

# Karel Čapek and I

Karel Čapek and I, written by David Short, is a partial memoir, created to mark – if with limited relevance he notes – the centenary of Čapek's *Letters from England*.

**K**arel Čapek has slipped into my life on a variety of odd occasions, often quite tangentially...

I would describe the first as more of a near-miss. That was back in, at a guess, 1959. There had just been something by or about Čapek on the BBC Home Service, which my father and I had been listening to, but the nature of which I have quite forgotten.

After it, my father suddenly said: "I once met his brother." But he did not mean Jozef; he had apparently made the false assumption that any famous Čapek must be related to Karel, and the man he had actually met was Norbert [Fabián] Čapek (1870-1942), the founder of Czechoslovak Unitarianism.<sup>2</sup> Norbert had visited Manchester College Oxford before the war, when my father was himself training for the Unitarian ministry.

Remaining puzzled by this link, and having acquired reasonable Czech in the Dept of Czech for Foreigners at the Philosophical Faculty of Prague University (where I was nominally a student from October 1966 to December 1971), and there being, back then, no means of checking such things via the World Wide Web, I visited Unitaria (Anenská 5, Prague 1) sometime in 1967 and had my suspicions confirmed that there really was no link between Norbert and Karel Čapek.

After reading, while still at school, some Čapek books that were in my father's library, including Paul Selver's translation of *Letters from England*, published in 1938, I had no further contact with anything Czech because my years of study at the University of Birmingham (1961-66) were taken up entirely by Russian, French and Serbo-Croat (as it then was). One of my courses there was 'Comparative Slavonic Philology', which I took to like a duck to water and seriously considered making a career of it.

Already having Russian and Serbo-Croat to represent East and South Slavonic, I needed a West Slavonic language and opted, in part thanks to my family's tenuous links with Czechoslovakia, for Czech. I applied for a British Council scholarship for 1966-67, which was granted, then renewed twice,



**My earliest recollections... they're sort of just random images."**

taking me up to 1969.

That period included the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968, which completely killed off any interest I might still have had in Russian, and I had also lost my Serbo-Croat by then. My sole interests were now Czech. In January 1969, at the massive student demo in Prague on the day when Jan Palach died, I met a girl, Libuše Cimrová, who was to become my wife in November of that year.

My new mother-in-law was a great Čapekophile: she had two almost complete sets of Karel's works. The explanation lies largely in the fact that she came from Malé Svatoňovice, the place where Karel was born and, after a break, lived for a time. Whenever we stayed, in later years, with my parents-in-law, in Nový Hrádek in the Eagle Mountains (Orlické hory), we would visit my wife's aunt in Malé Svatoňovice and another one in Havlovice, a stone's throw from Úpice, where Karel Čapek also lived for a time.

Readers with an interest in Čapek will doubtless be aware not only of the Čapek museum in Malé Svatoňovice, but also of the statue of the Čapek brothers erected nearby in 1969 with its clear allusion to Karel as author of *The Gardener's Year* (*Zahradníkův rok*). Three branches of my wife's family still live in Malé Svatoňovice.

At some time in my Prague years – I really forget when exactly – I was in the large Československý spisovatel bookshop on Národní třída, when I spotted something that I found distinctly odd: in a shop filled almost exclusively with books from Czech and Slovak publishers, one item published in England caught my eye. This was one of the later reprints of Karel Čapek's *Fairy Tales*, with *One Extra* as a *Makeweight* by Joseph

Čapek, first published in 1934 by George Allen & Unwin.

Presumably it was from imported stock that had survived the Communist takeover of the country in 1948 and been found unobjectionable. I bought a copy, but, meaning to check on it as I write these notes, I found that it has disappeared from its place on my Čapek shelf. Probably borrowed and not returned... That shelf does still hold my full set of Čapek's travelogues, bought when Československý spisovatel republished them in 1970, plus *Anglické listy* in a 1950s reprint of the wartime Allen & Unwin edition, in the original Czech, though I cannot recall when or where I had acquired that one – the trigger for this 'memoir'.

I remained a student of Czech language, literature and life, surviving on Czechoslovak scholarships and some income as a freelance translator, until December 1972, then in January 1973 began my career as a teacher of Czech and Slovak at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES), University of London (now absorbed by University College London).

At SSEES things were very well organised from my perspective. Although my formal job title referred to 'Czech and Slovak language and literature', we were two: I took care of all the language courses and language and linguistic research, while the late Robert Pynsent did likewise for the two literatures. My first encounter with Pynsent, whom I had never met or heard of in Czechoslovakia, though I learned in retrospect that our paths might have crossed at any number of times

and places, was at my job interview, in July 1972.

He, having been himself appointed only nine months or so previously, was on the panel and asked most of the questions. One concerned my knowledge of Czech literature and what authors I had read. Proudly, I was able to say how much Čapek that included. Near-disaster: I wasn't to know that Pynsent heartily despised Čapek, though I have never fully understood why, and thereafter it was a subject that I studiously avoided.

Ten years later, to be precise in January 1982, and outside of work, my family and I were returning from a Christmas break in Nový Hrádek when the pilot of our Czechoslovak Airlines plane on the shared CSA-British Airways Prague-London service was instructed, somewhere over Southend, to turn back because Heathrow was closed. We were deposited in Brussels and taken to the local Novotel for the night.

The passengers were split up for eating purposes according to whether their tickets were issued by BA (a very posh buffet) or CSA (a large plate of rice with some sauce, in a different room). We counted our blessings at being in the former group with a tiny handful of other Brits. One person overheard us speaking Czech and came to join us. To cut a long story short, he promised that when his wife collected him next day at Heathrow to go home to Gerrards Cross, she would gladly make the detour to deliver me and my family to Windsor. These were Radoslav and Gwenda Vočadlo, with whom we remained friends ever after, though Rado sadly died a few years ago.

Two things transpired from this new acquaintanceship: 1. Their daughter Karolina was going to start the Czech and Slovak course at SSEES that autumn; 2. Rado was the son of Otakar Vočadlo, who had been the first or one of the first teachers of Czech at SSEES around 1918 and, importantly, the author of *Anglické listy Karla Čapka* (Prague: Academia, 1975), a book which I then acquired at the earliest opportunity.

Its title is a misleading pun: Karel Čapek's 'English letters' of the title are not the *Anglické listy* travelogue that anyone might assume at first sight, but his correspondence, in connection with the trip to England, with Vočadlo (who accompanied him) and with such as HG Wells and GK Chesterton. The book is, then, one of several volumes of Čapek's correspondence, and is fully edited.

It has not been translated into English, unlike *Věře Hružové. Dopisy ze zásuvky* (To Věra Hružová. *Letters from a [bottom] drawer*), which I recently translated at the request of Věra's granddaughter and which is still seeking a publisher. Incidentally, these 'letters' include two postcards, from Kyleakin and Keswick, sent while Čapek was on his tour of Britain, so are actual letters from England in the common sense.

My new job at SSEES had called for so much in the creation of relevant new language courses, looking after students and so on, that literature in general and Čapek in particular rather fell by the wayside.

However, in December 1986, a conference was organised at SSEES to mark the approaching 50th anniversary of the death of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, first president of Czechoslovakia, who had also been behind the birth of Czechoslovak studies at King's College in 1915. I was naturally expected to give a paper at the conference and it had to have a language bias. And so arose my first public contribution on a Čapekian theme: 'Linguistic authenticity in Karel Čapek's *Conversations with TGM*'.<sup>5</sup> The edition I used for the purpose was another item published during the war by Allen & Unwin for



Image from the play *R.U.R.* by Karel Čapek, performed in 1924 at the Comédie des Champs-Élysées, Paris.

the émigré market and/or for smuggling into the wartime Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia.<sup>6</sup>

My final professional brushes with Karel Čapek are all to do with robots. In 2003, the entry robot in an article written for the first issue of the then new journal *Central Europe* has this word as the fourth Czech loanword in English (following howitzer, pistol and polka).<sup>7</sup>

There can be no reader of this 'memoir' who does not know of the word's Czech origin in Čapek's play *R.U.R.* and of its unprecedented borrowing into almost every language in the world. Then in 2010 I was asked to translate *R.U.R.* – my first of only two book-length translations of a work by Čapek.<sup>8</sup> It also contains my introduction, '*Čapek and robots: some ninetieth birthday observations*', which places both the key word and the play in a fairly detailed historical context.

I have referred passim to translation. In their day, several translations of works by Čapek were produced by Dora Pound (whom Google cannot even find), many by the much

more widely known Paul Selver (1888–1970), who inter alia translated *Letters from England*, and the bulk by Marie, née Isakovicsová (1897–1972) and Robert Weatherall (1899–1973), that is, considerably more than are mentioned at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie\\_and\\_Robert\\_Weatherall](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marie_and_Robert_Weatherall).<sup>9</sup> Besides *R.U.R.* and the Hružová letters, I myself, at the time of writing, am about 1/10th of the way through *Krakatit*, which I have undertaken for Jantar, my London publisher. Unlike previous translations of the same work, mine will be called *Krakatite*, by relevant association with dynamite.

I have said little here about the book whose centenary these notes serve to mark. But it is thanks to my father's possession of *Letters from England* and the period interest in the Čapeks generally that I have always known how to pronounce their surname. I am still apt to scream every time someone says 'Čapek' or even 'Kaypeck' and yesterday [01.04.2024] I even chanced on, but didn't open, a web page that called him 'Čapek'. All readers of the *BCS Review* must surely be familiar with the work, whether as *Anglické listy* or as *Letters from England* and I am not one for lit crit. However, I have to say that the more grudging side of me has always felt slightly niggled by the established title of the English-language version.

And on two grounds: 1. The contents are not letters sensu stricto (unlike Čapek's real *anglické listy* analysed by Vočadlo), though, even without addressees, they are nicely chatty descriptions of places, and some people, that could have been put in letters; 2. Like so many Czechs (and some, but by no means all other Europeans) Čapek has used 'England' actually to mean Britain – there are after all sections devoted to Scotland and North Wales, and even one small piece on Ireland, to which he hadn't made it physically.

His guilt here is obviously not as extreme as that of the person who once told me, in Czech: 'I went to England in the summer, spent almost the whole time in Edinburgh'. The double ambiguity of both *listy* and *anglické* is unfortunate, but all future generations are going to have to live with the irksome English title of the collection.

<sup>1</sup>My ad hoc translation of the opening lines of Čapek's *Hovory s T.G. Masarykem* (*Talks with TGM*).

<sup>2</sup>See [https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norbert\\_Fabi%C3%A1n\\_%C4%8Capek](https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norbert_Fabi%C3%A1n_%C4%8Capek); the equivalent page in English, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norbert\\_%C4%8Capek](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norbert_%C4%8Capek) is rather less substantial.

<sup>3</sup>That is, *Devatero pohádek a ještě jedna od Josefa Čapka jako převažek*, first published in 1932. Note how soon the English translation appeared after the original.

<sup>4</sup>*Prague: Primus*, 2000, comprehensively edited by Jiří Opelík. A rather clunky French translation has been published: my own, into English, with my own as well as Opelík's is still seeking a publisher.

<sup>5</sup>Duly published in Harry Hanak (ed.): T.G.Masaryk, 1850-1937, Vol 3, Statesman and Cultural Force. London: Macmillan, 1989 [1990], pp.178-99 (Studies in Russia and Eastern Europe).

<sup>6</sup>*Karel Čapek: Hovory s T. G. Masarykem* (*President Masaryk Tells his Story*), London: George Allen & Unwin, 1941, published, tellingly, 'following the recognition of the Czech Government in London and the formation of a Czech Army in Great Britain'.

<sup>7</sup>'The broader Czech (and Slovak) contribution to the English lexicon.' *Central Europe*, Vol 1, No 1, May 2003, pp 19-39.

<sup>8</sup>*Karel Čapek: Rossum's Universal Robots*. London: Hesperus Press, 2011 (Modern Voices series). In this connection I also gave a brief paper at the British Academy's season on 'Robotics, AI and Society' in 2017 (?), when sections of the play, in this Hesperus edition, were performed, book-in-hand.

<sup>9</sup>For an overview of their impressive contribution to making Čapek accessible to the non-Czech-speaking reader see *George J. Kovtun: Czech and Slovak Literature in English: A Bibliography*, 2nd edition, Washington DC: Library of Congress, 1988, pp 48-55 (also contains all other translations, by others, up to 1988). To add relevance to this reference, note that the illustration on the cover is Čapek's drawing 'English readers' from *Anglické listy/Letters from England*.