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REMEMBERING JAN FIRBAS

[I gave this talk on 29th April in the Department of English and American Studies at the Masaryk University. I invited myself, but was then kindly reinvited by [Associate] Professor Milada Franková. The idea was my son Matthew's (we went together), who discovered on the web that the cut price airline Ryanair had suddenly put Brno at the centre of the map of Europe, if not of the world, thereby succeeding in doing what Prague – which through Kovařovic's intervention had held up Janáček's career for ten years – and Vienna – which had swallowed up so many authors, opera singers and actors who were born in Brno – had *grosso modo* tried to prevent for many decades. Who had ever heard of Tuřany before? This wonderful visit was my first for ten years.]

This will not be an attempt to describe Jan Firbas's life. That has already been superbly done in the memorial volume *Language and Function: to the memory of Jan Firbas* (ed. by Josef Hladký, Benjamins 2002) in the first chapter "An outstanding personality of European linguistics" by Aleř Svoboda, of whom Jan – Jenda, – Johnny, as his Czech friends called him, always spoke with affection. The second sentence in Aleř's memoir: "Brno... was the town of his birth, the town of his life, and the town of his death" carries the same emphasis as this, my talk. I think that from our first meeting I always linked Jan, first with my memory of my father, whom he resembled, among other things, in his goodness and quietness and devotion to his library, and, secondly with the city, whose quality has always been so outrageously undervalued. This talk is centrally about Jan, but it is also about my father and Brno and me.

I propose now to describe some episodes and moments with Jan, in the hope of drawing out some of his characteristics and his serious moral qualities.

I first met Jan in the Hotel International in Brno in September 1981. The occasion of this meeting was deep-rooted and manifold, and you will have to bear with me for a while before I describe it in greater detail.

I was born in Brno during the First World War, in 1916. My father was also born in Brno, which was then Brünn, in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, with an Austrian and Austro-Jewish or Sudeten middle class, which it has since lost, thus

becoming parlously and sadly both monolingual and monocultural. Like me, my father had “British by birth” stamped on his passport. He owned a textile factory in Dornych, was a mathematician by inclination, and was to become the honorary British consul in the town, and therefore for some, the “leader” of society – these were the days of the British Empire – though he was a shy person. My mother was Viennese, something of a social beauty, and was, at least by birth, Jewish. From the age of three my brother Tom and I had an English governess who was cultured and anti-Semitic and excluded my mother from us. She also hated Brno. Two years later we started going through the English private boarding school system: pre-prep school, prep school, public school (me Rugby, Tom Harrow), me Cambridge (Trinity College), Tom Oxford, with one holiday a year in Brno. I even attended a German-speaking primary school for a month or two in Brno, where a boy appropriately called Deutsch jeered at me for being English, whilst, a year or two later, at my English prep school, I was always the Hun. In fact, similar to Gustav Mahler, who famously said he was three times stateless, as a Bohemian in Austria, an Austrian in Germany, and a Jew anywhere in the whole world. Me, I was English in Brno, a German mocked in my hated English private schools, Jewish here and there, and, much later, pro-Palestinian in Israel, and always a wallflower at any dance.

My dear father died in 1928. I had 6 years as a soldier in the war, mainly in Italy, and then started teaching English, untrained, in a secondary school in Yorkshire, the county my family originated from. Being a failure as a school teacher, I transferred to a further education college teaching French and German. When I started concentrating on translation, and writing about it (I was almost the first to do so in England, and became quite well known in a tiny but international world), – I heard another lecturer say she had been on a lecturing tour to Prague. Meantime, I, who for many years had had occasional nightmares about Brno (Petrov collapsing on me and the buildings literally falling apart) woke up one morning to hear the amazing *Bystrouška* music on the radio, and was chagrined because my girl-friend, now my wife Pauline, was going to hear the great opera that evening; I then discovered that Janáček had spent most of his life in Brno. Furthermore, I had begun to read and admire the work of Jan Firbas, who taught in Brno. So I applied to the British Council to lecture on translation in Prague (in which I had little interest, but it would have been suspicious if I had not) and in Brno, specifically to meet Jan Firbas. I duly had a letter to say I would have a week in Prague, one day in Brno, and one day in Olomouc; and Jan Firbas would be in charge of me in Brno. I was disappointed by the time allocation, since by then my only desire was to see Brno again; but this was better than nothing.

In Prague, at the height of the cold war, the authorities at the Charles University hardly knew what to do with me. I was billed (in Czech) as “originating from the Moravian district”; I gave two or three lectures, one, for the first and only time in my life, in French, as the students spoke neither English nor German; just one teacher daringly asked me if she could have lunch with me; otherwise I was left to my kind but inarticulate interpreter.

In the coach on the way to Brno, I was appalled by the high building suburb Brno-město, and when we arrived at the bus station, I recognized nothing, but I was in floods of tears.

I had returned after forty-three years away.

Joe Hladký met me, and the contrast with my reception in Prague could not have been stronger and more bewildering. Joe pointed out the familiar Mahen Theatre, where in the 30s I had gone by myself (my family was not musical) to see Wagner and Mozart operas, and the unfamiliar and impressive Janáček Opera House. He took me to an ample meal at his home, and told me that his puzzled colleagues had discussed my application to give lectures, and thought I must be a British spy. Then he took me to look at the block of flats, 1a Francouzská, which he had found out had been my home. We went into the front hall there, and he warned me not to tell any tenants that I owned the building (in fact, at that time, my family still did), otherwise they'd send me packing to look for a plumber for the rest of the afternoon.

Lastly we went to the Hotel International, where the radios in the rooms indicated stations all over the world, but the programme was always the same one from Prague. Jan was waiting in a dark corner of the room, where I could barely see him, and Joe left me with him. Due entirely to Joe's kindness and thoughtfulness, I already felt at home, as though with my own family, and I was always close to tears.

My immediate point of contact with Jan was that he had known my aunt Hanne – her family, the Till's, owned a large store on the Náměstí Svobody – and she had helped him with some passport difficulties when he went to study in England soon after the war. He had also known Florrie Bratmann, the English wife of a retired Austrian general, who used to join my governess and us, when we were little, in walks on the Špilberk. That first day we walked into the Náměstí, and Jan shrewdly took me to the cukrárna [i.e. confectionery shop – editor's note], formerly a Konditorei, that was called Toman in my childhood, and I chose a leaner version of the sweet cake which, like Proust's madeleine, was there to bring back memories of my earliest days. We had dinner at the Hotel Continental with Don Sparling and Mirek Pospíšil. I remember an animated discussion focussed on Brno's insufficiently prominent position on the geographical pole between Vienna and Prague. (In the course of our nearly twenty years' friendship, Jan sent me a sensitively chosen and different postcard of Brno every year with his Christmas greetings.)

Helen and Jan worshipped at the Červený kostel Church at the far end of the Husova. They lived their faith and talked little about it, but it radiates their lives. Jan was also a guardian of the Protestant Red Church on the Husova. At one time he told me he was concerned about its financial security. I was christened in the Red Church. I had never gone into it again until, two days after I gave this talk, Matthew and I went to an impressive organ and trumpet recital there, and we sat close to the font.

Jan's family life was the centre of his existence. Helen took care to see that the spacious light spruce flat in the Grohova radiated a friendly welcome. When my daughter Liz and my son Matt spent the night there as teenagers, nearly fifteen years ago, Matt was more interested in adopting Brno as his ancestral town, but Liz just said she felt completely at home. Warmth, and a blessed freedom to say what one liked, particularly, but not deliberately, the silly and the gossipy, and a live interest centred in the living room. Jan would eagerly seek out a reference in one of his many books. I never met his sons Peter or George there, but I was always struck by the contrast between Peter's richly picturesque and idiosyncratic English speech and that of his father, which was much wider, but was fundamentally pedagogical.

Jan was essentially, like me then, a walking person. In Brno, in London and in Guildford, if we weren't in a hurry, we walked, partly for the exercise, and partly to talk more easily.

In Brno we walked in the town and over the hills, which were wide ranging, except in the places where the gaunt high buildings came between us and the centre, and I remember saying that my dad would never have recognized his home town; in London, when Jan was giving his course of lectures, we walked every week from my college refectory along the garish Tottenham Court Road to University College, where Sid Greenbaum, chatty and alert, would be waiting to welcome him, and the students actively followed his FSP lectures, which so vividly combined the analysis of prosody and grammar, the interplay (a favourite word) of the spoken and the written language; in Guildford, I remember the four of us, Helen and Pauline, Jan and I, walking up quite a few miles to the Compton Gallery to see the dark symbolist pictures of G. F. Watts, and, of course, to have a sumptuous English cream tea. Pauline had promised them a return journey by bus. We waited and waited, and the bus never came. I think we were engrossed in talk; the missing bus wasn't even mentioned.

In contrast, alas, there is the lamentable story of the missing Brno tram. We had been to the opera, Jan, me and Professor Nils Enkvist. Again, we waited and waited, and the tram, the magnificent Brno tram, never came. Unable to stand it any longer, Professor Enkvist, whose voice was rather commanding, even Etonian, definitely pre-War Public School, suggested politely that we should take a taxi. Never was there such a humiliating moment for Jan and for me. Here was a commonplace taxi being preferred to a Brno tram, even if these did come from Hungary at the time. And unfortunately, Jan had no difficulty in finding the taxi, and we returned with our tails between our legs.

By a strange coincidence, the London Institute of Linguists, which I joined in the early 1960s and whose journal, *The Linguist*, I was already contributing to, had already started, I don't know why, subscribing to *BSE*, which I therefore knew many years before I read Jan. But I later became aware that Jan's relationship to *BSE*, which appeared more anxious and caring, he was the proverbial hen with its chicks – he was, after all, its editor – than mine to *TL* – I was (and am) merely on the editorial board. Nevertheless, it is nice to think that we were both

in a long honourable tradition, that in my eyes reached its peak in the journal *Scrutiny* and Leavis and his co-editors.

After his family, Jan's work was his all-absorbing interest. I have already stated that Jan's work is based on a comparative approach to languages, on equal attention both to the spoken and to the written as to literary and to non-literary language. He impressed me as a born teacher, always eager to explain concepts followed by examples, always ready to paraphrase himself where required, to satisfy himself that he had been properly understood. Jan had, by the way, great respect for the most creative English linguist Michael Halliday, which Halliday reciprocated, but Jan was always worried by Halliday's aberrant definition of *theme* as merely linear, i.e. as the first constituent of a sentence; for Jan, the theme was in contrast to the *rheme*, as well as to the communicative dynamism of a sentence, the constituent that contributed least to the advancing process of communication, i.e. the *anaphora*, which was normally subsumed in the previous sentence.

I do not know how keen Jan was on Janáček's music before we met. I know that we discussed it with one or two of his colleagues soon after we met, and I remember how childishly proud I was when he said I knew more about Janáček than they did. Jan took me at least three times to the opera here – *Makropoulos*, *Katya*, I think *The House of the Dead* (as well as *Rigoletto* with Professor Enkvist) – these were great occasions for me, thinking back to my lonely visits in the late 30s. And we went to the museum in the Smetanova where you're always asked to choose one of the master's works – I chose *The Vixen* of course. And we went with Helen to the rather erotic film with the punning title *Lev s bílou hřívou* [The White-Maned Lion; about Leoš Janáček] about *The Diary of a Man who Had Disappeared* at the old Scala Cinema opposite to the St Thomas Church, a film that Jan and Helen revisited a week later. Jan and I spent a morning at Mies van der Rohe's Tugendhat Villa, so close to the Augarten Park [Lužánky – editor's note] where the nurses walked their babies every afternoon, but, after being suppressed for fifty years, a key icon for any cosmopolitan revival for Brno, a successor to Adolf Loos's gracious functionalism, a precursor to Arnošt Wiesner's starker building in the Lipová. And we visited the virtually empty factory in Dornych, the formerly Communist Party directors with no wool to process, precursors of the desolation there now.

In the course of the 80s, I was invited to teach my Principles and Methods of Translation course for a week in the MU. Jan introduced me to the students, met me at the Slavia for breakfast, walked with me down the Udolní to the large refectory in the Rectorate, where we had lunch.

After two conferences in Prague I came home here to give lectures which he chaired. To me it was always as though I was teaching for him in his department, which the British Council had formally praised as the best department of English in Europe. I felt enormously privileged rather than honoured.

I should add that after Jan died, I wrote to the Rector of the Masaryk University, emphasizing its loss, and I never had any reply. I think that the department should be renamed "the Jan Firbas Department of English and American Stud-

ies"; a bust of him should be placed in the central courtyard; the excellent brochure, *Jan Firbas ve vzpomínkách* should be translated into English and widely circulated, and the Department should commission a full-length Czech biography and its translation into English and German.

[Here I asked for a portrait on an overhead projector.]

I close with an attempt to describe Jan: he had a naturally gentle, mild, deprecating, innocent shy, countenance, but all this was unconsciously deceptive, since a natural authority flowed from him, which he barely had to exercise. He evinced a continuously hesitant and apologetic modesty, though he had nothing at all to be modest about. One was aware that he had resisted strong political pressures and threats, that he had refused to join the Czechoslovak Communist Party, that he had been threatened with dismissal and hard manual work. Like Leavis in England, he achieved international recognition, long before he obtained the professorial position that was due to him.

He usually looked anxious, even nervous, sometimes wintry; he was anxious to be helpful. He did not smile easily, but his smiles were rain after drought. He had a rather high-pitched gravely voice, never grating, which I can recall as vividly now as when he lived. He spoke English perfectly, with a slight accent and using a few charmingly old-fashioned, characteristically English idioms like "we must keep our fingers crossed", or universal ones like "time flies." He was a serious person, he brushed off trivialities.

At a time when all extremisms and fundamentalisms and revolutions are outdated and always counterproductive, Jan Firbas was a model of a never tiring and active moderation, a man in the spirit of Tomáš Masaryk, whom the world has yet to discover.