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G R E A T C Z E C H O - S L O V A K S

DR. MIROSLAV TYRŠ

THE FOUNDER OF THE SOKOL-UNION

by

K A R E L D O M O R Á Z E K

P R A G U E

Published by

the Czecho-Slovakian Foreigners' Office

1920

Livingstone Porter
Kostelec u Štípy, Mo
October 4, 1932

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DR. MIROSLAV TYRŠ.

The thirtieth anniversary of Tyrš's death (August 8th, 1914) could not be celebrated in Czechoslovakia as intended.

War had just broken out, and the Sokols were compelled to leave their country to fight against those with whom, in peace time, they would have honoured amicably the memory of the founder of the Sokol-union. Years have passed since August 1914. The Habsburg-Roman combination which intended to exterminate the whole Czecho-Slovakian Nation had to recognise that there can be no victory in a fight against Justice and that the dream of Tyrš – Freedom of Czecho-Slovakia – had been realised.

Reality proved many of his sentences by which he encouraged his nation to intense work and true life; „The destiny of nations never has been decided on battle-fields; it was already determined before the fight. No nation in the world, even if small, can perish so long as it is strong and valorous. Only decayed nations perish.“ – „No external power, no material or brutal force can destroy a nation. As long as it follows the path of truth and public progress, it is invulnerable as a sunbeam, and perfidy and violences are powerless against it.“

The persecution of the Czech people became more and more brutal, yet hatred against Austria entertained common discipline. All were united in hate and in love. Abroad in Russia, France and Italy a new generation of God's warriors arose, ready to struggle and die for the freedom of those who are „at home“. They never doubted but that victory would come to those whose cause was right.

Tyrš said: „Personality is nothing – totality is all.“ „The fewer we are, the more reliance will be placed on every man.“ Let us prepare ourselves for a better future by exercising our body and our mind.“

After a half century Tyrš's plans were known in the widest circles of the Czecho-Slovakian people. The Sokols became the representatives of the common desire for national freedom and the promise of better times in the future. The Sokols began with gymnastic exercises and soon concentrated around themselves the greater part of national society. Oppressing conditions did not permit them to free the country by an act of common revolt; yet

they always prepared for the victory of our fight, and prepared well. The meetings of the Sokols soon became national festivals. Their educational influence was very large. It is an incontestable historical fact that the Sokol-union, which has been founded by scholars and humanitarians (Tyrš, Fügner, both Gregers, Tonner, Černý, Náprstek), has been accepted with enthusiasm by the large masses of our people, chiefly on account of its democratic and national principles. Yet, numbers alone did not raise the level of the union. Intelligent people remained outside the organisation, on the plea that its activity was not serious enough.

They did not take part in the activities of the union and went even so far as to see in the Sokol-union remains of past romantic times. Yet the Sokol idea was too strong, too full of life, and therefore, could not perish. Having taken root in the people, it gathered strength and grew with it, winning finally even those who had turned away from it at the beginning. The idea of Tyrš led our people in its struggle for freedom, taught it the duty of the present hour and the importance of order and discipline in moments of sorrow or joy. Common hate against the oppressors united the whole nation and prepared it for the decisive hour. The discipline, admired in our people during the revolution, was but the result of Tyrš's work.

When in the October days of 1918 Sokols, workmen and soldiers began to „keep order“ in the streets they met a people voluntarily disciplined. Wherever they appeared, obedience was assured. Our people were too well prepared for this hour, they esteemed too highly this historical day to stain it by revenge. Even this was the result of Tyrš's educational work. History will show that Tyrš also largely influenced our dear legionaries.

Therefore, I dare say that Tyrš was one of those who assured the freedom of our nation. How often have we cited and read his article „Our task, direction and aim“ (written in 1870) from which are taken the following sentences: "In a healthy nation there is no room for treason, indifference and cowardice; totality is higher valued than parts, the interest of the nation is more esteemed than the interest of individuals. In such a nation no one will betray the common cause; all will persevere bravely to the end. Only a healthy nation is able to defend itself. A sword in each hand! Military organisation! Yet, above all, able-bodied and brave men! He who wants to insure the defence of his nation during war, must preserve it from corruption during peace. Let it be the guiding star of all our doings, the religion and the highest consecration of all our life."

Thousands of warriors have given up their lives for their country, yet the commandment of Tyrš „to insure the defence of our nation“ was abandoned for a still higher aim: to insure our freedom.

In July 1860 Miroslav Tyrš was proclaimed doctor of philosophy at the University of Prague. 28 years old (he was born at Děčín on September 17th 1832), he was, up to this time, hardly known in Prague society; yet, soon afterwards, he began to intervene in the awakening of national life. Having been refused admittance as a lecturer at the University of Prague, he decided to become a writer.

On February 16th 1862 he founded the Sokol-Union in Prague. Together with Jindřich Fügner, a humanitarian of high intellectual culture and his best friend, he began to propagate democratic ideas and to work restlessly on their realisation. Having founded a gymnastic club – seemingly but a trifling enterprise – Tyrš knew already at that time that he was preparing a work which would take deep roots in the whole country.

He had no predecessor. Ideas and organisation, from the beginning to the end, was his own work. He had studied history and knew how important a part health plays in the evolution of a people. Darwin, „the immortal Briton“, had persuaded him of the necessity of the „struggle for life“, a fight in which health is the best arm. Bodily health and strength are the first conditions of courage, perseverance and readiness for action: they are therefore indispensable for the preservation of the species. In order to suppress brutality and violence, strength must be mastered by discipline.

„Voluntary discipline ennobles the heart, educates firm characters, and disposes us to self-denial and self-sacrifice, when common interest demands it.“

Tyrš was deeply convinced of the connexion between morality and physical health. If Karel Slavoj Amerling has said, „every Czech must be twice as diligent than foreigners are“ (Tyrš has a similar sentence: „Between all nations of the world, the Czech nation needs it most to concentrate its strength on self-defence.“); if Purkyně has shown us the importance of independent scientific and artistic culture, Tyrš has been the first not only in our country to teach that morality is of the highest value for the future evolution of a nation. Being convinced of the connexion between health and morality (the history of Hussitism had given him proofs of it), he wished not only to prepare his nation for the brutal and material struggle for life, but he also desired to

show to his people the ways leading to true life and common progress. If you read the critics and speeches of this „Darwinist“, you will be often surprised on finding how firm he is in the belief that only the highest justice and the victory of the sublime principles of freedom, equality and brotherhood can smooth the cruelty of the struggle for life, the necessity of which he never doubted. In his speech at the monument of Fügner (1869) this enthusiastic idealist declared that „the Czechs will be the first members of this new church which once will rule the whole world.“ Always and everywhere he condemned selfishness. Knowing the difference between immoral egotism and the morally admissible feelings of pride, of self-consciousness and of the desire of individual freedom, he became the propagator of brotherhood in the most human sense of the word . . . How far he got before his time!

In his article „The Philosophy of history“ (Rieger's Encyclopaedia 3rd volume) Tyrš says: „He, whose efforts aim at mastering nature by industrious life and at freeing nations in order to further their evolution and at enabling them to join freely other civilised nations – that is our brother. Every one who knows the high value of national freedom must strive for it. Patriotism must direct all our activity.

Tyrš said: „To be free in society means to acknowledge its laws and to subordinate one self to them willingly.“ „Personal interests have to be subordinated to the common ones and vanity must be suppressed,“ Common interest and the public weal have to be the aim of all our efforts. The same qualities which once assured the victory of our forefathers – industry, moral virtue, valour – also became the aim of Tyrš's endeavours in the Sokol-union. Only an ethical and sublime nation can be persuaded of the necessity of progress and eternal evolution . . . „Rarely is a situation so perfect that amelioration is impossible.“ Only an ethical nation feels an aversion against lazy contentment; only in such a country „every man is ready to confess his errors and to find pleasure in the inventions and the progress of other men, just as though they were his own!

According to Tyrš, perfect and methodical gymnastic exercises are the best way to high national aims, such as: valour, constant fresh strength, physical, intellectual and moral health. Tyrš experienced on himself the beneficent influence of gymnastics. Being the son of a delicate mother, he began to practice gymnastics on his doctor's advice and trained himself until he actually became stout. In founding the first Sokol-union, he thought of a brotherhood of generous men devoted to the common cause

and convinced of the equality of all. In his words, „the Sokol-union has been founded for all classes.“

If the physical education of the working-classes is well organised, so that the leisure hours are employed in rational gymnastic exercises, even national economy profits by it. Physical and intellectual ability to work suffers by every illness; it decreases by want of vigour. „If in individuals this decrease is negligible, it is nevertheless very considerable in the mass. It amounts to thousands or millions of men and constitutes a great and irreparable loss in national economy. This economical side of the question is so serious and commonly acknowledged that it is able to resist all prejudices.“ (1877.) Tyrš always laid stress upon the equality of all men – as far as they deserve it as moral beings. – His endeavours in the Sokol-union also aimed at the reconciliation of social contrasts.

He desired to introduce beauty and harmony into education. Greece had furnished him with models of physical beauty. He surely thought of Greek gymnastical education when he wrote: „There is an inner connexion between the elegance of movements and a good structure of the body. Every harmonious movement requires control of the whole body, not only of the one part by which the movement is being executed. As each control of the body is connected with the activity of the muscles, and as each harmonious movement requires constant control, therefore constant exertion of the muscles, it results that strength, perseverance and an elastic dexterity are built up without which strength resembles to brute force. Beauty, strength, grace and usefulness do not preclude one another (the Greeks can serve as models); on the contrary, usefulness and strength profit by beauty and grace.“ Mere exercises on the bar do not content the artistic taste. The Sokol-idea means much more than mastership in gymnastic exhibitions. Calling gymnastics a spacious art, Tyrš shows that every movement must have its aesthetic value, Dress instruments and buildings must be estimated by the same standard. In his article „Gymnastic exercises and Aesthetics“ (1873), he laid stress upon aesthetic education and uttered the hope that the Sokol-idea would animate artistic creation.

According to Tyrš gymnastic halls have to be centres of national education. This programme assures to the Sokol-organisation an honourable place in Czech social life. Its responsibility grows from day to day. The Czech people have to keep to – day their freedom and become a nation that is just to itself and unto others. Tyrš desired to see all Slavs united in the struggle for a sublime cause.

He firmly believed in their mission to propagate the principles of freedom, equality and brotherhood among men. His idealism was powerful and confident. He neither despaired nor gave up his work, even when his feeble body refused to bear the strain of his duties. Tyrš was convinced of the high importance and everlasting value of work and persevering activity. He was always on his guard to keep the Sokol-organisation from corruption and inner discord. — The original gymnastic methods and the pithy terminology of the Sokols are his own work. He edited a journal and watched over the evolution of the organisation. How happy he was in 1882, on the occasion of a Jubilee festival of the Sokol-union in Prague when leading 76 unions with 1600 members each — hailing from Bohemia, Moravia, America, Lublaň, Zagreb and Vienna — to the island of Střelecký where thousands of rejoicing people had assembled! Tyrš's articles, published soon afterwards in the „Sokol“, show the contentment of the happy leader. He has not worked in vain! The idea for the realisation of which he has sacrificed many a day and night will live in the future!

Seeing his „cause standing on firm foundations“, he decided to concentrate his forces on a new aim.

He invariably paid great attention to aesthetics. Thanks to his profound studies and long travel in foreign countries he was thoroughly versed in aesthetical matters. Having been a second time refused admission to the University of Prague by a clique of German professors, he became a lecturer on the history of art at the Czech polytechnic school. Although in the years 1860 to 1870 he wrote but articles on Sokol-matters, he published in 1870 many critical and aesthetic essays on the conditions of evolution and success in artistic creation (1873), a translation from Taine (1873); on the laws of composition in plastic arts 1873 (unfinished); on the reform of Czech artistic life (1879), and on the law of convergence in artistic creation (1880). In these essays he treated the genesis of the works of art which appeared to him the original expression of national creative forces. According to Tyrš it is every nation's duty to care for the education of its artists and its public. (This educational aim also led to his activity in „Umělecká Beseda“, an artististic association.) Art must be national and characteristic. He studied the laws of genius, and showed how to understand works of art. He laid down five conditions of beauty, yet, above all, he valued the characteristic qualities of artistic works.

He was the first Czech critic of his time and fully conscious of the seriousness of his task. (His articles were published in the journals: Osvěta, Světozor, Nár. Listy, and Zlatá Praha.) Having

become the champion and defender of young Czech sculptors and painters, he enthusiastically propagated the work of Josef Manes („We let him nearly perish during his life; let us keep at least his beautiful work, left to such ungrateful heirs!“), of Jaroslav Čermák, of Myslbek, Šnirch, Ženíšek and Brožík. He was asked to give his opinion on artistic juries and to act as Critic on art expositions. He paid great attention to the artistic decoration of the National Theatre, rose against German schools, awoke interest for West-European art and intervened successfully in questions regarding the restoration of national buildings and works of art. His feeling in these matters was very delicate, his comprehension of the style and the spirit of the time far above the opinion of his contemporaries. Intending to edit a History of plastic art, he prepared himself for it by profound studies. He wrote a series of articles, of which the following deserve mention: „Laokon“ 1872, „The model of Zeus of Otricoli“ 1874, „Phidias, Myron and Polyklet“ 1879, „On the Gothic Style“ 1881, and On the Importance of Studying Ancient Oriental Art 1883. In 1884 he reluctantly relinquished his activities in the Sokol-union and devoted himself entirely to scientific studies. Since 1882 he was lecturer on history of art at the University of Prague and in 1883 he occupied the chair of assistant-professor on the same subject.

On his promotion he was so weak that he could not leave his room to take the prescribed oath. He suffered from headaches, giddiness, and sleepless nights. His forces began to wane after the arduous strain. The doctors advised him to take a rest. And in July 1884 he started for Tyrol.

In the village of Oetz-on-the-Aach (an affluent of the Inn) he took a room in the inn of Tobias Haida, and used to take long country walks. He was always alone. In the morning of the 8th of August a Friday, he went to the village Lautens whence he returned no more . . . On August the 21st, his body was found in the waters of the Aach. Tyrš was buried in Fügner's grave in the cemetery of Olšany (Prague) on November 9th, 1884. A chronicler says that the whole nation wept for him, a proof that he had worked for all“. For many years he had prepared himself for a great work on plastic arts. For a long time he suffered from the hostility of the government and from the ill-will of some competitors who prevented him from becoming a lecturer at the University of Prague. Fate cheated him of success in both of these enterprises. He did not finish his work as he was called too late to the university of his country.

One work, however, he did finish, „The Code of Citizen-

ship." Our warriors have shown to Europe the results of his Education; even in the far future its elements will be known. There is no doubt but that Tyrš's work will be esteemed by all progressive men, and that even many among us will read him more attentively.

Tyrš was an exact and logical thinker, an idealist full of confidence. His personal appearance is thus described by the Sokolosef Müller, Tyrš's contemporary and collaborator. — „Tyrš was a man of middle stature, broadshouldered and deep chested. He had an erect gait and a sharp eye, Black, dense wavy hair adorned his head. He used to comb it back, so that the broad and high forehead was kept entirely free. The look of his brown eyes was generally kind; only when something base provoked him, a short lightning could be observed. His nose was proportionate and slightly hooked, his beard short. The beautiful virile face was lightly sunburnt and of an energetic and noble expression.“

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