

Jan F. Triska: An Appreciation

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From time to time we read or hear about someone who really “made it” in life. “Making it” might suggest that a person succeeded in reaching a goal, or perhaps it is an expression of appreciation, not only for the individual’s accomplishments, but also for the journey. The following is an appreciation of the life of Jan F. Triska, a Czech emigrant to the United States, whose journey and accomplishments were impressive. This is the story of a man who “made it.”

Jan Francis Triska was born on January 26, 1922 in Prague, Czechoslovakia, in a new state carved out of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918 at the end of the World War I. The chief architect of this new state and its first president was Thomas G. Masaryk, a lifelong hero of Jan Triska. Jan’s parents owned a neighborhood grocery store. His childhood was typical for children of aspiring middle-class families. He was active in Sokol gymnastics, spent summers with his grandparents in small villages in Bohemia and Moravia, swam, played tennis, raced canoes, and worked hard to excel in school.

Jan’s adolescent years, however, were marked by the German occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1939 and by the war that followed. He finished gymnasium (high school) in 1941. The Germans had closed the universities. The whole economy of the occupied country was involved in the war effort. Hoping to keep himself from having to work in a factory, Jan enrolled in a one-year course in office skills offered by a school of business administration. He subsequently found employment as a clerk in the Office for the Administration of the Coal Economy. Then, in 1942, without explanation, he was arrested and sent to a forced labor camp in Eisenach, Germany.

For a young man who grew up in a more or less sheltered environment, Eisenach was a harsh experience. The work, breaking rocks in a quarry, was strenuous, but in addition, Jan had to cope with two conflicting facts of life: first, the necessity of cooperating with his captors in order to stay alive, and second, a feeling of overwhelming guilt for working for the enemy that occupied his own country. For the rest of his life, Jan Triska would have difficulty reconciling himself to his behavior during his Eisenach years, remaining ashamed that he had not somehow resisted or fought back.

The United States Army liberated the Eisenach camp in April 1945. It took Jan three weeks to get home by various detours and modes of transportation. Europe was in a shambles, part of it liberated part still under German occupation. As soon as he was back in Prague, still under German rule, he joined the Czech Revolutionary Guard. The occupying force surrendered completely in May 1945.

When the Czech universities reopened in June 1945, Jan entered the Charles University School of Law. The studies were accelerated to allow students to make up for time lost during the war. While registering, Jan was approached to join the law school student association, Vsehrd, which, as he wrote in his unpublished memoirs, “opened up (for me) greater political awareness and positions of leadership unimaginable before.”

Jan was elected member of the Vsehrd governing board in the first election of the association and from then on served as chair of its Foreign Relations Committee. Given the intensity of his studies and the parallel involvement with Vsehrd, it is hard to imagine what kind of organizational skill and energy it took to combine both. His activities were widespread. Early in 1946 he spent two weeks in the Soviet Union as part of the Czechoslovak student delegation that was invited to discuss political and professional issues interesting to both parties. In the summer of the same year he organized a group of 60 students for a trip to the Netherlands, where they helped to disinter British airmen shot down by the Germans during the war and hastily buried. In 1947 he became National Secretary of the World Student Service Fund, a clearing house for distribution of international student aid. The contacts he made in this office enabled him to travel across Scandinavia to Finnish Lapland to help in rebuilding the war-damaged city of Rovaniemi.

Jan Triska was about to take his last examination to graduate from the Law School when the February 1948 communist coup d'état took place in Czechoslovakia. Immediately after the takeover, communist action committees emerged at all establishments to decide the fate of non-communists in each particular place. Their task was to locate and purge potential enemies of the new regime. Jan's affiliation with the National Socialist Party of Czechoslovakia, and his Western ties established through VSEHRD and the World Student Service Fund placed him on the potential enemies list. Jan pleaded his case before the Law School Action Committee as ordered. The Committee sentenced him to hard labor pending the resolution of his case. In the interim, he did graduate and receive his J.U.D. degree, but the likelihood of his pursuing a legal career in the new communist state was now improbable, to say the least.

As Jan had been promised a scholarship to Yale Law School some time earlier, he decided not to wait any longer for the resolution of his case. After devising cover for his parents, who would have been harshly persecuted should the authorities have discovered that they had known about his defection, Jan and two of his friends escaped over the Czech border into the US Occupation Zone of Germany. Soon afterwards, the American Military Police discovered them, and after interrogation, sent them to a refugee camp in Nuremberg, Germany.

There were altogether some 220 Czechoslovak student refugees in the US Occupation Zone at that time. Meeting in Nuremberg in May 1948, either in person or by representation, these refugee students established a Union of Czechoslovak Students in Exile. The main task of this organization was to distribute the extraordinary aid coming from various sources abroad, a precious part of which were applications for scholarships, which were sent directly to the camps or surfaced in other ways. In order not to miss any of these opportunities, Jan and two of his friends, Emil Ransdorf and Josef Orlicky, asked the Americans for a car. In the all-purpose military vehicle they received, they visited the refugee camps in Germany, interviewed interested Czech students, and assigned individual scholarships to those who seemed to be the best qualified.

When Jozka Grohman, a well-known Czech Communist Party member and, at that time, President of the International Students Union, scheduled the Union's international meeting for

September 1948 in Paris, it was clear that he was going to put on his agenda a defense of the Communist coup d'état in Czechoslovakia. The Union of Czechoslovak Students in Exile decided to send a delegation to Paris to protest his version of the communist takeover. Jan Triska was chosen to be part of the delegation. Although they were barred from participating in the assembly, they nonetheless succeeded in holding a well-publicized and well-attended press conference, where they offered a full report of their version of what had happened in Prague in February 1948.

On their way back to Ludwigsburg, where the Nuremberg camp had been transferred, Jan and Emil Ransdorf stopped in Geneva. Together with refugee friends they drafted a plan for an informal international learning center in Ludwigsburg, which was later realized as the Masaryk College of Czechoslovak Students in Exile. This institution became quite successful, but Jan did not have time to get involved in its future development. He was about to leave for the United States.

The Yale Law School had confirmed Jan's admission, for which he had applied while still in Prague, and also his appointment as a Sterling Fellow on full scholarship. The problem of immigration to the United States, which could have been a serious obstacle, was solved by the Displaced Persons Act passed by the US Congress in 1948, which stipulated that persons displaced during and after World War II could apply for resettlement in the United States. Jan left Bremerhaven for America to enter the Yale Law School in November 1948, making him one of the first displaced persons to arrive in the United States under the new act.

Jan's first semester at the Yale Law School was a disaster. Entering two months late, he struggled with the language (his English was largely self-taught), with adapting to the common law system, with learning how to study law in the United States, and with sudden loneliness, the depths of which he had never experienced before. However, after being granted a reprieve for entering the first semester late, Jan succeeded in overcoming these obstacles and finished his legal studies at Yale with an LL.M degree, and with only a dissertation to write to obtain a J.S.D.

But now Jan's Sterling Fellowship had expired, and it was time for him to find a paying job. For a few months he worked as an East Coast Traveling Secretary of the World Student Service Fund, but he needed to find a way to get to California so he could work on part of his dissertation with Hans Kelsen, a renowned legal scholar at the University of California in Berkeley. Under this circumstance, he accepted a position at the U.S. Army Language School in Monterey, where he taught Czech language and culture.

While in Monterey, Jan received an offer from U.C. Berkeley to do research at the School of Law and simultaneously at the Department of Political Science. The subject of the research was Eleanor Roosevelt's Declaration of Human Rights, which, at that time, was relatively new and widely discussed. Lecturing on this topic in Salinas, he met his future wife, Carmel, a teacher at Salinas Union High School. Once the research was finished, they married and moved to St. Louis, where they both taught at various schools. In 1952 Jan finished and defended his dissertation for the Yale Law School. His dissertation, entitled "State and Government Succession: Theory and Policy," dealt in part with refugees, ". . . a matter which proved to be

one of the most characteristic international issues of the twentieth century,” Jan later wrote in his memoirs.

Very much influenced by Professor Harold D. Lasswell at Yale, Jan wanted to specialize in international law and broaden his legal studies by relating them to the social sciences. Political science seemed to him to be the best complementary subject. He was admitted to the Harvard University Department of Government, and in 1957, after three full years in Cambridge, he left Harvard with a Ph.D. in political science.

At that time the Hoover Institution at Stanford University was planning a research project on international treaties. The project was to be headed by one historian and one lawyer, Robert Slusser of Columbia University and Jan Triska, respectively. Out of this project came two books: *A Calendar of Soviet Treaties* (Stanford University Press, 1959) and *The Law, Science and Policy of Soviet Treaties* (Stanford University Press, 1962). One of the findings of this research was that as a treaty partner, the Soviet Union was not markedly different from the United States. Both had broken treaties with their partners from time to time. The project ended in 1958.

Subsequently, Jan Triska was offered the position of assistant professor of political science in the Department of Government at Cornell University, which he accepted. Then in 1960 he was appointed associate professor in the Department of Political Science at Stanford University. Among other responsibilities, he was charged with setting up an international relations program funded by the Ford Foundation. At the beginning of the 1960 summer break, the Ford Foundation sent Jan on a trip around the world, the main purpose of which was to get acquainted with people working in the field of international relations, and initiate worldwide contacts with appropriate institutions.

Once established at Stanford, Professor Triska specialized in the study of the Soviet Union and the communist systems of Eastern Europe. He founded The Stanford Studies of the Communist System, a group of scholars and mostly graduate students who engaged in research projects and wrote for publication. His time at Stanford was divided between teaching and writing. He took his teaching responsibilities seriously. In his international law course, usually a class of 75 – 100 or more undergraduate students, each student was expected to deliver, at least once each quarter, an oral brief of an assigned case study. He made a point of getting to know every student in each of his classes and encouraged lively discussion. He kept regular office hours in order to be accessible to students and advisees. And he also taught in the overseas campuses of Vienna, Florence, and Krakow.

It would take too long to list all of Jan’s research activities in detail. Just a few examples will suffice: In 1962 he conducted research at the Munich Institute for Eastern Europe. In 1969 he pioneered survey research techniques in studying the difference in social participation of communist party and non-party members in Yugoslavia. In 1980 he received a fellowship at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, DC, which included research travel in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. The results of his research appear in the 14 books he authored, co-authored, or edited throughout his career, and in his more than 60 articles. In the words of a former student and colleague, David D. Finley, professor emeritus at Colorado

College, “he kept his research free from ideology. That was unique for students of communist affairs at that time. . . What characterized his approach was to look at communism as an interconnected system and infer generalizations and theories about what was happening, rather than make moralistic judgments.” (Lisa Trei, “Political Scientist Jan Triska, Scholar of Cold War, Dies,” Stanford Report, March 12, 2003.) Associate Professor of Political Science at Stanford Michael McFaul recalls, “The message of his teaching was that you can’t group the communist countries and treat them in the same way. . . . Czechoslovakia was a radically different place from the Soviet Union. He was the first person to make me realize the difference.” (Trei, op.cit.)

In some of his later research, Professor Triska compares the Soviet Union and the United States as dominant powers exercising hegemony over subordinate states, i.e. Eastern Europe and Latin America. He concluded in 1986 that it was no longer in the national interest of superpowers to dominate subordinate states; in fact, it was detrimental to their interests. (*Dominant Powers and Subordinate States*, Duke University Press, p. 470.) He also states, “Great power status requires a doctrine, a worldview, a set of social values; their purpose is to portray the great power as a leader towards a better future,” reminding us that as the sole superpower today, our every action is subject to world-wide scrutiny, and much of the world may not like what it sees.

In his last book, *The Great War’s Forgotten Front* (Columbia University Press, 1998), Jan depicts World War I through the eyes of his father, a conscripted Austrian artillery soldier, who kept a battlefield diary and sent it to his son shortly before he died. Reliving his father’s experience through the writing of the book, Jan’s commentary on the significance of the war to the soldiers fighting it, is direct and to the point: “. . . the war had no meaning other than as a brutal interruption in their lives. They wanted the war to end, win or lose, and go home. Loyalty to the Empire became meaningless; it did not last much past the first firefight, Survival was what mattered. . . Remaining alive was the chief and overwhelming concern. All else was irrelevant.” (Prologue, p. 3.)

In this same book, Jan suggests that to confront the predatory aspects of globalism, nation-states would do well to join other nation-states to assist each other “in protecting their own economies, politics, societies, and environments from external dangers.” (Epilogue, p. 154.) In sum, “The people of this planet are no longer separable. It is no longer possible or preferable to go it alone. No countries, regions, or continents are islands unto themselves any longer. The systematic, rational cooperation of all with all is now both inevitable and essential.” (Op cit., p. 155.)

Jan Triska retired from Stanford University in 1989. However, his life did not grow simpler. In 1990, after the Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, he participated in a political science seminar organized by the Palacky University in Olomouc for Czech professors schooled in Marxism-Leninism. In 1991 he was invited by the Austrian Institut fuer Wissenschaften fuer Menschen to join an international commission that was to set criteria for the selection of Czech, Polish, and Hungarian recipients of scholarships distributed by the European Union. He consulted with legal scholars from the Institute of State and Law of the Czech Academy of Sciences on the coordination of legal research with teaching in the Charles University Law

School, the improvement of legal education being sorely needed in the post-communist period. He continued his involvement with SVU, the Czechoslovak Society of Arts and Sciences, for which he worked in various capacities from the 1970s onward. In 1990 he was elected SVU president for a second time. In this capacity he was in charge of the 1992 SVU Congress in Prague and Bratislava -- for many of the participants their first return "home" after leaving Czechoslovakia -- an intellectually and emotionally charged event that led to the reevaluation of the goals and direction of SVU.

For his service to the Czech Republic, Jan Triska received the Medal of Merit, First Grade, bestowed by President Vaclav Havel in Washington, D.C. in November 2002. Jan died on February 20, 2003 at the age of 81. He is survived by his wife, two sons, and four granddaughters.

Jan Triska led a full life. The accidental fact of his birth placed him in the very center of Europe at a time of great upheaval and social change. He would have preferred to be a Czech diplomat rather than an academic scholar, but in the United States his love of learning led inevitably to the universities. He was proud to be an American citizen, yet everywhere he went, he represented the best of what it was to be Czech. Having an American wife, he kept a foothold in both cultures. He truly enjoyed being a father; his sons at every age were his companions and playmates, and his wife of fifty-one years was his partner in the fullest sense. Lively and energetic, he made a point of balancing discipline and hard work with savoring life's pleasures. Throughout his life, he made time for participating in the sports he loved, including fly-fishing; for exploring the four corners of the earth; for reading good novels; for keeping in touch with his many, many friends. Though a small, sturdily built man, Jan Triska was large and generous in spirit. We will truly miss him.