

The Masaryks and the Jews

Minister Zaorálek, Ambassador Meron, ladies and gentlemen,

I have been asked to speak about the attitudes of the two Masaryks, father and son, to Jews, Judaism and Zionism and I feel honoured to be able to do so at this occasion and in this building which is so intimately connected with the foreign policy of the Czechoslovak and Czech state as well as the life and death of Jan Masaryk. At the same time, I find it a difficult task to sum up the Masaryks' lifelong involvement with Jewish affairs in a few brief remarks because for both of them the fate of the Jews in the modern world was a complex and challenging issue to which they devoted much time and thinking, with their views sometimes shifting in accordance with the political demands of the day.

Since the 19th century and the legal emancipation of Jews in most of European countries, the modern world has been grappling with the so-called Jewish question, namely what position the Jews should have in society and whether they should be seen as a distinctive unit, possibly endowed with some special minority rights. Thomas Garrigue Masaryk's position on the Jewish question has been the subject of many studies, the last of which and one of the most authoritative ones was authored by no other than the late Miloš Pojar, the first Czechoslovak and Czech ambassador to Israel after the renewal of diplomatic relations in 1990. In this connection, I have the pleasure to mention that his book *T. G. Masaryk and Judaism* is being translated into English.

What emerges from Pojar's and others' analyses is that Thomas Masaryk, sociologist, politician and statesman, was on the whole a great friend of the Jews and eventually of Zionist endeavours but that this was the result of a long intellectual development and not in any way pre-determined. In his youth, spent in the region known as Moravian Slovakia, in Brno and in Vienna, he was exposed to a lot of antisemitic influences, some within his family. Reminiscing later, in 1914, in a short memoir called „Our Mr. Fixl“, Masaryk wrote that his mother forbade him and his siblings to go anywhere near a Jewish family called Lechner because, according to her, Jews needed the blood of Christian children in their rituals. At the same time, the Jewish ambulant tradesman Mr. Fixl evoked sympathies in Thomas, the child, and such emotions undermined the prejudices of the boy's milieu. „What we had,“ Masaryk wrote, „was superstitious antisemitism“ and bigotry bred by the Catholic church.

Masaryk managed to free himself of the anti-Jewish atmosphere experienced in his youth partly due to an increasing number of positive encounters with Jewish individuals and families in Brno and in Vienna, partly due to his studies of religion, philosophy and sociology. His knowledge of the Old and the New Testament and of Jewish history led him to admire many aspects of Judaism but he also criticized some aspects of contemporary Jewish existence, such as some Jews' hopes of the benefits of complete assimilation into the surrounding populations. This even brought him into occasional conflict with the so-called Czech-Jewish movement whose adherents saw the solution to the Jewish question in assimilation of the Jews in the Bohemian lands with the Czech nation, perhaps with the exception of the religious denomination.

Masaryk's scepticism towards the effects of assimilation brought him close to what one might call proto-Zionist ideas. For him the Jews, even in the post-emancipation era, constituted a nation – a nation not in political terms, but certainly in the ethnic sense. He spoke of them as such already in his treatise on suicide as a mass social phenomenon of modern civilisation, published in 1881, and again in a different study in 1890. Thus we see Masaryk adopt one of the main tenets of political Zionism, namely the existence of a Jewish nation in the contemporary world, fairly long before this movement came into being in the second half of the 1890s. In 1900, four years after Theodor Herzl founded the world Zionist movement, Masaryk even included a passage on Jews and Zionism into the political programme he wrote for his Popular (Realist) Party. There he said, /quote/ „We sympathize with Zionism which is not embarrassed for its Judaism“ /unquote/.

Such words could only ascerbate Masaryk's relations with the assimilationist part of Jewish society and they did. Nevertheless, the assimilationists continued being generally friendly towards Masaryk, and this was largely the result of his resolute stand on Jewish rights and against antisemitism, shown most decisively in the infamous Hilsner affair of the turn of the century. In 1899, a young woman was found dead near the Czech town of Polná and a Jewish man called Leopold Hilsner was arrested and charged with her murder. Public opinion was soon full of rumours about the motives of the killing. The prevailing opinion was that Hilsner had committed a ritual murder, wanting to use the blood of his victim in the preparation of unleavened bread – mazzoth - , since the crime had occurred shortly before the festival of Passover. It was in this explosive atmosphere that Hilsner faced two trials which eventually

led to his being imprisoned for life. In 1918, he was amnestied by emperor Charles and released from jail.

While Hilsner was on trial, Thomas Masaryk could not face the accompanying eruption of what he saw as medieval prejudice calmly. Almost alone among Czech intellectuals, he contradicted the accusations against Hilsner, subjected the evidence against him to detailed scrutiny and challenged Czech society to behave in a fashion becoming a modern European nation. What motivated him was not so much compassion with a possible victim of miscarriage of justice but rather shame for the behaviour of important segments of Czech public opinion at a crucial stage in the national emancipation of his compatriots. As Jiří Kovtun put it, Masaryk did not enter the fight on behalf of one man. His was a grand struggle for principles. He felt that the blood libel was equally dangerous in the realm of morals as epidemics were in the physical world. In Kovtun's words, /h/e saw it as his mission to stop this infection and cure the sick."

Masaryk was not successful in his immediate goals since Hilsner was sentenced and the disease of antisemitism was not eradicated. He also endured many attacks by his political enemies and even by Czech nationalist students. But the courage shown by him in the face of such adversity served him well in the long run because his personal integrity was recognized not only in Central Europe but also in the United States. This in turn helped him in advancing the cause of Czechoslovak independence and statehood when the time came to persuade Allied public opinion of its justified nature during the First World War. The second important result of Masaryk's activities during the Hilsner affair was the almost unanimous support he could expect from Czechoslovak Jews when he became the leading figure of the new Czechoslovak Republic, this despite the fact that many Jews had reservations about the dismemberment of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. These Jews saw the stability provided by the Habsburg monarchy in the years between the revolution of 1848 and the outbreak of war in 1914 threatened by the emergence of many new states whose nationalist ethos they suspected to be tinged with a dose of antisemitism. The central role played by Masaryk in Czechoslovak politics, however, seemed a guarantee that Jewish interests would be safeguarded in the new republic and in the course of time, great numbers of Jews transferred the loyalty they felt towards emperor Francis Joseph, under whose almost

seventy-years' rule they had made steady progress, to their new head of state in Hradčany castle.

In the meantime, the Zionist movement had been given a major boost by the Balfour declaration and a parallel seemed to emerge between the national efforts of Czechs and Slovaks on one side and the Zionist activities aimed at establishing a national home for the Jews in British-dominated Palestine. This became clear in the enthusiastic reception given to Masaryk by important sections of American Jewry during his trips to the United States between 1907 and 1918. Among his supporters, he could count Louis Brandeis, the first Jewish judge of the U.S. Supreme Court and head of the Zionist movement in America during the First World War.

While Masaryk was still abroad in the closing months of the war, the Zionists took action to gain assurances for the position of Jews in the changing political landscape of Central Europe. Inspired by them, a Jewish National Council was formed in Austria on October 14th, 1918, and a similar institution was founded in Prague eight days later. On the day Czechoslovakia declared its independence, October 28th, several of its leading figures, including the writer Max Brod, arrived at the seat of the Czechoslovak National Council which served as the provisional government of the new state and demanded official acceptance of the existence of the Jewish nationality. This became the first in a chain of events which eventually resulted in the acknowledgement of a Jewish ethnic group within the Czechoslovak constitutional order by the end of the decade. Subsequently, citizens of Czechoslovakia, starting with the population census of 1921, could list their ethnic nationality as Jewish if they wished so, regardless of their native tongue or religious affiliation. Almost 60 percent of Jews by religion did so in the census of 1930. Curiously enough, recognition of Jewish ethnic nationality in the interwar period occurred only in Czechoslovakia and Soviet Russia.

Masaryk himself had contact with the Jewish National Council soon after his election to the presidency and his triumphant return from exile. On the last day of 1918, he assured the Council's leadership of his „full sympathies“ for Zionism and promised that Jews would be equal citizens of Czechoslovakia. That promise was largely fulfilled though in the initial years of the republic, doubts about Masaryk's real stance arose occasionally. In 1919 for example,

authorities responsible for economic policies in Slovakia discriminated against Jews in awarding state licences for the production and distribution of spirits, licences for sale and storage of tobacco and licences for cinema ownership. Masaryk appeared to agree with such measures at the time although they were criticised by Chaim Weizmann, then president of the British Zionist Federation.

As to main Zionist policies, during the upheavals brought about by the defeat of the Central Powers in the World War and the emergence of a new order in Central Europe and the Middle East, Masaryk seemed to be slightly changing his position on Jewish settlements in Palestine. Previously, despite statements of support for Zionism, seen by him mainly as a movement of spiritual and cultural renewal of the Jewish people, Masaryk was sceptical about its practical goals such as the transfer of large numbers of Jews to Palestine, the development of a Jewish infrastructure there and the agricultural and industrial transformation of the country. He felt that in terms of demography, Arabs would remain in a dominant position. Now, after the Balfour declaration and with the beginning of British rule in Palestine, Masaryk seemed to be prepared to support all long-term goals of Zionism. Thus, in an interview with the journalist Jacob Landau in early 1919, the president declared that Czechoslovakia would support the concept of a Jewish Palestine at the forthcoming peace conferences in France.

The culmination of Masaryk's interest in Zionist activities in Palestine was his visit there in April 1927, a momentous event that is dealt with in other contributions to our gathering today and in the exhibition prepared for this occasion. Suffice it to say that although unofficial, it was the first ever such visit by a head of state of a democratic state. During his week-long journey across Palestine, following up on a visit to Egypt, Masaryk met representatives of all major ethnic and religious groups and acquainted himself with the progress made by the Yishuv, the Jewish population group. Despite his positive assessment of what he saw in the Jewish towns and settlements, doubts remained in his mind. The Jews would hardly ever gain the numerical majority in the country, he told the newspaper *Prager Tagblatt*.

In contrast to his father, Jan Masaryk was not a philosopher, religious thinker or sociologist. His outlook on life was more down-to-earth, his social contacts much more intensive,

unencumbered by high political office, and in the interwar period and during the Second World War he lived mostly in London, first as his country's envoy and then as minister of foreign affairs of the government-in-exile. All this had an influence on many aspects of his attitudes and activities, not least on his relationships with Jews in many walks of life. But in one respect, he truly followed in his father's footsteps although under completely different historical circumstances, namely after the holocaust. Like president Masaryk, the son had a sceptical view of the possibilities of Jewish assimilation and he espoused a passionate sympathy for Zionism. He was fortunate in that in his last years, under very difficult circumstances when he saw his country coming under Soviet domination, he could reconcile his country's foreign policy with his own personal feelings about the future of the Jewish people.

At this point it is necessary to say that apart from scattered passages in the memoirs of Jan Masaryk's friends, what we know about his views on Jewish matters derives largely from a book that first appeared in Tel Aviv in 1952. It was written by a man who more than others embodies the continuity between pre-war Czechoslovakia and the independent Jewish state – the Czech poet Viktor Fischl who became the Israeli diplomat Avigdor Dagan. In between, from 1940 until his aliyah in 1949, he worked at the Czechoslovak ministry of foreign affairs, in London, in Paris and in Prague. During that period he spent much time talking to his boss and his notes from those encounters became the book *Conversations with Jan Masaryk*.

From this work, we learn that in September 1938, on the night after the disastrous news of the Munich agreement broke, the Czechoslovak minister in London was visiting Chaim Weizmann and his wife Vera. Chaim Weizmann was by then president of the World Zionist Organization and would in due course, ten years later, become the first president of Israel. „I shall never forget,“ Masaryk confided to Fischl, „how tactfully Weizmann and his Jewish friends expressed their condolences. If I did not lose my faith in mankind at that time of my life, I owe it to this evening at the Weizmanns. That night I realized what Jewish wisdom is based on. Jews don't think in days or months, they think in centuries, in millenia.“

As far as assimilation was concerned, Jan Masaryk felt that it was not possible. Even in Britain he had noticed informal discrimination or subliminal prejudice. /Quote/ „Some of my Jewish friends have a knighthood or are barons. But don't think that they are fully accepted

by every other lord. That has very deep roots. Altogether, I have stopped believing in assimilation. What's left is Zionism, nothing else." /Unquote/

In the immediate post-war years, it was feelings like these that helped Jan Masaryk in carrying out policies towards the Zionist forces in Palestine that were often at odds with British aims there, although Britain had been his second home. With him being responsible for foreign policy under the leadership of president Edvard Beneš and prime minister Klement Gottwald, Czechoslovakia allowed thousands of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe to cross its territory on their way to Palestine and concluded contracts for arms deliveries with Zionist emissaries even before Israel declared its independence. This was only possible because for various reasons, the Soviet Union favoured the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine at the time. Masaryk was no doubt aware of the bitter irony of this situation at a time when he increasingly felt helpless face to face with brutal Soviet interference in Czechoslovak politics. It was this Soviet involvement that eventually led to his death just two months before Israeli independence.

The birth of the State of Israel was something that Jan Masaryk anticipated with joy and fervor. To Fischl he said, „to establish a Jewish state is one of the greatest political ideas of our time. It is so great that people lack phantasy to be able to understand it. But I believe in it. I am a Zionist.“ I dare say that there hasn't been a non-Jewish foreign minister like that since.

