

A STATUE FOR THE FUTURE

By Julian Wilde

Professor: Good evening and welcome to this Zoom meeting arranged for this summer's new graduates of the School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies here at the University of London.

You will all know that an anonymous former Czechoslovak student of the School has provided an exceptionally generous gift of £100,000 to pay for a statue at the School's library in Taviton Street.



The donor has set only two conditions. Firstly all current Governors, staff and students here at the School in Bloomsbury must be consulted about the type of statue and, secondly, the statue must link the Czech and Slovak lands and people, present or future, with the United Kingdom.

The President of the University Council has asked me, as the Governor responsible for undergraduate affairs, to gather the views of you new Graduates about this statue.

Statues are of course a hot topic at present, particularly in Bristol where the figure of Edward Colston was thrown into the harbour last summer because of his links with slavery and at Oriel College, Oxford where the statue of the colonialist Cecil Rhodes, a notably substantial benefactor, is the subject of impassioned debate.

It is significant, I feel, so many students have chosen to attend this voluntary meeting – practically the whole cohort.

Our virtual Zoom debate is different from those in Bristol and Oxford: we are not considering the future of an existing statue: we are considering a new statue and, happily, we have the money.

So, let's hear what our "Generation Z" has to say.....just put up your hand if you want to speakand leave your mikes on, so we can hear and see the reactions of others to what is being said.

Let's start with Elizabeth who is in Blackburn, Lancashire.

Elizabeth: Thank you, Professor. I want to say straightaway that I don't think it should be a statue of a politician or national leader.

Here in Blackburn we have an imposing statue of William Gladstone, four times Prime Minister during Queen Victoria's reign - it's been here since 1899. It was paid for by public subscription.



but the cotton workers in Blackburn admired for the extension of the vote for working statue.

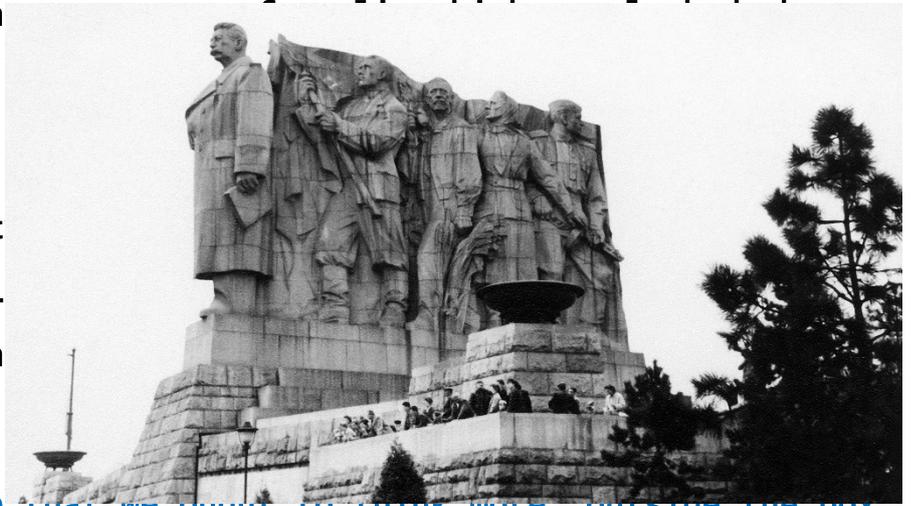
Town Council is actively debating whether be removed; his family fortune had come directly from the slave trade. Here in Blackburn Gladstone's

statue, I think it's almost certain that, at some point, there will be opposition to the presence of the statue.

Eliška: That's spot on.....I want to tell everyone that we have exactly the same difficulty in the Czech Republic with statues of political figures.

All Czechs, now and always, have had respect for the founder of our country President TG Masaryk, but in the 30 years after his death many much-loved statues of him were torn down by the Nazis, restored after world war II, and then removed again by the Russian-backed communists.

Confusingly, the huge mon
Vltava on Letná Hill for
troyed..... and do you know
Since then the Prague cit
what should replace him ...
to decide: the space is n
So for me, defo no politi



Antonin: It seems to me that we ought to think more outside the box .
what about having a statue which does not portray any particular human
form?

When I came from Kosiče to SSEES to study, I was impressed here in Lon-
don by statues which convey an idea - for example the figure of Lady
Justice with sword and with scales on the Old Bailey law courts.



Princess Diana Fountain in Hyde
statue for the 21st century. The
form and shape symbolising and con-
openness and inclusivity of Diana.
d shape portrays more than the
y unveiled at Kensington Palace by
e characteristics.

brood as part of my degree course
I went to see the famous statue
of Sir Nicholas Winton on platform 1 at Prague Main Station.

I can see from all the nodding heads on my screen that many other stu-
dents have been there too. I loved it - simple and poignant. But there
is another statue, on the same theme and on the same station, not in hu-
man form, which appealed to me even more. It was...

Roxy: Sorry to interrupt, but I was with you on that day, Maria, and we both started crying when we saw it.



It's called the Farewell Memorial and is in the form of a train door from 1939. The imprints of outstretched hands of children are etched on one side of the glass and those of their parents on the other. Can you imagine how desperately sad that moment must have been?

The Winton children wanted their parents' terrible dilemma to be remembered and they paid for the statue four years ago. I think that we must look for a similar creativity.

Pavel: I think it's important too that we look closely at the conditions for this statue. Have you noticed that the word "past" is not in the conditions? I am sure it is deliberate omission and makes the task more challenging. How can a physical statue link the people of Czech and Slovak lands with the UK in the present or in future years?

Well, last August I visited the Václav Havel Foundation in my home city of Prague to listen to a talk by its director Michael Žantovský who was the Czech ambassador here in London for six years. He was inspiring and forward-looking and I came away thinking how we must always value and promote the freedom of speech and thought which Havel championed. That's what the Havel Foundation tries to do.

So, I like Antonin's idea of thinking outside the box. The Havel Foundation is like a living and evolving statue, constantly reminding us of the principles which Havel embraced as society moves forward.

Magdaléna: I admire the way we are expanding our thinking and I want just to add a feminist perspective to our discussions. I can see my friends smiling on the screen...they know what's coming. But please hear me out.....campaigning Magdaléna!

As a little girl I lived on a remote rural farm in southern Moravia. I remember the excitement of going with my parents and grandparents on my first visit to Prague, a special expedition for my 7th birthday.

We climbed the Petřín Tower, had mega ice creams, went on a swan pedalo on the river and also visited the National Museum. On the main staircase there my granddad pointed out, with pride, the busts of 48 distinguished Czechoslovak people.

I just said to my grandma “Only two women.....it’s not fair.”

Seven years later my Gymnázium had a school trip to England and on our itinerary were Oxford and its university. We went to the Museum of Natural History where there are 28 statues of renowned scientists and philosophers and wave your hands now, if you know what I am going to sayyes, a blizzard of hands on my screen....all of them are men. I was disappointed, but not, this time, surprised.



I’ll shut up now, but I do feel strongly that in 2021 women and men should be considered equally in our discussions about this new statue, whatever form it might take.

Professor: Thanks, Magdaléna, and thanks to everyone who has contributed so far with some thought-provoking viewpoints. May I just remind everyone of the fact that our anonymous donor, herself or himself, is a graduate of this particular school. How far should we take that into consideration in our debate ?

If we were a Medical school, for instance, a statue of Hippocrates would be an uncontroversial choice , or at a School of Philosophy a statue of Aristotle or Plato would not cause opposition, either now or in the future, but they would not be specific or personal to the place. So what

about us here at the school ? Can we, should we, link the statue to our school ?

Petr, you next, please

Petr: Thank you, a link would be good, yes, but I just want to say that it's also important that we do not make the mistake of being too local.



In Bratislava where I live there is an amusing statue which the tourists love. Šöner Náci was the grandson of a famous clown who inspired him to bring happiness to the streets and people of the city. He walked around the Old Town for decades in the last century in top hat and tails, greeting people in several languages. But in my view that statue, popular though it is, only has a meaning in Bratislava - it is too local and too specific.

Harriet : I have a suggestion which picks up on several of the points which have been made this evening.

My thesis this year investigated the motivation of those largely unsung Brits involved in the evacuation of Czechoslovaks who were being arrested by the Nazis in 1939.

Doreen Warriner is of particular interest to me because she was an academic at Oxford University who travelled to Prague in October 1938 to work with the British Committee for Refugees in Prague

My research has been helped by the recent publication of her biography, written by her nephew Henry, from which it is clear



that it was in fact Doreen Warriner who alerted the attention of Nicholas Winton to the plight of refugee children.

In the sixth months before she had to flee the Gestapo in Prague and return to the UK she personally organised the escape and evacuation of hundreds of adult Czechoslovaks, complementing Winton's work with children.

I apologise if this seems a bit of a history lesson and I will not give any more details just now about Doreen – a remarkable free-spirited woman. But one last crucial fact; after the war she was appointed to a lectureship here at our very own school where she worked until her retirement in 1966.

Professor: And your suggestion is then, Harriet, a statue of Doreen Warriner?

Harriet: Yes, Professor, but the statue will be a living statue for the next fifty years, a memorial for the future.

Its human form each year will be a pair of students from our school, one Czech or Slovak and one Brit who will be the winners of a travel competition for a scholarship bearing Doreen Warriner's name. Each student will win £1000 to enable them travel together both in the Czech or Slovak lands and the UK.

The £100,000, if invested wisely, will gather interest and should last throughout the 21st century. The winning students will, I believe, be a living, continuing force for international understanding and will, as adults, top up the funds.

Does my idea meet with the approval of the new graduates at this Zoom meeting? It's time for jazz hands.....and yessssssssssss..... it certainly does.

Will our anonymous donor like the idea of living statues bearing Doreen Warriner's name throughout the 21st century ?

surely the answer will again be yessssssssss.