

The new legacy of Marína Paulíny

Martin Hochel, who studies at Birkbeck College, University of London and works for EURACTIV Slovakia, examines the legacy of the vice-chairman of the Czechoslovak Red Cross Marína Paulíny. **Dr Thomas Lorman**, lecturer of Central European history at UCL SSEES, helped to edit and structure the article. The authors would like to thank Ms Zuzana Francová, the great-niece of Marína Paulíny, for providing access to the unique series of articles that were published in *Živena* magazine in 1947. They would also like to thank Mrs Elena Mallicková, from the Slovak Embassy, for suggesting the article.

Last year marked the 75th anniversary of the death of Marína Paulíny (1897-1945), the former deputy of the wartime Czechoslovak Red Cross in the UK.

Despite playing a key role as a cultural diplomat, entrepreneur, social worker and promoter of Czechoslovak tourism throughout her life, her contribution had been forgotten. Nevertheless, there has been a new interest in her life and legacy. As indicated by her great-niece Zuzana Francová, an art historian, 2020 saw her life being officially commemorated by the Slovak Ambassador and his Czech counterpart, as well as the Memorial Association for Free Czechoslovak Veterans.

The former Slovak Ambassador, HE Lubomír Reháč, helped to organise this and emphasised that Marína Paulíny was one of the many memorable Slovaks and Czechs who were active in Britain during the war. Her story was subsequently discussed in the Slovak media, including Radio and Television Slovakia, as well as Radio Slovakia International and other media outlets.

Although Marína Paulíny has, therefore, become recognised as a Slovak and Czechoslovak patriot, tourist entrepreneur, cultural diplomat and former deputy of the Red Cross, her other activities deserve attention, such as her support of Slovak students at the University of Birmingham during the war.

Marína Paulíny was born in the village of Slovenské Pravno to a proud and prominent Lutheran Slovak family. Her father left for the United States in 1905, and the family joined him shortly afterwards. After he died in 1916, Marína started working for the headquarters of the Czech National Federation and the Slovak League in America and, later on, for the Czechoslovak Consulate in New York.

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She travelled with the American Red Cross to Siberia, where she helped the Czechoslovak Legion on their way home. After returning to the newly established Czechoslovakia, she engaged in activities to promote tourism, supported the humanitarian 'Hoover mission', and assisted Alice Masaryková, the daughter of Czechoslovakia's first president, to establish the YWCA organisation in Czechoslovakia. In the following years, she served as the director of its Bratislava branch.

Although Viera Štetková, who wrote an extensive article about her legacy in 1947 for *Živena* magazine, claimed that her two homelands were Czechoslovakia and the United States, she certainly visited many countries in the interwar period including, possibly, the United Kingdom.

What is certain is that, shortly before the Second World War, she actively challenged the prevalent British attitude that Czechoslovakia's minorities were badly treated, an allegation that was used to argue that the Sudetensland should be incorporated into Nazi Germany.

To resist this propaganda, she accompanied foreign visitors and journalists across Czechoslovakia to demonstrate that claims of minority abuses were unjustified. Furthermore, she introduced people such as Robert H. Bruce Lockhart, Storm Jameson, and Kingsley Martin to Czechoslovak society.

After the war broke out, she left for the UK, which she reached after travelling through Hungary, Yugoslavia, and France. Štetková tended to focus on her extraordinary efforts as the deputy of the Czechoslovak Red Cross, as do other accounts of her time in London. For example, she is said to have caught the interest of many notable persons, including the Archbishop of Canterbury and the 'London circles of prominent social and political figures'.

Nevertheless, she was also able to maintain close contacts with the Czechoslovak representation in London, notably with Hana Benešová and Alice Masaryková. Shortly after the war ended, on October 5 1945, she was flying back to Czechoslovakia when the plane crashed seconds after take-off from Blackbushe Airport in Hampshire. She is buried at Brookwood cemetery along with the other 22 passengers and crew.

One of the many activities that Marína is now admired for was her support of Czechoslovak students in the United Kingdom. Specifically, in the collection of letters that was published by *Živena*, it is evident that she kept in touch with around 10 Czechoslovak students, who went to the University of Birmingham shortly after finishing their schooling in Czechoslovakia in 1939. They were in Birmingham to attend a 'foundation year' during which they chose their future specialisation and were then trapped in the United Kingdom due to the outbreak of the war.

In these students' letters from 1940-41, one recalls this experience by explaining that instead of having a fixed timetable, they attended lectures in the offices or private rooms of the professors, who read and lectured to them.

Marína was able to help the students since she had already established close ties with some of the professors

who were interested in Czechoslovakia. For example, Professor Stevens is mentioned in one of the letters to have created a Slavic club, or "Slavic cercle" [sic], at the University of Birmingham.

The vice-chancellor of the University, Professor Raymond Priestley, likewise showed great sympathy towards the idea of having further students from Czechoslovakia come to Birmingham. In another letter, one student warmly thanked Marína and acknowledged her efforts to help them maintain their wellbeing, for example by securing funding.

This legacy of supporting Slovak and Czech students during their studies in the UK is just as critical now in the age of Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Marína Paulíny's support for students, as well as the assistance she provided for veterans and prisoners through the Red Cross, were all important activities that would help renew Czechoslovakia after World War II.

Yet, in Czechoslovakia, she was barely remembered as she did not conform to the new ideals of the post-war era and the then Communist dictatorship. Viera Štetková, the niece of Milan Hodža who wrote a rare article



Slovak Embassy.

To commemorate the anniversary of the birth of Marína Paulíny on March 28, the Slovak Ambassador to Britain, HE Róbert Ondrejčák, visited her grave at Brookwood Cemetery. The image above shows the ambassador (right) at the grave, with Gerry Manolas, chair of the Memorial Association for Free Czechoslovak Veterans (centre) and Col Vladimír Stolarík, Slovak Defence Attaché (left).

in 1947, admitted that Marína Paulíny was almost unknown to the public in Czechoslovakia a mere two years after the war. Indeed, she was not commemorated in any way for decades and the inspiration that could have been found by considering, for example, her support for students, was missing.

Now, after 75 years, the memory and legacy of Marína Paulíny have come back to life. In this setting, a chapter called *A Life Dedicated to the Nation* and written by Zuzana Francová for a book, as well as the activities of the Slovak and Czech Embassies in London, have brought her remarkable life to wider attention.

One can only wonder about the stories that have yet to be revealed of the Slovaks and Czechs buried in the United Kingdom and what relevance their lives and their legacies may have for us today.

<https://tinyurl.com/v5t9st6d>

