

# Bohumil KAFKA, *Jan Zizka* monument

VERNEY

*The sculptor represents the transition from one pose to another ... In his work we still see a part of what was, and we discover a part of what is to be.*

—Auguste RODIN

On July 14, 1420, Jan Zizka, the iconic Czech military hero of the religious wars that marked Bohemia's Hussite Revolution, led an unlikely defence of Prague against Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund and 80,000 knights intent upon destroying the city and its residents. The key battle occurred on Vitkov Hill, a long, high, narrow ridge between the city's present-day Karlín and Žižkov neighborhoods. For the past six decades, the most visible reminder of Zizka's legacy has been an enormous bronze statue of the one-eyed general watching over Prague from atop the hill — an artistic representation of medieval military history with continuing contemporary resonance, emblematic of the full sweep of modern Czech history.

Czech journalist Christian Falvey vividly articulates why this is not just another statue of “some grand-looking fellow with a suave beard in full regalia, trotting out of battle into history on his stately steed.” Rather, he notes, Zizka “is poised in a moment of murderous discretion, a deadly Slav glaring down some poor crusader with his one good eye as he brings his mace to bear.” Its four legs firmly planted, Zizka's war-weary horse, veins jolting out of its muzzle and legs, gasps before its next onslaught. “The monument is so kinetic and realistic,” he adds (slyly referencing the prevalent irreligiosity of today's Czech Republic<sup>1</sup>), “that you almost find yourself waiting for its seventeen tons of bronze to ... start tearing down the hill to massacre the heathens in the bus station below.”<sup>2</sup>

The world's third-largest bronze equestrian statue, it stands nine meters tall on a thirteen-meter-high pedestal.<sup>3</sup> Zizka's head alone weighs 109 kilograms, and a contemporary

photograph shows its sculptor, Bohumil Kafka, working inside the horse's head seated on a bench and accompanied by an assistant.<sup>4</sup> Although Kafka was no relation to his contemporary, the famed writer Franz, the story of this statue's creation — a tortuous, sixty-eight-year ordeal — could serve as material for an absurdist novel of bureaucracy run amok.

First conceived in 1882, thirty-one years passed before any serious action was begun. In 1913, competitive proposals were solicited for a Zizka monument. Results were inconclusive: no first place was awarded, and second place was bestowed on three proposals, none of which were even partially used. Preliminary construction began in 1920, but subsequent competitions in 1924 and 1927 also failed to yield a winner.

During this time, veterans of the Czechoslovak Legions who had fought with Russia against the Austrians during World War I began lobbying for a national monument in their honour to serve as a backdrop to the Zizka memorial. Rudolf Medek, a prominent Legionnaire, played a key role. On November 8, 1928, the tenth anniversary of Czechoslovakian independence, the memorial's cornerstone was laid, and it was completed three years later. Proposals were again solicited for a Zizka statue, and Bohumil Kafka was among those responding.

Kafka was born February 14, 1878 in Nova Paka. After studying sculpture and stonemasonry, he worked as a stonecutter and ornamentalist in Dresden. Kafka attended Prague's Academy of Arts and Crafts and then studied at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, also in Prague. In 1904, the young sculptor went to Paris and fell under the influence of Auguste Rodin. After sojourns in Rome, Venice, Strasbourg, Milan, Zurich, and London, he returned to Prague in 1916, where he was appointed professor at his alma mater. Although his early work was distinctly Art Nouveau in style and spirit, his statues took on an increasingly traditional character. This would create prob-

lems with Medek and others in the artistic elite, who favored a distinctly Czech expressionism. Medek, who considered himself an art connoisseur (His father-in-law, Antonín Slavíček, was an important Czech painter), was effectively Czechoslovakia's cultural czar. However, the Cubist and Expressionist proposals he and the culturati favoured were overwhelmingly rejected by the Czech middle class, which much preferred traditional realism.<sup>5</sup>

Kafka drew inspiration for his design from paintings of Zizka by Mikoláš Ales, a beloved Czech artist. Despite Kafka's credentials, talent, and the suitability and popular appeal of his source material, progress remained fitful. His proposed design received lukewarm approval from Medek's committee, which did not want a baroque statue resembling those in Berlin and Vienna. After consulting historians and hippologists, Kafka had completed a full-size scale model by 1937. However, Medek then abruptly told him to cease work, due largely to František Udrzal, who had been minister of defense and prime minister during the 1920s and '30s. Udrzal's Agrarian Party lost power in 1932 and reformed as the Republicans. Three years later, Udrzal entered the Senate, considered a repository for politicians at the tail-end of their careers.

Nonetheless, Udrzal still wielded influence—especially with Medek, whose career he had advanced as his former boss. Udrzal protested that the

horse sculpted by Kafka was a Noric, an Austrian breed—incendiary demagoguery in a country only recently freed from three centuries as a vassal state of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.<sup>6</sup> Udrzal blithely ignored the historical fact that Zizka and his troops routinely used captured Austrian and German steeds.<sup>7</sup> This was, in all likelihood, a manufactured pretext: the Republican Party included many Catholics who did not want any statues built honouring Zizka, a hero of the early Protestant Reformation. However, Udrzal died the following year, Medek reversed his decision, and Kafka was allowed to continue working.<sup>8</sup>

He had the mould ready by 1941, finishing just as Czechoslovakia was overrun by the Nazis. As a symbol of anti-German Slavic nationalism, the mould became the object of a vigorous search by the Gestapo. It and the scale model were cut into pieces and successfully hidden in a variety of locations around Prague, including coal cellars. After World War II, the pieces were put back together, and the statue was cast. Kafka would not see his completed work in place, passing away after a long illness on November 29, 1942.<sup>9</sup>

Kafka's statue was ceremoniously erected on July 14, 1950 within a far different ideological context than that of its initial conception. Following their 1948 coup d'état, the communists commenced an Orwellian rewriting of Czech history. Stalin's party line was amenable to Zizka as a secularized symbol of Pan-Slavic



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