

**Jan Masaryk, As Seen Through the Eyes of Marcia Davenport**  
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**Introduction**

This presentation is intended to illustrate Jan Masaryk's earlier life, up to his death in 1948 by suicide or, probably, murder. It does not dwell on the post-war era in which, for forty years, Czechoslovakia was held hostage by the Communist regime. This period is best described by historians who can weigh the circumstances of life under the Soviet regime. A full account of the political machinery existing at that time in Czechoslovakia was also described by the author, Marcia Davenport in her moving book, *Too Strong for Fantasy*.

**Jan Masaryk**

Marcia Davenport, the well-known American author whose novels were translated into several languages, discovered Czechoslovakia while she was in Europe gathering material for a biography of Mozart.

It was during the 1930s that she visited Prague and fell in love with the city, as well as with the Czech people. Following the Munich incident and the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1939, she became even more enamored with the country and vowed to help its people as much as possible. It was then that she wrote her compelling novel, *The Valley of Decision*, in which she describes the tragedy of Czechoslovakia.

During this time, the Czech Foreign Minister, Jan Masaryk, was already known by the New York society, although Marcia Davenport had not actually met him until some years later. Their first meeting was in November 1941, only a few weeks before Pearl Harbor, when Marcia was introduced to Jan by a mutual friend. She had already heard of this suave foreigner, but was not particularly interested in his persona, since – in her circles – he possessed various superficial qualities that had earned him the nickname 'Playboy of the Western World.' And, although there was talk about his charm and wit, the stories of his eccentric life did not greatly appeal to her nature.

It was not, therefore, until several years later that she had come to alter her perception of Jan's virtues and discovered his positive qualities. By then, of course, they had become close friends. Their common bond, Jan's mission for his homeland and Marcia's goal to help the Czechoslovak people, laid a foundation for a lasting friendship.

During the years of the Second World War, Jan often flew from London to New York, dropping in unexpectedly on Marcia or calling and asking her to meet him at various gatherings of Czechoslovaks residing in the United States.

According to Marcia Davenport, Jan had numerous friends and some relatives in the United States. There were cousins from his mother's side, Charlotte Garrigue of Boston, and friends he had made earlier. Having lived for a number of years in London as well in America, Jan felt quite at home in the Western part of the world. He had an enormous gift for language. His command of both British and the American English was extraordinary. He spoke the language of the educated as well as that of the common people; he knew the slang and the idioms

of both. It was hard to believe that he was not a native of either country, so flawless was his accent. Yet, he remained first and foremost a Czechoslovak.

When Marcia and Jan first met, Jan was 55 years old. He was a very tall man, over six feet, with a stout build. He walked with an easy but confident stride, hardly seeming to touch the ground. He was quite corpulent with fine small hands he often used in gestures to emphasize what he said. He was bald and jowly with a high forehead and brown, deep-set eyes that were dark and very expressive. They mirrored his wit and moodiness, as well as a happy, child-like innocence, but they also showed profound sadness with a hint of tragedy.

Jan Masaryk had enormous charm. He was well liked by most of the people who met him, even though he possessed many faults. He was a man of diversity and multiple tastes in people, often booming with jokes and laughter. At the same time, though, he could be reserved and even secretive. He used his disarming charm to quickly make friends, but then he kept them at a respectable distance. Every inch a diplomat, he was good at sizing up people and striking just the proper tone with them. Overall, Jan Masaryk was a very complex man.

In 1914, at the outbreak of World War I, Jan was 28 years old. He had been on his own for about ten years, without any specific accomplishments to his credit. As a young man, he must have been a disappointment to his scholarly father. Here was Tomas Masaryk who had come a long way from his modest ancestry: from illiterate serf to professor of philosophy and eventually, a seat in the Austrian Parliament. Jan possessed none of his father's ambition. One of four Masaryk children, he was bored with the intellectual conversations of his parents and often would slip out of the house to enjoy the company of his young friends and the mischief they would get into.

Jan inherited just two skills from his parents. He had his mother's good ear for music and played the piano quite beautifully and mostly by ear. He had an enormous repertoire of folk music, a quality that made him exceedingly popular with the young generation. From his father he inherited his skill as a good horseman. However, neither of these two virtues was significant enough to assure the twenty-year-old a suitable job. Fortunately, he did possess one other asset: his mother, Charlotte Garrigue, had taught him perfect English. And, thus, when his father gave him less than a hundred dollars and sent him off to pursue his luck in America, he at least had the advantage of his excellent command of English.

Jan entered the United States as an immigrant. He did not look up his mother's relatives or seek out his father's friends. Neither did he try to get in touch with the large communities of Slavic people who resided in the Midwest. Instead, he chose to do things on his own. He took whatever meager jobs he could find, such as filling inkwells or running errands. Eventually he accepted a job at a friend's foundry and supplemented his income by playing the piano in movie houses.

Ten years later, in 1914, he returned home to Czechoslovakia. Jan, who by now had reached his twenty-eighth birthday, was immediately drafted into the Imperial Army.

The war ended in the fall of 1918 and events that followed were fairytale-like, almost unreal. Tomas Masaryk, the Parliamentary leader of a newly independent people, became the first president of the Czechoslovak Republic. He was worshipped by his nation, and so was his

son, Jan. With the wisdom and stability he had acquired through the years, Jan became the personification of Masaryk's Republic. He was the idol of the Czech people. The Masaryk family was reunited at Hradcany in Prague and a new, happier era had begun for both men.

President Masaryk had never lost contact with his American friend, the industrialist Charles Crane. Their friendship resulted in the appointment of Crane's son, Richard, as the first American Ambassador to Czechoslovakia, while Crane's daughter, Frances Crane Letherbee, eventually married Jan Masaryk. Their childless bond lasted, however, less than five years.

During the 1920's, Jan became Charge d'Affaires in Washington and in 1925 he was appointed Czechoslovak Ambassador to the United Kingdom (Great Britain). The years that followed marked political as well as social success for the President's son. He became the darling of British society.

Unfortunately, with the rise of Hitler's power and the Nazi expansion, all this came to an abrupt end. The unexpected betrayal by Britain and France at Munich marked the beginning of a dark age for Czechoslovakia. Tragic events followed in rapid succession.

On September 14, 1937 – on Jan's birthday – President Masaryk died; his right-hand man, Eduard Benes, became his successor.

In 1938, the Sudetenland, part of Czechoslovakia, was detached and annexed to Germany. The following March, Hitler marched into Prague, and Czechoslovakia lost autonomy, becoming the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia under Germany.

In December 1941, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and the United States went to war. These were turbulent times for most of the world. Still, in May 1945, with U.S. armies joining forces with the allies, the war was won and Germany defeated.

Unfortunately for the Czech people, freedom was short lived. In less than three years the country became a vassal of the communist Soviet Union.

Jan was devastated. He felt totally helpless but he was not going to surrender his homeland to the Soviets. He would rather die. His British friends, aware of the looming disaster, warned him to leave before it was too late. As it happened, the end came even earlier than they had all expected.

On March 7, 1948, Marcia Davenport departed for London with Jan's solemn promise that he would follow within a short time. They were to meet in London and marry soon after.

On March 10, 1948, just three days later, Marcia received an urgent phone call from Prague.

That morning Jan was found in the courtyard beneath his window – dead.