

## MOURNING BECOMES THE NATION: THE FUNERAL OF TOMÁŠ G. MASARYK IN 1937

On September 22, 1937, the day after the funeral of former Czechoslovak president Tomáš G. Masaryk, the journalist Ferdinand Peroutka wrote on the front page of the magazine "Přítomnost":

I don't know how many theories there are about what a nation is and how it arises, but I know that in the last few days we've seen the nation, that we've seen it as clearly as one can see a material object. Those unforgettable multitudes that gathered in the space between Prague castle and White Mountain – that wasn't a crowd, it was a nation.<sup>1</sup>

In "Lidové noviny" the following day, Eduard Bass wrote in a similar vein:

Anyone suffering from the lack of a theoretical definition of what a nation is could have stood at any spot along Masaryk's posthumous journey, and would have seen the true Czechoslovak nation standing before the great deceased man, with a single desire: to be worthy of this rare and exceptional figure.<sup>2</sup>

Many observers shared this feeling of having "seen" a nation.<sup>3</sup> The multitudes at Masaryk's funeral were said to express a unified will, the nation's determination to

<sup>1</sup> Peroutka, Ferdinand: Zástupové [Gatherings]. In: Přítomnost 14 (1937) No. 38, 593. – All translations from the Czech are my own. – I would like to thank Peter Bugge, Tomáš Hlobil, Marek Nekula, Cynthia Paces, and Jindřich Toman for valuable comments and assistance in preparing this article.

<sup>2</sup> Bass, Eduard: Po pohřbu [After the Funeral]. In: Lidové noviny 23.9.1937 ráno [morning edition], 1.

<sup>3</sup> My account of the funeral, and of accounts of the funeral, draws on a range of newspapers and magazines: A-Zet, České slovo, Den, Fronta, Lidové listy, Lidové noviny, Moravskoslezský deník, Národní listy, Obnova, Panorama, Polední list, Prager Tagblatt, Právo lidu, Přítomnost, Rudé právo, Tvorba, Die Rote Fahne, and Venkov. This gives a good idea of the Czech political spectrum, as well as of the range of pro- and anti-Masaryk feeling (which did not overlap clearly with the left-right spectrum), although it doesn't cover so well the views of national minorities, especially Germans, Jews, and Slovaks. The nationalities issues surrounding the funeral would warrant a further study, taking into account more of the German and Slovak press as well. – Other useful sources include a compendium of articles and photographs published soon after the funeral, in December 1937: Čapek, Karel/Kopta, Josef/Skrach, Vasil Kaprálek (eds.): Dni žalu. Památník o sklonku života, o nemoci, smrti a pohřbu presidenta Osvoboditele T. G. Masaryka [Days of Grief. A Memorial of the Final Days, Illness, Death, and Funeral of the President-Liberator T. G. Masaryk]. Praha 1937. – Two excellent collections of photographs are Hájek, Karel: Poslední cesta TGM [The Last Journey of TGM]. Praha 1947. – [Sitenský, Ladislav:] To kalné ráno. Fotografie Ladislava Sitenského doprovázené slovy Karla Čapka a Jaroslava Seiferta [That Gloomy Morning. Photographs by Ladislav Sitenský Accompanied by the Writings of Karel Čapek and Jaroslav Seifert]. Praha 1997. – For a recent eyewitness account of the funeral, see Demetz, Peter: Prague in Black and Gold: Scenes from the Life of a European City. New York 1997, 361-364.

defend itself – the funeral was a military one, ending with an “inspection” of the Czechoslovak army in front of the coffin of its former commander-in-chief – as well as its determination to carry on Masaryk’s tradition. Opinions on just what that tradition was, of course, varied notably across the political spectrum. But in the week between Masaryk’s death, on September 14, 1937, and his funeral on September 21, a remarkably unified picture arose in the Czech press about the masses arriving in Prague to pay their last respects to the “President-Liberator.”

Masaryk’s death created two notable mass gatherings. The first was the huge lines of people who assembled to view Masaryk’s coffin, which lay in state in the Plečník Hall of Prague Castle from the morning of Saturday the 18th to the evening of Monday the 20th. During this time an estimated 750 000 people viewed the coffin in an uninterrupted stream that lasted through the night, most of them waiting five, seven, even nine hours for the chance to pass quickly through the hall (Figures 1 and 2). At one a.m. Sunday morning, for example, the line was eight to ten hours and several kilometers long. At the peak of traffic, ten to twelve thousand people an hour were estimated to be passing by the coffin, four abreast.<sup>4</sup> This might be seen as an organizational disaster evincing considerable haplessness on the part of the funeral’s organizers – or perhaps an equally exceptional flair for the staging of mass spectacles. As we shall see, it was rarely interpreted as either.

The second gathering was the funeral procession itself. People wanted to catch a glimpse, not only of the president lying in state, but also of his final journey to the grave. On Monday, hundreds of thousands more people began arriving in Prague to secure a place along the projected route the next day, from Prague Castle to Wilson Train Station (“reversing the path,” Demetz points out, “Masaryk had taken when he triumphantly entered the city after his exile” in 1918).<sup>5</sup> Many people spent the night on the street. The city was declared “overcrowded” and accommodations hopelessly unavailable, so that cafes and restaurants were asked to stay open all night to provide shelter for anyone who needed it. And several days beforehand, newspapers and radio began publishing appeals to people *not* to come to Prague for the funeral, fearing the logistical nightmare of a city suddenly having to deal with twice its normal population. Czechoslovak railways organized special trains to Prague and borrowed wagons from Austria and Hungary. Samaritan groups were organized to give first aid to people who fainted or were hurt in the bustle; reinforced police units closed off parts of the funeral procession’s path until shortly before it began. It was eventually estimated that from 750 000 to a million people viewed the funeral, most of them standing several-deep in rows along the streets (Figures 3 and 4). Despite the huge number of people, there were few incidents of disorder – in fact, most of the major newspapers asserted that there were none at all – and apparently no one was hospitalized. “*Lidové noviny*” reported delightedly that not a single person on

<sup>4</sup> For some estimates of the crowd’s size, see “*Statisíce lidí putujících k mrtvému*” [Hundreds of Thousands Go to See the Deceased] and “*Až k Výpichu jde fronta*” [The Line Goes All the Way to Výpich]. In: *České slovo* 19.9.1937, 3, or the front-page photo and caption “*Tři čtvrti milionu lidí*” [Three quarters of a million people]. In: *České slovo* 21.9.1937, 1. – Cf. also the estimates in *Lidové noviny* 20.9.1937 k polední [noon edition].

<sup>5</sup> Demetz: *Prague in Black and Gold* 362 (cf. fn. 3).



Fig. 1: Hundreds of thousands of people stood in line for hours to view Masaryk's coffin in Prague Castle.

Source: *Hájek: Poslední cesta TGM* (cf. fn. 3).

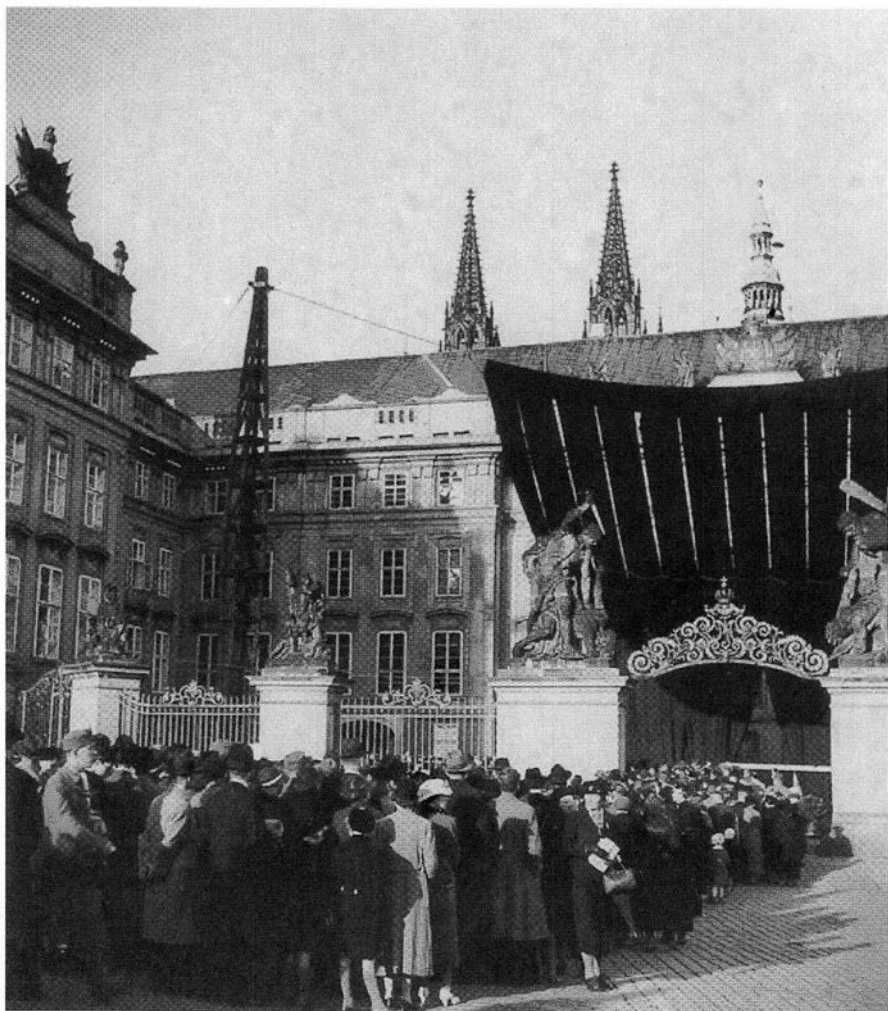


Fig. 2: The impression of order and discipline is clear in this photograph by Ladislav Sitenský.  
Source: *To kalné ráno*, plate 32 (cf. fn. 3).

Wenceslas Square fainted from the moment the head of the procession appeared to the moment the last soldier left the square.<sup>6</sup> Police registered only a few pickpocketings all day.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Poslední čin [Last Deed]. In: *Lidové noviny* 23.9.1937 ráno [morning edition] 5.

<sup>7</sup> A-Zet reported that six pickpockets were caught, but four of them were foreigners. Likewise, it was said that the one break-in recorded was committed by someone who wasn't from Prague – as the police, “judging from the scene of the crime,” took pains to point

The staging of the funeral procession was, inevitably, rife with symbolic connotations. Six soldiers walked beside the coffin, one representing each nationality living in Czechoslovakia;<sup>8</sup> representatives of all the major churches were also included in the procession. President Edvard Beneš gave the only speech, before the procession began – he was to be the one official interpreter of Masaryk's legacy. He then walked alone, just after Masaryk's son and two grandsons, behind the coffin, a poignant and effective image that was photographed and reprinted in many papers and established him as Masaryk's most authentic successor, almost a surrogate son (Figure 5).<sup>9</sup> Near the head of the procession were representatives of the Czechoslovak Legions, veterans of World War I who had fought on three major fronts in France, Russia, and Italy. The presence of the Legionaries with their colorful standards was meant to emphasize Masaryk's own military past, to remind Czechoslovaks that they had fought for their freedom once before and might have to do so again.

But however much symbolism was contained in the ceremony itself, it was the viewers who stole the show. After the initial coverage of the funeral procession, most newspaper commentaries on the funeral talked more about the crowds than anything else. "Whatever was carried in the procession, whoever walked behind the coffin, the true pathos of this event lay in those who watched from both sides," wrote Peroutka.<sup>10</sup> But what was so special about them? First of all, we must remember that in both cases – the people who lined up to see Masaryk's coffin and those in rows along the streets – they formed a particular kind of crowd: the queue. This image gradually gained importance in the discourse surrounding the funeral, as the striking images of huge lines of waiting people impressed themselves on viewers' imaginations. For example, the poet Jaroslav Seifert had published an elegy, "Masaryk's Rose," on September 16, when the rows of observers had not yet become an estab-

---

out. What forces of disorder there were at the funeral, it seems, were not to be identified with the Czechs. *Mír v podzemí Prahy* [Peace in the Prague Underworld]. In: *A-Zet ranní* [morning edition] 21.9.1937, 3.

<sup>8</sup> The six soldiers were probably, as Demetz says, Czech, Slovak, German, Hungarian, Ruthenian, and Polish. *Demetz: Prague in Black and Gold* 362 (cf. fn. 3). But it is interesting that the official Czech Press Agency release did not specify the six nationalities, nor did any Czech newspaper I read. Perhaps the intent was to maintain silence as to whether any of the soldiers was Jewish; or perhaps what was being silenced was the national designation (Ukrainian? Rusyn?) of the soldier from Podkarpatská Rus. This silence is yet another reminder of how a sense of national unity was not just "spontaneously" produced by the funeral but was also carefully constructed. More puzzling is the fact that many photos show four soldiers on each side of the coffin, and two walking behind it (as in Figure 5).

<sup>9</sup> Beneš was repeatedly referred to as "orphaned" by Masaryk's death. The same metaphor was applied to the veterans of the Czech legions.

<sup>10</sup> *Peroutka: Zástupové* 593 (cf. fn. 1). – The Communist "Die Rote Fahne" spun this idea in its own way: "Wer den kurzen Trauerzug sah und dabei die ungeheuren Menschenmassen, die den ganzen Weg entlang sich drängten, die die angrenzenden Gassen belagerten – dem mußte das ungeheuerliche Mißverhältnis zwischen den wenigen Tausenden, die den Trauerzug bildeten, und den vielen, vielen, vielen, die ihm nur mit den Augen, mit feuchten Augen folgten, geradezu schmerzlich und beunruhigend auffallen." Millionen gaben das Geleit. In: *Die Rote Fahne* 22.9.1937, 1.





Fig. 3: The funeral procession passes along Národní třída and Ulice 28. října.  
Source: Čapek/Kopta/Skrach (eds.): *Dni žalu*, plate 63 (cf. fn. 3).



Fig. 4: Ladislav Sitenský's superb photograph captures the orderliness of spectators lined up to watch the funeral procession. Note the relatively small number of policemen and the "periscopes" used by people in the back rows.

Source: *To kalné ráno*, plate 37 (cf. fn. 3).

lished motif of reporting on the funeral ceremonies; when the poem was published in book form shortly afterwards, in Seifert's collection "Eight Days", he changed the title to "By the Roadside."<sup>11</sup> The queue was not a mass of people milling about, but

<sup>11</sup> Seifert wrote ten poems between Masaryk's death and burial; most of them were published, one a day, on the front page of the socialist newspaper "Právo lidu". The collection "Eight

a gathering that was imposing for its orderliness; there was an element of organization to these masses that was immediately visible to the naked eye. This is reflected in the two words that appear over and over again to describe the crowds, "špalír", meaning a row of people lined up along the path of a parade or procession, and more generally "zástupy" (and sometimes even the literary and rather more exalted plural "zástupové"). A "zástup" can be a line (queue) but also a relatively well-ordered multitude. It does not have the connotations of unruly chaos generally associated with "dav", the more common word for "crowd."<sup>12</sup> And the "zástupy" quite often "proudily" (flowed or streamed) or "defilovaly" (marched past) – telling verbs that indicated controlled, directed movement.

But an equally important part of this orderliness is that it was spontaneous and self-imposed. Over and over again, commentaries emphasized that people formed lines of their own volition, without having to be forced into rows by the police:

Order and discipline rule everywhere. The extensive measures to preserve order that have been taken are considerably facilitated by this exemplary self-discipline of the citizenry. Thus does even this journey to the coffin of the builder of the state become at the same time a manifestation of order that almost symbolizes disciplined Czechoslovak democracy.<sup>13</sup>

This element of spontaneous self-discipline was crucial to the national image that emerged from the funeral, and in this respect the Czechoslovaks' orderliness was often compared to the enforced obedience of Nazi Germany. In the Social Democratic paper "Právo lidu", Josef Stivín wrote:

[...] we are a nation that is glad to obey leadership and that can respect and listen to authorities. But they must not be authorities relying on power, violence, or German *Kadavergehorsam*. They must be authorities that have excelled over others through their spirit.<sup>14</sup>

And "České slovo" wrote that "we have remained an island of calm and disciplined democracy amidst the violence of dictatorships."<sup>15</sup>

Closely tied to this idea of self-discipline was the motif of silence, tirelessly reiterated in newspaper stories throughout the reporting on the funeral. Silence had descended on Masaryk from the moment he fell seriously ill at his Lány estate on September 3. During his sickness, the silence was "oppressive" or "anxious": "In the whole estate absolute silence is painstakingly preserved, so that not even the

---

Days" went through eight editions by the end of 1937. Cf. *Pešat*, Zdeněk: Jaroslav Seifert. Praha 1991, 145. – Seifert's poems represent only a fraction of the enormous outpouring of elegies to Masaryk after his death. Nearly every Czech poet, major or minor, wrote at least one. See *Jirko*, Miloš (ed.): *Monumenty a květiny TGM* [Monuments and Flowers to TGM]. Praha 1937.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. the passage from Peroutka cited at the beginning: the "zástupy" were not a "dav" but a "národ".

<sup>13</sup> Venkov 19.9.1937, 3. This news release of the Czech Press Agency appeared in other papers as well – cf. "Proudý zástupů defilují" [Streams of Multitudes Walk in Procession]. In: *Národní listy* 19.9.1937, 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Stivín*, Josef: *Nesejde s myslí* [He Will Not Fade from Our Memories]. In: *Právo lidu* 23.9.1937, 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Pout' k odkazu* [A Pilgrimage to a Heritage]. In: *České slovo* 24.9.1937, 1.





Fig. 5: The funeral procession halts at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Old Town Square. Immediately behind the coffin are Masaryk's son Jan and two grandsons; behind them is President Beneš, standing alone at the far right of the photograph. Source: Čapek/Kopta/Škrach (eds.): *Dni žalu*, plate 59 (cf. fn. 3).

slightest sound might penetrate into the president's room."<sup>16</sup> Silence continued to reign after Masaryk's death, during the viewing and funeral, but it was gradually transformed into a sign of calm, dignified, and resolute strength. In another poem of "Eight Days", about the queue at the castle, Seifert wrote:

Only the patter of shoes can be heard in the courtyard,  
Hundreds of thousands walk, are silent at the throne  
that death has here. No, people don't talk here.<sup>17</sup>

And even as they make clear that some music was played during the procession, accounts of the funeral emphasize the magisterial silence of the proceedings. The fact that Beneš gave the only speech at the funeral not only singled him out as the bearer of the Masarykian tradition; it also reinforced the silence of the rest of the proceedings. The "inspection" of the army by the dead president – a vast dumb-show in which thousands of soldiers silently passed the coffin and dipped their arms – was an imposing pantomime.<sup>18</sup>

The impression of silence reinforced the impression of the crowd's discipline. Not only did the silent crowds participate fully in the silence of the proceedings, but their silence also indicated their subdued nature, as when "Právo lidu" reported that "people walk quietly, subdued, sad, and they maintain remarkable order."<sup>19</sup> The motif of quiet or muffled sobbing was also common – establishing both the crowd's sincerity and ability to feel strong emotion (again over and against the German "Kadavergehorsam"),<sup>20</sup> and its ability to stand up under grief. But just as important as the connotations of self-discipline were those of solemnity, dignity, and intensity. There were no external impressions to distract people from their own grief: "[...] the multitudes streaming toward Prague Castle are reticent and unusually quiet. You can't hear the noise that's typical of a large gathering," wrote "České slovo" about the people waiting to see Masaryk's coffin.<sup>21</sup> "Právo lidu's" correspondent asked: "Where are you, sarcastic jests and biting jokes of the ordinary crowd?"<sup>22</sup> Finally,

<sup>16</sup> V úzkosti čekáme [We Wait in Anguish]. In: Lidové noviny 13.9.1937 k poledni [noon edition] 1.

<sup>17</sup> Jen klapot střevíců je slyšet na nádvoří, / jdou statisíce, mlčí u trůnu, / jež tu má smrt. Ne, tu se nehovoří. Seifert, Jaroslav: Už jenom pro pláč [Now for Tears Alone]. In: Ranní noviny 20.9.1937, 1.

<sup>18</sup> Years later, Demetz, who saw the funeral as a boy, wrote: "I remember the eerie silence of the day; one million people lined the streets, but you heard only the muffled sound of the horses' hooves, the clink of wheels and weapons, the infantry boots on the cobbled streets, and quiet sobbing in the crowds." Demetz: Prague in Black and Gold 363 (cf. fn. 3).

<sup>19</sup> Smutný předvečer v pražských ulicích [A Sad Evening in Prague's Streets]. In: Právo lidu 22.9.1937, 3.

<sup>20</sup> An editorial in "České slovo" several days after the funeral made this quite clear: "[...] the deep line [linie] of sadness, in which every honest Czechoslovak took a place, was never interrupted. Not a single gesture reprimanded our population for hypocrisy. There was no cynicism on the streets of Prague, but nor was there hysteria; there was just sincere grief at the death [...]." Jiřa, Karel: Je v srdcích klid a mír [In the Hearts, there is Calm and Peace]. In: České slovo 26.9.1937, 1.

<sup>21</sup> Až k Výpichu jde fronta (cf. fn. 4).

<sup>22</sup> Zástupy v noci [Night Multitudes]. In: Právo lidu 21.9.1937, 8. Here again we see the conspicuously drawn distinction between "zástup" and "dav".

the silence of those waiting carried a sense of self-sacrifice and patient endurance. Many people, indeed, showed impressive fortitude, standing hours outside in bad weather to see the coffin,<sup>23</sup> or waiting all night in the streets to reserve a place along the line of the procession. The observation that these people were silent created a sense of common resolution and readiness for suffering.

With these linked connotations of patient endurance, the silence also contributed to a sense of endless waiting, a slowing, freezing, or suspension of the normal flow of time. A small dress rehearsal of this came at noon on Sunday, September 19th, when Prague observed two minutes of silence – “České slovo” called it “a wonderful image of life turned to stone,”<sup>24</sup> “Venkov” “a model of national discipline.”<sup>25</sup> Many newspaper accounts, inspired by the spotlights lighting up the square in front of the castle or the unusual activity in the streets in the middle of the night, said that night had turned to day. Further, the waiting itself distorted time, as “A-Zet’s” reporter observed: “Two hours or more? All we see is that the sun has shifted from our sidewalk to the other side of the street.” Later, when the air force joined the procession overhead, the correspondent writes: “At 10:55 three squadrons of planes rise above Prague – 27 planes. In five minutes, another three. And then we no longer count them, just as we don’t count time.”<sup>26</sup>

We might pause on this sense of timelessness to draw some contrasts with recent literature on re-burials in the post-Communist countries. Katherine Verdery, following István Rév, points out that reburials, like that of Imre Nagy in Hungary in 1988, can serve to erase the history intervening between the original death and the reburial. Rév argues that: “By bringing back and reburying the repressed, the time between the burial and the final funeral is put into brackets.”<sup>27</sup> In this way, the rewriting of history changes the way we locate ourselves in time, as Verdery points out – depending in part on which sorts of ancestors, if any, we tie our own identities to.<sup>28</sup>

But if the key adverb of time in a reburial is “again,” linked to a sense of renewal or restoration, we find a different conception of time in the death and burial of Masaryk (and, one suspects, in other funerals, as opposed to reburials): a union of “never” and “always,” or more specifically a transition from the “nevermore” of death to the “always” of memory and immortality. This shift found expression in Karel Čapek’s first report on Masaryk’s death, three short paragraphs which move masterfully from the sense of loss, the inevitable result of “the struggle with death, a struggle in which the body is never the final victor,” to the sense of commitment to the future:

<sup>23</sup> Tři čtvrtě milionu u katafalku [Three Quarters of a Million at the Catafalque]. In: Rudé právo 21.9.1937, 1: “The silence of the waiting multitudes was broken only by thunder.” This was actually a rare mention of silence in a Communist newspaper – a point to which we will return.

<sup>24</sup> Dvě minuty ticha [Two Minutes of Silence]. In: České slovo 19.9.1937, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Dvouminutové ticho Prahy [Prague’s Two-Minute Silence]. In: Venkov 19.9.1937, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Osm hodin napětí [Eight Hours of Suspense]. In: A-Zet 22.9.1937, 2.

<sup>27</sup> Rév, István: Parallel Autopsies. In: Representations 49 (Winter 1995) 15–39, here 32.

<sup>28</sup> Verdery, Katherine: The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Post-Socialist Change. New York 1999, 118–119.

Even in this moment of sadness, let us believe and hope, [...] with all of Masaryk's faith in the immortality of the human soul and the divine order of things, *THAT T. G. MASARYK CONTINUES TO WATCH US*.<sup>29</sup>

The editor of "České slovo", Karel Zdeněk Klíma, wrote that "if we look back at him, we will always see well in front of ourselves."<sup>30</sup>

For this reason the ideas of inheritance, pledge, challenge or example recurred in the discourse surrounding the funeral: these were the main rhetorical figures embodying the conversion of death's "nevermore" to the "always" of a tradition and a promise: Masaryk's body may no longer be with us, but we will never betray his spirit. Thus, the solemn silence of the crowds became the solemnity of an oath. Beneš's funeral oration – tellingly entitled "Masaryk's Journey and Legacy [odkaz]" – ended with the words:

Masaryk, continuing to remain among us even in his departure, is an example and a challenge for us all [...]. This challenge means that we must remain faithful to Masaryk. Parting with him in the name of all of you, I promise that we will hearken to this challenge. President-Liberator, we will remain faithful to the heritage you have placed in our hands!<sup>31</sup>

We will return to the bitter irony that these words were pronounced just a year before the Munich Agreement. For now, in September 1937, the funeral seemed to lock the nation into a state of suspended animation, a peculiar show of passive will-power and subdued strength. The sense of timelessness, of a seamless fusion of past and future, was reinforced by many of the symbolic connotations of the funeral ceremonies, which clearly linked Masaryk to a long line of Czech historical figures. The Hussite fight song "Ktož jsú boží bojovníci" (You Who Are the Lord's Combatants), sung after Beneš's speech, evoked Jan Hus, and the one-eyed General Syrový, who led the whole procession, conveniently brought to mind the one-eyed Hussite warrior Jan Žižka – as many reports took pains to point out.<sup>32</sup> The Hussite song was followed by the chorale to St. Václav, ending with the words "Do not let us perish," a sentiment that was equally addressed to Masaryk; the parallel was clear as the coffin passed the statue of St. Václav on Wenceslas Square. ("Saint Václav Rides to Meet Him," wrote "A-Zet".)<sup>33</sup> The first part of the procession retraced the favorite route of the fourteenth-century king Charles IV; Čapek's account of the funeral even has the ghosts of Masaryk and Charles IV pause for a friendly chat

<sup>29</sup> Lidové noviny 14.9.1937 k poledni [noon edition] headline on page one. Italics and capitalization in the original. This motif, "He continues to watch us ...," became an advertising slogan of sorts: for some time afterwards, "Lidové noviny" continued to print it above advertisements for books by and about Masaryk.

<sup>30</sup> České slovo 21.9.1937, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Beneš's speech was reprinted in many major newspapers – for example, in: Lidové noviny 22.9.1937 ráno [morning edition] 2. The notion of an oath also appeared in the speech of the chairman of the Senate, František Soukup.

<sup>32</sup> "At eleven fifteen, in a bend of the road, a one-eyed rider appears on a horse, and behind him a retinue of knights, glittering in the sun." Na vltavském břehu [On the Bank of the Vltava]. In: Lidové noviny 22.9.1937 ráno [morning edition] 4.

<sup>33</sup> Svatý Václav jede mu vstříc [Saint Václav Rides to Meet Him]. In: A-Zet ranní [morning edition] 22.9.1937, 5.

under the statue of Saint Václav, a super-palimpsest of Czech national symbols.<sup>34</sup> On Old Town Square the coffin was left to stand for a minute of silence before the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (Figure 5) – “The Great Dead Exchanged Greetings,” as “Právo lidu” pointed out.<sup>35</sup> And at the actual burial, which took place outside of Prague at Masaryk’s estate in Láň, the Czech minister of education threw a lump of dirt from the grave of Jan Amos Komenský, the seventeenth-century scholar, onto Masaryk’s coffin as it was lowered into the ground.

In this sense, the funeral tied Masaryk to a tradition of Czech historical figures, although the specific details (and political connotations) of each parallel could be left to the individual imagination. Just as important as this ambiguity was the way in which Czech history was compressed into a single moment, a montage of historical allusions projected onto the physical space of Masaryk’s “posthumous journey.”<sup>36</sup> This suggests the kind of “continuity myth” István Rév speaks of,<sup>37</sup> but here it is not meant to excise out part of history; rather it intends to tie as many historical symbols as possible to the present, to make the public catharsis of the funeral as all-inclusive as possible. There was even room for the arch-Catholic journal “Obnova” to praise the funeral’s organizers for singing *both* the Saint Václav chorale and the Hussite war song at the beginning of the procession. This was not only another inclusive palimpsest (“A symbol of our thousand-year history followed by a song from our second half-century, filled with the echo of martial deeds”), but also, supposedly, a symbol of reconciliation between the two churches and the need to unite in a common defense:

The leaders of the republic thus consciously let both hymns be heard above the coffin of the restorer of a new Czechoslovakia, and there is no need to suppress the opinion that they wanted thereby to indicate both a certain reconciliation between two historical traditions, and the necessity of cooperation between advocates of these traditions in building and defending today’s state.<sup>38</sup>

Masaryk’s projection onto Czech history, then, was part of a process that Rév speaks about, whereby the living “reclaim the victim as a properly dead person, giving him or her social integrity as a dead member of the society of the living.”<sup>39</sup> But this “so-

<sup>34</sup> Čapek, Karel: Cesta devíti hodin [A Journey of Nine Hours]. In: Lidové noviny 23. 9. 1937, 3.

<sup>35</sup> Velcí mrtví se pozdravili [The Great Dead Exchanged Greetings]. In: Právo lidu 22. 9. 1937, 5.

<sup>36</sup> A report on coverage of the funeral abroad said that the “English press” saw it as “a panorama of the history of Czechoslovakia from its founding to the present day”. Lidové noviny 23. 9. 1937 ráno [morning edition] 2. This summary of foreign press reports appeared in other newspapers as well.

<sup>37</sup> Rév: Parallel Autopsies 32 (cf. fn. 27).

<sup>38</sup> Po pohřbu p. presidenta Osvoboditele [After the Funeral of Mr. President Liberator]. In: Obnova 25. 9. 1937, 2. – Reconciliation has its limits; a later issue approvingly quoted a French anti-Semitic paper that complained of the predominance of Jews in the French delegation to the funeral, led by Léon Blum. “Obnova” remarked that assimilation in Czechoslovakia had not yet proceeded far enough for its own delegations to be “so beautifully homogeneous”. Složení francouzské delegace na Masarykově pohřbu [The Composition of the French Delegation at Masaryk’s Funeral]. In: Obnova 2. 10. 1937, 7.

<sup>39</sup> Rév: Parallel Autopsies 26 (cf. fn. 27). Rév here is drawing on and paraphrasing Robert Hertz’s “Death and the Right Hand”.



cialization" of Masaryk was carried out even more strongly through his projection onto the viewing crowds themselves, whose orderliness, endurance, patience, and silence seemed to make them peculiarly receptive to this transformation. Rather than integrating Masaryk into a national community, the crowds seemed literally to embody him, to become his reincarnation, as if his soul had migrated into them. Thus, many commentators said that the crowds' disciplined behavior was Masaryk's last "deed" or "service to the nation" – their discipline and honest, sincere grief were Masarykian, and the coming together of so many people of different nationalities and political persuasions seemed to embody the tolerant coexistence Masaryk espoused.<sup>40</sup> In a public letter to the prime minister the day after the funeral, Beneš thanked the people for their discipline:

Yesterday we escorted him [Masaryk] on his final earthly journey in a way that exhibits the effects of our upbringing at his hands [jeho výchovy]. It isn't then a mere phrase if we hear, from all sides, that we lost only what in him was mortal, *but that his spirit will lead us on*. [...] *Above all the people itself* showed such a sense of order and discipline and behaved in such a dignified manner [...] that it once again confirmed that its liberation was the necessary consequence of its having matured in all spheres of national life.<sup>41</sup>

The crowds lining this route were thus conceived as Masaryk's true, final resting place.

It thus may be no surprise that, immediately after the funeral, the interpretation of the crowds began to become just as contentious as the interpretation of Masaryk himself. The main problem with the multitudes was that, suddenly, there weren't enough of them. A reader wrote to "A-Zet" complaining that

Anyone examining magazine pictures of the funeral of the President-Liberator was surprised by empty spaces in the rows of associations on Wenceslas Square and asked himself: *Why were people in the countryside warned over the radio not to come to Prague?*<sup>42</sup>

Peroutka commented that: "Some of the streets along which the funeral procession moved were nearly half-empty because of the measures that had been taken."<sup>43</sup> "České slovo" revealed that some of the train wagons borrowed from Austria and Hungary were sent back unused. Again the radio warnings were blamed.<sup>44</sup> It was said that on Wenceslas Square, only the hotel rooms facing the square were occupied.<sup>45</sup>

There were few specific targets for these complaints, which were generally aimed at a vague and generic group of "administrators", "bureaucracy", "official anxiety", "official measures" and so on. For many commentators, these unnamed culprits had

<sup>40</sup> Thus, Peroutka wrote: "It was Masaryk's last deed to stage for us, through his death, this exalted theater". Peroutka: *Zástupové* 593 (cf. fn. 1). This motif appears dozens of times in a wide range of papers, as well as public speeches and ceremonies.

<sup>41</sup> Beneš's letter was reprinted in: *Lidové noviny* 23.9.1937 ráno [morning edition] 2, under the heading "Jeho duch nás povede dál" [His Spirit Will Lead Us On]. Italics in original.

<sup>42</sup> Čtenáři píší A-Zet [Readers Write to A-Zet]. In: *A-Zet* 25.9.1937, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Peroutka: *Zástupové* 593 (cf. fn. 1).

<sup>44</sup> Pohyb Prahy ve smutečních dnech [Movement of Prague during the Days of Mourning]. In: *České slovo* 23.9.1937, 2.

<sup>45</sup> In margine velkého dne [In margin of a Great Day]. In: *Lidové listy* 23.9.1937, 4.

cheated the crowd out of the pathos and emotional experience it deserved. (Thus, to the complaints about the radio broadcasts were added complaints about the severity of the ceremonies and their purely military nature – often in the same papers that had reported how emotionally affected the crowds at the funeral had been.) Peroutka lamented “every single movement of the heart that was lost in this manner,”<sup>46</sup> and Klíma wrote: “Because of these very official considerations, the heart of the nation [...] could not speak out as it wanted to and was able to.”<sup>47</sup> Hence, the crowds had also been denied the chance to fully exhibit their own self-discipline; surely an even larger sample of the Czechoslovak nation would have been just as well-behaved. The self-disciplined crowds had given the lie to their own governors and shown themselves capable of preserving order better than those who were supposed to be ruling them. The Catholic paper “*Lidové listy*” asked:

Did they fear mobilization? Did you doubt the logistical powers of a nation that organizes congresses with hundreds of thousands of visitors as easily and flawlessly as, in other places, people throw a garden party? History would like to know the weakly soul, without faith or hope, that wanted to infect the Czechoslovak nation with a defeatist spirit!<sup>48</sup>

Several paradoxes were inherent in these criticisms. The crowd was said to represent both an affirmation of the nation’s current political course, and yet also a reproach to its rulers; both Masarykian simplicity and sobriety, and yet an honest, emotional grief that had not been allowed to express itself. And the crowds came to symbolize both a presence and an absence: both the popular multitudes of Czechoslovaks, and the way these masses had been turned away from the funeral. These contradictions were exploited perhaps most clearly in Communist interpretations of the funeral, which we will spend some time considering – not because the party was so important politically, but because Communist journalists were among the few who did not subscribe to the dominant figure of the self-disciplined, subdued, quiet crowd.

Thus, the front-page editorial of the Communist newspaper “*Rudé právo*” two days after the funeral depicted it as a “demonstration” of the “working people” (*pracující lid*) against fascism and reaction – represented not only by Nazi Germany, but also by the Communists’ political opponents in the Czechoslovak coalition government. This approach involved not only the standard Communist reinterpretation of Masaryk, emphasizing his pre-war “revolutionary” activity at the expense of his post-war “state-building” conservatism; it also involved a reinterpretation of the crowds. Against the silent, docile multitudes submerged in their own grief, which had quickly become the dominant rhetorical figure of discourse around the funeral, the Communists set up their own interpretation. In his front-page editorial in

<sup>46</sup> Peroutka: *Zástupové* 593 (cf. fn. 1).

<sup>47</sup> Klíma, Karel Zdeněk: *Za srdcem rekovým* [In Memory of a Warrior’s Heart]. In: *České slovo* 21.9.1937, 1.

<sup>48</sup> In *margině velikého dne* (cf. fn. 45). The paper alludes to the mass “*slety*” (sports festivals) of the patriotic Sokol gymnastics movement, as well as to the huge public gatherings of Catholic worshippers.

"Tvorba", Ladislav Štoll said that the funeral had called forth "a state of special mass thoughtfulness". Štoll's crowds were not only "zástupy"; they were "thinking gatherings of people."<sup>49</sup> Rather than evoking the disciplined "slety" (sports festivals) of the Sokols and the mass gatherings of Catholics to which "Lidové listy" alluded, he wanted to portray a mass of mobilized workers, a politically explosive force. "Die Rote Fahne", a German Communist paper, also avoided the figure of the silent crowd in describing the streets the morning of the funeral:

When a small group of Fascists appears [on the streets] Na příkopě and Národní třída, a rain of appropriately biting catcalls falls from the crowd. Lively discussions develop everywhere, and the people [das Volk] protest the admittance of these clear enemies of Masaryk's inheritance. Newspaper boys go along the lines of people; those selling "Rudé právo" and "Halonoviny" are especially zealous and successful. The waiting crowds pass the time in reading newspapers and discussions, but an exemplary discipline of the masses is to be remarked.<sup>50</sup>

In this context, the radio broadcasts telling people not to come to Prague were motivated by fear of these "thinking gatherings of people"; the forces of fascism – Štoll for one did not hesitate to identify his more moderate political opponents as agents of Berlin – were trying to "diminish the political meaning of this demonstration for Masarykian ideals."<sup>51</sup> The official severity of the funeral was seen, not as robbing the people of an emotional experience, but as an attempt to "cover up the elemental movement of the people that burst forth and grew at the first news of Masaryk's illness."<sup>52</sup>

As the funeral evolved, in Communist rhetoric, from a manifestation of the nation to a demonstration of the working class, the crowds grew. "Tvorba", "Rudé právo", and "Die Rote Fahne" all speak of "million-strong gatherings" or "masses."<sup>53</sup> What saved this from being a transparent exaggeration is that the emphasis subtly shifted from those who were actually at the funeral to those who would have come, if they hadn't been discouraged by those vague "official instructions" and "forces of reaction." The very criticism that people had been turned away from the funeral allowed the Communists to fill in these virtual gaps in the crowd with their own workers. "Millions – how many more of them would have come to Prague on this day [...]?" asked "Die Rote Fahne".<sup>54</sup> Štoll wrote:

the desires of the million-strong gatherings of people that walked in spirit behind Masaryk's coffin give, especially after the lessons of the previous years, a new character, a new content to the heritage of Masaryk's ideas [...].<sup>55</sup>

Now the crowds, rather than incarnating Masaryk's heritage, were transforming it.

<sup>49</sup> Štoll, Ladislav: O Masarykovu tradici [Masaryk's Tradition]. In: Tvorba 12 (1937) No. 39, 609.

<sup>50</sup> Die Massen lagern auf den Strassen. In: Die Rote Fahne 22.9.1937, 3.

<sup>51</sup> Štoll: O Masarykovu tradici 610 (cf. fn. 49). Italics in original.

<sup>52</sup> Demonstrace demokracie [A Demonstration of Democracy]. In: Rudé právo 23.9.1937, 1.

<sup>53</sup> There is a noticeable shift from the phrase "statisicové zástupy" (multitudes of hundreds of thousands) in most of the press to the implausible "milionové zástupy" of Communist papers. Cf. also the passage from "Die Rote Fahne" cited in footnote 10.

<sup>54</sup> Millionen gaben das Geleit (cf. fn. 10).

<sup>55</sup> Štoll: O Masarykovu tradici 610 (cf. fn. 49).

The Communist account of the funeral was not the reigning one, nor was it even very convincing. But it does illustrate all too nicely the ambiguities in the conception of the “national” multitudes at the funeral. There was, true, a surprising regularity in accounts of the crowd – its discipline, its resolution, its solemn acceptance and embodiment of Masaryk’s inheritance. But even if one could see it “as clearly as one can see a material object” (in Peroutka’s words), it still remained a crowd, whose meaning was ultimately open to interpretation. A year later Peroutka would glimpse his nation made visible, leading its government rather than being led, once again – this time during the Munich crisis:

The entire people of this nation has stood up spontaneously against the German threat. It wasn’t led by its government – rather, it led its government. Last Wednesday it poured into the streets of our capital and other cities, stormily offering its leaders its willingness to die for freedom. [...] Here is the real source of the national will, here is where deeds are dictated at decisive moments. These were the same multitudes we saw last year gathering in front of Masaryk’s coffin – just as resolved, just as idealistic.<sup>56</sup>

But no deeds were dictated “here”, in the crowds filling the streets. Peroutka’s faith in the power of the national will reminds us that the meaning of any multitude – no matter how resolved and idealistic – is ultimately unresolved, open to interpretation and appropriation by competing ideals, and seductive precisely for its indeterminacy. Some six months later, this time on the occasion of the German invasion, Milena Jesenská would echo the theme of silence, writing with her characteristic brand of steely-eyed sentimentalism: “The trams were full, as at other times. But the people were different. They stood and were silent. I have never heard so many people be silent.”<sup>57</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Peroutka, Ferdinand: V poslední chvíli [At the Last Moment]. In: *Přítomnost* 15 (1938) No. 39, 609.

<sup>57</sup> Praha, ráno 15. března 1939 [Prague, the Morning of March 15, 1939]. In: *Jesenská, Milena: Nad naše síly: Češi, Židé a Němci 1937-1939* [Beyond our Strength. Czechs, Jews and Germans, 1937-1939]. Ed. Václav Burian. Olomouc 1997, 180. The article was originally published in: *Přítomnost* 16 (1939) No. 12, 185, a week after Nazi Germany occupied Bohemia and Moravia.