

Srba, Bořivoj

Muses in exile

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MUSES IN EXILE

Between 1939 and 1945, during the Nazi occupation of the Czech lands, Czechoslovak culture was developing in several different milieus. One of them was Great Britain and London, where many Czechs, Slovaks, Czech Germans and other former Czechoslovak citizens had been driven by the difficult situation in the former Czechoslovak Republic after the Munich Treaty, which had given its southern parts to Germany and after Slovakia had broken away and the rest of the Czechoslovak Republic had been occupied by Germany. The above mentioned development had to overcome several extremely hard obstacles. Despite the difficulties, both cultural and artistic activities of, above all, Czech political expatriates developed to a notable extent reaching remarkable results.

Great Britain and especially London, though badly suffering from the war events (we must not forget the Battle of Britain in 1949 and bombing of London and the Southern parts of the Isles in the following years), created most favourable conditions for the development of theatrical activities of the Czechoslovaks thanks to the fact that Great Britain during the whole war was able to resist Nazi war attacks and succeeded in maintaining its political and moral credits of a free state and enabling many citizens from the former Czechoslovak Republic – Czechs, Slovaks, Czech Germans and others – to find a new home there. Czechoslovak theatre people were to a certain extent officially supported also by the British authorities that were in charge of refugees as well as by the Czechoslovak exile government. Numerous emigrant organisations such as Czechoslovak club at the Czech Embassy in London, Cultural Commissions of Czechoslovak refugees supported by the Czechoslovak Refugee Trust Fund, Club of Czechoslovak Women (later transformed to the Council of Czechoslovak Women), a youth organisation Young Czechoslovakia, semi-official Czechoslovak institute in London, and, since 1941, Czechoslovak-British Friendship Club (CBFC), were very active in organising theatrical activities and their development. The conditions favourable for both cultural and artistic activities were also positively affected by the fact that political refugees living in Great Britain were concentrated in so called “hostels” in compact communities often sharing similar political opinions. The communities often competed among one another in the field of arts. Various European entities sought asylum in Great Britain during the second world war all of them being active in the field of culture and arts. Among their efforts especially one attracts our attention – it is the fact that their efforts were mainly focused at producing different cultural programmes (recitation, dancing performances, concerts, theatre productions) presented in public. All of them thanks to their specific nature could be possibly labelled “performing art” (in German it would be “die darstellende Kunst”).

Another activity of Czechoslovak emigrants which seems significant was aimed at creating musical programmes – singing solo recitals, choir concerts as well as chamber and orchestral concerts.

Czechoslovak professional musicians: singers, instrumentalists, conductors as well as choirs formed on purely amateur or semi-amateur basis some of which reaching professional level were organisers and performers of these events. We must not forget singers Ludmila Clementisová, Růžena Herlingerová, Marie Menšíková, and Olga Riedová (soprano), neither Josef Válek (tenor), Otakar Kraus, and Richard Pollak (baritone), Julius Gutmann (bass), Marie Hlouňová and Jan Šedivka (violin), Karel Horschitz-Hořic, and Karel Neumann (violoncello), Líza Fuchsová, Walter Hans Süsskind, Vilém Tauský (piano), the two latter ones were also conductors as well as Bohumil Vančura and Josef Obruča. Among

the choir ensembles we should mention the following: Choir of the Young Czechoslovakia, Choir of the Council of Czechoslovak Women, Czechoslovak Army Choir, Musical ensembles Czech Trio, later Dumka Trio, and Czechoslovak Wind Quintet, and Czechoslovak Army orchestra a part of the Czechoslovak Independent Brigade Group.

The Czechoslovaks co-operated especially with German, Austrian, French as well as Spanish emigrants, and of course mainly with the Britons. Concerts systematically introducing Czech operatic, chamber, and symphonic music to London audiences deserve a special attention.

Let us mention the most important events: a series of concerts of Czech operatic creation which were often prepared as in a way of "cross-sections" of different operas (many Smetana's and Dvořák's works were presented in this way between 1941-1945), a cycle of Czech chamber music concerts in autumn 1943 "*Dvořákův rok*" ("*Dvořák's Year*") performed in 1941 to celebrate the 100th birthday anniversary of Antonín Dvořák, similar events in honour of Bedřich Smetana to celebrate the 120th anniversary of his birthday and the 60th anniversary of his death in 1944, promenade concerts performed by the Czechoslovak Army Orchestra at London squares and parks. Though many concerts were of international character they also comprised examples of Czech folk music which was a very important dramaturgical intention. To a lesser extent they also comprised popular music compositions represented, for example, by the non-official anthem of the allied armies "*Roll on the Barrels*", a polka by a Czech composer Jaromír Vejvoda, originally called "*Škoda lásky*" ("*Regretting the Love...*")

As mentioned above, British artists, soloists and ensembles took an exceptional part in the performances. Very active were the following: Myra Hess (piano), The Long-Kersey-Whitehead Trio, The Blech String Quartet, The Griller String Quartet, The London Wind Players, BBC Symphony Orchestra headed by its principal conductor Adrian Boult, London Philharmonic Orchestra with its principal conductor Malcolm Sargent, Royal Choral Society, and others. Thanks to their exceptional endeavour Czech music became well-known and popular with the music loving British audiences. We should emphasise that it was not only classical music (besides in England very popular Antonín Dvořák's compositions also Bedřich Smetana's, Leoš Janáček's, and Josef Suk' works) but also music by then contemporary composers J. B. Foerster, Vítězslav Novák, Ladislav Vycpálek, Bohuslav Vomáčka, Bohuslav Martinů, and others.

The Czech emigrant community from London became extraordinarily active in the field of theatrical activities. You would have hardly found a single group of Czech immigrants who would not have attempted for at least primitive theatre forms - presentations, cultural soirées, and cabarets. Moreover, ensembles and theatres resembling thanks to the regularity and seriousness of their activities professional theatres came into being.

Among them a group of both young professionals, semi-professionals (they were getting ready for their professional theatre career) as well as amateur theatre people was working most systematically and effectively. The group was formed in London under the left-wing organisation Young Czechoslovakia in summer 1939 and worked under the cultural commission of a self-governing refugee organisation supervised by the supporting fund CRTF. It was called Dramatic Group of Czechoslovak Cultural Centre and later was supported by the Czechoslovak-British Friendship Club, too. At the beginning its leader was Ota Ernest a director and actor who before leaving the Czechoslovak Republic had worked in a theatre in Pilsen, later the group was headed by his brother's, Jiří Orten a poet, friends: Josef Lederer (a poet using a pseudonym Jiří Klan), Pavel Tigrid (a lawyer), Josef Schwarz (a conservatory student who after his return to his home-land used a pseudonym of Josef Červinka), Karel Brušák (a young poet and theatre entrant who came to London from France after 1940). Other members of the group were: Walter Berger, Josef Guth, Zdeněk Rudinger, Zita Bergerová, Růžena Hlaváčková, Věra Langrová, Alena Maxová, and others. Some of German nationality but former Czechoslovak citizens who could speak Czech also participated in the performances as directors or actors. They were, for example, Paul Demel, Herbert Lom, Anna Maria Joklová, Marianne Hellerová (a dancer), and Walter Hans Süsskind and J. Silvera (musicians).

These young people decided that though living in exile they would aim at the objectives marked already in their home-land by the Czechoslovak theatre avantgarde, i.e. E. F. Burian and his "D" Theatre and Jiří Voskovec's and Jan Werich's Osvobozené divadlo. They were so tightly connected with the creations of the above mentioned avantgarde that it might have been considered imitation. In their variety shows, pastiches, cabarets and theatre performances they not only assumed already well-tried avantgarde procedures but they also tested their utterance capacity and they made them more topical them for the new conditions. From the ideological viewpoint, however, their performances so much reflected the attitude of their generation so heavily affected by existential scepticism that they often provoked politically orientated polemics within Czechoslovak exile community. Their sceptic attitude seen from outside seemed to show a decisive resistance against war efforts of the Czechoslovak Centre of Foreign Resistance Movement headed by Edvard Beneš. For some of them the WW2 before the end of the year 1941 when the Soviet Union became involved had represented an imperialistic war.

However, some performances of this group became, thanks to their dramaturgy, a part of the Czechoslovak official propaganda. From them we should mention a performance *"Básníci naši naděje chudé"* (*"The poets of our Humble Hope"*, 1940) by Ota Ornest. The performance presented to celebrate the 90th anniversary of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk's birthday together with two soirées by Tigrid: *"Ocel nadcházející revoluce"* (*"The steel of the Forthcoming Revolution"*, 1942) and *"Soviet Union Music and Poetry"* (1942) were most successful. They were studied to celebrate different political anniversaries of the first year of the Soviet involvement in WW2 on the part of the Allies. Ota Ornest also prepared a theatrical performance *"The Life and the Death"* (1940) - a pastiche of different scenes and sketches from the work of Karel Čapek. This performance organised by both the British authorities as well as Czech exile official authorities was designed to pay tribute to the first anniversary of the writer's death, he was run to death by the Nazis.

For another, this time semi-official occasion, a *"Gala Performance of the Czechoslovak-British Friendship Club"* held at the occasion of its first general assembly, Ota Ornest staged the exposition part of Arnošt Dvořák's expressionistic drama *"Husité"* (*"The Hussites"*). Besides the Czechoslovaks, the audience could also see British theatre people who led by Marius Goring performed the last act of Shakespeare's *"Tempest"*. Czechoslovak actors of German nationality led by Julius Gellner performed a few scenes from Schiller's *"Don Carlos"*. The programme objectives of this group were best represented by performances independent of official authorities' stimuli, the most significant of them tried to remind the Czech part of the audience comprising political refugees of the results of the Czechoslovak theatre avantgarde as well as to introduce them to the other part of the audience comprising other nationality. The dramaturgy of most of their productions was inspired by the repertory of Burian's "D" Theatre. The group led by Ornest and, also directed by him, at the very beginning of its activities performed a pastiche of folk nursery rhymes, songs, and dances transformed according to Burian's *"Vojna"* (*"The War"*) to so called *"Lidová suita"* (*"Folk Suite"*, 1940). Tigrid directed Burian's voice-band stage performance *"Křest sv. Vladimíra"* (*"St. Vladimír's Christening"*, 1939). In its second period the group performed mostly under the auspices of CBFC, first of all thanks to Karel Brušák specific verses from other Burian's productions: adaptation of a baroque folk drama *"Hra o sv. Dorotě"* (*"The Morality of St. Dorothy"*) as well as a pastiche of folk traditional ceremonies *"Žebravý Bakus"* (*"Bacchus the Beggar"*) and later under the name of *"Věčné jaro"* (*"The Eternal Spring"*, 1942) other works from Burian's repertory: *"Píseň Šalomounova"* (*"The Song of Solomon"*), Goethe's *"Utrpení mladého Werthera"* (*"Young Werther's Sufferings"*) and the second part of the poem *"Máj"* (*"May"*) by a Czech romantic poet K. H. Mácha. Voskovec's and Werich's Osvobozené divadlo was inspiration source for a new authentic cabaret composed of texts written by the members of this group for the Czech broadcasting of the BBC. It was performed in many runs under the name of *"Volá Londýn"* (*"London's calling"*, 1942). The audience could see best performances of young Czech dramaturgists as well as directors (Ornest, Tigrid, Brušák) and, of course,

actors (Ornest, Schwarz, Langrová, Hlaváčková, Demel). Their efforts gained its most positive value especially in performances of their original dramatic texts. Even the first contributions to one of the opening programmes performed in co-operation with a German theatre 24 Schwarze Schafe (1939) in Arts Theatre, especially Josef Lederer's "*Hus and Pálec*" proved the fact that they were able to write viable dramatic texts pithily expressing their political as well as life attitudes and their ability to criticise themselves. Their sketches for St. Nicholas's Eve (December 6) organised by the cultural commission of CRTF for all members of the Czechoslovak refugee community in December 1939 confirmed it. The sketches were targeted at different vices within the Czechoslovak community - most successful Ornest's "*Píseň strašlivá o dětech kapitána M. I. Granta*" ("*Most Gruesome Song about Capt. M. I. Grant's Children*") and Lederer's satirical sketch "*Young Czechoslovakia 60 Years Later*". Their efforts in this field culminated by a variety show composed of radio sketches transmitted by BBC to the occupied Czechoslovakia in the BBC programme "*London's Calling*" were closely related to scathing political satires by Voskovec and Werich. Voskovec and Werich were also reminded by the updated songs from the repertory of Osvobozené divadlo.

Young Czechoslovakia as well as Czechoslovak-British Friendship Club comprised several other theatre groups of young people. From their theatrical creation several productions by Anna Maria Jokl (born in Vienna and the graduate from the avant-garde director Erwin Piscator's Art School in Berlin. After the Nazis coup she lived in Czechoslovakia where she worked as a journalist. Later, after an adventurous escape from Prague occupied by the Nazis, she found asylum in London. She wrote performances for a German refugee cabaret 24 Schwarze Schafe (4 & 20 Black Sheep) besides work with one of several refugee groups living in the Canterbury Hall Hostel. She was a dramaturgist, director, choreographer, and staged several reciting as well as miming performances such as old English sailors' ballads, old French folk and popular poetry, Czech, Spanish and French songs and dances. The top of her creation represented staging of her own play "*Sabotáž*" ("*Sabotage*", 1942) thanks to which she became pretty popular among both Czechoslovak, German, and other refugee communities and partly also among the Britons. "*Sabotage*" was an attempt to present an episode from the resistance of the Czech people in their homeland against the Nazi occupants, it was staged in English language.

Herbert Lom, a young actor of Czech-German origin, also attracted public attention. He similarly as Anna Maria Joklová was a director but also a playwright and reciter. Under the auspices of CBFC Lom gave several public readings of poetry. For the Council of Czechoslovak Women at the occasion of Mothers' Day he prepared a gala performance. In the Czechoslovak Institute in co-operation with other Czech actors he staged his own play "*Ruce k dílu!*" ("*Ready to Work!*", 1942) supporting Czechoslovak war activities. Joklová and Lom used to stage their plays together presenting them as examples of the Czechoslovak fight against Hitler. Even English working class amateur actors from the London Unity Theatre were interested in them.

On the other hand Oto Lampl, who came from Paris, did not succeed in incorporating his creation into the main stream of Czechoslovak theatrical activities. His attempts to do so were not appreciated by Czechoslovak political refugee community in Great Britain. His cabarets performed in Czech language: "*Československý chanson ve vyhnanství*" ("*Czechoslovak Chansons in Exile*", 1941) or his "*Večer Oty Lampla*" ("*Ota Lampl's Evening*", 1942) were, on the one hand, sentimentally pseudo-patriotic and, on the other hand, salacious a la Montmartre, that was why they were denounced by both left or right-wing refugee critics. Lampl at the beginning performed his cabarets in air-raid shelters in London underground as well as London factories and barracks of both British and friendly troops. Later he moved them under the protection of the British Ministry of War that organised cultural programmes for soldiers.

In 1942 there was an attempt to start a regular Czech cabaret and satirical theatre "DeN" which was planned to reside in London Aeolian Hall at 125, Bond Street, London W1. The creators of "DeN" were two men hidden under pseudonyms Dobrý (Good) and

Náš (Our), first letters of these pseudonyms were used to form the name of the theatre. The plan failed due to low quality of their very first performance.

Professional theatre people of German nationality among Czechoslovak political refugees were also exceptionally active in London. Their aim was to start professional or semi-professional theatres. That was why they were linking up with professional German theatre people coming in British exile from Germany and Austria. Many of them: Paul Demel, Heinrich Fischer, Amy Frank, Erich Freund, Julius Gellner, Charlotte Küter, Paul Lewitt, Friedrich Richter and Elisabeth Warnholtz took part in starting later famous theatres 24 Schwarze Schafe (4 & 20 Black Sheep), Kleine Bühne (The Little Theatre), Lessing Theatre, Die Laterne (The Lantern) and others.

These theatre people contributed to the development of Czechoslovak cultural and artistic activities not only by productions prepared in direct creative co-operation with the Czechs (some of them took part in, e.g. Ornest's pastiche *"Život a smrt"* ("Life and Death") performed at the occasion of *"Čapek's Evenings"* at the beginning of 1940 or in Brušák's *"Lidová suita II"* ("Folk Suite II", first half of 1941) but they also became participants of international cultural events (e.g. scenes from Schiller's *"Don Carlos"* in "Gala Performance CBFC" in January 1942). They also organised independent evenings, in German language, performing both drama and fiction inspired by the history of the Czech lands (*"Unbeugsames Böhmen"*, 1942). German and Austrian theatres in London also staged dramas by Czech playwrights who were mostly Czechoslovak refugees. Among them the following: adaptation of Hašek's *"Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka"* ("Adventures of the Good Soldier Schweik") in the Lantern Theatre or a comedy *"Die Bekehrung des Ferdisch Pistora"* ("Ferdish Pistora's upturn") by František Langer.

British theatre people extraordinarily contributed to the development of the Czechoslovak cultural and artistic activities in Great Britain. They not only helped the Czechs to stage several performances, let us mention *"Čapek's Evenings"* by Ornest, but within CBFC or quite independently they themselves prepared a number of evening performances describing the Czechoslovak fight against the Nazi occupants (*"A Town Without Name"* - a production by Louise MacNeice performed at the occasion of *"London's Calling Prague Manifestation"* in spring 1943 or a drama *"Mothers Are Waiting"* by Audrey Lucas performed at the occasion of Mothers' Day in the same year). Let us mention at least the following: Marius Goring and Herbert Marshall (directors) or actors and actresses Richard Attenborough, Bernard Miles, Wendy Hiller, Gladys Jones, Esme Percy, Sibyl Thordike, and Mary Ward. Some events were inspired by the British for example Čapek's *"Matka"* ("Mother") in the form of "play reading" in Liverpool in 1942 or Smetana's *"Prodaná nevěsta"* ("The Bartered Bride") in the New Theatre Sadler's Wells Opera Company in London choreographed by Saša Machov.

The muses in exile in Great Britain in spite of being muses of different European nations and spoke several languages: English, French, German, Polish, Spanish, Vlamish, Serbo-Croatian, Greek, and also Czech were definitely not mute.