Salzburg via Pasov (Passau). Whatever the case, around 1386 he was already living in Prague and dreaming of how once he finished his studies he would become a priest, have fine clothes and a good position, and people would respect him.

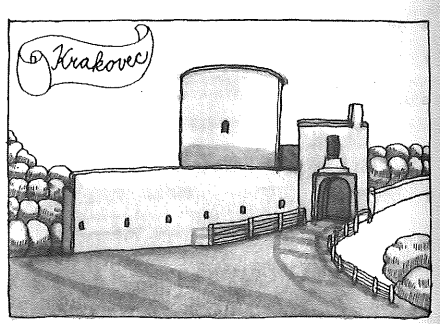
At the university he was initially a pretty average student, with a taste for wine and games of chess. All this changed after he had gained his bachelor's degree and even more his master's degree, but the real turning-point came when he was ordained priest. At this point he realised that his real mission was care for the salvation of human souls.

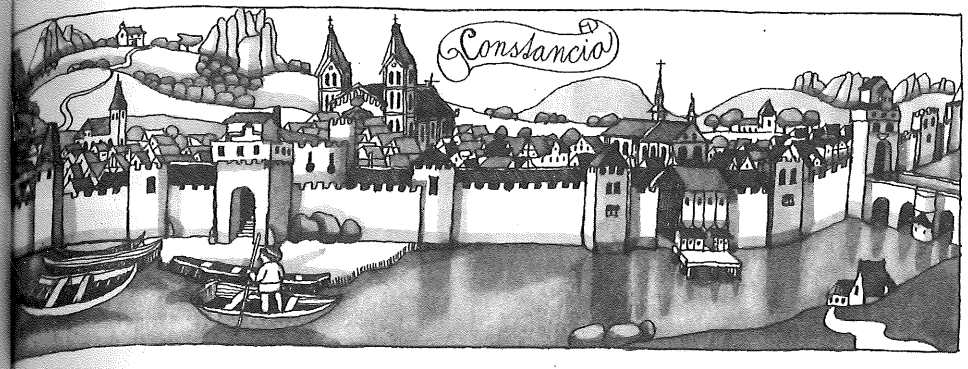
From this realisation it was a short step to reflection on the need for reform of the Roman Catholic Church, which was in a depressing state and gripped by crisis. Not only had there been two competing popes at its head since 1378, but the whole church organism was eaten through with chronic abuses. The most serious included the sale of church offices and functions (known as simony), a fondness for amassing property on the part of its functionaries, a love of external splendour and ostentatious wealth, as well as the widespread failure among priests to attend to their pastoral duties. So long as Hus contented himself using the pulpit of the Bethlehem Chapel to voice general criticisms of the existing state of affairs and moral appeals for remedy, he earned approval even from the Archbishop of Prague. It was a different matter, however, when a group of reform-minded Czech masters led by Hus started to draw inspiration from the work of the English theologian John Wycliffe. For Wycliffe there was only one way out of the morass. The church had to be stripped of its property and forced to live by the gospels. Even more dangerously, Wycliffe believed that it should be the secular power, specifically the ruler his officials and nobles who carried out the reform of the church. This was all unacceptable to the Roman Catholic Church, which responded by branding many of Wycliffe's views heretical.

Hus was not intimidated, nor did he yet have any reason for fear. He enjoyed the support of most of the Czech community in Prague, many members of the royal court including Queen Sophie, influential Czech nobles, owners of palaces near the Bethlehem Chapel, and a large number of students who made their opinions noisily

clear. The German teachers and students of the Prague University took an anti-Wycliffite and anti-Hus position, and were supported by German burghers in Prague and other Bohemian and Moravian towns. Hus's message on church reform, originally addressed to all Christians without regard to nationality, acquired strongly national (ethnic) and political dimensions. This became as clear as day in January 1409, when the King of Bohemia Wenceslas IV issued the Decree of Kutna Horá, which effectively placed Prague University under the control of Hus's group. The German teachers and students left Prague in protest, some of them founding a new university in Leipzig, and it was these "exiles" who started to wage an intense campaign against Hus and his friends, whom they proclaimed to be heretics. The Hus case developed more international European dimensions in 1410, when his supporters presented a suit at the Papal Curia against the Archbishop of Prague for confiscating Wycliffe's books. This was the beginning of a legal process that was to end tragically for the Bethlehem preacher. While the King of Bohemia Wenceslas IV took no action against Hus, with foreign eyes upon him he could not openly support a person suspected of heresy. When papal officials issued an anathema against Hus, the preacher found it wiser to leave Prague and live under the protection of his noble supporters, principally at Kozí Castle in South Bohemia and later at the Castle of Krakovec

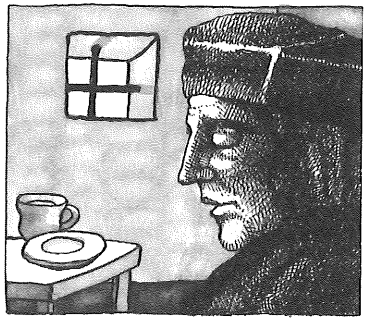






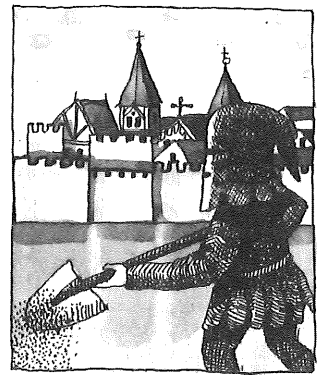
near Rakovník. It was in Krakovec that in 1414 he received an invitation to the imperial city of Constance (Konstanz), where Pope John 23rd, at the instigation of the King of the Romans and Hungary, Sigismund Luxemburg, was calling a General Church Council with the aim of solving the problem of disputed claims to the papacy, drawing up church reforms and giving judgment on serious questions of doctrine.

Hus accepted the invitation in the hope that he would now be able to clear himself of suspicion of heresy in front of the highest church assemble and at the same time convince the intellectual elite of Christendom that his conception of church reform was the right one. He must have had an inkling, however, that his case might not end well, since before his journey he wrote and sealed his will,



directing that it should only be opened after his death. He then asked King Sigismund for a letter of protection that would secure him a safe journey to Constance and back, and freedom of movement at the place of the council itself. The document had a fatal flaw, however, in that it related merely to secular law, and not to church law, under which Hus's case fell.

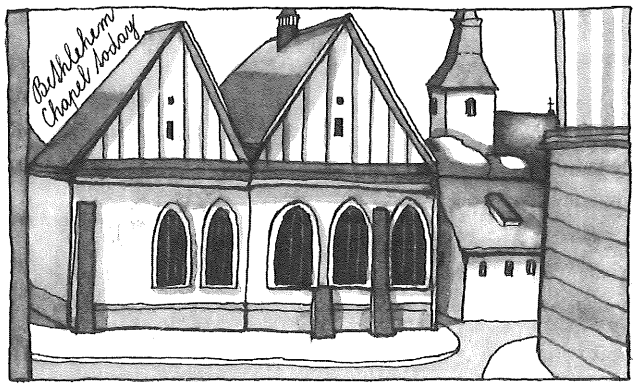
Three weeks after his arrival in Constance Hus was lured from his lodgings with the widow Fida, arrested and imprisoned in harsh conditions at the Dominican Monastery on the shores of Lake Bodam (Bodensee). It was meant as a warning, since the nature of the imprisonment indicated that the council was going to subject him to an inquisition trial. Hopes of Sigismund's help proved vain, since the King of the Romans washed his hands like the biblical Pilate, claiming that he had no power to interfere in church law. The Czech preacher at least managed to get himself a public hearing before the plenary council, which was exceeding rare in cases of people accused of heresy. The proceedings took three days, sometimes resembling a learned disputation and sometimes a court hearing. The results were very bad for Hus. The exhausted and sick preacher, standing alone against an assembly that was hostile in mood,



had little chance of turning the tide in his favour and refused to recant on the articles that the investigating commission had considered heretical in his writings. The verdict was unambiguous. Jan Hus was condemned to death at the stake as a convicted and obdurate heretic.

In fact neither Sigismund, who feared stormy reactions in Bohemia and Moravia, nor the council itself had any real interest in the execution of the Czech master. An assembly proclaiming church reform did not wish to send to his death a man who had been striving for the same, if in a different and from the point of view of the council an unacceptable way. For almost a month Hus received continual visits in his prison cell from people urging him to recant and save at least his own life. Master Jan, his mood swinging between hope of safety and desire for a martyr's death, kept to his resolve. He could not repudiate the divine truths and ideals in which he believed and which he defended. On Saturday the 6th of July 1415 he died on a meadow in front of Constance with the words of hymns on his lips, silenced only by the smoke and flames that ravaged his tormented face. His ashes were thrown by constables into the waters of the Rhine. Not quite a year later, Hus's friend, the philosopher Jerome of Prague, died the same death on the same spot.

News of the burning of Hus and then of Jerome fed flames of anger and impatience in the Bohemian Lands. Hus's numerous supporters, scornfully christened "Hussites" by their enemies (in Czech "husa" means "goose"), started to seize church property and try to carry out

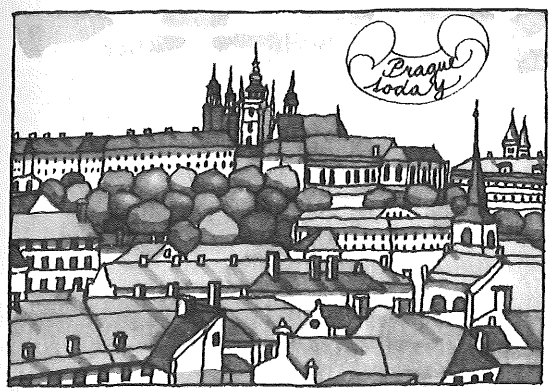


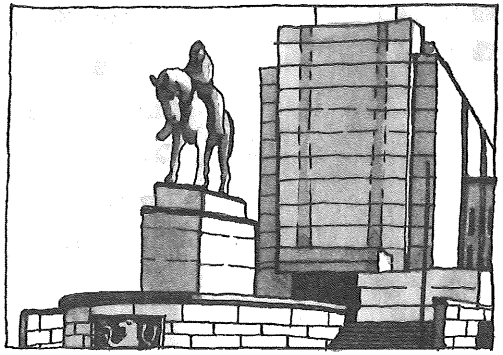
the programme of reform of the church and society. In July 1419, escalating disputes turned into open Hussite Revolution. In the course of the upheaval the Bethlehem Chapel no longer played the same important role as at the beginning of the 15th century. Today, the rebuilt chapel is visited mainly by tourists from the Protestant areas of Germany and North Europe, England and the USA. They come to honour the memory of Jan Hus as the heir of John Wycliffe and the forerunner of Martin Luther and Jean Calvin.

The Victories of the One-Eyed Warrior

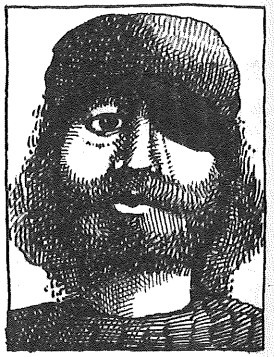
The hollow in which the original four towns of Prague lay, is guarded by three great landmarks. The first is Prague Castle itself, the second Vyšehrad. The third, in the east, is Vítkov Hill, the constructivist National Monument on its summit, and what draws the visitor's eye even more than the austere building is the huge statue in front of it on a granite plinth. This depicts the Hussite General Jan Žižka of Trocnov, and at almost 10 metres high is the largest equestrian statue in Europe.

The National Monument was built in 1929 - 1932 to commemorate the birth of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, and Bohumil Kafka started work on the statue in 1931. During the Nazi Occupation and Second World War there was no chance of installing the completed



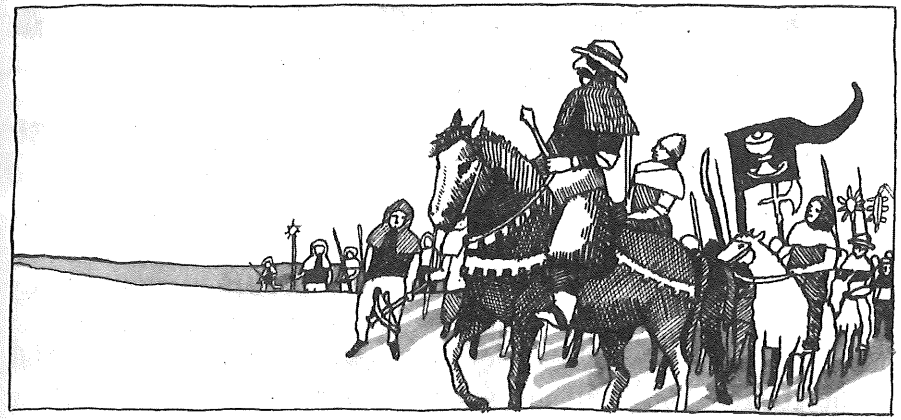


work on the waiting plinth, and it was not ceremonially unveiled until 1950. By this time the ideological message and function of the National Monument itself had changed; now it was supposed to commemorate the Liberation of Prague by the Soviet forces in 1945 and the revolutionary tradition, in suitable communist spirit. The Communists had nothing against the Hussite warrior. On the contrary, like interwar Czechoslovakia, the Communists keenly identified with the Hussites, seeing them in a somewhat simplified and distorted light as fighters against the Catholic church and for a socially just world. They generally ignored or even directly suppressed the simple fact that the Hussites were fighting for their concept of divine law, and were resolved to convince the whole of Christendom of the rightness of their cause by word and by the sword.

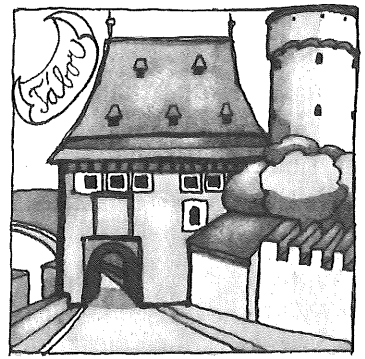


It is no accident that the National Monument buildings and the Žižka statue stand on the top of Vítkov Hill, for it was here that on Sunday the 14th of July 1420 Jan Žižka fought a victorious battle against the King of the Romans and of the Hungarian Lands, Sigismund of Luxemburg, son of Charles IV. Sigismund was the legitimate heir to the Bohemian throne, but the Hussites refused to acknowledge him, since they blamed him for a share in the death of Jan Hus and his unwillingness to acknowledge the Hussite programme, condemned as heresy by the Council of Constance and the Pope. There were many reasons for the Roman Catholic hostility to Hussism, but they included the fear that the Hussites were reforming the church without regard to existing institutions, were seizing church property, dissolving monasteries, driving out monks, subordinating the church to secular power and threatening to engulf Christendom in anarchy.

As the highest secular representative of Western Christendom, Sigismund of Luxembourg could not ignore the opinion of the Pope



and Council. He spent some months vainly negotiating with the Hussites, who in 1419 had won control of all Prague and had become an important political force in the Kingdom of Bohemia after the death of the childless King Wenceslas IV. Frustrated, Sigismund decided to try a military solution to obtain his inheritance. Together with Pope Martin V he declared a crusade against the Hussites, calling on Christian forces to assemble in front of Prague in June 1420, to destroy the obdurate heretics. Red-haired Sigismund was not a talented general. His gifts lay more in diplomacy and politics and he hoped that the mass of crusaders would terrify the recalcitrant Hussites and Prague would capitulate without a battle. This was a highly optimistic view. Hussite Prague took up arms and appealed to Hussites throughout Bohemia for help. They were all united by the emblem of the chalice, the symbol of communion in both kinds for the laity (the original practice in the Apostolic and early church which they had revived). The first to come to Prague's aid were the Hussites of East Bohemia, followed by reinforcements from North-East Bohemia. The last, but largest group hastened north from Tábor in South Bohemia.



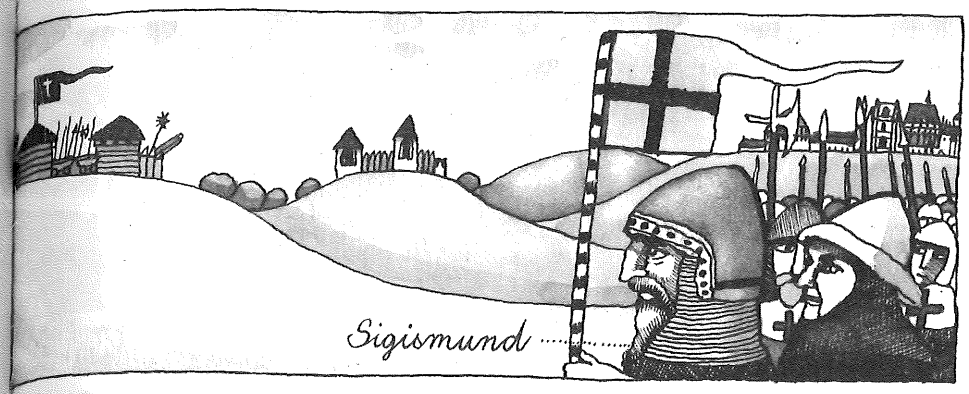
Named after a famous mountain in the Bible, Tábor had been founded by

the Hussite community in the ruins of the ruined city of Hradiště on an imposing site above the River Lužnice. Even today, after almost six centuries, Tábor still feels like a medieval fortress with crooked alleyways, walls and the cylindrical tower of the former castle. In the 15th century it was an impregnable complex. One of those who had helped to build it was the impoverished minor nobleman Jan Žižka, from Trocnov in South Bohemia.

He was a remarkable man. In 1420 he was already around sixty years old and had a colourful past behind him. As a child he had lost an eye, as an adult he had been twice widowed, lost much of his money, then served the mighty family of Rožmberks before quarrelling with them and finally joining highway robber bands paid by influential noblemen to attack merchant wagons on the Bohemian-Moravian-Austrian border. This taught him a great deal about guerilla warfare, and he developed his powers of improvisation and a feeling for terrain. Later King Wenceslas IV granted him a pardon, enabling Žižka to join a military troop that fought on the side of the Polish-Lithuanian Union in the war with the Order of Teutonic Knights. In July 1410 he probably took part in the famous Battle of Tannenberg (Grunwald). After his return to Bohemia his friends recommended him as a member of the Wenceslas IV's court guard in Prague. In Prague he became an enthusiastic supporter of Hus's ideas and decided to further the Hussite programme by the method he knew so well, by the sword.

When the Hussite Revolution broke out in the summer of 1419 he immediately took a role in the fast developing war and notched up one victory after another. The founders of Tábor welcomed him with open arms and entrusted him with command of the Tábor Army. Žižka imposed strict discipline, equipped the unpractised rural Hussites with flails and firearms, taught some of them to ride and relied above all on the tactic of wagon-defences. These chained rows of wagons turned out to be an effective defense against heavy cavalry attack for infantry in open terrain. It was in the order of things that in May 1420 the one-eyed gentleman should have led his Taborite warriors into Prague.

From the outset it was obvious to Žižka that the Hussites could not face Sigismund's much more numerous crusaders on an open field,



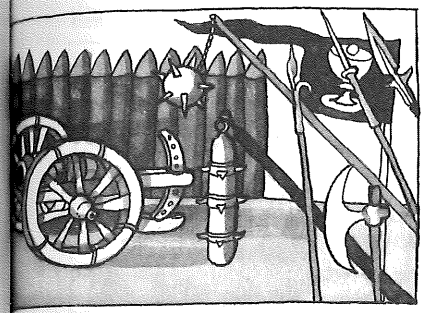
and so could not prevent the concentration of the enemy forces before Prague. He showed great foresight, however, in guessing correctly that Sigismund did not intend a direct assault on the fortified right bank of Prague, where the local Hussites were concentrated with their reinforcements from the country, but would instead try to cut the city off n all sides and starve it out. Sigismund had garrisons at Prague Castle and Vyšehrad, and most of the access routes were controlled by castles in the hands of supporters of the Luxembourgs. The only open communication line between the Right Bank of Prague and its allied areas in the country was a road leading under Vítkov Hill (hence the shortened name Vítkov). At the last minute, shortly before the crusading armies arrived before Prague, Žižka ordered strategically important Vítkov to be occupied, and provisional bastions surrounded by three ditches to be built at the end of its elongated, narrow ridge.

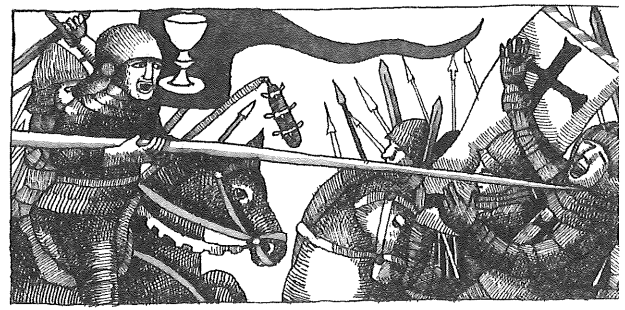
The Tábor general turned out to be right. In the last days of an unusually hot June in 1420 the crusaders started setting up their tents on the Left Bank of the Vltava in a long belt from Prague Castle through Letna Plateau as far as the little village of Bubny (near the present-day metro station Vltavská). In Prague the Hussites were unnerved to see the huge number of foreign soldiers, from the German areas of the Holy Roman Empire, the Low Countries, Hungary and of course all the Catholic regions of the Lands of the Bohemian Crown. It was as if they were taking on the whole of Christian Europe, and fighting literally "against everyone". With the arrival of the

Austrian army under Duke Albrecht V of Habsburg on the 4th of July, the crusader armies were complete. The optimistic Sigismund was forced, however, to swallow some initial failure when the troops under Catholic nobleman Oldřich of Rožmberk failed to take Tábor. On the hand, the decisive encounter would clearly be by Prague, where on the Right Bank around 10,000 Hussites capable of fighting, including armed Taborite women, faced as many as 30,000 crusaders encamped before the city.

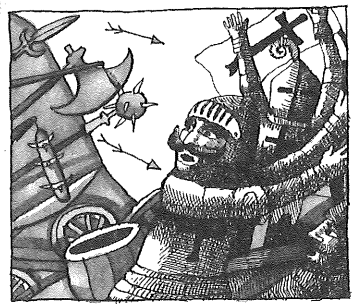
On Saturday the 13th of July, several hundred mounted crusaders forded the Vltava to test out the strength of the defenders of Right-Bank Prague, and also to convince the defenders that the main attack would be launched against the walls of the Prague Old and New Towns. In the late afternoon of the following day Sigismund decided to act elsewhere. Cavalry consisting of around eight hundred Austrian and Meissen riders under the command of Heinrich of Isenburg crossed the Vltava at Libeň and then attacked Žižka's small stronghold on Vítkov from the area that is now occupied by the Na Ohradě cross-roads. At the fateful moment it was defended only by a few dozen men and women. Despite some difficulties the crusaders surmounted all three ditches and joined battle for the bastions, which were protected only by a low mound or wall. Heinrich of Isenburg perished in the fierce fighting. So too did a brave woman on

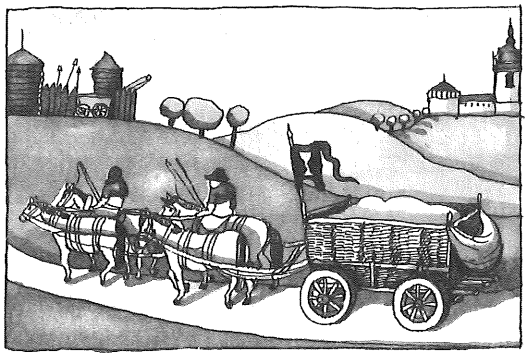
the Hussite side who swung her flail round and round crying out that a true Christian must not yield before Antichrist. This scene was later depicted in figural reliefs on the doors of the National Monument. Žižka almost lost his life as well, and it was only with the greatest effort that he and his Tábor flailsmen kept the enemy from encircling the stronghold.





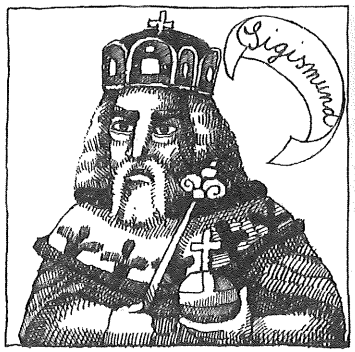
The turning point came a little later, when the Hussites in Prague discovered that the main attack was directed not at the town but at Vítkov. They immediately sent dispatched reinforcements to relieve Žižka's garrison, and these, hidden by the vineyards on the south sides of the hill, mounted a surprise attack on the crusaders' left flank. The situation on the battlefield was transformed. The confused Meissen and Austrian cavalry panicked and started to withdraw in disorder. Some fled down the steep northern slope, where many perished

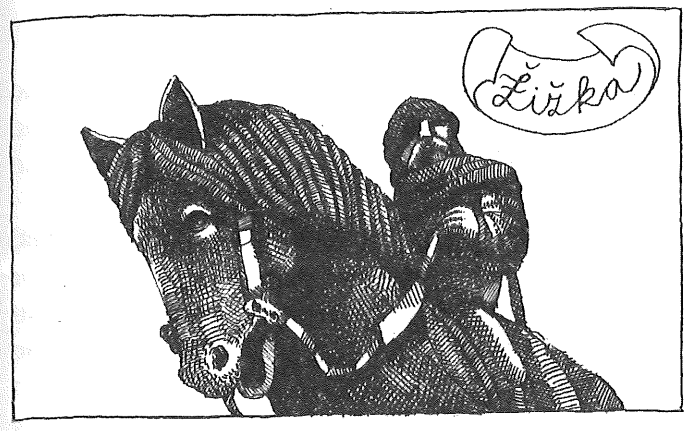




or were severely injured. 140 - 300 dead crusaders were left on Vítkov and under its slopes.

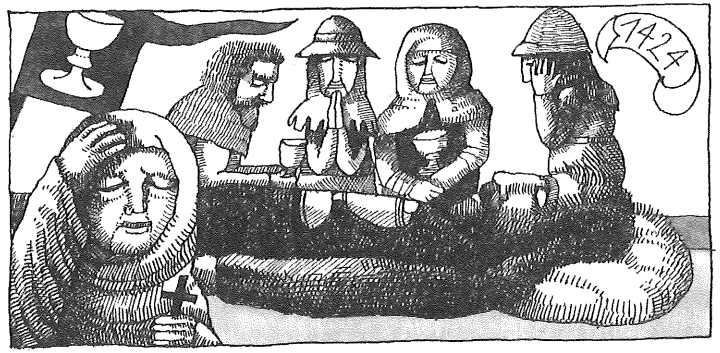
Given the vast numerical superiority of Sigismund's forces, these losses in no way affected the overall ratio. Strategic and other practical considerations, however, prevented the Catholics from exploiting their advantage of numbers. Luxembourg could not repeat the attack on Vítkov because the Hussites were now expecting it, and he considered a direct assault on Right-Bank Prague to be too risky. Wagons with corn were now appearing on the highway leading under the southern side of Vítkov since the unusually hot summer had brought an early harvest. Hussite Prague could breathe again as hunger was no longer a menace. Sigismund grasped the stalemate too, and offered the Hussites negotiations, although the discussions that took place in the fire-damaged Lesser Town led nowhere. Sigismund therefore had himself crowned King of Bohemia in St. Vitus's Cathedral under the protection of crusader arms, then dissolved the army that he had insufficient funds to keep together and departed with his wife for Kutná Hora. The grateful Praguers started to use the name Žižkov instead of Vítkov for the hill where the Hussites had first beaten the crusading troops and convinced Europe of their own might. In subsequent centuries when Žižka was demonised by the ruling Habsburgs the name was informal, but in





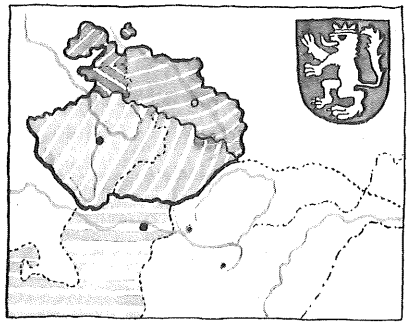
1877, when the Czech national movement strongly identified with Hussites, the city district growing up around Vítkov Hill was given the official name Žižkov, which it has retained ever since even when it became a suburb of Greater Prague.

The Battle of Vítkov was by no means Žižka's last. The Táborite captain went on to win many other battles and did not give up even after serious injury to his only eye. Blind or virtually blind he continued to lead his men to victory after victory. In 1423 he shifted his activities to Eastern Bohemia, where he built up a Hussite military union based on a standing army. True to his nature, Jan Žižka of Trocnov died while on a military campaign, not far from Přibyslav. He did not die as a result of wounds, however, but of illness, on the 11th of October 1424. The generalissimo, who had never suffered a single defeat, gradually became a symbol of the bravery and strength of the Czech nation. It is this view of him that is embodied in the monumental statue on Vítkov, from you can see one of the most beautiful panoramas of Prague.



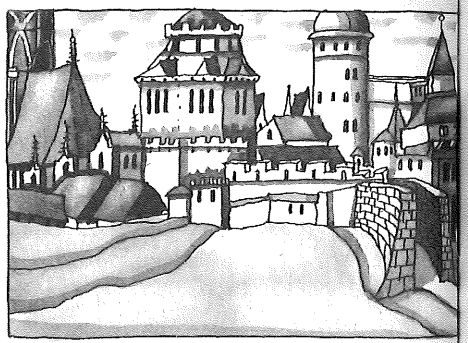
The Emperor Rudolf II and his Illegitimate Son

The Hussite storms over the Bohemian Lands died away, but the population remained divided in religious faith, and the kings of Bohemia ruled over both Utraquists (Hussites) and Catholics. The situation was further complicated in the earlier 16th century by the rise of the Lutheran reformation in neighbouring German areas. People in



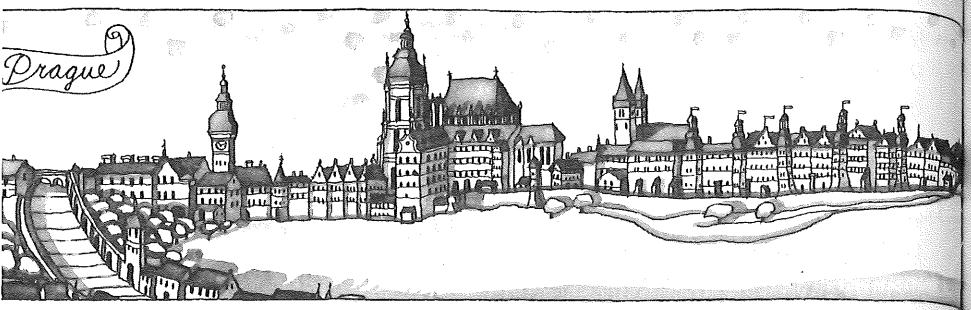
what were known as the subsidiary lands of the Bohemian Crown (Upper and Lower Lusatia, Silesia), the majority of them ethnically German, responded in large numbers to the teachings of Martin Luther, whose views met with marked sympathy in Bohemia and Moravia as well.

By this time the Bohemian Lands were already ruled by the Habsburgs, who obtained the Bohemian throne in October 1526 and were to keep it right up to October 1918. The rulers of the Habsburg dynasty were gradually building up a monarchy with its axis on the Danube, incorporating the Hungarian, Austrian and Alpine Lands as well as the Bohemian Lands. This was a major reason why they made Vienna their seat, since the Austrian capital lay more

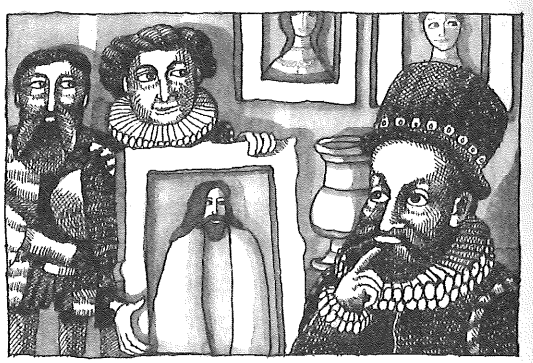


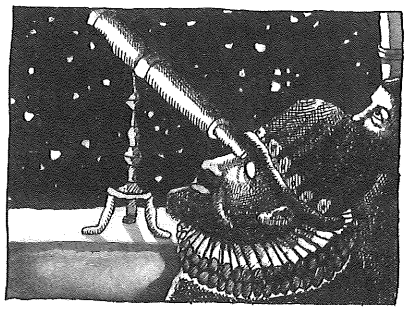
or less in the centre of their holdings. They only occasionally resided in Prague, which had therefore lost its status as permanent royal seat, and they could not visit Budin (Buda) in Hungary at all, since it had been taken by the Ottoman Turks. The Austrian Habsburgs were Catholics, and in any case politically and financially dependent on the richer Spanish branch of the family, which was pursuing a tough Catholic line. In Central Europe this militant Roman Catholic policy aroused indignation, but it is only fair to say that the Austrian Habsburgs initially proceeded cautiously and moderately in religious matters. This was true of Ferdinand I and especially his tolerant son Maximilian II. When Maximilian died there was some anxiety at the possible attitude of his son and heir, since the twenty-four-year-old Rudolf had been educated for several years at the court of Spain. As it turned out, the Bohemian and Hungarian King and Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf II, despite the initial distrust with which he was viewed, was to become one of the most popular of Bohemian rulers.

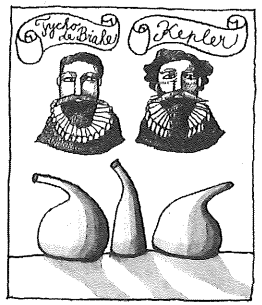
There were several reasons for this but the principal one is obvious. In 1583 the shy and introverted man with his typical Habsburg lower lip moved his court to Prague, and stayed there. It was a move prompt-



ed by disputes with relatives in the Austrian and Alpine Lands and the increased Turkish threat to Vienna. For the last time in its history Prague became the imperial residence and seat of the King of Bohemia. All Rudolf's successors were to live in Vienna. Art-loving, a passionate collector, and thirsty for learning, Rudolf soon turned the Bohemian capital into the most important centre of the Late Renaissance and Mannerism north of the Alps. Rudolf's art collections, part of which were plundered during the Thirty Years War and part moved to Vienna, were legendary. A small, but still valuable remnant of these collections was preserved at Prague Castle. The fame of the imperial court was enhanced by the presence of the painters Hans von Aachen, Giuseppe Arcimboldo and Bartholomeus Spranger, the sculptor Adrian de Vries and many other artists. The reputation of Prague as a centre of science attracted the astronomers Tychon de Brahe and Johannus Kepler to the city on the Vltava. Space near the emperor's chambers was provided for the researches of alchemists, such as the Britons John Dee and Edward Kelley, who attracted the most attention and were allegedly spies for Queen Elizabeth I of England. The collections, which included not only art works but all kinds of manmade and natural curiosities, turned Prague Castle into an even more peculiar and remarkable







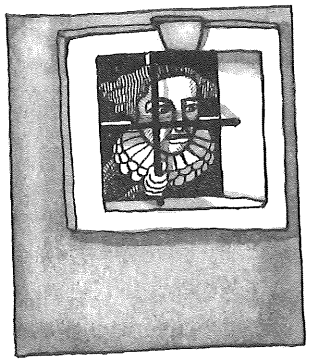
place. The idea behind all this extraordinary effort was to reflect the integrity, diversity and harmony of the cosmos as the work of God. In their own distinctive way, then, the artists and scientists of Rudolf's court foreshadowed later efforts to capture all knowledge in encyclopaedic form.

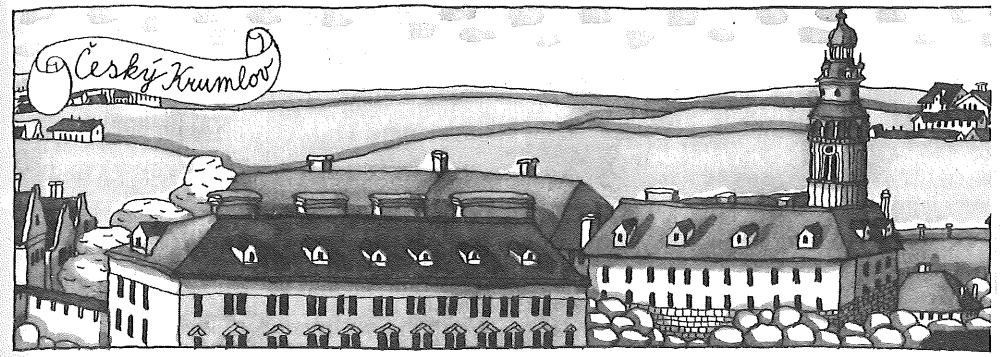
The emperor preferred to spend his time with his collections, where he felt genuinely happy, and so he only rarely left Prague. Soon, however, he developed the unflattering reputation of a gloomy eccentric, a melancholic whose indifference to political events was endangering Habsburg interests at a time of escalating tension between Catholics and Protestants all over the European continent. Rudolf's moods, described by his enemies as mental illness, definitely suggest a psychological disorder, but observers could not but acknowledge the emperor's high intelligence, the depth and breadth of his learning and his command of languages. Given international conditions and the problem of the succession, members of the Habsburg family, especially the Spanish branch, were disturbed by Rudolf's distaste for marriage. There were plenty of suitable potential brides, such as the Spanish Infanta Isabela Clara Egenie, or Maria de Medici, later married to the French King Henry IV, or the emperor's cousin Anna of the Tyrol... It was no use. Rudolf refused to wed, although he evidently had quite a weakness

for attractive women. Many pictures from how collections, which show old men or demonic men making love with beautiful nymphs, give an idea of his taste and erotic imagination.

The emperor maintained Katerina Strada as his mistress for decades, even though he was occasionally unfaithful to her. She was the daughter of the antiquary and administrator of Rudolf's collections, Jacop Strada of Rosberg, which yet again suggests the environment in which the emperor felt most at home. Katerina bore him six children who survived to adulthood, and evidently others who did not. The emperor took care of all the six children, who were styled d'Austria. Two daughters entered a convent, and the third married the Count of Contecroy. One son died in 1619, another survived the Thirty Years War, but the best-known (or rather notorious) was the eldest son, Don Julius Caesar d'Austria.

Rudolf initially invested great hopes in him and took care of his education, but as he grew up it became clear that the youth was ungovernable. He succumbed to alcoholism, and in the backrooms there was increasing talk of his excesses. The emperor refused to give up responsibility for his debauched offspring, and tried to reform him. All in vain. In 1606 the emperor had no choice but to have Julius imprisoned, in a Carthusian Monastery in Gaming in Austria. The aggressive young man was not allowed to carry any weapons, was given a strictly

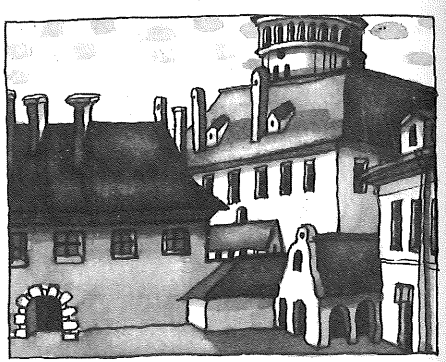




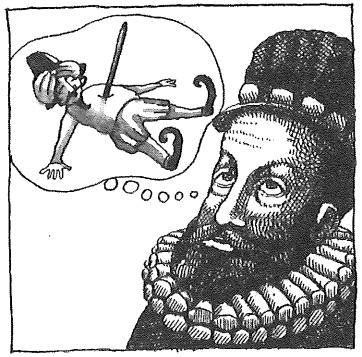
limited yearly income and permitted to drink only beer and cinnamon-flavoured water, with a ban on even a mouthful of wine. Julius could not endure this harsh regime for more than a few weeks. In November he was already residing at the luxurious chateau in Český Krumlov that Rudolf II had purchased from Petr Vok of Rožmberk at the beginning of the 17th century.

Don Julius was soon the terror of the picturesque town, which still retains its unique historical charm to this day. Only a month after the arrival of the emperor's illegitimate son the local consuls were making written complaints of his behaviour, but perhaps the emperor never even received them. It was by now quite obvious that Don Julius was insane, and if anyone had still doubted it they were convinced by the tragic fate of Markéta (or Marie) Pichlerová, daughter of a Český Kumlov bath-keeper. The poor girl became Julius's mistress, but could hardly have had any idea what awaited her. The degenerate boy had sadistic tendencies, and in one of his excesses cut her so many times that she lost consciousness. He then threw her helpless body out of the chateau window onto a rubbish tip, which saved the wretched woman's life - rather unfortunately for her, as it turned out. When she had recovered, she naturally didn't even want to see her perverse assailant, but Don

Julius forced her mother to send her daughter to the chateau. It was a mistake. On Shrove Monday, the 18th of February 1602, the demented young man killed the girl and then cut her body into pieces, which he placed in a coffin, hammering down the lid with his own hands. He gave the orders for his mistress to be buried in the local monastery, but he himself did not wash for four days after the bloody crime and went about with the gore of his victim on his clothes and body. He was shunned not just by the scullions, who preferred to leave his food and drink outside his door, but even by his own dogs. This time the emperor intervened decisively. He had his illegitimate son practically isolated in the prison of Český Krumlov Chateau, where on the 25th of June 1609 Julius died.



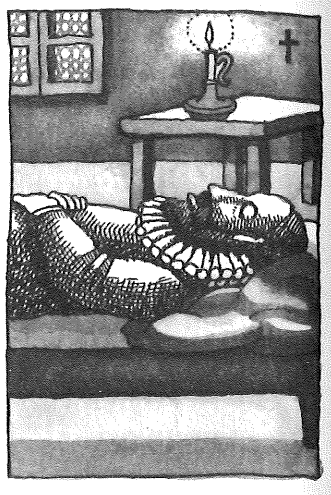
The case of Don Julius stirred up all the tales of the emperor's mental illness. In any case, Rudolf's Austrian relatives led by his younger brother Matthias conspired to have him imprisoned in Vienna in April 1606 by a secret agreement supposed to strip the eccentric Habsburg of his political power. On the basis of the Vienna consultations, Matthias became head of the Austrian branch of the dynasty. The main reason for the attempts to dethrone Rudolf was not the emperor's depression but his policies. Rudolf was intoxicated by a dream of defeating the Turks. He loved to have himself depicted as the victor over the Ottoman menace and took it very hard when anyone made



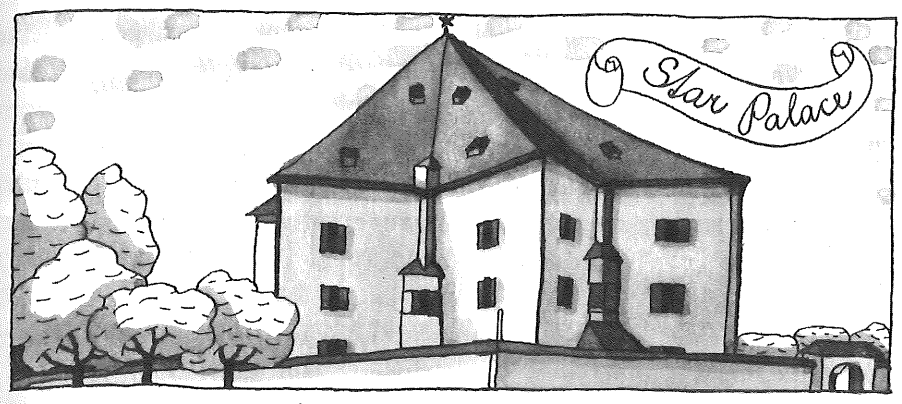
concessions to the mortal enemy of Christianity. He was therefore outraged at the peace made in November 1606 and the surrender of several important Hungarian fortresses to the Turks. The emperor's obstinacy threatened the interests of the Hungarian and Austrian Lands specifically, since they would have borne the burden of renewed war. The representatives of the Hungarian and Austrian Estates therefore supported Matthias and won the Moravians over as well. With their help, in the spring of 1608 Matthias launched a military campaign into Bohemia with the aim of forcing his brother to abdicate. At the key moment the Bohemian Estates decided to back Rudolf, their leaders taking the chance to make their loyalty to the emperor conditional on the legal codification of religious freedom for non-Catholics. Rudolf had to agree, even though he knew how this would infuriate his bigoted Spanish relations. Matthias was unwilling to risk provoking open armed conflict. Near the Chateau of Libeň (today within the Prague city boundaries) representatives of the two sides signed peace conditions. Matthias assumed power in the Austrian Lands, the Hungarian Lands and Moravia, while Rudolf kept the Kingdom of Bohemia, Silesia and the imperial title.

The problems had not ended. Rudolf kept his word and in July 1609 issued the Letter of Majesty on freedom of religion in the Bohemian Kingdom, which legalised the existing status quo. Inhabitants of the Bohemia state were now explicitly free to follow the faith of their choice, and not the faith of their overlord. This was the main difference between the situation in the Bohemian Lands and in German areas of the empire. Rudolf soon extended religious freedom to the Lutherans in Silesia as well. Personally this caused him no qualms, because he inclined to an interpretation of

Christianity than transcended denominations, but the Habsburg Catholic camp and above all Spanish foreign-policy-makers were enraged. Under ever greater pressure, the increasingly sick emperor made one last attempt to turn the tables with the help of the mercenary soldiers of Leopold, Bishop of Passau. Their incursion into Prague in 1611 and the events that followed meant Rudolf's political downfall. The unfortunate Habsburg was abandoned even by the Bohemian Estates and forced to abdicate and leave the Bohemian royal crown to Matthias. The imperial title was all that was left to him.



Rudolf did not long survive his humiliation. Eaten up with hatred for Matthias, he died on the 20th of January 1612 in his beloved Prague Castle. His body rests in the royal tomb of St. Vitus's Cathedral. Anthropological investigation of the emperor's skeletal remains and evaluation of medical reports of the time have brought to light the truth about the emperor's illness after centuries in which it was deliberately suppressed. Rudolf died of the third stage of syphilis, activated by diseases of the lung and liver. This diagnosis goes some way to explaining the apparently incomprehensible swings in the emperor's behaviour. Nonetheless, Bohemia and Prague remembered him with affection. For the city and the land his reign was a period of cultural flowering and an era of religious tolerance, now menaced by the clouds gathering all over Europe.



The Battle of the White Mountain

On the Western edge of Prague, on the elongated plateau known as the White Mountain to the right of the road to Karlovy Vary, stand two remarkable buildings. Nearer to the city itself, and in the centre of a large park that was formally a hunting enclosure, stands the Hvězda [Star] Summer Palace, named for its stellar design, while at the tram terminus the eye is caught by the Baroque Church of Our Lady of Victory. Around these buildings, taking up the entire space between the northern and southern slope of the "mountain", spreads the site of a battle fateful for the course of Czech history. It was a historical turning-point that cannot be understood without at least a brief sketch of the events that led up to the battle.

It all started with the abdication and death of the Emperor Rudolf II, who left no legitimate offspring. His brother and successor Matthias had no children either, and so the

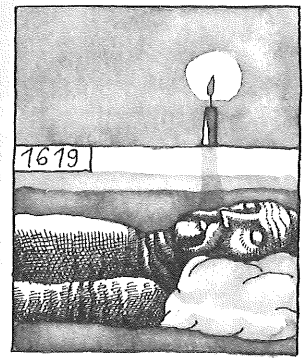
Habsburgs were faced with the urgent question of which of the Matthias's male relatives would soon be following the ageing ruler on the imperial, Bohemian and Hungarian throne. The more influential, Spanish branch of the family successfully backed Matthias's cousin Ferdinand of Styria, a product of Jesuit education and bigoted Catholic. His uncompromising attitude to the Protestants in Styria aroused justified fears among the Protestant politicians of the lands of the Bohemian and Hungarian crown. Almost everyone assumed that when he inherited he would pursue a tough Catholic line, and in tandem with this policy seek to limit the power of the estates in the individual crown lands and strengthen central power. The struggle to preserve religious privileges was therefore closely bound up with the attempt to maintain an Estates constitution, in which the ruler required the assent of the land diets before taking any important steps. Habsburg diplomacy was successful to an almost unexpected degree. In 1617 Ferdinand was elected and crowned King of Bohemia while Matthias was still alive, and a year he acquired the crown of Hungary as well. The representatives of the non-Catholic estates were only to realise later, far too late, what a terrible mistake they had made, despite the promises of the heir to the throne to maintain existing privileges.

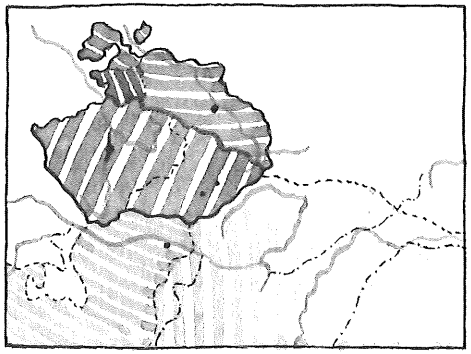
In the last year of the reign of Matthias, religious tensions in the Kingdom of Bohemia increased sharply. The anger of non-Catholics

at the emperor's failure to keep the terms of Rudolf's Letter of Majesty on religious freedom burst into open conflict. On the 23rd of May 1618 the leaders of the Bohemian non-Catholic Estates went to Prague Castle and threw the emperor's two regents and a scribe who happened to be with them out of the window. None of the men were seriously injured, but both parties knew that the Rubicon had been crossed. The rebels and the supporters of the emperor started to arm themselves; in fact the Defenestration of Prague (Fenstersturz) had

triggered a European War so long that it would retrospectively be called the Thirty Years War, but no one can have realised it at the time. Matthias died just as it was beginning, and was buried in the spring of 1619, the first Habsburg Emperor to be laid to rest in the Capuchin Chapel in Vienna.

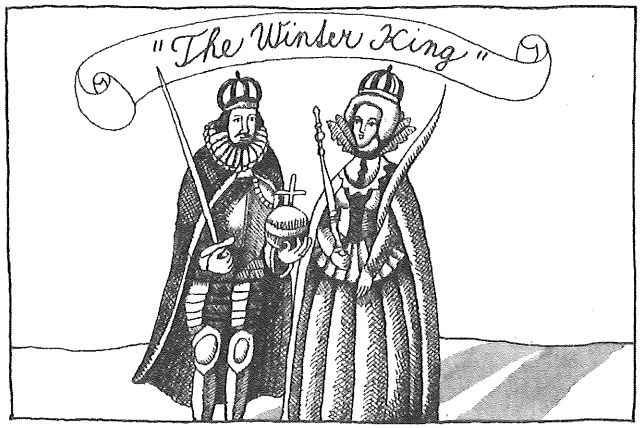
Ferdinand II, already elected and crowned, was now due to take up the government of the Bohemian Lands, but the non-Catholic Estates, who were openly at war with the Habsburgs, rejected his claims and looked around for a more suitable candidate. The General Diet of the Bohemian Crown, meeting in Prague, first of all changed the constitution in July 1619 and created a confederation of Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia and the two Lusatias. In mid-August the confederation was joined by representatives of Upper and Lower Austria and finally the Hungarian Estates as well. The Habsburg holdings in Central Europe





were shaken to their foundations. The diet declared that Ferdinand II had forfeited the Bohemian throne, and in his place it elected Frederick, the Elector Palatine, husband of the English Princess Elizabeth, the daughter of King James I. The choice shows that the rebellious Estates were trying to secure the broadest possibility international support. Frederick, the leading politician of the Calvinist faith, stood at the head of the non-Catholic Union in the German areas of the Empire, and his father-in-law, the King of England, was one of the most important enemies of Catholic Spain. But hopes of substantial foreign help were to prove vain. James I was hesitant and short of money-unwilling to get involved in a Central European conflict with the powerful Habsburgs. The Dutch were no more forthcoming.

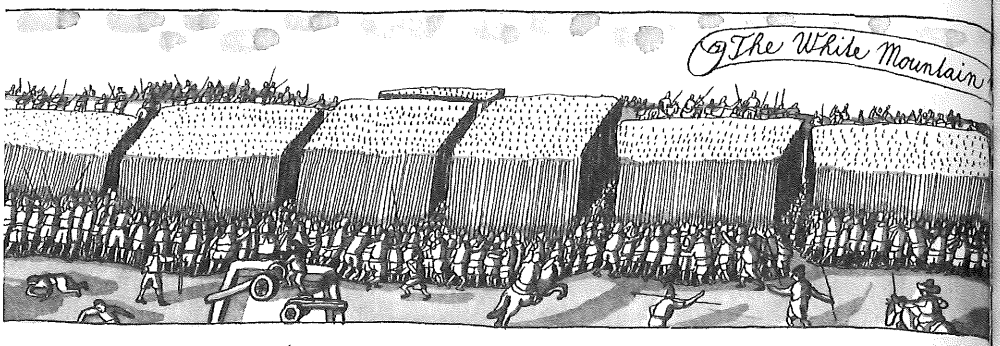
Even when Frederick of the Palatinate arrived with his wife in Prague in the autumn of 1619 this situation remained unchanged. By



coincidence, the Estates welcomed the new elected king with a celebratory luncheon at the Star Summer Palace. On the 4th of November the coronation was held in St. Vitus's Cathedral. Far from all Praguers were impressed with the new royal couple. Elizabeth and her court ladies caused a scandal with their unusually deep necklines, while Frederick's Calvinist preachers upset the locals by rigidly insisting that St. Vitus's Cathedral be purged of superfluous splendour.

Meanwhile Ferdinand II was anything but resigned to the situation. The day after Frederick of the Palatinate was elected King of Bohemia, Ferdinand became Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and consolidated his international prestige. Immediately thereafter he scored an unprecedented success by making a secret alliance with the head of the Roman Catholic League, Maximilian of Bavaria, from which he could hope for substantial aid. The emperor could also rely on the army under the leadership of Charles Bonaventure Buquoy against the Estates forces in South Bohemia. Everything suggested that the coming year 1620 would see some major denouement to the mounting drama.

That was indeed what happened. In July 1620 the armies of Maximilian of Bavaria under the command of the experienced General Jean Tilly launched a campaign to tak, Linz in Upper Austria. The appearance of the Catholic League at the side of Emperor Ferdinand II immediately turned the tables against the Estates. Maximilian of Bavaria occupied Upper Austria more or less without a battle, and this opened the way for Catholic armies to push on into the Kingdom of Bohemia. The tempo of events speeded up. Maximilian's army and Buquoy's imperial force penetrated deep into the Bohemian interior in the autumn months and on the 27th of October had reached Rakovník, a mere 60 kilometres west of Prague. Here they came up against the Estates army, commanded by Christian the Elder of Anhalt, the leading supporter and confederate of Frederick of the Palatinate. In a battle lasting several days Buquoy was lightly wounded in the sensitive place with which (as he put it) men sin the most, and had to spend the rest of the campaign in a carriage. The numerically inferior Estates troops hastily retreated in the direction of Prague, managing the retreat under cover of night. On the

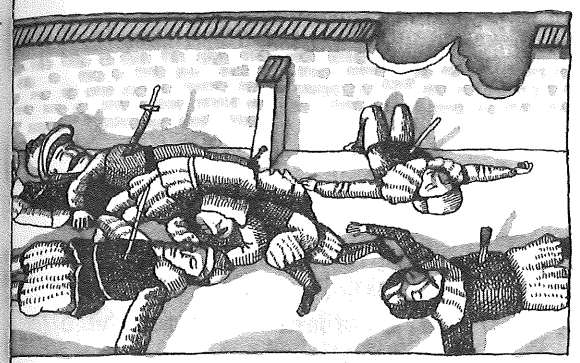


morning of the 8th of November they were already taking up a strategically advantageous position on the plains of the White Mountain. When the mist lifted, the Estates commanders discovered that the Catholic army was advancing along the Karlovy Vary highway.

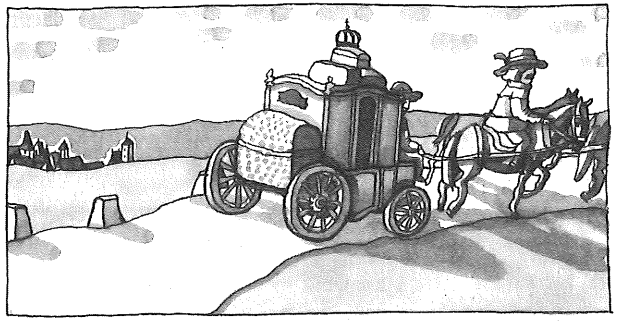
A bridge guarded by Czech musketeers led across the Litovice Stream, which formed marshes here, but the musketeers abandoned the position at the first sign of a fight, allowing the enemy to cross the stream. Getting across the narrow bridge was a lengthy business for more than twenty thousand men, and so some commanders on the Estates side, above all Colonel Jindřich Šlik, recommended attacking the enemy with the troops on the south side of the positions and so delivering a blow from which the Catholic forces might not recover. But he was overridden by those who preferred to play safe. The position on the White Mountain seemed sufficiently secure, and the rear was covered by Prague, to which the army could retreat in case of need.

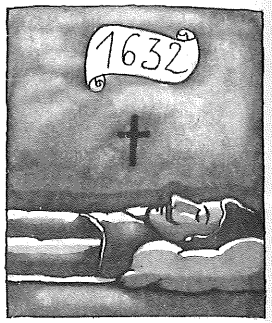
There was disagreement on the Catholic side as well, with commanders uncertain whether to attack the numerically weaker, but strategically more advantageously deployed Estates army. Buquoy in particular counselled caution, but Maximilian of Bavaria was keen to attack, since he was aware that if the battle was not fought immediately, the army would disperse in the winter and it might not be possible to put it together again. The result of the meeting was a compromise: the Catholics would attack the enemy with a smaller force and provoke a small engagement, which would then clarify the position and prospects. In modern terms we might call it a reconnaissance engagement.

The tactics chosen by the Catholics proved successful beyond expectation, although the beginning of the battle was unpromising. Around noon the Catholic forces attacked the left flank of the Estates position, which failed to resist the assault, partly because some of the soldiers took flight immediately. The situation might still have been saved by Christian the Younger of Anhalt, whose tactics caused disarray among the imperial troops. There was also hope of help from the Hungarian cavalry. Unfortunately Polish Cossacks in Habsburg, with sabres in both hands and their own reins in their teeth, massacred the Hungarian riders. The decisive factor turned out to be the advance of the Bavarian Colonel Johan Kratz, whose horsemen halted Anhalt's cavalry. After that the resistance of the non-Catholics collapsed quickly. The last to make a stand was the Moravian Regiment of Jindřich Šlik, placed by the wall surrounding the hunting park. Šlik's men had nowhere to retreat but all the same ought bravely, if by no means to the last man as the later legend had it. Šlik himself surrendered with his sword in his hand. The battle ended with slaughter in the hunting park, where soldiers of the royal guard of Frederick of the Palatinate were caught in the trap. After less than two hours the battle had ended in complete victory for the Catholic side, which had engaged only a third of its men in the fray. It left approximately 1,600 - 2,000 soldiers dead.



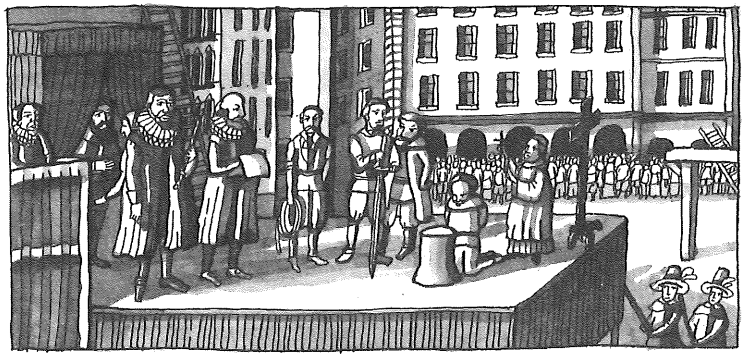
While the defeat was cruel and crushing, it might not necessarily have meant that the whole war was lost, but demoralisation took its toll. The Estates army was composed (like that of its enemy) of mercenary soldiers of various nationalities, and did not intend to offer further resistance. Many soldiers had not been paid for a long time and had no intention of risking their lives for nothing. Frederick of the Palatinate, who had reigned in the Bohemian Lands for precisely one year, left Prague with the queen and leaders of the anti-Habsburg

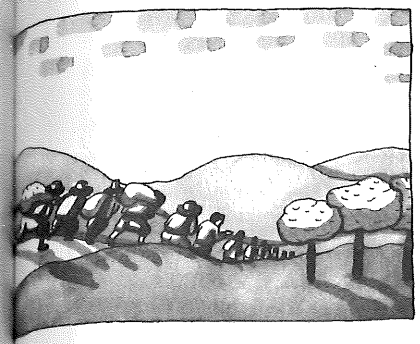




rebellion on the 9th of November, earning himself the unflattering soubriquet of "Winter King". He continued to fight against the Habsburgs, but without significant success, and died in 1632. His wife Elizabeth survived him by thirty years, and their son Ruprecht (Rupert of the Rhine), born in Prague, also made a name for himself in history. In England he was later to fight against Oliver Cromwell.

The victorious Ferdinand II exploited his triumph to the hilt. The leaders of the Estates Uprising who failed or refused to escape were imprisoned, and twenty-seven of them were executed on the 21st of June 1621 on Old Town Square. Twenty-seven crosses in the paving in front of the town hall mark the place where the scaffold stood. The property of almost all the noble rebels and of many burghers was then confiscated, and a new constitution promulgated in 1627 - 1628. Its articles proclaimed the Bohemian crown to





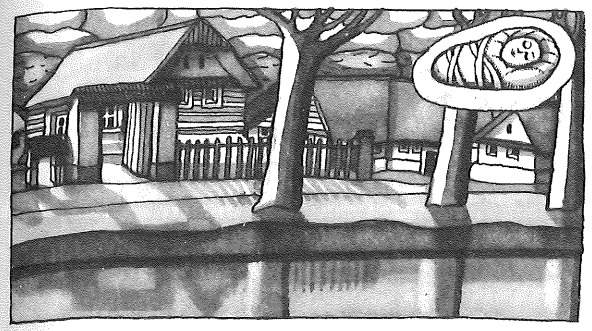
be hereditary in the Habsburg line, curtailed the powers of the Land Estates and declared Catholicism to be the only permitted religious faith. As a result of these measures, which meant the rise of centralism and the end of the Estates order on the old model, tens of thousands of people left Bohemia and Moravia, among them the famous educationalist Jan Amos Komenský (Comenius).

The Catholic side, including the emperor himself, attributed the victory at the White Mountain to the help of the Virgin Mary, in whose name the Bavarian and imperial troops had fought. In the spirit of this interpretation the originally Lutheran Church of the Holy Trinity in Prague's Lesser Town was re-consecrated to Our Lady of Victory. It was to this church, in 1628, that the Czech noblewoman Polyxena of Lobkovice, descended on her mother's side from the Spanish line of Manrique de Lara, donated a wax statuette of the child Jesus. Ever since, the cult of the Infant Jesus of Prague has attracted pilgrims and tourists from all over the Hispanic world. Our Lady of Victory also inevitably became the patron of the pilgrimage church built at the beginning of the 18th century on the plain of the White Mountain. By this time almost all the population of Bohemia and Moravia were Roman Catholics and the Czech Lands were being ever more closely integrated into the Habsburg Danubian Empire.

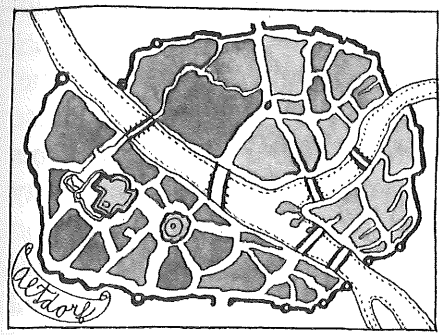
The Extraordinary Story of Albrecht of Valdštejn

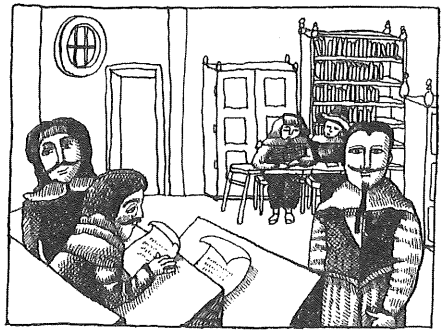
His energy and ambition left lasting traces in Prague, in North and North-East Bohemia especially around Jičín, and in Central and Eastern Moravia, but also in the Baltic states, in South and North Germany and even, less directly, in far-away Sweden. His dazzling rise and tragic end fascinated myriad writers of his time, and as Wallenstein (a form of his name he did not use himself), he was later immortalised by Friedrich Schiller, and captured the imaginations of more recent litterateurs, such as Alfred Döblin and Gollo Mann, or among Czechs Jaroslav Durych who wrote two books about him. His fame in literature has only increased the avid interest of historians. For almost two centuries scholars have been arguing passionately over whether the Duke betrayed the Emperor Ferdinand II, or the Emperor the Duke, his generalissimo. Perhaps the conflict between the two was inevitable, since years before it even happened it had been predicted in the horoscope drawn up in 1608 by the celebrated astronomer Johannes Kepler for a young, still unknown officer. Apart from Jan Amos Komenský (Comenius), Albrecht Václav Eusebius of Valdštejn is undoubtedly the most famous Czech of the 17th century, even if his career was contradictory and controversial to say the least...

The future general, politician and above all brilliant businessman and organiser was born on the 14th of September 1583 in Heřmanice nad Labem, a small East Bohemian community. The tombstones of his parents, Vilém of Valdštejn and Markéta Smiřická, are still there today. The noble family was protestant by faith, and the young Albrecht



received his basic education at the school of the Unity of the Brethren (a minority church inclining to Calvinism), and in Lutheran Goldberg in Silesia. Valdštejn was then sent to the academy in Altdorf near Nuremberg (Nürnberg), where his fierce temperament became apparent. After wounding a burgher in a brawl, he was forced to leave

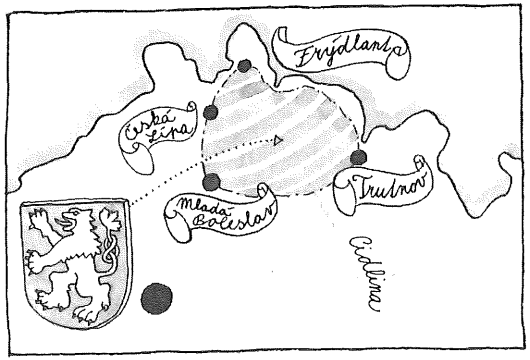


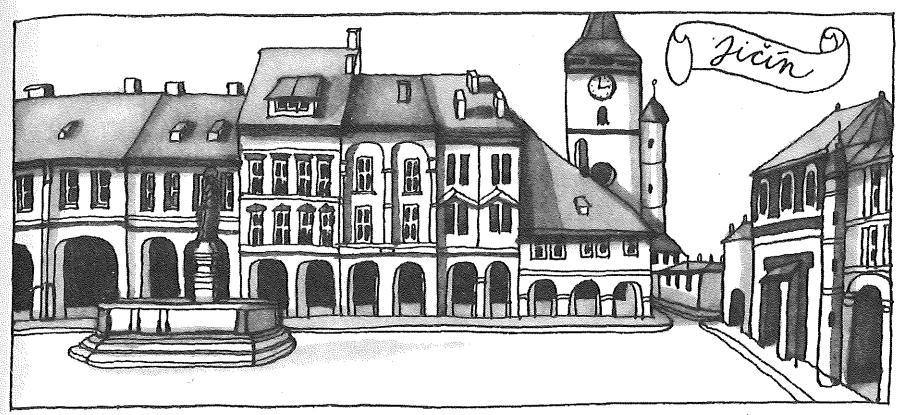


the school. In any case he was not a scholarly type, although he was not without intellectual gifts; he had an excellent command of German and a knowledge of other languages, and enjoyed mathematics. As was expected of young nobles, he then travelled, apparently visiting Italy, and embarked on a typical gentlemanly career. He lived for a time in Vienna at the Court of the Archduke Matthias, opportunistically converted to Catholicism, acquired military experience and a certain respect on the Hungarian front in the war against the Turks, married a rich

widow who brought him quite lucrative estates in Eastern and Central Moravia, and was soon widowed. So far his life had been in no way exceptional, and even rather dull, but it changed radically with the outbreak of the Estates Rebellion and beginning of the Thirty Years War.

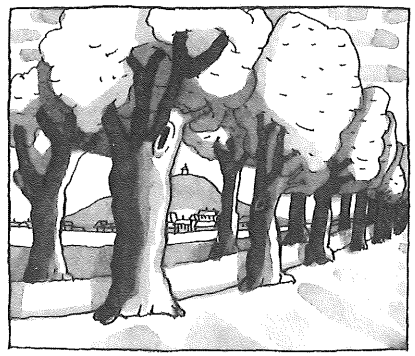
Colonel Albrecht of Valdštejn rapidly abandoned the Moravian Estates, which were considering military action against the Habsburgs, and went over to the other side. He gambled on the victory of Emperor Ferdinand II, and was not to regret his decision over the coming eleven years. After the Battle of the White Mountain, in which he did not take part, his star rose so fast and so high that there is nothing in Czech history to compare with it. His advance was not just a question of the loyalty he had shown the Habsburg Monarch at a difficult moment, but closely bound up with the huge political and economic upheavals that followed in the Bohemian Kingdom and Moravia. Valdštejn became a member of the mint consortium which in 1622 - 1623 devalued the currency to the extent that it lost 86 - 98 % of its value. The state was forced to declare bankruptcy, which was of course a tremendous opportunity for those who were able to pay their debts with the devalued currency and then use it to buy the property confiscated from the anti-Habsburg rebels. This was the main reason for Valdštejn's dazzling ascent. A talented entrepreneur, he bought up estates mainly in the economically advanced north-eastern and eastern areas of Bohemia. The core of his huge holdings, centred more or less on the territory between Mladá Boleslav, Česká Lípa, Frýdlant, and Trutnov and bordered to the south by the River Cidlina, consisted of the estates of the Smiřický family, which Valdštejn had seized as as guardian of the Jindřich Jiří Smiřický, still a minor. This was economically the best administered domain in the whole of Bohemia. The new owner inherited a well-established admin-

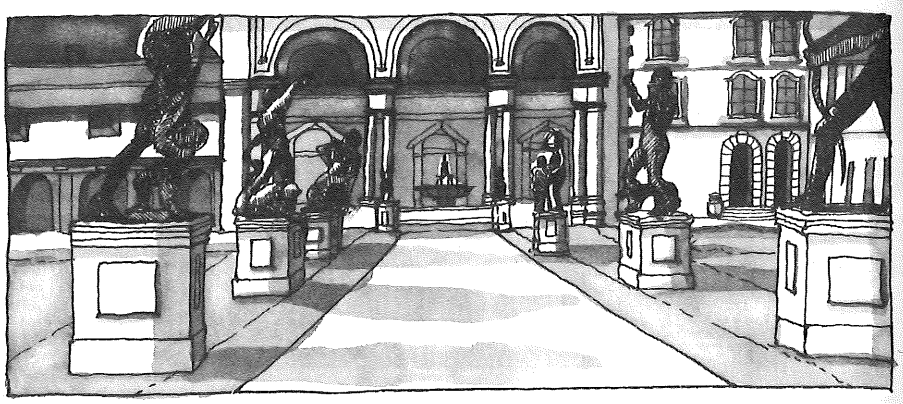


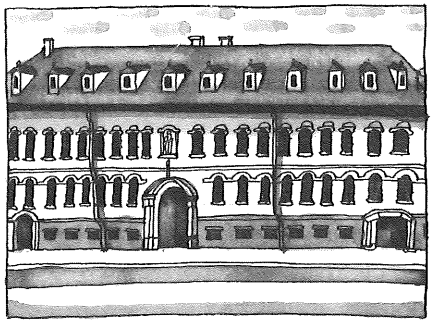


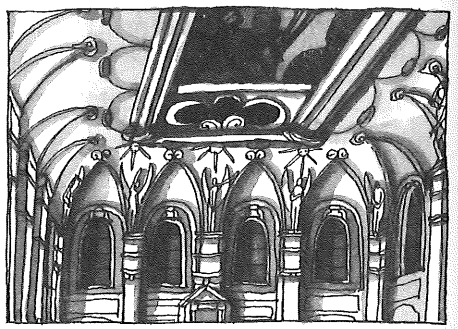
istrative apparatus and proceeded to develop the economic potential of the Smiřický inheritance.

This new wealth underpinned, and indeed required, corresponding forms of social prestige and display. The Emperor Ferdinand II promoted Valdštejn's holdings to the status of Duchy of Frýdlant, although in fact its centre was not the border Castle of Frýdlant, but the town of Jičín, which Albrecht renovated in style and where he founded a gymnasium (grammar school) with the Jesuits. Not far from Jičín he had an airy loggia built in Italian style, set in a magnificent garden (known as the Libosad), and between the town and the newly built Carthusian monastery in Valdice he established a superb avenue of limes. Almost two kilometres long and still existing today, it has 1,200 trees. In Prague Valdštejn bought several houses in the Lesser Town where, close to the Vltava, he had an extensive palace built with a large garden adorned with statues by Adrian de Vries. The Valdštejn



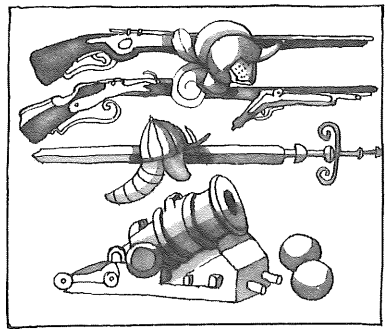




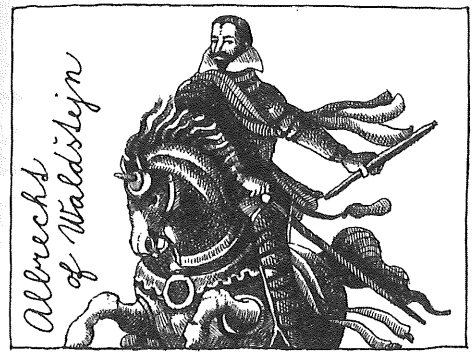


Palace, the work of Italian architects, is today the seat of the Senate of the Czech Republic. Depicted as the god of war, Mars, the proud duke still gazes down on events below him from the ceiling fresco of the Great Hall of the main building. The whole complex, oscillating in terms of style between Mannerism and early Baroque, unmistakeably reveals Valdštejn's fondness for Italian culture.

The duke was not, however, to have much time to sit back and enjoy the sumptuousness of his properties. His restless spirit attracted him to the battle fields. In 1625 the secret council, the emperor's most confidential consultative body, hesitated but ultimately accepted Albrecht's offer to put together a force of 24,000 men to defend Habsburg interests in the next phase of the Thirty Years War.



Valdštejn was appointed generalissimo, the highest commander of the imperial army, and could begin to pursue ambitious plans in which he showed organisational talent, military gifts and foresight. He geared the economic activities of his holdings to the needs of the imperial army, which could thus rely on regular supplies of weapons, clothing and other essentials. Over the period 1626 - 1629 Valdštejn gained control of North Germany with his armies, ejecting the Danish forces, occupying a considerable part of the southern coast of the Baltic and acquiring the title of Duke of Mecklenburg and General Governor of the Baltic and Oceanic Sea. He made excellent use of his diplomatic



talents and cool head in negotiations with the defeated Danes in the Hanse City of Lübeck, ensuring that Ferdinand II emerged the victor in this stage of the war. His army, by 1630 consisting of 100,000 men, now controlled a huge area between the North and Baltic Seas on one side and North Italy on the other. Albrecht of Valdštejn was at the zenith of his fame, and his master could justly consider himself the effective ruler of the whole Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation.

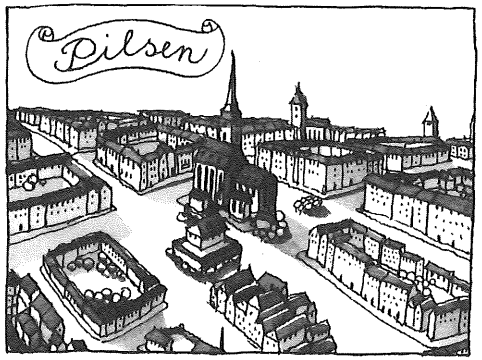
His fall from favour was sudden, and all the more painful for that. The extraordinary success of a Bohemian (Czech) noble was a thorn in the flesh of the nobles of the German region, especially those that had been suffering as his huge army marched through

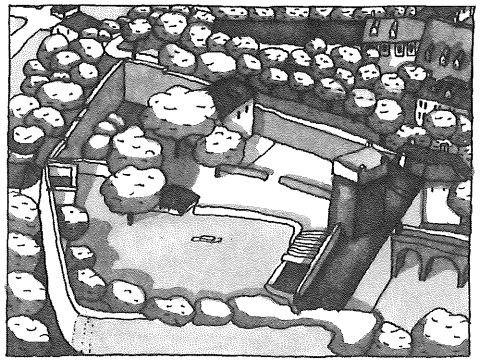
requiring billeting, while less successful military commanders and many people at the Viennese Court were thoroughly envious. Their intrigues soon came to a head. In 1630, when Ferdinand II requested the Imperial Diet in Regensburg to elect his son as King of the Romans, the Catholic electors made their assent conditional on the removal of Valdštejn from the position of High Commander. In the summer of 1630 the emperor gave way, although a Swedish expeditionary force had already disembarked at Peenemünde under King Gustavus II Adolphus. The Thirty Years War was continuing.

Valdštejn took his fall hard and grudgingly. He was not used to having so much free time (which he devoted to managing his properties and to his second wife Isabelle of Harrach, sister of Arnošt (Ernst), Archbishop of Prague). The fall of the previously powerful man was naturally, however, of great interest to the enemies of the Habsburgs. In the summer of 1631 there were secret meetings at which representatives of the Czech non-Catholic emigrants, apparently with Swedish consent, are alleged to have offered Albrecht of Valdštejn the Crown of Bohemia if he would support the anti-Habsburg camp. Given the advance of the Swedish forces into Central Europe this idea does not appear fantastic, but it remains unclear whether the meetings culminating in this "treasonable" bargaining actually took place in the form described. The only evidence of their content comes from the later report of a Czech non-Catholic emigrant who provided it to the Habsburgs as crown testimony for the post-hoc justification of Valdštejn's murder. Moreover, the claim is questionable on other, very fundamental grounds. If the Duke had ever actually sat on the Bohemian crown in the event of a Swedish victory, he would have had to restore his land holdings to their exiled owners, and would thus have lost his vast possessions. Whether the royal crown would have seemed to him sufficient compensation for the material loss, no one can say.

In the latter part of 1631 Valdštejn continued to keep in the background

and merely observe from a distance the continuing Swedish campaign and in November the occupation of Prague by the army of Lutheran Saxony, which made possible the temporary return of some Czech exiled leaders. The situation was critical for Ferdinand II. In desperation he turned to Valdštejn and asked him to take up the high command again. The duke agreed, but only on the condition that he be allowed to conduct negotiations on peace conditions with any party he chose. The emperor had no alternative but to agree. Albrecht of Valdštejn relatively easily drove the Saxons out of the Kingdom of Bohemia in the first half of 1632, and then engaged the Swedes at the Battle of Lützen, in which Gustavus Adolphus fell. But then he started a complicated game with a purpose that historians have never yet satisfactorily explained. He opened negotiations with the Swedes, France, the Czech emigrants and the German Protestant princes without it being clear quite what he wanted. All that he revealed was the conviction that a future peace to end the long war had to based on the status quo ante of 1618, which was of course absolutely unacceptable for Ferdinand II. Reports from the spy networks that the powers of the powers of the time already ran quite effectively increased suspicions of treachery on the Duke's part, and these were skilfully manipulated by his rivals at the imperial court. In January 1634 Ferdinand II issued a secret order for the removal of Valdštejn by any means.





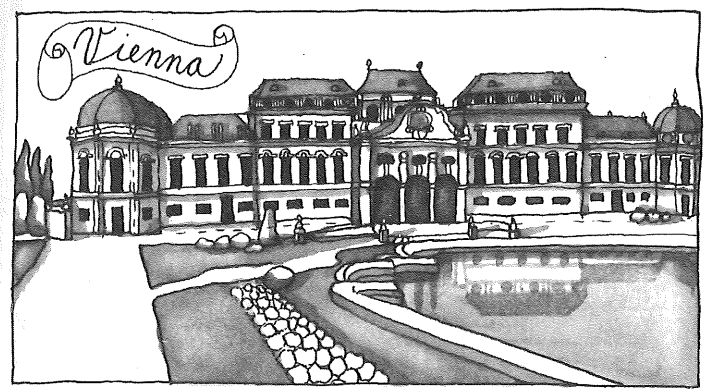
At this point the seriously ill duke could rely only on the few units that he had with him in Pilsen, from where he moved to Cheb (Eger). Here

he met his fate on the 25th of February 1634. In the evening during a feast at Cheb Castle his intimates Adam Erdman Trčka of Lípa, Vilém Kinský of Vchynice, Kristian Illow and Cavalry Captain Heinrich Niemann were murdered. The imperial officers who had been informed of the secret order to destroy Valdštejn then broke into a house on the square where the duke was just going to bed. After a few moments of hesitation, the Irish Captain Walter Deveroux stabbed the surprised Valdštejn, shouting "You evil, perfidious old rebel beast!"

The bones of the once feared generalissimo, in whose death not just the suspicious Ferdinand II, but also the French Cardinal Richelieu and mistrustful Catholic Spain had an interest, were to find no lasting rest for many years. For a century and a half they lay in Valdice near Jičín, but since 1785 they have been interred in the Chapel of St. Anne at the Chateau of Mnichovo Hradiště.

Praguers Understood Him

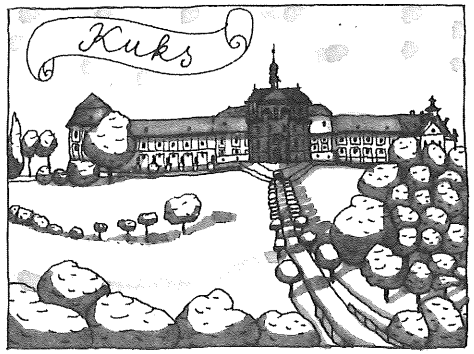
With the fall of Albrecht of Valdštejn and the confiscation of his huge landed estates, the woes that afflicted the Kingdom of Bohemia in the course of the Thirty Years War only deepened. The duke's estates and those of his companions murdered in Cheb were acquired by imperial officers and nobles loyal to the Habsburgs, many of them foreigners, whether Spanish, Italian, French or German. At the end of



the War, which left the Czech Lands still under Habsburg rule, half the territory in Bohemia was held by nobles of foreign origin. It was to take the Czech Lands several decades to recover from the traumas of the war, including the loss of a third of its inhabitants and economic devastation, all accompanied by systematic re-catholicisation. Only thirty or forty years after the Peace of Westphalia, the official end to the conflict signed in 1648, were there renewed signs of economic growth and cultural revival. In architecture and sculpture, but also in literature and music, popular at every level of society, it was the Baroque style that triumphed. Indeed, the distinctively dynamic, Central European Baroque style remoulded the face of Bohemian

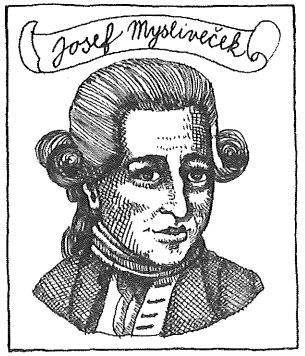
and Moravian towns, countryside and influenced ways of life for many years to come. The Baroque also reigned supreme in Vienna, which the music-loving Emperor Leopold I (1657 - 1705), victor over the Ottoman Turks, made the heart of the powerful Danubian monarchy that included the Bohemian Lands. Prague had not been the imperial residence for years, but huge Baroque palaces were built here too and in Brno and Moravia. Their salons echoed with fashionable Romance languages and above all Italian, the language of the new musical genre, opera.

Technically demanding and costly, opera performances were initially designed primarily for the courts of kings and the high nobility. When the Emperor Charles VI was crowned King of Bohemia in 1723, the coronation festivities included a performance of the opera *Constanza e Fortezza* (Constancy and Courage) by the composer Johann Joseph Fux. The event enchanted Count František Antonín Sporck, a nobleman resident in Bohemia. A year later the well-known hothead engaged an Italian opera company that performed in Prague and at his seat of Kuks near Dvůr Králové. In 1730, at the luxurious Baroque chateau in



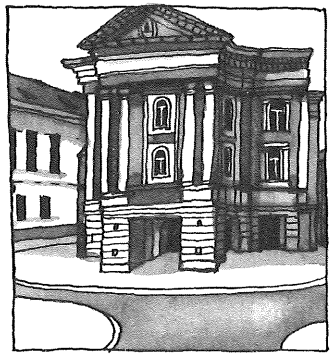
Jaroměřice nad Rokytnou, the first ever opera by a Czech composer was presented. Called *O původu Jaroměřic [The Origin of Jaroměřice]*, it was composed by František Václava Míč at the wish of Jan Adam Questenberg. The libretto was originally in Italian, but was soon translated into Czech and German.

The music heard by the rest of society was mainly sacred music, sung and played in churches and on the many saints days, pilgrimages and other festivals, but also accompanied by secular music. Music was so widely taught and performed in the Bohemian Lands that people began to speak of the country as the "Conservatory of Europe", and Czech composers and musicians won recognition far beyond the borders. In this respect nothing changed as European tastes shifted with the arrival of Rococo playfulness and Classicist restraint. It was therefore no wonder that in 1777 the famous Czech composer Josef Myslivečeк, more admired in Italy than in Vienna, advised the young Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart to try his luck in Prague, where his talents would be more appreciated than in



the Habsburg capital. By coincidence, in the same year the twenty-one-year-old Mozart met a couple called the Dušeks in Salzburg. Later they would smooth his path in Prague, but the time had not yet come for Mozart to visit the Bohemian city, and this was actually all to the good. His musical genius was as yet only in the early stages of development, and Prague still had no proper permanent theatre building

Such a theatre was eventually opened in 1783 in the Old Town. It was built thanks mainly to Count František Anton Nostitz - Rhieneck, after which the small but elegant and well-equipped theatre was originally named, although in 1799 it received the official title of *The Estates Theatre [Stavovské divadlo]*. The cultured and cosmopolitan nobleman regarded theatre as both an entertaining and educational institution and from the beginning intended it for a broad Prague

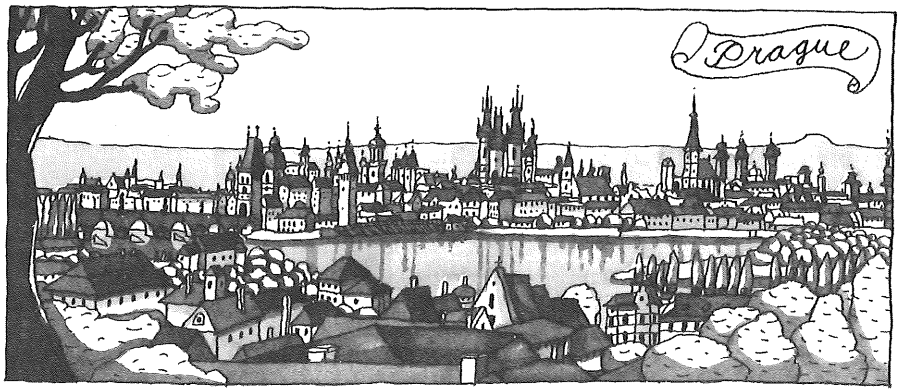


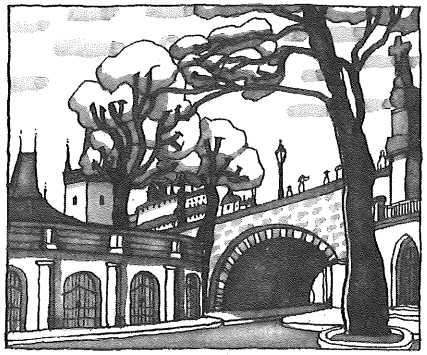
public without distinction of nationality or social standing. He took another exceedingly fortunate step by engaging the famous theatre company of Pasqual Bondini, earlier performing in humble conditions in the Thun Palace in the Prague Lesser town, to work in the new theatre. The stage was now set for Mozart's Prague triumph.

The thirty-year-old composer first arrived in Prague in January 1787. The moment was just right. Prague was in the middle of the ball season and the arrival of the composer, whose opera *The Marriage of Figaro* had been a sensation in the city, was considered an event of the

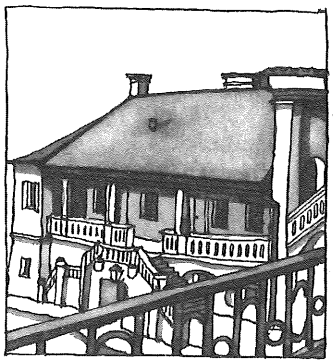
first order. Mozart enthusiastically attended a ball organised in his honour and noted with pleasure that all the guests "joyfully jumped around to music from *The Marriage of Figaro*", including the flower of Prague's beauties, although the composer neither danced nor flirted with them, partly because of tiredness and partly, as he commented, "out of inborn stupidity". It was unthinkable that Mozart should not conduct a performance of *The Marriage of Figaro* in the Prague Theatre, and this was so successful that it had to be repeated three days in a row. The small, rather delicate man showed his elan and energy at every opportunity. He gave two piano recitals, presented a great many piano improvisations in society, visited pubs where he drank long into the night, stayed long enough for the successful premiere of his *Prague Symphony* (properly the *Sinfonia in D*) nd composed a number of minor pieces, above all dance music. And his first Prague trip culminated with the signing of a contract in which he undertook to compose a new opera with which Bondi's company would open the next season. He had seven months to complete it.

Mozart set out for Prague a second time in August 1787. He took with him the unfinished score of the opera *Don Giovanni*, the libret-

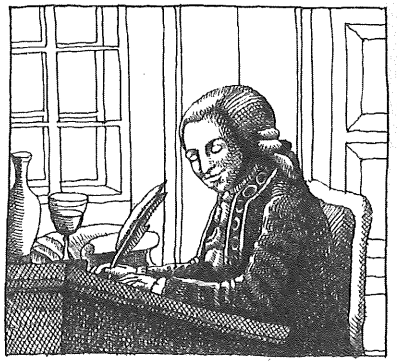




to written by his experienced collaborator Lorenzo da Ponte. He took lodgings in the inn *U tří zlatých lvů [At the Three Golden Lions]* on the corner of Uhelný trh [The Coal Market] and Skořepka Street. It was just a few minutes walk from the theatre, but the noise and bustle in the centre of Prague didn't suit Mozart and so he moved to Bertramka, a tranquil manor belonging to the pianist and composer František Xaver Dušek and his wife the singer Josefina. The Bertramka stood just beyond the Prague city walls, in Smíchov, away



from the commotion of the big city. Even so, he didn't manage to make the originally agreed deadline for the premiere, which was put off until the 29th of October. A rumour later circulated in Prague to the effect that the night before the delayed premiere Mozart had still not written the overture, and only completed it in the small hours with the aid of punch. This was not true, but the story accurately reflects Mozart's tendency to put off onerous tasks to the last minute.



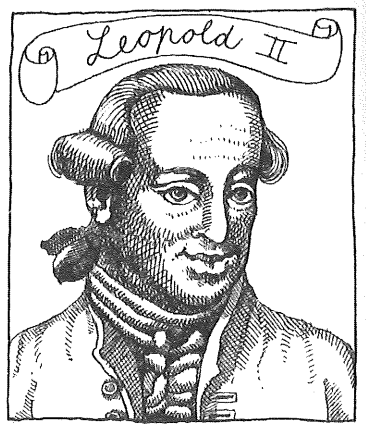
The success of the opera *Don Giovanni* exceeded all expectations. The Nostic Theatre was entirely sold out for the world premiere. The twenty-member orchestra, conducted by the composer himself, gave an outstanding performance, and there was praise for the singers and actors of Bondi's company. A series of enthusiastically applauded repeats followed, and these continued even after Mozart's departure from Prague on the 16th of November 1787. By the year 1825, when the public first heard the opera in Czech, it had been performed in Prague two hundred and fifty-seven times, an extraordinary number for the time. The fantastic response in Prague was not paralleled in Vienna, where *Don Giovanni* was rather coldly received in 1788.

The difference in reaction could hardly have been caused by the theme of the punishment of the proud seducer Don Juan, already known in many forms in the 18th century. The Viennese public was probably indulging in a little latent rivalry with Prague. By building a theatre the Bohemian city had shown that it was no longer resigned to the secondary cultural and political role into which it had sunk since the Thirty Years War. In what was now an atmosphere of Enlightenment reforms and social ferment, society in Bohemia was subconsciously sensing the imminent changes symbolically expressed in the twelve times repeated cry of *Viva la liberta!* (Long live liberty!) in one of the choral scenes from *Don Giovanni*. The drama of a rebellious spirit, spurning conventions and pursuing individual freedom even at the price of self-destruction, was not just

a reflection of Mozart's own unfettered nature, but struck a chord with the growing desire of the Bohemian public to overcome traditional social differences reaching back deep into the Middle Ages. The Praguers loved their Mozart and understood their Mozart, if in their own way.

In the spring of 1789 Mozart made a short stop in Prague on his way to Berlin, spending one night in the luxurious inn *U zlatého jednorožce [At the Golden Unicorn]* on Maltézské Square. By coincidence, ten years later lodgings would be taken in the same house by Ludwig van Beethoven, whose music, so piercingly different from that of Mozart, did not appeal to the Praguers of the time.

Mozart visited Prague for the last time in 1791, to attend the premiere of the opera *La clemenza di Tito* which he had written, when in financial difficulties, for the coronation of the Emperor Leopold II as King of Bohemia. He did not himself attribute much importance to the opera, and was not surprised by the lukewarm reception, but he must have been offended by the comment of Leopold's wife Maria Ludovica, who called the opera "German muck". At the

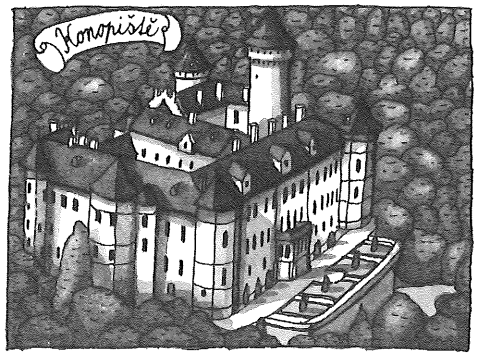


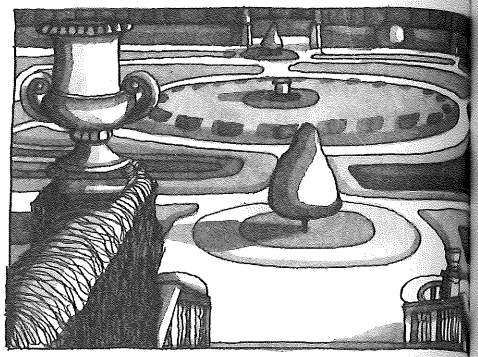
time he was working hard on something else, the opera *Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute), which he completed at his beloved Bertramka. In mid-September he left Prague.

On the 5th of December 1791 Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart died in Vienna. Prague had a requiem sung for him in the Church of St. Nicholas in the Lesser Town. Even today, after two centuries, Mozart and Prague belong to each other. The reconstructed *Estates Theatre* breathes with the atmosphere of Mozart's times, and in the Bertramka, although long ago swallowed up by Greater Prague, concerts are held in honour of the Dušeks and their brilliant guest.

Konopiště - Sarajevo - Prague

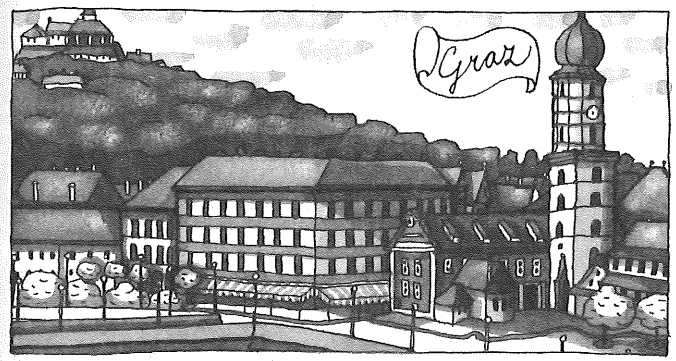
The course of history often lacks logic, and has been changed by pure chance. Perhaps that is one reason why it is so exciting and interesting. Czech history, for example, could well have been very different had it not been for unexpected and unforeseeable events in the life and death of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand d'Este. Today his Chateau of Konopiště, only forty kilometres south of Prague, attracts many visitors with its remarkable interiors, rich collections and superb English landscaped park. Here the archduke had his country seat, here he hatched the plans he rarely confided in anyone, and here he devoted himself to his favourite activity - hunting. It was here too that on the 12th - 13th of June 1914 he played host to Kaiser Wilhelm II. The meeting took place less than seven weeks before the outbreak of the First World War, and has led some to speculate that at Konopiště the two men, the fifty-year-old Habsburg Franz Ferdinand and Wilhelm Hohenzollern, four years his elder, made an agreement to unleash a military catastrophe. This is out of

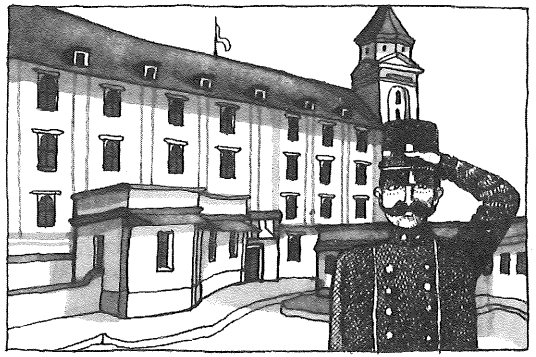


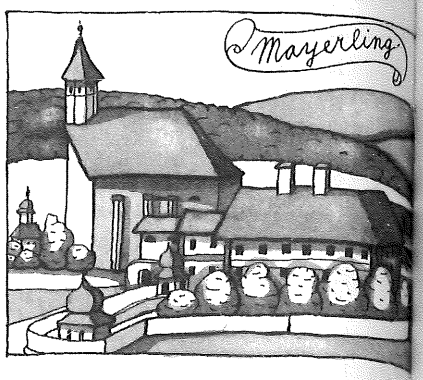


the question. Archduke Franz Ferdinand had no desire for war at all, let alone a long war. His goal had always been to push through fundamental reforms to modernise the Danubian monarchy and turn it into a real great power. For this he needed peace, but also the imperial throne for which he had been waiting so long, although at the beginning he had never even thought he would inherit. Even in this highly important matter chance had played a part. But let us not get ahead of ourselves.

Franz Ferdinand was born on the 18th of December 1863 in Graz in Styria, the son of Karl Ludwig Habsburg and his second wife Maria Annunciata. The sickly newborn, who was not at first expected to survive, was only the nephew of the Austrian Emperor Franz Josef I, who had been reigning since the end of 1848. Everyone assumed that the emperor would be succeeded on the throne by his son, Crown Prince Rudolf, who was only sixteen months older than Franz Ferdinand. The little archduke was brought up in a strict Catholic spirit, with which he deeply identified, and he early added the predicate d'Este to his name when he came into a large inheritance from the Duke of Modena. In his youth he took up the usual

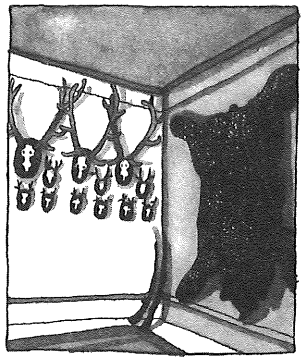






military career, serving in Prague but also in Sopron in Hungary where he acquired an aversion to everything Hungarian. The turning-point in his life came on the 30th of January 1880, for on that day Crown Prince Rudolf took his own life at Mayerling. From that moment Franz Ferdinand was generally considered the heir to the Austrian throne, although this was only confirmed by the emperor as late as 1897.

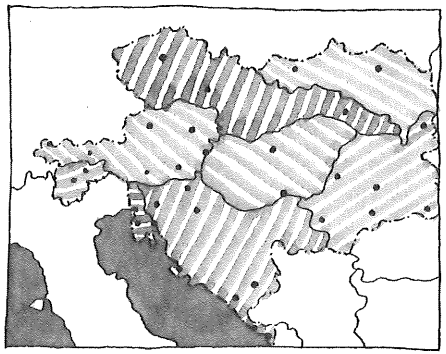
By this time Franz Ferdinand had already made a trip round the world and bought the estate of Konopiště. The castle here had been made somewhat more comfortable by Baroque renovations, but the archduke had it reconstructed into a luxury chateau in the Romantic Neo-Gothic style fashionable at the time. He used most of the chateau interiors to house his huge collections, above all his hunting trophies, historic weaponry, what is known as the St. George Museum - a set of paintings statues and other objects depicting St. George's fight with the dragon. He also landscaped the park and added the Rose Garden. All he needed now was a bride.



To the horror of the Habsburg family and especially the emperor, however, Ferdinand chose not an archduchess but the court lady Žofie (Sophia) Chotek, a mere countess from an old Czech family. Sophie did not meet the traditional Habsburg condition of equal birth, but Franz Ferdinand obstinately insisted on the marriage. The emperor

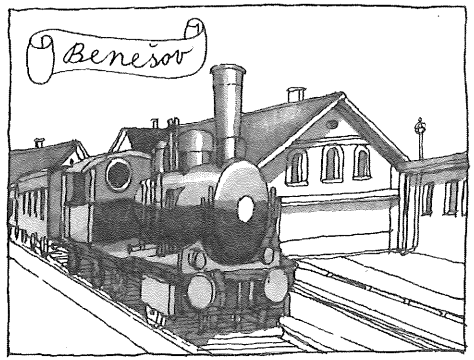
gave his consent only on the condition that the archduke renounce for his children and their descendants all rights and privileges arising from membership of the Habsburg Dynasty, including the right of inheritance to the throne. Franz Ferdinand did so on the 28th of June 1900, and married Sophie at the Chateau of Zákupy in North Bohemia. Franz Josef I raised Sophie Chotek to the status of "Duchess of Hohenburg" but this improved her standing at the Viennese court only slightly, and she was never really accepted. No wonder the archduke and his wife preferred residing at Konopiště, and sometimes another Bohemian estate, Chlum by Třeboň (Wittingau), to life in Vienna at their residence the Belvedere Palace. At least the attitude of the Habsburg relatives failed to upset their relationship. Their marriage was harmonious and in the first four years of the 20th century three children were born to them - a daughter Sophie and sons Maximilian and Ernst.

Franz Ferdinand was more frustrated by the impossibility of implementing reforms of the Habsburg Monarchy, which since 1867 had been a confederation called Austria-Hungary. The arrangement meant that in the Eastern, Hungarian part of the empire it was the Hungarians (Magyars), who held the dominating political position and were making this clear to the other numerous ethnic groups who lived there, particularly the Croats, Rumanians, Slovaks and Ruthenians. The newly privileged Hungarian position in the monarchy was also arousing the anger and envy of the Czechs,



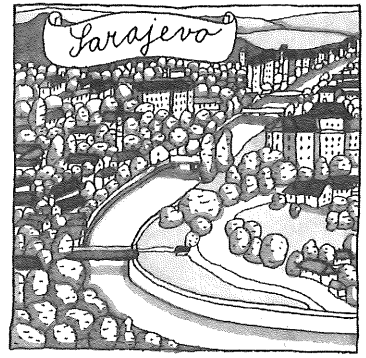
who belonged to the western, Austrian half of the empire but were unwilling to swallow the fact that the Habsburgs had acknowledged the constitutional (i.e. semi-autonomous) legal status of the Kingdom of Hungary but not of the Kingdom of Bohemia. From the very beginning of the new arrangement, 1867, the Czechs had been demanding the same or similar rights for the Kingdom of Bohemia, but in vain. While the official language of the western half was German, in the eastern half it was Hungarian, which inevitably disadvantaged the populations that spoke Slavonic languages or Rumanian. The result was serious national (ethnic) tension in both parts of the monarchy and the growth of nationalist feelings. The archduke was aware of the danger posed by these developments to the future of the Habsburg multinational empire. He commissioned all kinds of analyses and expert opinions, and came up with a series of plans to solve the problem. Although the proposals were various, they had one common denominator in the sense that they envisaged the federalisation of the monarchy, the weakening of the Hungarian influence and the strengthening of the Slav and Rumanian element in the Hungarian Lands. The Croats and Slovaks looked to the archduke with admiration and hope. The Czechs, however, did not loom large in his plans although he kept himself informed about the state of Czech public opinion. At the most he considered the idea of dividing up the monarchy on ethnic principles into a number of smaller wholes and so limiting the destructive effects of nationalism. Any substantial change, however, depended on the death of the Emperor Franz Josef I, who together with his advisors resisted any suggestion of reform.

In 1910 the emperor celebrated his eightieth birthday, but it was not until April 1914 that his state of health declined seriously. Then, for a whole month, a locomotive stood at the station in Benešov, less than two kilometres from Konopiště, ready to set off to Vienna at the Archduke's com-



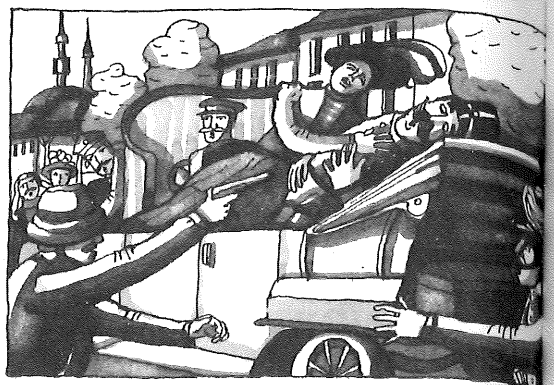
mand. But Franz Ferdinand never received the expected news of the emperor's death. Instead it was for him and his beloved wife that death was waiting.

It was waiting in Bosnia, a country that Austria-Hungary had occupied in 1878 and had annexed thirty years later. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Habsburg interests came up against the interests of Serbia, which had become more confident after its successes in the Balkan Wars. For Belgrade and for the Serbian minority in Bosnia, longing for the creation of a Greater Serbia, the Habsburgs were the arch-enemy. And it was in Bosnia that in June 1914 Franz Ferdinand was due to oversee the manoeuvres of Austrian-Hungarian units. The Serbs regarded the military exercise as political provocation. In the tense atmosphere a Serb secret organisation, *Unification or Death*, better known as *The Black Hand*, decided to provoke an incident. The Serbian Dragutin Dimitrijevic sent three inadequately trained youths



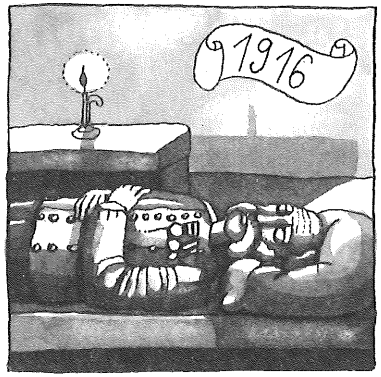
to Sarajevo in Bosnia to assassinate the Archduke Franz Ferdinand. He may not even have expected the three dilettantes to pull it off.

The manoeuvres, which the Archduke inspected on the 26th and 27th of June, took place successfully. The next day, Sunday the 28th of June 1914, was to be devoted to ceremonial affairs, and above all a gala welcome at the Sarajevo



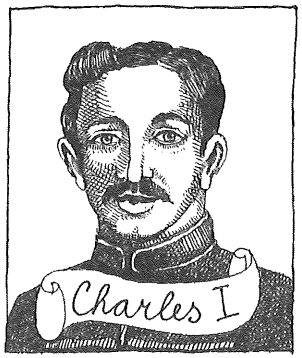
Town Hall. On the way one of the assassins hurled a bomb at the open care carrying the heir to the throne and his wife Sophie, but the attack failed. At the town hall the undaunted Franz Ferdinand condemned the assassination attempt and resolved to continue with the planned programme. By an incredible coincidence, the car took a wrong turning and stopped on a bend just in front of another of the assassins, the student Gavrilo Princip. Without evening taking proper aim with his gun, he first hit the Duchess Sophie, whom he had not intended to shoot at all, and then the Archduke. Both wounds were fatal.

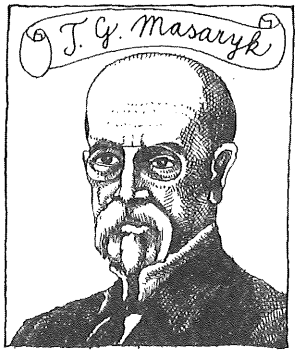
The Sarajevo Assassination was the fuse for the international explosion that the dead Archduke had never wanted. It provided Austria-Hungary with an excuse to declare war on Serbia,

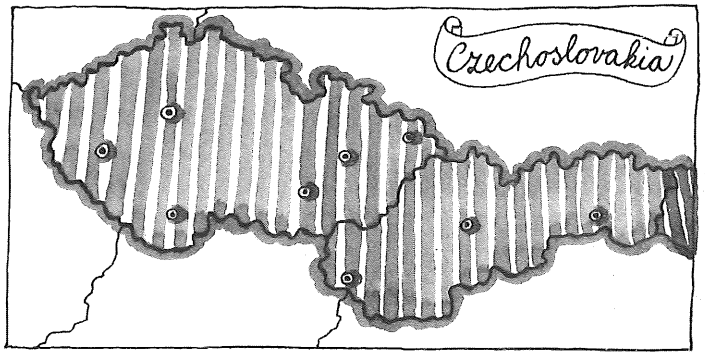


but the conflict spread and at the beginning of August 1914 almost all Europe was in arms. After four years of war the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy collapsed. The Emperor Franz Josef I lived on until November 1916 and the attempt made by his successor Charles I to save an empire convulsed by nationalist conflicts came too late. The Czech and Slovak resistance movement abroad, led by Prague University professor Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, had embraced ideals of complete independence and was geared to the victory of France, Great Britain and the United States, fighting against Austria-Hungary and Germany.

In the Autumn of 1918 the Habsburg position was so weak that on the 28th of October Czech politicians in Prague could proclaim an independent state, and two days later the Slovaks added their voices, T. G. Masaryk was elected the first president of the Czechoslovak Republic, which later came to include Ruthenia (Sub-Carpathian Ukraine) as well. It is one of the paradoxes of history that the new state, which avowed the principles of the French and American constitutions, almost copied the defunct monarchy in its ethnic composition. Apart from Czechs, Slovaks and Ruthenians, relatively large minorities lived within the borders definitively settled by the Paris Peace Conference. The Germans in Bohemia and Moravia, the



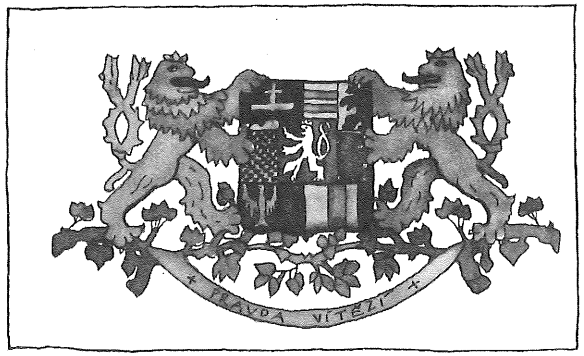




Hungarians in Slovakia and Ruthenia, and Poles in part of Silesia did not, however, regard the new state as their own, and were not easily reconciled to its existence. It was an open question whether these internal tensions could be surmounted. Yet another open question, but this time entirely hypothetical, is how the history of Central Europe might have turned out if Franz Ferdinand d'Este had ever been able to take that train from Benešov and start on his reforms...Of course, only God knows the answer.

From Munich to the Protectorate

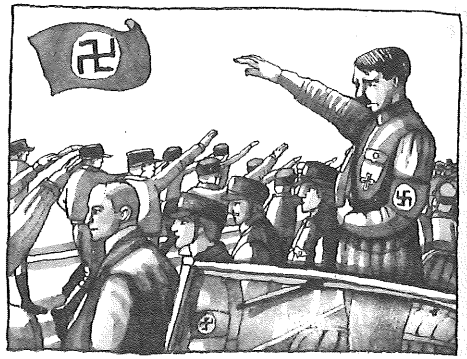
In 1929 the Czechoslovak Republic seemed solidly established as a prosperous democratic state, and one of the more advanced countries in the world in terms of its economic and cultural level and relatively high percentage of educated population. This overall stability was reflected on the internal political scene. The Czech Germans seemed to be identifying more with the republic, and in 1926 some of them took seats in the government. Ruthenia remained the poorest



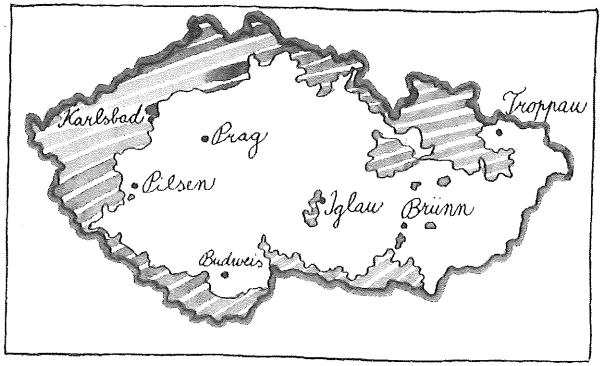
part of the republic, but conditions in this easternmost tip of the country were been gradually improving. With time even the discontented Hungarians in South and East Slovakia were taking a more moderate line. Radical political parties, communist or fascist, had little prospect of serious success. But then, like a bolt from the blue, came the Great Economic Crisis, which by 1930 - 1931 had Czechoslovakia in its grip.

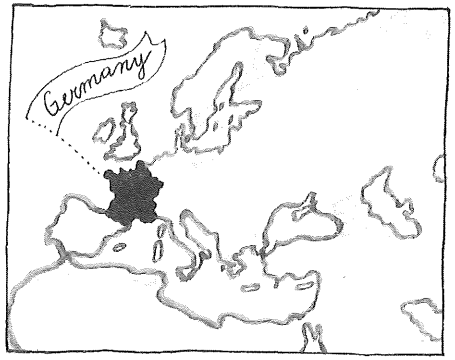
The apparent idyll disappeared, and earlier antagonisms reappeared in even sharper form. This was above all because the areas worst-hit by the crisis were those inhabited by the ethnic Germans, who were inclined to blame the Czechoslovak state for their plight and from 1933 to listen ever more attentively to the seductive words of the German Chancellor Adolf Hitler, with his thunderous demands for the

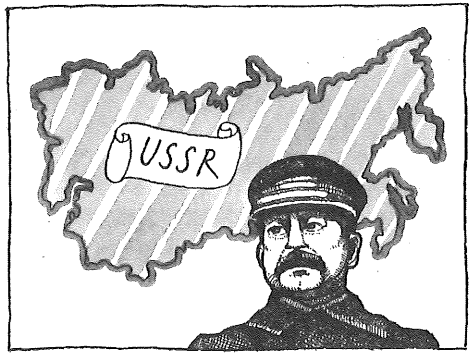
revision of the results of the First World War and the unification of all Germans in one great empire. The Sudeten Germans (as the ethnic Germans in the Czech Lands) were called, did not adopt Nazi ideology overnight. It spread among them slowly, but it was an ominous sign when in the parliamentary elections in the Spring of 1935, the majority of their votes were cast for the nationalistic *Sudeten German Party* (*Sudetendeutsche Partei*), led by Konrad Henlein.



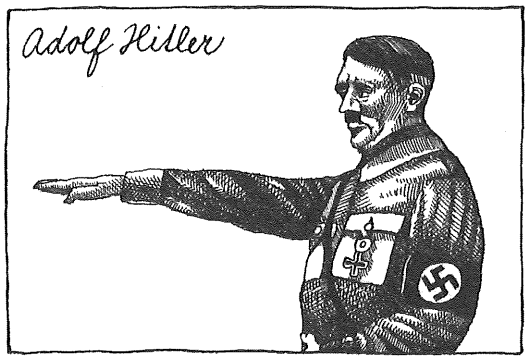
The Czechoslovak leadership responded to the ever more aggressive behaviour of Nazi Germany by strengthening its ties of alliance with France, and in 1935 by alliance with Stalin's Soviet Union. The mutual obligations of Czechoslovakia and the USSR to provide military aid in case of attack were conditional, however, on military aid being forthcoming from France. The proviso reflected Czechoslovakia's anxiety not to be suspected of close co-operation with the Stalinist dictator-



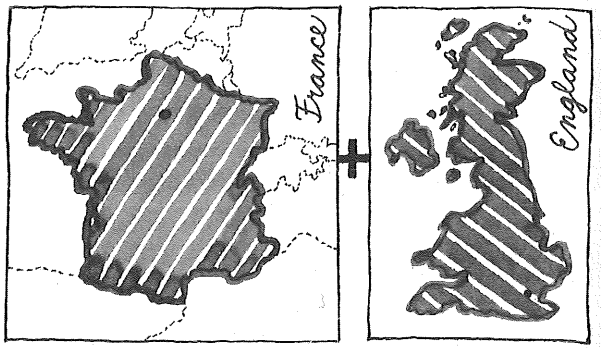


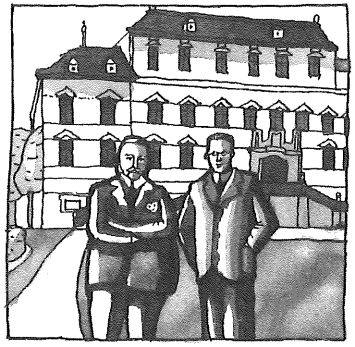


ship. At the end of 1935 the very elderly President T. G. Masaryk abdicated and made way for the experienced diplomat Edvard Beneš. Political manoeuvring was not, of course, enough. From 1936 Czechoslovakia embarked on the systematic construction of fortifications on the frontiers with Germany and with building arms factories in the less accessible Slovakia. The defence programmes hit complications, however, since the Bohemian and Moravian borderlands were precisely the areas where the German population was concentrated, with its ever more apparent pro-Hitler sympathies. When Hitler annexed Austria to Germany by the Anschluss of March 1938, the Czechoslovak-German border became much longer, and another belt of reinforced concrete defences was hurriedly constructed. By this time the Nazi dictator was set on the destruction of Czechoslovakia, which stood in his way territorially and simply by being a democratic state. At the end of 1937 he had secured the co-operation of Henlein's party, which was to fulfil the role of Hitler's Trojan Horse. It demanded not just autonomy for the German minority, which constituted 29 % of the population of the Czech Lands, but also the freedom to publicly espouse Nazi ideology, which was entirely unacceptable for a democratic state.



Hitler exploited the increasing and skilfully orchestrated tension in Czechoslovakia to put pressure on the western democratic powers, principally France and Great Britain. In both states there was rising anxiety that the Czechoslovak problem would end in another war that would cost the lives of millions. After the bitter and still recent traumas of the First World War this was the last thing that the French and British public wanted. The slogan of the day was the preservation of peace, even at the price of a weakened Czechoslovakia. The policy-makers of the British and French governments shared this mood and responded to it. In August 1938 Lord Walter Runciman came to Czechoslovakia on a mission designed to avert the threat of war and force the Czechoslovak government to listen to the demands of the Sudeten German Party. On this trip he had two meetings with the Sudeten leader Konrad Henlein Runcoman in Červený

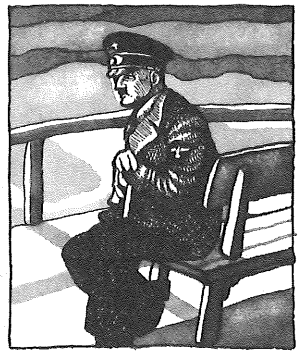


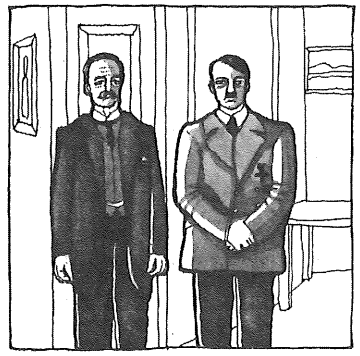


hrádek, and Henlein knew how to make the right impression. He assumed the mask of a misunderstood and moderate politician, unfairly spurned by Prague. Lord Runciman was happy to believe him, since this fitted in with the British course of conciliation with Hitler. Czechoslovakia would have to pay the price for peace, even if it meant

ceding territories with predominantly German populations to Germany. The vultures smelt an opportunity and were already circling above the prey. The Hungarian leaders indicated to Berlin that they would join Germany in a war with Czechoslovakia if no one came to her aid.

And isolation seemed more and more inevitable. In mid-September the British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain visited Adolf Hitler at

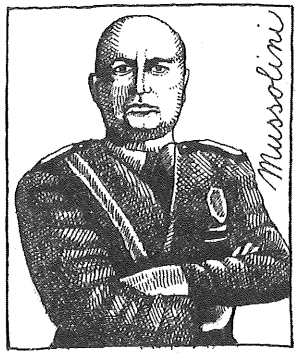


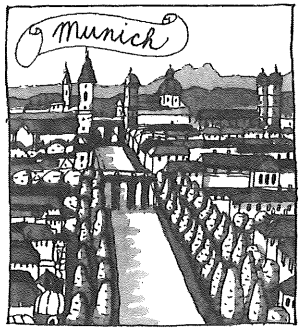


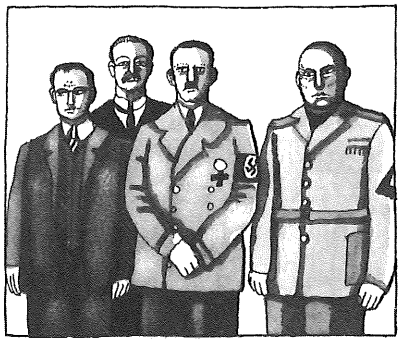
the Berghof. The German Chancellor demanded the cession of the Czech borderlands to Germany, and his British partner agreed in principle. The main obstacle was the attitude of the Czechoslovak government, which on the 16th of September dissolved the Sudeten German Party and issued a warrant for the arrest of Henlein, who had fled to Germany. A few days later it rejected the Anglo-French demand that it cede border areas with a more than fifty-percent German population to Hitler's Reich. Although it caved in after the French and British ambassadors delivered a strongly worded ultimatum on the 21st of September, the concession caused a wave of protest. The very next day the public forced a change of government by a general strike and mass meetings, and the new government declared mobilisation on the 23rd of September. The media praised the brilliantly smooth course of the mobilisation, but deliberately failed to mention that a third of German Czechs had ignored the call-up. War was looming, despite another personal meeting between Hitler and Chamberlain.

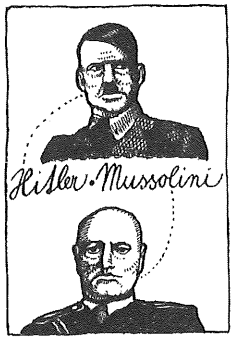
Public feeling in France and Great Britain was very different from the militant mood in Czechoslovakia. The governments of the two western powers did not intend to embark on a bloody conflict for the

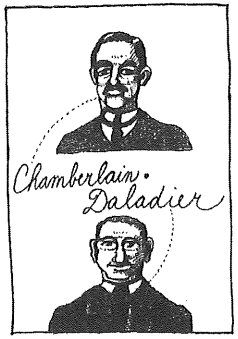
sake of a small state of fifteen million people, which in any case had only been established in 1918 with their agreement. They stepped up diplomatic activity designed to remove Czechoslovakia from active involvement in events. This time the mediating role was taken up by the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. At his formal instigation a conference was held on the 29th of September 1938 in Munich, attended by Hitler, Mussolini himself, Chamberlain and the French prime minister Édouard Daladier. Czechoslovakia was not invited. Its two representatives were not even allowed to remain in the antechamber of the conference hall, and remained in their hotel under Gestapo supervision. Shortly after midnight, on the 30th of September, the Munich Agreement was signed. It designated the





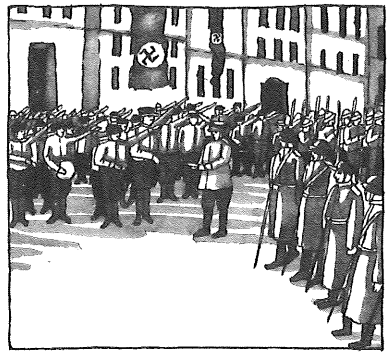


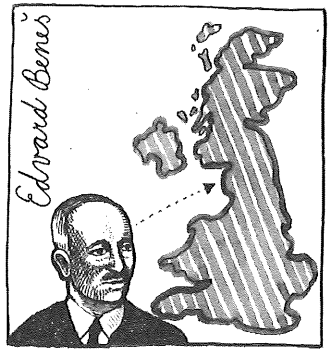




borderland areas that Czechoslovakia had to hand over to Germany.

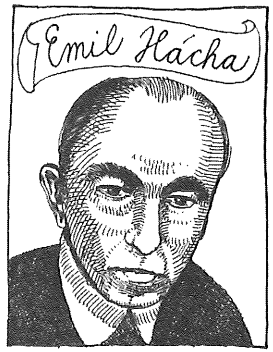
President Edvard Beneš and the Czechoslovak Government accepted the Munich diktat that very day. Besides their fear of a war in which Czechoslovakia would have to fight alone against Germany and possibly Hungary and Poland as well, they did not wish to be considered the main cause of conflict by European public opinion. Meanwhile, Chamberlain and Daladier were welcomed home from Munich as

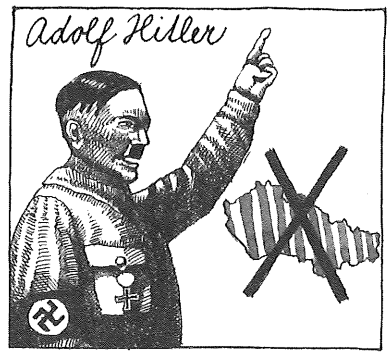




great peace-makers by enthusiastic crowds. On the 5th of October, as the German armies occupied the former Czechoslovak borderlands, President Beneš resigned and soon after flew to Great Britain. Clearly he anticipated the future direction of events and rightly foresaw that war would not be averted, and in that war he would take on the role of leader of the Czechoslovak resistance abroad and president in exile.

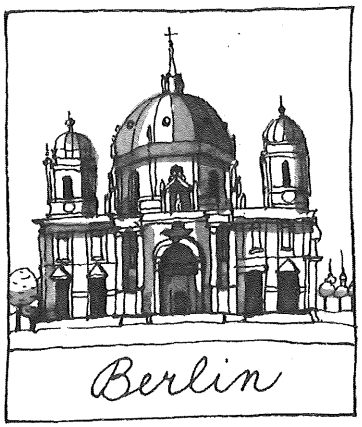
After the acceptance of the Munich Diktat, the weakness of the truncated republic, which had lost not just the Bohemian and Moravian border mountains, but also its fortifications, important industrial areas and communications, became all too clear. In October and November Czechoslovakia lost even more territory, this time to Poland and Hungary. Slovakia and Ruthenia gained an autonomous status that further undermined the authority of the central organs. The newly elected president Emil Hácha, a brilliant lawyer but an inexperienced politician, believed that a conciliatory line to Berlin



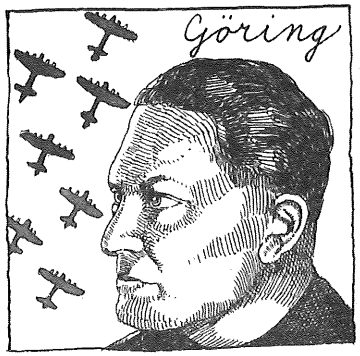


would ensure the future of the rump state. He was deeply mistaken. Hitler was set on the complete destruction of Czechoslovakia.

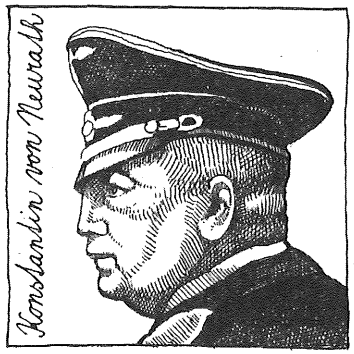
The Führer was presented with an excellent opportunity shortly before the middle of March 1939. As a useful instrument he exploited the Slovak nationalist leadership, approaching them with the request that they proclaim an independent Slovakia. On Tuesday the 14th of March the Slovak Assembly readily obliged. At the same time Hungarian military units crossed onto the territory of Ruthenia, although in places they encountered opposition from the Czechoslovak army. The alarmed President Hácha had already asked for an audience in Berlin the preceding day, but was not able to take the train until the afternoon of the 14th of March. Nothing good awaited him in the capital of the Third Reich.



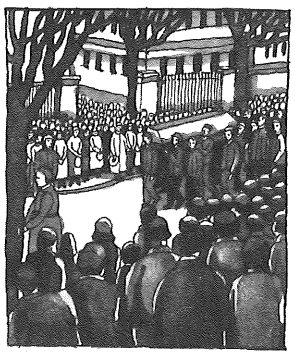
The airforce chief Hermann Göring threatened Hácha with the bombardment of Prague if he refused Hitler's solution, which was the annexation of the Czech Lands to the German Reich. In fact the German armies had already begun to occupy the Ostrava area and on the 15th of March they were marching into Prague. Göring had never seriously intended bombardment and had been lying, but he had achieved what he wanted. The psychologically broken Hácha, who had to be given a stimulant injection by Hitler's doctor, gave his assent. On Wednesday the 15th of March 1939 Czechoslovakia vanished from the map for what would be more than six years.



The future constitutional form of the Czech Lands was now decided by Hitler in Prague castle. On the 16th of March a decree was promulgated setting up the "Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia". The occupied territory

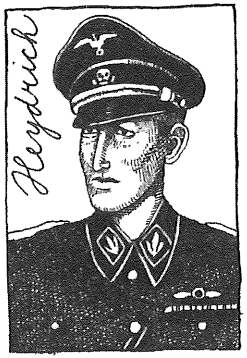


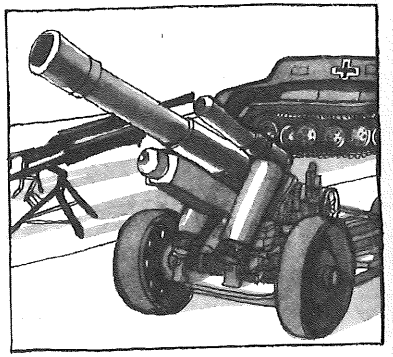
retained a degree of autonomy within the German Reich, retaining its own president (Hácha) and a Protectorate government mainly consisting of Czechs. But real power lay with occupation authorities headed by Reichsprotektor Konstantin von Neurath, more a diehard conservative than a fanatical Nazi. Although the Czech population greeted the German occupiers with curses and raised fists, there were no serious expressions of resistance. The Czechs guessed that their very survival was at stake and turned inwards to the values of their national culture, seeking strength in the glorious periods of their history. Genuinely mass protests broke out in Prague somewhat later, on the 28th of October 1939 on the anniversary of the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic. German police intervened against the demonstrators. The worker Václav Sedláček was shot dead and Jan Opletal, a student at the medical faculty, was seriously injured and died soon afterwards. His funeral sparked new demonstrations, and this time the Nazis reacted more brutally. On the 17th of November they broke into student halls of residence in Prague and Brno, arrested roughly 1,200 students and sent them to concentration camps. Nine student leaders were executed and Czech universities were closed indefinitely. It was the first 17th of November to become a memorable date in Czech history, but there would be others.



The Assassination of Reinhard Heydrich

It was the 27th of September 1941, the eve of the Feast of St. Wenceslas, patron saint of the Bohemian Lands. For more than two years the inhabitants of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia had been looking to St Wenceslas in the hope that he would intercede for them in one of the darkest times in Czech history, but in fact worse was coming, in the shape of the Reinhard Heydrich. The thirty-seven-



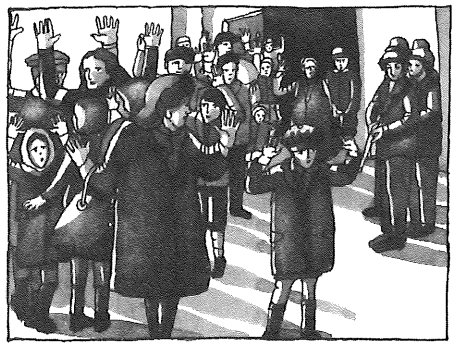


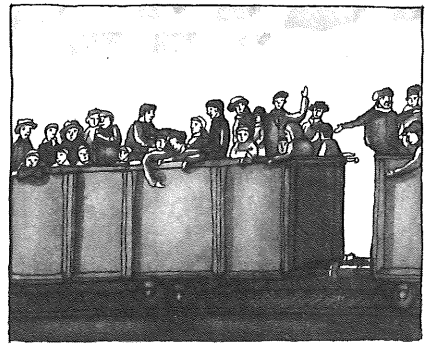
year old Heydrich, chief of the Main Reich Security Office (Reichsicherheitshauptamt) and the third man of Hitler's Third Reich, was arriving in Prague to take up the post of Acting Reichsprotektor. The leadership of Nazi Germany had decided that the existing Reichsprotektor, Konstantin von Neurath was too soft, and sent him on medical leave. Hitler wanted an energetic and reliable man in the Protectorate, one who would deal uncompromisingly with the Czech resistance and ensure the efficiency of the Protectorate's arms industry at a time when German armies were advancing into the interior of the Soviet Union.

Former naval officer Heydrich was quick to live up to his reputation. He immediately ordered the arrest of the prime minister of the Protectorate government General Alois Eliáš, who had been maintaining contacts with leaders of the Czechoslovak government in exile in London and trying to protect resistance organisations at home. Then he declared martial law on Protectorate territory, and on the 2nd of October made a secret but crucial speech in the Spanish Hall of

Prague Castle, outlining his ideas on the future of the Czech Lands. "This region must become German space and the Czech has no business being here." In the future the Slav population was supposed to become Germanised, to be resettled or simply physically exterminated. In the case of the Jewish minority there was no question of delay. In November 1941 the North Bohemian town of Terezín (Theresienstadt) was already being transformed into an enormous ghetto, from which transports of thousands of Jews were later sent to the death camps in Poland. Among the Jewish population of the Czech Lands alone, almost 80,000 people had lost their lives by the end of the Second World War.

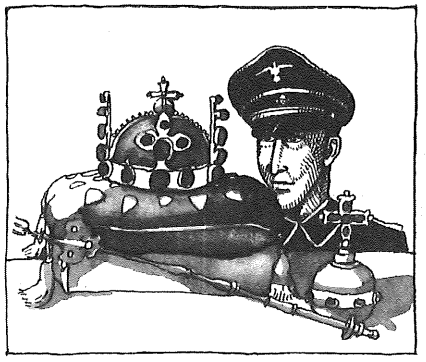
The Protectorate government, headed after Eliáš's arrest by Jaroslav



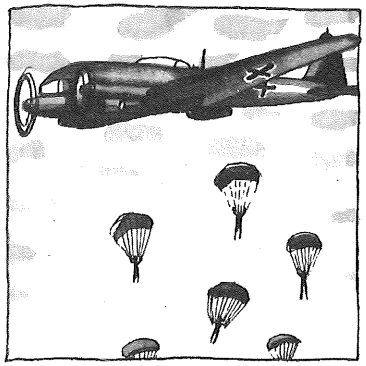


Krejčí, was appalled by Heydrich's policies. As early as the 28th of September 1941 it considered resignation, and decided to remain in office by only one vote, but under Heydrich's pressure it became ever more obviously a compliant tool of Nazi power. After several months the acting Reichsprotekor could be

satisfied with his activities. The Czech home resistance was in ruins and the new Protectorate government, appointed in January 1942, was no longer permitted to meet as a collective body. In any case, the deciding voice in the government was not the Prime Minister, but the German Walter Bertsch, who was in charge of the Ministry of the Economy and Labour. Heydrich was developing an increasing arrogant taste for the role of real ruler of the Protectorate, and his pride knew no bounds. On the 19th of November 1941 he demanded to be shown the Bohemian crown jewels, to which the Protectorate President Emil Hácha gave him the keys. The story goes that the acting Reichsprotektor could not resist the temptation to try on the Crown of St. Wenceslas, careless of the old legend that anyone who wears it unrightfully is doomed to punishment. And indeed, he was not to



survive for long. On the 28th of November 1941 a British aircraft dropped three parachutist groups over Czech territory, with the cover names *Silver A*, *Silver B* and *Anthropoid*. The members of the first two groups were entrusted with intelligence tasks, but the members of *Anthropoid* had only one purpose – to kill Reinhard Heydrich.

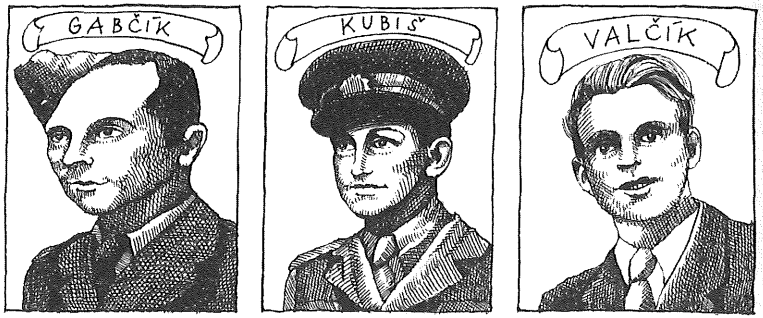


The idea of killing one of the most powerful men of the Third Reich had been born in the Czechoslovak resistance headquarters in London, in confidential discussions between the head of the intelligence service, Colonel František Moravec and the President-in-Exile Edvard Beneš. The British secret service supported it, and provided the Czechoslovak parachutists with special training. There were several reasons for getting rid of Heydrich, including Beneš's fear that the war might end without a clear victory and any peace negotiations would take into account the level of resistance against the occupiers. It was no secret that the Czech home resistance, concentrating mainly on intelligence work, was considered to be weak by the British. Nor was Beneš's international prestige enhanced by the generally stabilised economic conditions in the Protectorate and the efficient Czech arms factories making weapons for the German war effort. An action showing the whole world that Czechs were not resigned to Nazi slavery and were willing to take up arms against a top Hitler functionary who was terrorising Bohemia and Moravia was from this point of view highly desirable. It should be added that from the outset exile circles were well aware of the number of lives that would be lost in revenge for any successful assassination.

D Day was Wednesday the 27th of May. In the morning Heydrich drove off in an open limousine from his country residence in Panenské Břežany, north of Prague. This time the grey-green eight-cylinder Mercedes, driven by Heydrich's bodyguard Johann Klein, was not accompanied by two police cars. The acting Reichsprotekor felt safe in Bohemia and in any case he was in a hurry to get to the airport.

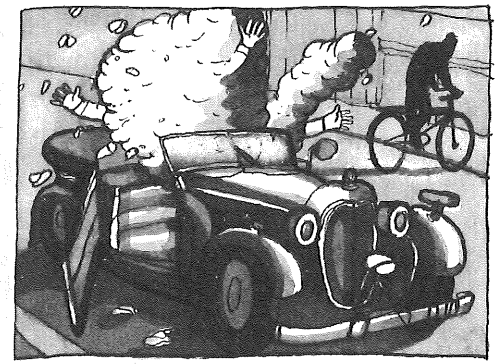
Shortly before half past ten the car had reached the built-up outskirts of Prague and was heading along the main road (then Kirchmayerova Boulevard, today Zenklova) down to the Vltava.

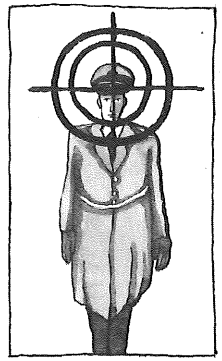
The parachutists had chosen a sharp bend where the driver had to slow down as the place to strike. As the Mercedes approached Sergeant Major Josef Valčík used a sign with a pocket mirror to alert his two colleagues, Jan Kubiš and Jozef Gabčík. Sergeant Gabčík coolly exploited a suitable moment. From the point of view of the driver Klein, he was just a pedestrian running unexpectedly into the road as if trying to catch a Number Three Tram



that was just moving off. Suddenly however he changed direction, threw away the raincoat he had carried over his arm, and aimed his automatic pistol straight at Heydrich. But the gun jammed and the bullet never left the barrel. Fortunately the prompt Kubiš took his friend's place. His bomb demolished the right side of the car, which swerved onto the pavement through its own momentum. The explosion stopped the tram as well, which had been moving slowly up the hill to the Pod Vychovatelnou stop. It was just a minute after half past ten.

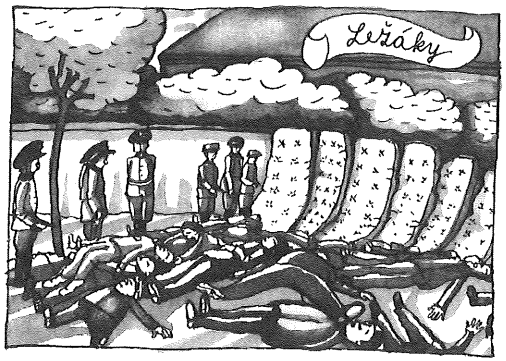
The angry but unharmed Klein set off in pursuit of Gabčík, who managed to pull out a reserve pistol in time and shot his pursuer in the leg. Escaping, he soon managed to jump on a tram heading for the city centre and then to disappear in the crowds. Sergeant Kubiš was





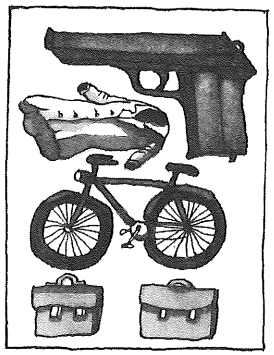
slightly wounded. Shrapnel from the bomb had hit his face. He had more to fear from Heydrich, but the seriously injured general's strength soon failed. Kubiš ran to a bicycle placed in readiness and rode on it down into Libeň. Like Valčík too, he had managed to escape. For the time being. The Acting Reichsprotektor, pale and exhausted by pain, struggled back to the wrecked Mercedes and slumped into it. From there he was taken by a removals van to the nearby Na Bulovce Hospital. Although Heydrich's condition at first seemed far from hopeless, post-operative complications set in. The leading henchman of Hitler's regime died on Thursday the 4th of June. He was the highest placed Nazi leader to die a violent death in the Second World War.

The terror unleashed by the Nazis on the territory of the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia immediately after the assassination and following Heydrich's grandiose funeral in Berlin on the 9th of June, was both appalling and calculated. Five weeks of martial law brought death to more than 3,000 people. On the 10th of June the

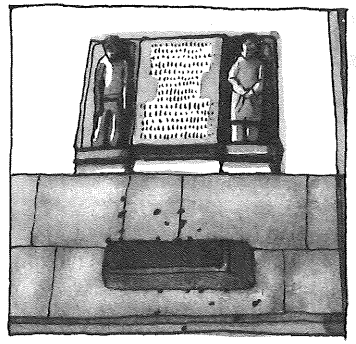


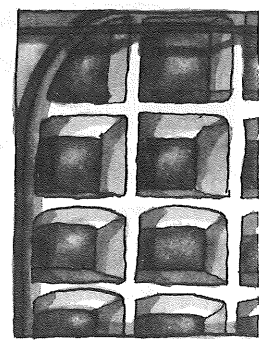
village of Lidice not far from Prague was destroyed, the men shot, the women sent to concentration camps, some of the children placed with German families and others taken to Poland and later murdered. The extermination of Lidice was meant above all as a warning to the Czech population. Fourteen days later Nazi cruelty erased the East Bohemian hamlet of Ležáky as well, and its inhabitants were likewise shot.

For quite a long time, however, the assassins themselves eluded the Nazis. Not even the discovery of the objects used (automatic pistols, two briefcases, a raincoat, the bicycle on which Kubiš had escaped, a bomb made in Great Britain) brought the investigators any closer to their prey. The Prague Gestapo and elite detectives sent from Berlin drew a blank. Finally they were helped by human fear. One of the Czech parachutists dropped in the Protectorate, Karel Čurda, who was hiding at his mother's not far from Třeboň (Wittingau) in South Bohemia, sent an anonymous note to the police and on the 16th of June went in person to the Prague Gestapo headquarters. He told his interrogators all he could, and although he knew nothing about where the assassins were hiding and their other helpers, the names of the people who had earlier helped the parachutists proved enough for the Gestapo. In just a few hours the Nazis found out that Gabčík, Kubiš, Valčík and another four men were hiding out in the Orthodox Church of St. Cyril and St. Methodius (originally of St. Charles Boromeo) in Resslova Street in the Prague New Town.



The action to take them started soon after midnight on the 18th of June. Not until around seven, however, did the assault team manage to break the resistance of the three para-

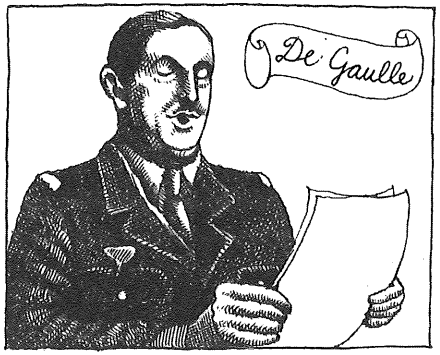


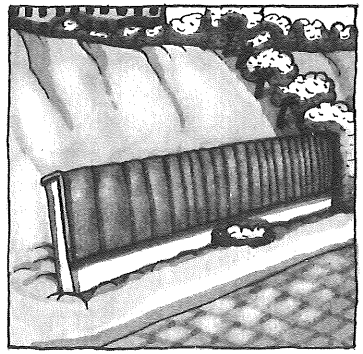


chutists putting up a defense on the church choir gallery. This was not much satisfaction for the Nazis, since one parachutist was dead and the other two were unconscious and did not live to come round. The other parachutists held out in the church crypt against the much more numerous Nazis for another few hours, until all their ammunition had run out. Except for the bullets they kept for themselves. Around noon four shots rang out from the crypt. The parachutists had kept their promise. They had not surrendered, but chosen a hero's death.

The furious Nazis took out their rage on the parachutists' relatives, friends and everyone who had helped them. The very next day, on the 19th of June, the former Prime Minister Alois Eliáš was executed on the shooting ground in Prague-Kobylisy, just a few hundred metres from the place where the assassination had taken place.

Despite the high cost to the civilian population, the killing of Reinhard Heydrich fulfilled its political purposes. The Czechoslovak resistance suddenly found itself in the forefront of world public opinion and the fate of Lidice and Ležáky drew attention to the plight of the small nation in the heart of Europe. In August 1942 Great Britain rescinded its signature to the Munich Agreement and in the following month the French National Committee, headed by General de Gaulle, declared the Munich Agreement to have been invalid from the beginning. In October 1942 the United States recognised the Czechoslovak government-in-exile as the legitimate representative of the Czech and Slovak people. The exiled Czechoslovak leadership began to hope that it might begin to make up for the failures of the autumn of 1938 and



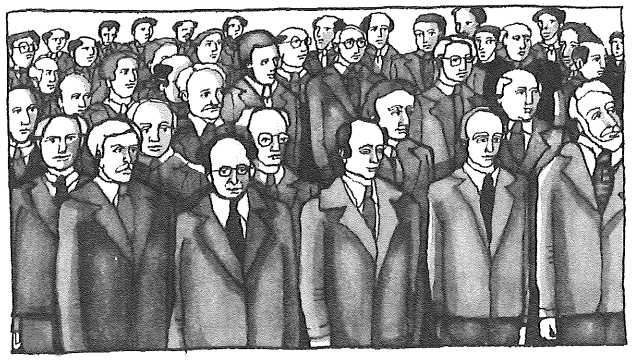


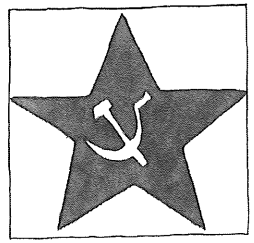
the spring of 1939. Finally, but no less important, the actions of Reinhard Heydrich and the Nazi terror following his death made the prospects for co-existence between the Czech and German populations in the eventuality of a re-established Czechoslovak Republic highly problematic. The transfer of most of the German population from Czechoslovak territory 1945 - 1946 was simply the culmination of the preceding dramatic and bloody events.

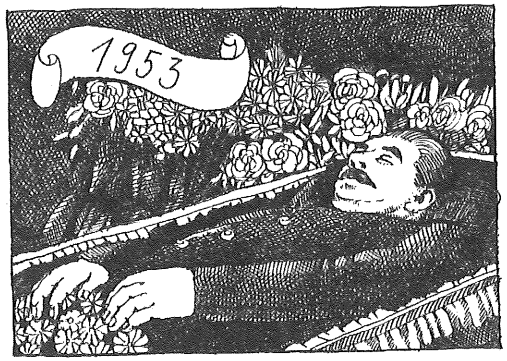
The traitor Karel Čurda did not have long to enjoy the reward that he received from the Nazis. In 1945 he was recognised, arrested and then executed by the decision of a Czechoslovak court. Gabčík, Kubiš, Valčík and their comrades (Adolf Opálek, Josef Bublík, Jana Hrubý and Jaroslav Švarc) are still honoured by the Czech nation as heroes. The Church in Resslova Street, where they perished, has hardly changed since 1942. All that has been added is a commemorative plaque. We would no longer find the legendary "Heydrich bend" as people called the place of the assassination on what is now Zenklova Boulevard. During the 1980s it was replaced by a flyover intersection.

Spring Awakening

The re-established Czechoslovak Republic, shorn of Ruthenia and with its German minority expelled, was to enjoy something like democratic conditions for less than three years following the end of the Second world War. These years, 1945 - 1948, were dominated by the bitter political struggle between democratic forces and the communists, supported by Stalin's Soviet Union. On the 25th of February 1948 the Czechoslovak Communist Party seized political power and installed a cruel totalitarian regime, which tried to copy the Soviet model in every detail. Hundreds of thousands of people suffered harsh repression, several hundred were executed after political show trials, a free press ceased to exist, freedom of speech became an empty phrase, culture was forced to serve the interests of an intolerant ideology and deteriorated accordingly, the churches were subject to particular-



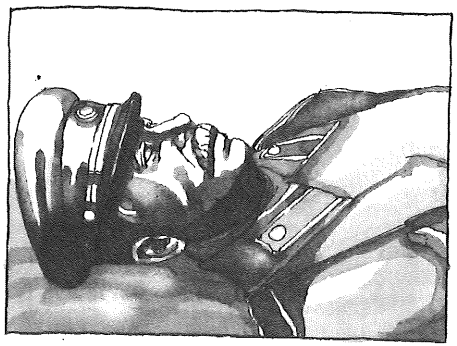


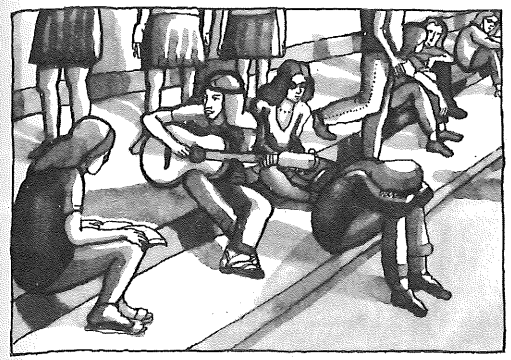


ly extreme persecution, the economy groaned under the weight of arms orders, forced collectivisation devastated the countryside and the living standards of most of the population fell substantially.

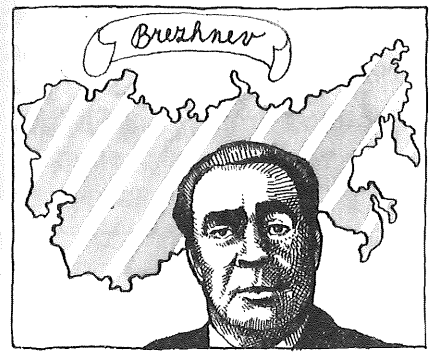
Hope for Czechoslovakia revived only with Stalin's death in 1953 and then the criticism of the dead dictator voiced in 1956 by Nikita Sergeyevich Khruschev. Until 1961, however, there was at best only a very slight thaw, because the communists were afraid to relax their grip in even the smallest and most limited ways. By this time Czechoslovakia was already firmly integrated into the Soviet bloc and the military alliance of the Warsaw Pact, but unlike East Germany (the German Democratic Republic), Hungary and Poland, however, it enjoyed one undoubted advantage. There were no Soviet Army units based on its territory.

From the beginning of the sixties, change in the atmosphere became much more apparent. The removal of the huge and monstrous Stalin monument from Letná Plain in Prague in 1962 symbolically prefigured the coming events. Little by little, but increasingly audibly, criticism of prevailing conditions began to be heard on the cultural scene, especially in the work of film-makers and writers, while economists and scientists started to voice their reservations, and were even joined by a number of communist functionaries who had been genuinely shocked by the revelation of Stalin's crimes. The Slovaks became open in their resentment of the dismissive attitude to their demands taken by the Prague central authorities. Young people, although educated in a communist spirit, increasingly took a negative attitude to the ruling ideology and were more attracted to the western lifestyle, which they copied,

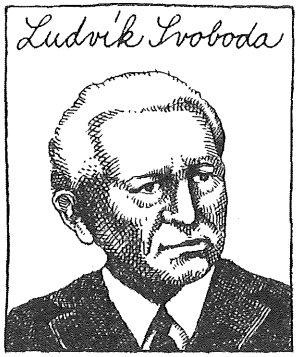




adopting the fashion for long hair and jeans and a passion for rock music. The western and southern borders of Czechoslovakia were still guarded by barbed wire electric fences, but it was no longer as difficult to reach the "Free World" as it had been in the fifties. Under public pressure the communist regime gradually relaxed its hold, taking relatively little notice of the fact that since the autumn of 1964, after the removal of Khruschev, power in the Soviet Union had been in the hands of Leonid Ilyich Brezhnev, who had close links with the army and former admirers of Stalin.



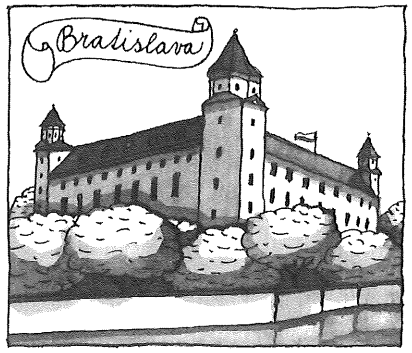
By the autumn of 1967 the Czechoslovak Communist Party and the country was in ferment. Right at the beginning of January 1968 Antonín Novotný was replaced at the head of the Communist Party by the Slovák Alexander Dubček. Novotný was still president, but in March public opinion forced him to resign. The parliament then elected General Ludvík Svoboda, a veteran of the First and Second World Wars, as new president. The changes at the top speeded up the liberating trends in society, which rapidly developed even more momentum of their



own. All this was happening at the same time as the dramatic student protests in West Germany and France. While the student movements in Western Europe were based on radical leftwing ideas and expressed the revolt of the young against conformist bourgeois life, the *Prague Spring,* as the events in Czechoslovaki were called, had other roots. It was a return to the half-forgotten values of the interwar era, to ideals of democracy and tolerance. It was fired by a desire to open up once again to Western culture and to combine social justice with individual freedom. Poetically, but precisely, these aspirations were expressed in the popular slogan, "socialism with a human face".

The reform communists, who identified with this slogan and whom most of the population trusted, found themselves in an unenviable position. Mounting public pressure was forcing them to further democratisation, which was logically undermining the position of the communist party. From the outset Moscow and its faithful states had been following the Czechoslovak experiment with extreme suspicion. They feared that the Soviet type of socialism would be dismantled and the Czechoslovak model would be dangerously attractive for the the other states of Central and Eastern Europe. It was in response to this threatening trend that Brezhnev formulated his famous doctrine, according to which any threat to socialism in one country affected all the states of

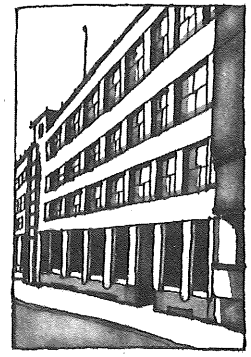
the Soviet block, which would not stand by and do nothing. From as early as February 1968, Dubček and his colleagues had been forced to listen at regular intervals to sharp rebukes from the Soviet, East German, Polish and Hungarian leaders. The Czechs continued to go their own way, however, trusting in the decision of the 14th Congress of the Czechoslovak Communist Party planned for September 1968, which was supposed to pass resolutions that would have made the democratic changes irreversible. Dubček's somewhat naive confidence was not even shaken by the provocatively slow departure of Soviet units returning from a military exercise on Czechoslovak territory, nor by threatening language from Brezhnev and his colleagues at meetings in Čierná nad Tisou and later in Bratislava.



Conditions in Czechoslovakia were playing into the hands of the "hawks" in the Soviet leadership and at the head of the army. As early as April 1968 the Soviet High Command drew up the first version of a plan for the military occupation of Czechoslovak territory. Political circles gave it their provisional assent. Brezhnev could also count on conservative forces within the Czechoslovak Communist Party, including some members of the presidium, and on his intelligence network in the Czechoslovak security services and army. The final decision on military intervention by the five states of the Warsaw

Pact (the Soviet Union, which was responsible for the main operation, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria and East Germany) was taken in Moscow on the 18th of August, immediately after Brezhnev had spoken to the President of the USA Lyndon Johnson on the telephone and Johnson had assured him that the United States regarded Czechoslovakia as part of the Soviet sphere of interest and would take no major action in its defence.

On the afternoon of Tuesday the 20th of August, the presidium of the Czechoslovak Communist Party met for its regular meeting in the large building on the banks of the Vltava. The pro-Soviet members of the highest communist organ intended, in accordance with Moscow's instructions, to express strong criticism of Dubček's policies and at the same time to secure approval for the imminent military invasion, due shortly after midnight. They failed entirely. When the occupation forces were already on Czechoslovak soil, the presidium of the communist party issued a proclamation condemning the aggressive act.



This proclamation was then broadcast by Czechoslovak Radio, which the conservatives had not managed to get off the air as planned. In the small hours of Wednesday the 21st of August 1868 Prague was still quiet, deep in tranquil summer sleep.

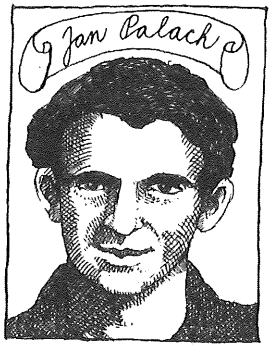
Just after three, however, most of the inhabitants of the capital were woken by the constant roar of aircraft heading for Ruzyňe Airport to unload soldiers and heavy equipment. After another couple of hours endless columns of Soviet tanks and armoured transports were heading into the centre of Prague to suffocate the Prague Spring. Thousands of desperate, terrified, disappointed, angry and defiant people watched the biggest military action conducted in Europe since the end of the Second World War. More than half a million soldiers were sent by the Soviet Union and its satellites to crush the political experiment and consolidate their position in Europe. Armed resistance to such a force had no hope, but young people still threw up barricades in Prague, especially around the radio building. From the purely military point of view the Soviet invasion was successful; a few dozen members of the local population perished, but losses among the occupiers were minimal. Politically, however, things did not go according to plan.

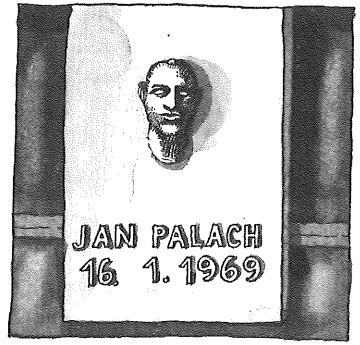
The Soviet scenario had envisaged that the intervention would go hand in hand with the formation of a "workers and peasants" government headed by Vasil Bil'ak and Alois Indra,

which would formally assume power and rubberstamp the occupation. This plan foundered immediately on the 21st - 22nd of August, both because of the opposition of most members of the presidium of the Czechoslovak Communist Party and the President, and because of the spontaneous resistance of the population to the aggression. Brezhnev was forced to resort to negotiation with a Czechoslovak delegation in Moscow, where the Soviet secret police took Alexandr Dubček and his close colleagues Josef Smrkovský and Oldřich Černík, who had been arrested and held since the 20th of August somewhere in the Carpathian Mountains.

In the circumstances, however, the "negotiations" in the Kremlin were just a matter of the Soviets dictating terms on the basis on the presence of a half-million strong army of occupation in Czechoslovakia. It was a tragic situation in which Dubček, Smrkovský and the other protagonists of the Prague Spring could not but remember the similar position of Emil Hácha when he negotiated with Hitler in the night of the 14th - 15th of March 1939. Like Hácha, Dubček even psychologically collapsed and had to be given a tranquillising injection twice. Nonetheless, he twice expressed fierce objections to the Soviet approach, arousing Brezhnev's great displeasure. In the end almost all the members of the Czechoslovak delegation signed the so-called Moscow Protocol on the 26th of August, legalising the intervention and temporary presence of Soviet forces on Czechoslovak territory. The Soviet generals had achieved their ends, and "temporary" eventually turned out to mean until the start of the summer of 1991, when the last Soviet soldier left Czechoslovakia. The only delegate who refused to sign this humiliating document, aimed at complete repression of the results of the Prague Spring, was František Kriegel.

On the 27th of August Prague welcomed the leaders returning from Moscow as moral victors, but the Czechoslovak population soon discovered that there could be no continuation of the democratising policy. They put up as much resistance as they could. In November there was a strike of university and some high school students, and the still relatively free media openly addressed the nation, but gradually one reformer after another disappeared from the leadership of the state and Communist Party. The last appeal for resistance was the despair-

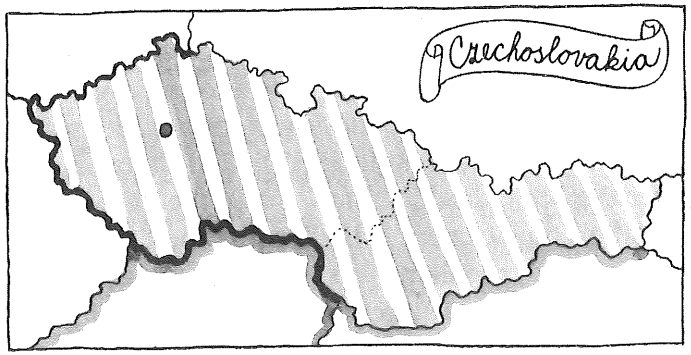




ing and heroic act of the history student Jan Palach, who set fire to himself in Wenceslas Square in protest against the continuing political retreat and died of his injuries on the 19th of January 1969. His funeral on the 25th of January grew into a nationwide demonstration of resistance to the occupation and the compliance of Czechoslovak politicians with the demands of Moscow. Another large, spontaneous demonstration took place in the centre of Prague after the victory of the Czechoslovak ice hockey team over the Soviet team in the world championship match in Stockholm on the 28th of March 1969. It provided the excuse for the Soviet leadership to obtain the dismissal of Alexandr Dubček and his replacement at the head of the Communist Party by the ambitious but compliant Gustáv Husák. Thus, on the 17th of April 1969, any remaining illusions of democracy faded. It would be twenty years before a crushed and demoralised Czechoslovakia would awaken again.

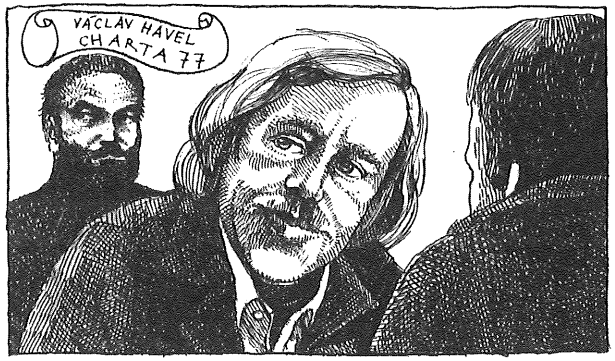
November 1989

After the 17th of April 1969, Czechoslovakia lapsed into the long period of historical immobility known as "Normalisation". This term had first appeared at the end of August 1968, and had then been employed with such frequency by the communist regime and the media it controlled that it entered popular vocabulary and was often used with an ironic subtext. The repressive campaign unleashed by the communists faithful to Moscow in 1969 - 1971 was not as brutal as the purges following 1948, but it still affected the whole of society, more severely in the Czech Lands than in Slovakia. More than a million people were forced to leave the Communist Party, and so became second-class citizens. People who were not considered compliant by the



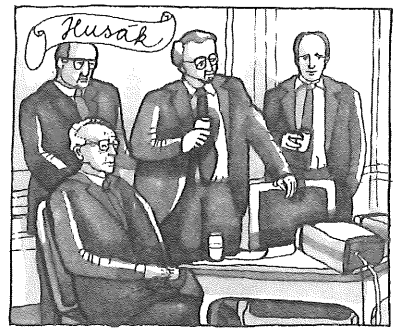
authorities gradually disappeared from universities, scientific, cultural institutions and important offices, and children from politically suspect families were not allowed to study or at least had great difficulty getting a higher education. The borders with the West were once more hermetically sealed and travel anywhere apart from the "socialist states" was possible only with the permission of the secret police, who would monitor any trips carefully. The whole of public life, including cultural life, was controlled by the communist authorities through their own people. Surprisingly, the economic situation was not bad, although society was in some ways living on credit.

The small number of opposition groups, which at the end of 1977 united around the *Charta* 77 declaration and found an unofficial



leader in the playwright Václav Havel, were an international embarrassment for the communists but not much of an internal obstacle. It seemed to many people that normalisation would last for centuries. Naturally this was an illusion that the communist regime deliberately fostered. More acute individuals realised that the Husák leadership was so tightly dependent on Moscow that the only hope was future change in the Soviet Union.

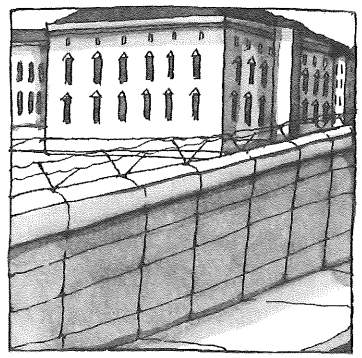
It was a view confirmed in the spring of 1985, when the reins of power in Moscow were taken by Mikhail Sergeyevich Gorbachev, who initiated cautious reforms of the Soviet system and at the same time started to negotiate with the West on major international problems. The new Soviet line terrified the Czechoslovak communist leaders. On the one hand they did not dare to criticise it openly, but on the other they were well aware that they owed their position to Brezhnev, whose era was vanishing into the



dustbin of history. Their anxieties and insecurities found expression in internal disputes that were skilfully kept from the public for as long as possible. In the autumn of 1987, however, it seemed clear that the conservatives, closely associated with "normalisation", had consolidated their position when Milouš Jakeš was elected to the head of the communist party to replace the ageing Gustáv Husák, who retained the post of president. Only Czechoslovak society was already shaking off its lethargy. This was in large part thanks to the young generation, which had not lived through the fifties or the beginnings of normalisation and was not afraid to voice criticism.

Since the beginning of 1987 the atmosphere in Czechoslovakia, especially Prague, had been changing. Cultural and scientific life had been freeing itself from the straitjacket of communist supervision, ecological activism was spreading, and university students were founding informal associations. At the beginning of 1988 the opposition newspaper *Lidové noviny [National News]* started to come out illegally, and the Catholics, especially numerous in Moravia and Slovakia, were raising their heads again. Nevertheless, the normalisation regime still felt confident, and so it was taken aback by a demonstration held in the centre of Prague on the 21st of August 1988 that demanded democracy and the departure of the Soviet occupation forces. Over the next six months anti-communist demonstrations,

mostly in Prague, became part of almost every more important anniversary. On some occasions anxiety about international opinion led the regime to take no action, but in most cases police units equipped with armoured cars, water cannon and dogs were deployed against the demonstrators. The police intervened with particular brutality in January 1989, when demonstrations took place for whole week on the 20th anniversary of the death of Jan Palach. The communist regime was obviously, if gradually, falling apart. It was rapidly losing support among the "silent majority" and could expect no help

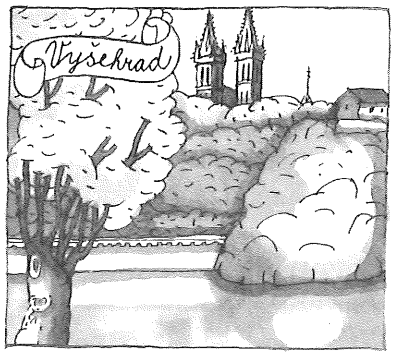


from the Soviet Union. Gorbachev's policy was to let events take their course, as became clear in the early autumn of 1989 with the exodus of thousands of East Germans to the west via Hungary and then Czechoslovakia. At the beginning of November the Berlin Wall, symbol of the division of German and Europe, was torn down and on Sunday the 12th of November, Pope John Paul II canonised the medieval Agnes Přemyslovna of Bohemia in the presence of thousands of Czech Catholics in the Vatican. Fundamental change was only a matter of time..

The dissidents of the *Charta 77* had been planning to take an open public stand on Human Rights Day, the 10th of December, but events overtook them. The 17th of November happened to be the 50th anniversary of the Nazi attack on Czech universities, and the parallel between Nazi brutality and communist tyranny was clear. Opposition-minded university students decided to hold a major commemorative act, which was permitted by the communist authorities on condition that the procession kept to an agreed route and went nowhere near

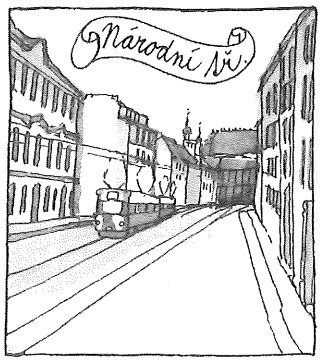
Wenceslas Square. Not content to rely on the presence of representatives of the communist controlled *Union of Socialist Youth*, the regime sent members of the secret police to the organising committee for the meeting. It therefore had first hand information.

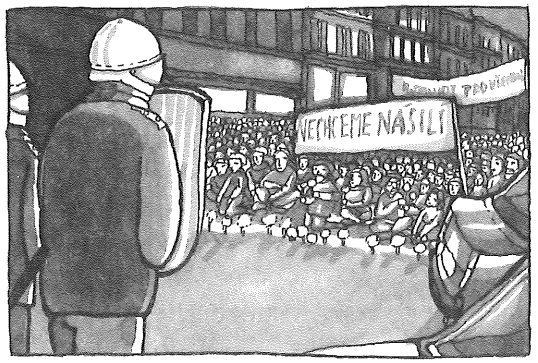
On the afternoon of the 17th of November 1989, 15,000 people gathered at Albertov in Prague. They were not just students, since many people of different generations had come to show public resistance to the communist regime. A speechifying representative of the Socialist Union of Youth was whistled off, while the spokesmen of the opposition students and a witness to the events of 1939 drew applause. The march then headed for Vyšehrad, where it was supposed to conclude



with a wreath-laying ceremony at the grave of the Romantic poet Karel Hynek Mácha. Immediately after leaving Albertov, there were voices at the head of the crowd calling for the procession to turn right to Wenceslas Square, not left to Vyšehrad. For the time being, however, the agreed route was followed, although participants were carry-

ing lighted candles, and anti-communist slogans were chanted as the procession reached the Vyšehrad Cemetery. At Vyšehrad the people did not disperse, but decided to continue the march into the city centre. The initial idea was to go across Nusle Bridge, but eventually it was decided that it would be better to take the route via Vyšehradská Street. There are good grounds for thinking that police agents were behind this change, since in Vyšehradská Street the demonstration hit a police cordon that relatively easily diverted the growing crowd onto the Vltava Embankment. From here the front of the demonstration turned into Národní třída [National Boulevard], but could get no further since the major Prague artery was blocked by police units. The



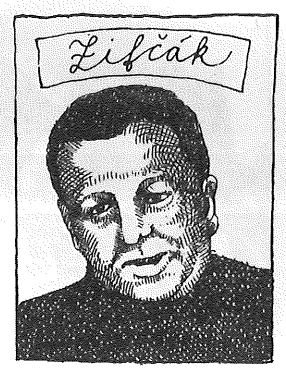


armed riot police were a terrifying sight. They were standing in several rows, silent, white helmets on their heads with protective face guards, shields and cudgels in their hands. It was just after half-past seven in the evening.

The police called on the demonstrators to disperse, but this was

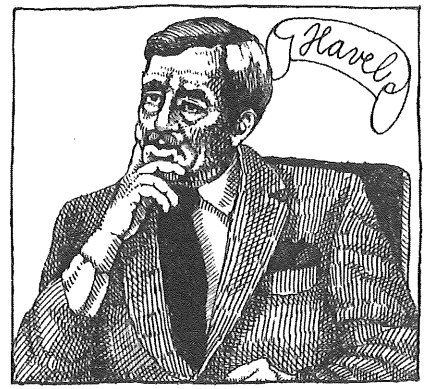
hardly possible when all the exit routes were occupied by the police themselves. The crowd of several thousand was trapped. The young people in the front rows stood there in front of the police, sat down, knelt, sometimes tried to give a policeman a flower. Occasionally there was the sound of a cudgel blow, for a moment a song, for a moment a shout of "we've nothing but our bare hands", but mostly there was silence, tense and expectant. The impossibility of escape was underlined when a police transport began to push demonstrators in the direction of the Vltava. The crowd succumbed to panic, but the police were proceeding coolly and rationally, completely according to plan. They cleared a passage to left and right between the demonstrators and the intersection of Národní třída with Na Perštýně Street and Spálená. In this section there are relatively narrow arcades on both sides of Národní třída. These were the only ways out for the demonstrators, but in order to use them they had to pass through even narrower living alleys of police in both arcades, who cudgelled and kicked them as they tried to get through.. More than 500 people were sufficiently badly injured to seek medical help.

But worse was to come. Near the intersection a young man was lying under a canvas sheet. The demonstrators believed he was a victim of police violence, and on Saturday news of the dead student, whose death was confirmed by foreign radio news, spread like wildfire through Prague. Tens of thousands of people gathered in the centre of Prague on Sunday to protest. What no one suspected was that the role of the dead student had been played by a secret policeman called Zifčák, who under the cover name of Růžička had insinuated



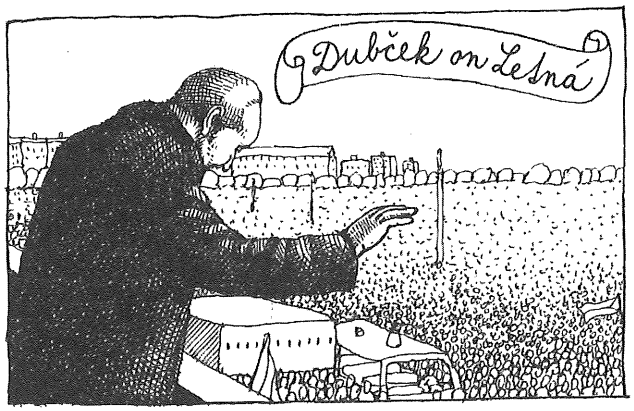
himself among the students and was one of the provocateurs who had diverted the procession into Národní třída. The motive behind Zifčák's actions has never been satisfactorily established. Perhaps the idea was to discredit the demonstrators and dissidents who had given the report of the dead student to foreign news agencies, or perhaps the security services were playing some peculiar political game of their own. Whatever the truth, although the news of the dead student was rapidly exposed as false, events had been set in motion that could no longer be halted.

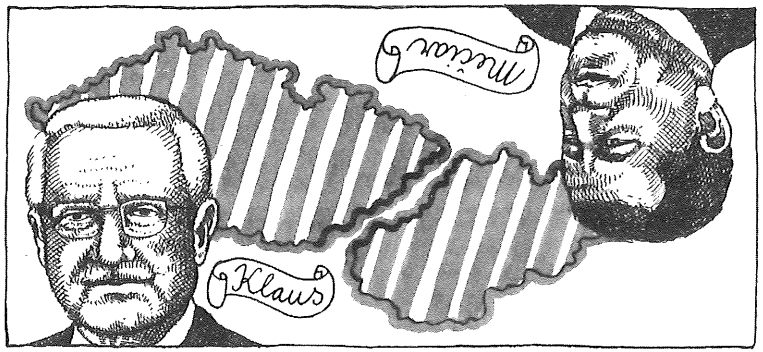
On the evening of Sunday the 19th of November, Civic Forum [Občanské fórum] was formed as the umbrella organisation for the opposition and the co-ordinator of its programme and further events. Václav Havel took on its informal leadership. Theatre people and university students declared a strike. From Monday the 20th to Friday the 24th of November there were demonstrations in Wenceslas square every afternoon, and the communist regime was already helpless in the face of them. On Wednesday morning the regime called police



units and the communist *People's Militia* to Prague, but did not dare to intervene against a crowd of 250,000 people. The communist leadership had an all-day meeting on Friday the 24th of November in the Political University on the edge of Prague, but had no idea what to do. On the evening of the same day Milouš Jakeš and other communist chiefs resigned, a move which Praguers regarded as the collapse of the regime. Music was played on Wenceslas Square and celebrations went on into the early hours of Saturday. Mass gatherings were held on Letná Plain on both days of the weekend, and together with a two-hour general strike on Monday the 27th of November broke the last crumbling resistance of the communists, who were forced to negotiate with Civic Forum leaders.

The Velvet Revolution, as people christened the Czechoslovak Revolution because it was relatively non-violent, ended with two events. The 10th of December saw the abdication of President Gustáv





Husák, who shortly before his resignation appointed a Government of National Understanding. Then, on Friday the 29th of December, the parliament, now chaired by Alexandr Dubček, elected Václav Havel president of Czechoslovakia. After forty-one years the communist regime had finally fallen.

New prospects opened up for Czechoslovakia, and above all the road to genuinely free elections. The rapturous crowds chanting their support for Václav Havel in the courtyards of Prague Castle were not to know that it would be a difficult path, and would lead to the break-up of Czechoslovakia. The historically rooted differences between the two parts of the republic proved impossible to overcome. And so on the 1st of January 1993 two new states appeared on the map of Europe – the Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic.

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