ARTICLES

Revolutionary Kašpárek: The Life Cycle of the Radical Puppet

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Abstract

Throughout the Czech National Revival and the final years of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the puppet stage served as a site of resistance, of advocacy for Czech sovereignty, and criticism of Germanic influences on Czech culture and everyday life. The undisputed star in these efforts was the puppet hero Kašpárek, the little Czech jester who uses his wits to defeat Austro-Hungarian petty bureaucrats, police officers, and other deputies of imperial authority in hundreds of puppet plays throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This article explores How Kašpárek Laid Austria to Rest, a 1918 performance which saw Kašpárek's role shift from one of resistance to one of revolution. In this play, performed in Pilsen (Plzeň) in the final weeks of the First World War, Kašpárek no longer faced off against Austrian officials, but rather met a much larger opponent, the two-headed imperial eagle, symbol of the empire itself. In this performance, Kašpárek does not need to outwit his opponent; he is a dominant force from the start. After beheading the eagle, the performance becomes a kind of funeral mass for the empire with Kašpárek serving as both priest and master of ceremonies, bringing a kind of jubilation to the usually somber context. In this discussion, I examine this turning point from the interconnected perspectives of social history and semiotics. This dual approach exposes both the developments and conditions that allow for this striking symbolic victory on the puppet stage, but further an exploration of the ways the folk archetype of the jester and, by extension, a folk-based image of Czech national identity navigate radical political change.

Introduction

On September 23, 1918, the little Czech puppet Kašpárek caused the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. At the end of an evening's performance full of songs gleefully mocking the empire and its decline, the puppet rose up on the stage, wielded a sword, and beheaded the imperial eagle—the official symbol of the Hapsburg family and its three centuries of control over the Czech lands. The act was a shocking one. Kašpárek was a symbolic representative of the Czech nation and he had enacted a symbolic, decisive victory over the foreign oppressor. Perhaps even more shocking was the fact that he did it in front of imperial censors who, vastly outnumbered by the Czech audience and lacking any other options, could only sit by while their monarchy and their empire crashed down onto the

stage. It would take another month before the legal dissolution of Austro-Hungary would officially come on 28 October, but Kašpárek was given full credit for the empire's demise. The Czech diplomat Emil Walter would recall, "…té neděle, kdy státní úřady mlčky snesly tuto výzvu a tento odvážný, zatěžkávací pokus. 28. říjen byl pro divadélko…jenom důsledek 23. září" […that Sunday, when the state officials silently tolerated that challenge and that daring and weighty endeavor. For the theater, 28 October was… merely a consequence of 23 September"] [Walter 1928: 29]. Walter's response speaks not only to the withered state of imperial control over cultural production, but also to the immense power of the little jester, bolstered by his own role and that of the puppet theater within Czech romantic nationalism and the more recent campaigns for Czech sovereignty.

Little Kašpárek's beheading of the imperial eagle could rightly be called one of the most potent symbolic victories in theater history. This potency came in no small part from the context of the tumultuous final weeks of the last world war and of the empire as a whole, but it was also the result of a centuries-long struggle to assert Czech identity and sovereignty within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The puppet theater—and Kašpárek plays in particular—had been central to the Czech national cause since the mid-nineteenth century, serving as popular venue for anti-Austrian sentiment and a forum for codifying what it meant to be Czech. With the struggle of Czechs against Austrian authority as a clearly defined conflict, the emblematic actors of Kašpárek and the Hapsburg eagle, and the symbolic battleground of the puppet stage, this performance had all the necessary elements for a decisive symbolic victory. The present study considers both this singular theatrical event and its context with attention to its past, present, and future. Broadly, it addresses the question of how a puppet who is thoroughly grounded in a discourse of anti-authoritarianism coopts authority for himself and what that transformation does and means for that hero and for the puppet theater as a whole. In the first section's exploration of the groundwork of the performance, I examine the historical and semiotic forces that imbue this victory with such weight that Walter would declare it the actual moment of the empire's collapse. In the second section, I address the performance itself, asking what exactly is won in this theatrical battle and what tactics make it possible. In examining the resources and associations the performance draws upon to achieve its victory, I explore the ways historical Czech authority is projected onto the body of the jester puppet, allowing his victory to become a national victory. In the final section, I consider the aftermath of this performance and its impacts on Kašpárek's position in Czech theater and culture. While the political and historical implications of the victory are fairly unambiguous with the demise of the empire, the implications for the jester are less clear. The idea of the jester without a king is already a precarious one, but Kašpárek sees additional complicated roles as the post-revolution revolutionary and as a kind of victorious underdog. These new and complex aspects of Kašpárek's identity and the new roles which allow him to navigate those changes expose larger questions of the ways seemingly timeless or universal folk characters shift with changing historical contexts and of the ways transitions towards democracy can destabilize established folk archetypes.

Setting the Stage for Symbolic Victory

Like all symbolic victories, Kašpárek's triumph over the Hapsburg eagle reflected a broader conflict: the centuries-long Czech struggle for sovereignty and the various official and popular campaigns to legitimate the use of the Czech language, both central to the Czech National Revival. This movement and the puppet plays which contributed to it often tended to paint the status of Czechs in the Austro-Hungarian Empire as one marked by oppression— a kind of inter-European colonialism—and this is certainly an exaggeration, albeit a quite useful one in propagating a widespread political and social movement [Bezděk 1983: 9-11]. Puppet plays both fed and were fed by this constructed narrative of national oppression. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, puppet play repertoires across Europe were dominated by fairly unambiguous tales of good versus evil, often constructed through juxtapositions of the wicked and powerful against the righteous oppressed [Jurkowski 1996: 278-80]. Performed by itinerant puppeteers, these structures were tailor-made for the usual puppet theater audiences, made up most often of rural or less privileged people, children, and others excluded either financially or situationally from other modes of theatrical performance. In the Czech context, these reductive narratives of good and evil gained a special status, reflecting both the condition of the less privileged classes and the broader correlation to the national grievances about the Czechs' less privileged status in the empire. This dual meaning was a boon for the Czech puppet tradition in latter half of the nineteenth century, lending a newfound legitimacy that brought the puppet theater from the market square or fairground and into schools, social organizations, and the homes and milieus of middle- and upper-class Czech patriots. In the context of the early twentieth century, when the vestiges of romantic nationalism continued to promote images and ideas of Czech identity as one tied to an imagined pastoral national ideal, the puppet theater gained preeminence in urban patriotic contexts not despite its origins in village squares, but because of it.

While it might seem rather obvious, one of the most significant aspects of the Czech puppet theater—and one central to the role it would play in the Czech national movements—was that it was performed in Czech. The Czech puppet theater and the Czech language have a specific, historically established relationship dating back to the late eighteenth century and the Austro-Hungarian restrictions on Czech-language theater. Under the imperial structure of theater licensing, Czech-language theaters were rarely granted permission to perform, while performances in German were widely promoted and supported by the state. The puppet theater had a special status in the Czech National Revival project of reviving the Czech language and curbing the Germanization of the Czech lands. The puppet theater was marked as essentially the only theatrical medium with performances in the Czech language and this association with Czech theatrical culture in Czech forged a connection between the puppet theater, the language, and the national cause [Dubská 2004: 39-40]. This association was still very much present through the first half of the twentieth century as the puppet theater

progressed from a forum for promoting the Czech language to a forum for performing ideas of Czech identity and the Czech cause as a whole.

Kašpárek performances were often directly engaged in the promotion of the Czech language, both through modernizing and disseminating traditional Czech legends and historical plays—made new and more entertaining with Kašpárek's hijinks—and, more often, by mocking German and German speakers with multilingual puns and other demonstrations of the puppet's masterful bilingualism. In one theatrical prologue published in 1913, Kašpárek intervenes in the Germanization of Czech children most literally, stepping into the classroom to prevent the devil from teaching the children German numbers:

Kašpárek: To je dobře, že Vás není málo,
    však se mi už po Vás stýskávalo.
    Za to, že jste přišly, mám Vás rád,
    budem se dnes smát, smát, smát.
    (K čertu;) A co ty zde děláš, ochechule povzteklá?
    Zde nemáš co dělat, táhni do pekla!
Čert: Nepřišel jsem já dnes pro špás,
    já učím děti der, die, das.
Kašpárek: Ty jedna obludo rohatá,
    ošklivá, nohatá, chlupatá,
    zde v této světnici ty děti hezké,
    ti hoši a děvčátka, to děti jsou české.
    (K dětem) Dětičky, pravda, že všechny jste Češi…
    pravda, že němčina málo Vás těší,
    že do škol jen českých chodit chcete,
    dětičky, že nikdy Němci nebudete?
    (K čertu): Nadarmo, čerte tu hledáš spolky.
    Budeš-li nás ještě někdy učit der, die, das,
    vypráším ti gatě, zlomím ti nos,
    uvidíš, že nejsem ledakdos! (Čert odletí.)
    Tak, a teď začne divadlo se hrát,
    každý z Vás bude smát…

[Kašpárek: It's so good that there are so many of you,
    I have missed you so much!
    I'm so glad you've all come,
    and today we're going to laugh and laugh and laugh.
    (To the Devil) And what are you doing here, you venomous hag?
    There's nothing for you to do here, so shove off back to hell!
Devil: I didn't come to play pranks,
    I'm teaching the children 'der, die, das.'
Kašpárek: You horned monster,
    all ugly, long-legged and shaggy,

here in this room these lovely children,
the boys and the girls, these children are Czech.
(To the children) Children, isn't it true, that you are all Czechs,
and that you don't really like German so much,
and that you only want to go to Czech school,
and that none of you will ever be German?
(To the Devil) You won't find any allies here,
hurry off if you want and find yourself a German school.
If you ever try to teach us der, die, das again,
I'll mess up your breeches and break your neck,
rip off your ears and bite your nose,
you'll see that I'm somebody! (The Devil flies away)
Well then, now the theater can begin the show,
and all of you will laugh and laugh…] [Kraus 1913: 12] (1)

Even here, five years before the collapse of the empire, we can see the extreme liberties taken by Kašpárek on the puppet stage, which would only escalate over the course of the war. The devil-cum-German teacher in this interaction can even evoke a sense of pity, admitting as he does that he has not come for any ill purpose. In some ways, the text is so unambiguous that it almost defies discussion, but the ways the contrast between Czech and German languages and identities is established here is helpful in understanding the particular role of language in the puppet theater in Czech patriotic discourse. Beyond serving only as a medium—where performance in the Czech language is itself a patriotic act—language serves as the conflict itself. Little Kašpárek brings a complementary pair of promises to the classroom, offering violence and threats to the German teacher and a newfound sense of fun and laughter to the Czech children, delivered by replacing the formal structure of German language pedagogy with the informal, but equally educational, mode of the puppet play. Performing in Czech gives Kašpárek a tool to mock the German devil, but his success in transforming the German classroom into a puppet play is the central victory of the prologue, presaging the kind of multivalent puppet victories to come.

The Little Jester and His Puppeteers

The symbolic capital of the Czech language was matched by that of Kašpárek himself, despite the perhaps surprising fact that the jester is not technically Czech himself. Kašpárek hails from a long, European tradition of jester figures which gradually mutated and evolved from the Italian Pulcinella of the *Commedia dell'arte* into regional variations across Europe, including Kasperl, a jester character adopted from Germany [Jurkowski 1996: 279]. It was the Austrian puppeteer Johann Laroche (1745-1806), with his repertoire of plays starring Kasperl, who likely brought the character to prominence in the Czech lands, first performing in Prague in 1764. The dramaturgical aspect of Kašpárek's

transformation from Austrian import to an icon of Czech national and linguistic identity is complex and convoluted, largely because the jester rarely played the leading role in performances until late in the nineteenth century, and so is often absent from published scripts. (2) Rather, Kašpárek was inserted as a minor comic character into all measure of plays, ranging from European standards like *Hercules* and *Faust* to a growing collection of plays depicting the glorious past of Czech kings and heroes. Despite the haziness of his origins and his transformation from Kasperl to Kašpárek, the character had become firmly entrenched in the Czech puppet theater repertoire by the middle of the nineteenth century [Dubská 2004: 58].

In the twentieth century, Kašpárek's reign as the dominant force in Czech puppet theater—and later as a potent symbol of the Czech nation itself—is founded on a specific brand of popular humor and a political climate which made humor a crucial outlet for popular political dissent and Czech nationalism. Critique of the current social and political environment added to the comic effect, bringing popular entertainment into the realm of subversive pleasure as audiences laughed in the face of authority. Kašpárek must change to some extent with each new dramatic context, but his humor remains grounded in opposing rigid, formal, and aggressively proper characters and ideas with his own natural, easy, and flexible approach, just as he did in his insults and threats made towards the German devil in Kraus's prologue. Surrounded by one-dimensional characters and caricatures of authority figures, Kašpárek enjoys a natural complexity and a sense of subversive fun. In the specifically Czech context, Kašpárek's natural behavior opposes the artificiality of imposed, external authority and marks the little guy as superior. This process connects Kašpárek to this fundamental element of humor, the undermining force that reverses structures of authority. His being a puppet extends this effect even further. The little Czech jester is already an unlikely hero, but the little Czech jester puppet—in a sense an inanimate object literally manipulated by an external authority—becomes the ultimate comic hero, attacking all forms of logic and authority with wit and especially with language. In this extended metaphor made realized, the puppet Kašpárek has both a power and a sense of freedom which more formal authority lacks, and he takes this power from his ability to play and joke with serious ideas and serious representations of authority. This sense of play is rendered all the more impactful by the historical and cultural associations that bear upon the puppet stage. All of the forces of these associations—with Czech language, with the overarching narrative of the witty underdog, with romantic nationalist ideas of the authentic Czechness of the puppet plays of the previous century—all converge onto the body of Kašpárek, imbuing his words and gestures with massive symbolic power.

While Kašpárek's iconicity emerged from his immediately recognizable jester-hatted figure, the puppet is, of course, not a puppet without a puppeteer, and the puppeteer who animated the performance of *How Kašpárek Laid Austria to Rest* deserves special attention. In the pre-war years of the twentieth century, the jester was animated by a growing number of professional, urban puppeteers. Foremost among them was Josef Skupa (1892-1957), who would both write and

perform *How Kašpárek Laid Austria to Rest.* (3) Skupa joined Pilsen's *Loutkové divadlo Feriálních osad* [Puppet theater of the Vacation Camps]—lovingly known as the Feriálka—in 1917, and it was there that he would bring Kašpárek to his striking victory over the Hapsburg eagle. Skupa was brought into the company in an attempt to modernize, moving beyond the traditional stylings of the company's older puppeteer Karel Novák (1862-1940), whose performances drew heavily on nineteenth-century visual and performance styles [Vašíček 2000:15]. However, Skupa was entirely adept at incorporating traditional and more modern styles of the puppet theater, and his early contributions to the Feriálka's program offered attractive combinations of new ideas and old forms, drawing on the wartime audience's complex demands for both nostalgia and relevancy. Over the course of the war, Pilsen had seen rapid growth due to its massive armaments factory's expansion to serve the needs of the empire in wartime. This urban, working population demanded more engaged forms of entertainment which focused more on present conflicts and questions than on the historical imaginings of Novák's repertoire, but were not yet ready to part with the familiar aesthetics of the puppet theater of their youth [Malík 1962:56].

In the autumn of 1917, Skupa worked to modernize the theater's space and its equipment while preparing his premiere, the 1909 Alois Jirásek play *Pan Johanes*, followed by a loose interpretation of Franz von Pocci's *Castle of Owls*. (4) In the latter of the two, Skupa began to unleash his talents for improvisation and comic adaptation, transforming Kašpárek into a caricature of a government minister and filling the characters 'speech with rhymes and puns. With the success of this production, Skupa moved into a leading role at the Feriálka, creating a series of cabaret evenings centered on the popularity of his Kašpárek performances [Vašíček 2000:19]. As one audience member recalled:

> Čísla vážná, obyčejně vlastenecká, střídala se v programu s čísly veselými, poťouchle až dovádivě veselými a mezi čísly byl to vždy Kašpárek, který pečoval o takřka familiérní kontakt zákulisí s hledištěm. Nebylo státnických 'veličin 'bývalého Rakouska, nebylo jediné podařené stylizované zprávy z bojiště, aby se humor konferenciérův nesvezl po ní svým žahadlem. Kašpárek řečnil, parodoval, zpíval, básnil, přednášel, tančil…
>
> [Serious numbers, usually patriotic, were interspersed with funny ones, cunningly or playfully funny and between the numbers there was always Kašpárek, who took care of the so-called familiar contact between the stage and the audience. There wasn't an official of old Austria or a single artful piece of news from the war that he wouldn't tackle with the humor of a master of ceremonies. Kašpárek spoke, parodied, sang, waxed poetic, lectured, danced…] [Wachtl 1918: 90].

While Skupa would largely leave Kašpárek behind after the war, he was careful to feature the jester puppet in wartime performances, despite the public cries for modernization. Performing the idea that Kašpárek was still central to the puppet stage and that he could take on new ideas and respond to current events brought the Feriálka a huge advantage, letting them use all of the authority and iconic force of Kašpárek in the final months of the long-fought struggle for Czech sovereignty.

Laying Austria to Rest

The performance of *Laying Austria to Rest* was a kind of convergence of massive forces. The entire history of Kašpárek, the Czech puppet theater and its connection to the Czech language and the national narrative of the underdog came together with the very-much contemporary situation in Pilsen. The disgruntled population of workers in the city, working to produce armaments despite the complex feelings that they were producing arms in a war against themselves and supporting a dying empire which never respected their historical claim to sovereignty came together in the theater despite the chaos and hardships of the end of the long conflict. All of the historical and contemporary struggles and the questions of who and what would determine the Czechs' fate at the end of the war all came together at the Feriálka for an evening's cabaret on 23 September, 1918. *Laying Austria to Rest* was only one act of several that evening, and the written part of the text consists only of two songs, but Josef Skupa took full advantage of the kinds of symbolic load Kašpárek could bear, drawing not only on the historical connection between the puppet theater and the righteousness of the Czech cause, but further invoking sources of external authority. In some ways, the performance of *Laying Austria to Rest* is a story of a single, symbolic gesture, of the moment the eagle loses its head as the moment when the symbolic authority of the empire is lost. But in the larger context, this performance is one of citation—in many ways the lifeblood of the puppet theater—and the way the puppet and the puppeteer draw on, transform, and amplify external sources of authority to make statements that expand far beyond the diminutive puppet body. Full of often parodic references to religious and historical texts, *Laying Austria to Rest* reimagines authority, stripping it away from the eagle and everything else associated with the empire, letting Kašpárek perform the notion that God and history are on the Czech side. These references and invocations of the forces which could justify Czech sovereignty take on a force matched only by Kašpárek's sword.

Before the jester even emerged on the stage, *Laying Austria to Rest* capitalized on established songs and texts to manipulate audience expectations. The performance began with a recorded broadcast of Chopin's funeral march, a most familiar sonata in a most unusual context. The concepts of funerals and death are cast into a new light in the puppet theater, the space where animate and inanimate converge and where questions of life and death are much less dire. While we unfortunately do not have records of the audience response to these first moments of the performance, the odds of laughter seem rather high in the puppet

theater, where a piece so somber can only be seen as absurd. The song was followed by an excerpt of the Latin funeral rights, also recorded and still without any action on the stage. Kašpárek and Skupa, despite the performance's general stance towards all things imperial, would be magnanimous enough to give the eagle a Catholic funeral. It is quite striking that both the march and the mass precede the death itself, but there is a sense to this order when thinking about the political context. The death of the empire itself—particularly for Czechs seeking independence—would not be a moment of mourning, but one of rebirth. The only appropriate time to mark the passing of the empire and the eagle was in these final moments of its existence. These two introductory pieces mark that passing using a specifically foreign and ceremonial modes of performance; they use the language of the empire to memorialize the empire. Tellingly, they also present the inevitability of the demise not as a specifically Czech premise, but as one which is upheld by greater authorities including the Catholic church. (5) The continuation of the performance saw a kind of transfer of power, moving from the foreign voices of Chopin and the Latin funeral rites into a more familiar and local authority. As the lights rose, Kašpárek appeared on the stage, weeping beside a catafalque bearing a beleaguered, dying, two-headed eagle, the symbol of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and began to sing a lullaby to Austria:

> Dobrú noc, Rakousko,
> sladce spí,
> nech sa ti snívajú
> c.k. sny.
> Sladce spí,
> dobrú noc,
> už se neprosíme
> o pomoc!
>
> [Good night, Austria,
> sleep tight,
> sweet dreams
> of imperial might.
> Sleep tight,
> good night,
> and we won't be asking
> for your help anymore!] [Koval 1928: 48]

From these first words, we can see the kind of armory Skupa and Kašpárek assemble, the weapons they will use to perform Czech authority and to contrast the formal religious modes of authority used earlier in the performance. The lullaby at the beginning of the performance feels rather sweet and innocuous, but already deals a tremendous blow to the power relations of the empire,

undermining the paternalistic force of the empire over the Czechs and creating a new structure where the Czech's have a newfound parental authority.

The lullaby itself carries a force that isn't immediately clear to the foreign viewer, but which carried a clear and deep resonance for Czech theatrical audiences. While this version was written by Skupa himself, the lullaby had deeper origins in the Czech tradition and the National Revival, drawing on a traditional song of Slovak origin, but also historically popular in Moravia and Bohemia. Beyond the general promotion of Czech—and Slovak—folk songs broadly throughout the National Revival, this song had a particularly elevated status from its nineteenth-century inclusion in Antonin Dvorak's 1886 op. 73 no. 1 ("*V narodnim tonu*" ["In folk tone"]), a collection of four folk songs arranged by Dvořák and made popular in theaters and drawing rooms as an elegant expression of the pastoral image of the national ideal. (6) The original lyrics are much less pointed:

> Dobrú noc, má milá, dobrú noc,
> nech je ti sám pán búh na pomoc,
> dobrú noc, dobre spi, nech sa ti snívajú sladké sny.
>
> [Good night, my dear, good night,
> May God himself be a help to you.
> Good night, sleep well,
> May you dream sweet dreams!]

The wishes for a good night remain consistent, but there is a notable difference in the two versions' presentation of God's protection and authority. While the original resigns the child to the care and help of God, Skupa's version takes the position of the children liberating themselves from the supposed—and no longer desired—help of the parents. In this revision of the song's lyrics, Kašpárek shifts the focus from religious authority to earthly authority, identifying the shift in child-parent dynamics in the Czechs' relationship to the empire using a weapon so seemingly tender that it takes on a new light. While in a few moments, the jester would execute the eagle with a sword, in this moment he makes an almost more drastic move, harnessing a new spirit of condescension to assassinate the eagle with a lullaby.

Without allowing the audience any time to respond, Kašpárek flew up onto the catafalque and beheaded the eagle with a single blow of his sword, completing the most literal of the evening's attacks. After pausing to allow the cheers and laughter of the audience to subside, Kašpárek changed the tone of the performance from a funeral for Austria into a celebration of rebirth for the Czechs, singing another adapted song, this one taking its tune from the famous Czech fifteenth century Hussite battle hymn, "*Ktož jsú boží bojovníci*" ["Ye who are God's soldiers"], calling for the Czechs to return to their role as warriors. After

demanding the rise of the Czechs, the final verse of this version of the hymn completes the burial of the Austrian empire:

> Marné jsou vzteky všech.
> Vaše mocná sláva —
> všechna stará práva
> Vyoře otec Čech
>
> [All of your anger is in vain.
> Your powerful glory —
> all of your old authority
> Will be plowed under by Father Čech] [Skupa 1948: 29].

This verse is not the same kind of close adaptation as we see in the lullaby, but rather an addition to the historical text, an addendum to the story of the Czechs' previous glory days, now explicitly connected to the present situation. In its historical context, the original song was both a reminder to its singers that the Czechs had God on their side in the religious wars of the fifteenth century and also a kind of martial weapon in its own right. Rumors abound of how the Hussite armies would sing the song so loudly and with such ferocity that enemy armies were scared off before battles could even commence. This final verse revives that level of intimidation and adds a direct address to a specific enemy, bringing the performance of the funeral, the last rites, and the mother's lamenting lullaby into the new phase of the burial.

The evocation of the burial in this final song is relatively unsurprising, but the specific image of plowing something or someone under has particular resonances in Czech legend and historical conceptions of Czech sovereignty. The last line of this final verse invokes not only the legendary founder of the Czech nation, Forefather Čech, but also Přemysl Oráč, the plowman who, according to legend, founded the powerful Přemyslid dynasty which ruled the Czech lands from the ninth century until 1306. Přemysl Oráč—whose legend is codified in the twelfth century *Chronica Boemorum* and in Alois Jirásek's 1894 *Staré pověsti české* [*Old Czech Legends*] rose from his humble roots as a peasant plowman, marrying the Czech heiress to the throne and bringing legitimacy and a sense of fair counsel to Czech leadership. His image as a non-aristocratic ruler was particularly popular in nineteenth and early twentieth century movements to promote a democratic future for the Czech nation. In Skupa's text, the image of Přemysl is brought together with that of Forefather Čech, who embodies the connection between the Czech people and the Czech lands. While Přemysl symbolically connects the Czech people to a tradition of righteous rulership, Čech connects the Czech people to the land itself. Brother of Rus and Lech, who made similar efforts for Russians and Poles, Forefather Čech's legend sees him bringing his people to their promised land in a quest for peace and abundance. Taken together, the image of the plowing under, which concludes Kašpárek, presents a

literal conception of revolution, of turning over the native Czech soil, burying the Austrian authority and bringing Czech authority back to the surface where it belongs. The intersection of these two legendary figures with the form of Kašpárek on the stage creates a semiotic *tour de force*, each offering a specific claim about the righteousness of the Czech cause. This point of contact with the depth and breadth of Czech history, conducted by a puppet with his own deep associations with Czechness, was a potent acknowledgement of the puppet theater's capacity for addressing the past, present and future of the Czech lands. The new ways Skupa's Kašpárek was taking on—rather than fighting—forms of authority would mark a massive shift in the medium in the coming years. In the short-term, the little jester was celebrated as one of the budding republic's most radical and revolutionary heroes.

The production met immediate success and public acclaim and played twice weekly from September until the declaration of Czechoslovak independence on 28 October. The lyrics to the production's subversive songs were distributed and sung throughout Pilsen through October and beyond [Koval 1928: 50-1]. In 1928, the Czech diplomat Emil Walter recalled the performances, the significance of the lack of censorial response, and their enduring significance, confirming Skupa and Kašpárek's success with the claim that the collapse of the empire was a consequence of this performance [Walter 1928: 29]. Walter's reaction highlights the audacity of performing this piece with officials present, and their inability to react certainly signaled a kind of impotence on the part of the Austro-Hungarian authorities. Beyond this brazen disregard for the official presence in the audience, the performance itself undermined and ultimately destroyed the symbolic authority of the empire, positing Kašpárek and the songs he sings as Czech national symbols capable of overpowering the decrepit imperial symbol of the eagle. Kašpárek, his rendition of "Ye who are God's warriors," and the revised lullaby singing the empire into eternal sleep play into different elements of Czech national sentiment, history, and the assertion of sovereignty. As we have already seen, the puppet hero himself, despite his relatively recent import from the German tradition, had evolved through the National Revival into the distinct personification not only of Czech humor, but Czech morality, and had demonstrated time and time again how the "little Czech" could use his wits to navigate and overcome the challenges posed by external authorities. This production does not pit the Czech lion—the firmly established national symbol of the Czech crown since the thirteenth century—against the eagle. Rather, by allowing the smallest of Czechs to bear the full weight of the historical righteousness of the Czech national cause, this performance proposes an opposition to the concept of empire as a whole, presenting a movement led by the small and its capacity to overcome the mighty forces of authoritarianism.

The playful treason of this war between national symbols on show in *Laying Austria to Rest* is a striking manifestation of the particular kind of agency accessible to the puppet grounded in the puppet's simultaneous status as an object and an actor. Kašpárek indeed remains the dwarfish jester and a symbolic

representation of the Czech nation, but—and crucially—Kašpárek occupies and performs in a world that is constructed to his scale. He is not fighting the empire itself; he is a national symbol fighting a national symbol. If he is but a toy or an object, then the Hapsburg eagle is a toy as well. While the Kašpárek puppet and the sculpture of the eagle exist as tangible, inanimate objects, the act of performance transforms them both into something more. The animation of the puppets onstage transforms the inanimate figures into dynamic, moving forces, the forces that not only dominate and determine, but constitute the world they occupy. In the context of this performance—the end of a long war where the opposing parties were technically fighting on the same side—the symbolic opponents of the jester and the eagle made the actual conflict tangible in a way that life outside of the theater could not.

The performance of *Laying Austria to Rest* not only revealed Kašpárek's capacity for massive semantic loads but would also reveal a great deal about the symbolic force of the puppet theater as a whole. With the long-standing association between European puppet theater and parody, along with the specifically Czech connections between puppet theater and the patriotic cause, the choice of the puppet theater as a venue for any particular performance bears a significant communicative weight, both before and beyond the context and content of the performance itself. Even with the ideas of dread and horror occasionally invoked by the puppet theater's loose distinction between animacy and inanimacy, it certainly remained primarily associated with fun, entertainment, and mocking humor. Addressing the death—or assassination—of the empire specifically in the puppet theater places the national symbols of Kašpárek and the eagle onto equal footing, but also implies that the contest between them is some kind of joke, that the collapse of the empire is something to mock or pity. The symbolic assassination is of course a powerful anti-Hapsburg expression, but the performance of this act in the puppet theater is in many ways the truly seditious act. This moment contains all of the complexities of the puppet theater and its relationship to the National Revival. The puppet theater was so historical and so powerful that it was able to accomplish the ultimate National Revival goal of ousting the Hapsburgs from the Czech lands, but it did so by reducing the empire to the scale of a puppet, rather than elevating the Czech nation to the scale of the empire.

Throughout the Hapsburg period until the collapse of the empire, the Czech puppet theater had been a crucial venue for small-scale seditious acts, where Czechs could embrace their pride at the historic might of the Czech people while expressing frustration at their current lack of sovereignty and authority. The physical presence of censors in a puppet theater audience, as we saw in *Laying Austria to Rest,* was a rare occurrence, and the puppet theater largely avoided strict censorial control by remaining small, mobile, and seemingly naive or innocent. In many ways the puppet theater had all the advantages of a public platform without the harsh limitations of official scrutiny. The very lack of official support or perceived legitimacy of the puppet theater was crucial to the success of the puppet

theater as a forum for political and social critique, and throughout the last century of the Austro-Hungarian empire, puppet theaters found great advantages in the fact they their public faces were "only puppets." While delivering biting parodic and satirical representations of the Austro-Hungarian government and society, puppeteers were able to counter accusations of sedition with the defense that they were mere puppets and that, considering their diminutive scale and social status as a form of pure entertainment, their provocations were certainly closer to impishness than to treason. *Laying Austria to Rest* was certainly an extreme example of the lax censorial response to the puppet theater's parodies of Austrian authority, but it speaks to the potential of both the false innocence of the puppet theater and the power of the puppet's inherent fluidity. The puppet can be both the whole world and just a puppet. In the performative realm, Kašpárek can be every Czech and all of Czech history compressed into one figure, using his sword to end three hundred years of foreign rule, not despite, but because he is "just a puppet."

The Jester without a King

Transitioning through the end of the war, the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the formation of the First Czechoslovak Republic, Czech puppet theater would have to adjust not only to the end of imperial censorship, but to its own growing authority and the changing position of a medium so heavily associated with opposing authority in the newly democratic state. Changes in the repertoire, aesthetics and audiences would raise questions about what puppet theater should be and how it fits into new twentieth century models of popular culture. However, the largest question facing the Czech puppet theater in the early days of the First Czechoslovak Republic was whether it would survive the burden of its own history. It remained to be seen whether Josef Skupa and his peers could create a new, twentieth-century puppet theater that would assert the crucial role of fun, play, experimentation and innovation in the puppet theater, or whether the newfound authority Kašpárek had invoked in his devastating blow to the empire would come to crush the medium under the weight of its firmly asserted historical and social significance.

Despite the impact and boldness of his revolutionary gesture, Czech independence put Kašpárek into a state of flux, a jester without a king and a national hero whose rebelliousness was no longer desirable. Two questions loomed as puppeteers and audiences determined the jester's future. First, once authority was no longer imposed from outside, could or should the model of the Czech people remain a rude, disobedient trickster? As it turned out, the answer to this question was both yes and no. Many of Kašpárek's pre-1918 plays would remain popular throughout the interwar period, re-contextualized as artifacts of the Czech national revival and independence movement. And despite the end of Austrian bureaucracy and control in the Czech lands, Kašpárek's defiant ways would be channeled into opposing nosy landlords, strict bartenders, and other less powerful, but equally oppressive forms of authority. But, in the vast majority of cases, the answer to whether the old trickster Kašpárek was welcome was a firm

no. Shirkers and tricksters had no place in the upright culture of the new democracy culture. Despite this seeming mismatch, Kašpárek could not be simply abandoned in favor of new, more suitable puppet characters. He was too popular and too central to the Czech puppet theater tradition. Rather than casting the beloved Kašpárek aside, amateur puppeteers and teachers across the country set about refining Kašpárek's performances and his character, transforming the trickster into a model of positive behavior for the first generations of children raised in the First Czechoslovak Republic.

Campaigns to shift Kašpárek's symbolic status were active throughout the 1920s and 1930s, a period when the Czech puppet theater was immensely popular as a mode of pedantic entertainment. In schools and cultural organizations—particularly in the mass sporting clubs like Sokol which promoted healthy bodies and minds as a key to a healthy young nation—Kašpárek and concerns about using his character effectively were a frequent subject of attention. In a 1928 article in *The Sokol Bulletin*, an anonymous puppeteer identifies the potentials of working with Kašpárek in the Sokol puppet theaters:

> Kolem nás bují lehkomyslnost, hon za požitkářstvím, bezmezné sobectví, tanec uvolněných poválečných zmatků, kteří rozleptávají národní naši odolnost a soběstačnost. Vracíme-li se k dětem, obracíme se v naději k lepší budoucnosti národa. Bude jen naším štěstím, budou-li naše káňata moci žít opět velikým národním všelidským ideálům. A pro děti je jich tlumočitelem Kašpárek. Chraňte Kašpárka a zachráníte i děti i kus naší budoucnosti.
>
> [The equable, robust, and cheerful attitude towards life that we have in the Sokol inspires us to make Kašpárek into a symbol, one that will prove our precedence over the whole rest of the world. We owe it to ourselves and to our little ones. All around us we see recklessness, hedonism, unchecked selfishness, the boundless chaos of the post-war world, which eats away at our national resilience and independence. But if we bring our focus back to the children, we can focus on the hope for a better future for our nation. We will only find joy if our little ones can once again live their lives in our great, national, universal ideals. And for children, the transmitter of these ideals is Kašpárek. If we can save Kašpárek, we can save our children and a piece of our own future] [Anonymous. "Kašpárek Sokolských děti" 488].

Two decades previously, Kašpárek had been the ultimate symbol of just that "recklessness, hedonism, unchecked selfishness… [and] boundless chaos" from which the jester was now supposed to rescue Czech children. In this new position, Kašpárek not only loses his anti-authoritarian raison d'être, but actually becomes an authority over children in his own right.

The reformed, post-independence Kašpárek reflects the larger challenges of transforming folk or cultural icons through a transition into democracy on a broad

level. In severing the eagle's head in 1918, Kašpárek cuts off the possibility or advantageousness of his own distinctive naughtiness, ushering in a new phase where he is expected to act as a leader and as a role model. The lack of any external enemy to oppose—at least until the rise of Nazi Germany—and the fact that he had himself demonstrated that his naughtiness was limited to the specific context of opposing outside oppressors left Kašpárek with a much more limited range of dramaturgical possibilities. Increasingly through the interwar years, the opponents Kašpárek fought were more abstract concepts that actual puppet villains as he was used in mass public health education projects, campaigns to sell savings bonds, and other national efforts. In the wake of the interwar financial crisis, Kašpárek plays increasingly served to help children understand the changes in the world around them and the part they could play in it. In one prologue from this period, he preaches a discourse of personal and collective responsibility to his young audience:

> Učte se dívat. Kolem vás je hodně skrytých slzí.
> Snažte se všude pomáhat a uvidíte brzy,
> že tváře všech se rozjasní a smutek matek zmizí.
> Tož — všichni chutě do boje a hurá proti krisi!"
>
> [Learn to look around you, to see all of the hidden tears around you.
> Always try to help and soon you will see
> that everyone's faces light up and mothers' grief disappears.
> So, let's all head eagerly into the battle and let's defeat the crisis!] [Malík 1933: 153]

While Kašpárek's post-independence roles preserve his status as a folk icon of Czech national identity, these modes of responsibility are absolutely antithetical to the spirit of pre-independence Kašpárek. Looking back to the jester's intrusion on the German schoolteacher's lessons and the impunity with which he threatens violence on the teacher, the transition from a mode based on opposition to one based on cooperation is clear, but others are perhaps less evident. Some factors contributing to Kašpárek's pre-independence power were simply lost. The fact that he speaks Czech in particular fades quickly from importance even by the start of the 1920s. In theatrical culture, though, the biggest loss for Kašpárek is the widespread loss of his adult audiences. The post-war Kašpárek is still a funny little man who dresses in red and speaks in rhymes, and that suffices to maintain his popularity in children's puppet theater through the interwar years. The revolutionary Kašpárek, however—the one who evoked comments from ambassadors and the howling laughter of munitions factory workers—is crushed under the weight of his newfound authority. It is—in some ways—another stunning victory. The subversive, revolutionary Kašpárek is so fundamentally antithetical to modes of authority that he destroys even himself when he takes the seat of power.

NOTES

1 All translations are my own.

2 Collections of theatrical prologues, short scenes performed just before the main play of a performance, were a popular venue introducing more pointedly political commentary into the puppet theater. Dozens of collections of such prologues were published from the turn of the century through the 1930s, overwhelmingly featuring Kašpárek engaging in the same kind of unsubtle commentary seen in this example from Josef Kraus.

3 Tracing the early transformation of Kašpárek into his adopted Czech identity is further complicated by two factors: the fact that many itinerant puppeteers and many of their audience members were illiterate and that those puppeteers who could read and write would be hesitant to record their intellectual property in a form that could be used by their competitors. Before the boom in home puppet theaters of the late nineteenth century and its attendant rise in published collections of puppet plays, the most celebrated collection of Czech plays which includes Kašpárek is *Komedie a hry Matějě Kopeckého* [*Comedies and Plays of Matěj Kopecký*]. Matěj Kopecký (1775-1847) is regarded as the founding father of both the Czech puppet tradition and of the largest family dynasty of Czech puppeteers. This collection, documented and published by his son, offers early examples of ways Kopecký and others would insert Kašpárek into Czech and foreign established plays.

4 Josef Skupa is best known for his work in the interwar years, when his puppet duo Spejbl and Hurvínek provided new icons for newly independent Czech audiences. The massive popularity of Skupa and this comic duo let Skupa build a multi-media empire, releasing record albums of puppet dialogs and producing mass-manufactured merchandise in addition to producing touring productions which brought Spejbl and Hurvínek to audiences across Europe.

5 *Pan Johannes* was extremely popular in the final years of the empire, featuring the lowly Czech Tomáš protecting his innocent love-interest from the exploitative advances of the king of the mountains. *Castle of Owls* is an Austrian play, but the 1912 Czech translation incorporates Kašpárek into the tale of a lord's supernatural and ill-fated rise to power.

6 While the Czech lands remained diverse in religious affiliations through this time period, the historical memory of the Counter-Reformation, which many Czechs would associate both with the loss of sovereignty and with the suppression of the Czech protestant or Hussite movements creates a strong association—particularly in the puppet theater's trade in symbolic shorthand—between Catholicism and imperial authority.

7 Antonín Dvořák is among the composers most closely associated with the Czech national cause. Through his works directly engaging with the Czech national struggle (Op. 7 in particular), his use of exclusively Czech librettos, and his celebration of Czech and Slovak folk music give his work and the lullaby featured here particularly strong national resonances. Op. 73, where "*Dobrú noc má milá*" [Good Night, My Dear] appears, allows for an importation of folk

aesthetics into more privileged urban spaces in a mode quite similar to that of the puppet theater's movement into middle- and upper-class cultural spaces around the turn of the century, creating a purified and codified version of folk culture more suited for mass distribution to more discerning audiences.

8 The fact that the song is Slovak and not Czech in origin is of relatively little consequence here, particularly as this version was historically popular in Moravia as well.

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