

## Ferdinand Peroutka

Ferdinand Peroutka, a prominent Czech journalist, dramatist and novelist, had a life that was closely tied to the history of Czechoslovakia, its triumphs and its defeats.

Born in Prague on February 6, 1895, Peroutka started writing articles for various magazines, particularly Jan Herben's *Èas*, as a high school student at Královské Vinohrady Lyceum. After a free Czechoslovak state was established, young Peroutka, then editor of the liberal daily *Tribuna*, published a series of articles entitled *Jací jsme* (*Who We Are*), in which he criticized some of Thomas Garrigue Masaryk's historical and political concepts. These articles earned him public interest and the curiosity of the president of the republic.

In 1924, with Masaryk's financial and moral help, Peroutka founded his own political weekly review, *Pøítomnost*, which quickly became the leading voice of Czechoslovak liberalism in the period between the two wars. Peroutka introduced Masaryk to the legendary "Friday Circle," an informal but influential group of Czechoslovakia's intellectual elite, organized by Karel Èapek, the renowned playwright and novelist and Peroutka's close friend. At the same time Peroutka was editor in chief of the daily *Lidové noviny*, the country's most prestigious independent daily newspaper.

When *Pøítomnost* was in its early stages Masaryk's influence was strong, and Peroutka was frequently called the main journalist of the "Castle" (official residence of Czech kings and presidents of the Czechoslovak Republic). The leading articles in both *Pøítomnost* and *Lidové noviny*, however, indicate that, although he supported Masaryk's main political and moral principles, he applied to them his distinctive individualism and critical objectivity. Peroutka, by introducing a new way of thinking and writing he called realistic, on the pages of *Pøítomnost* unfolded both his political and his literary critical talent. Especially well known are his critical analyses and profiles of works of such domestic authors as F. X. Šalda, Vítizslav Nezval, Vladislav Vanèura, and others. *Pøítomnost* was also a literary political instrument of the Èapek generation. Karel and Josef Èapek, Josef Kodíèek, Edmond Konrád, and others from the Friday Circle published their articles in *Pøítomnost*. Milena Jesenská, a Czech journalist of the interwar period, who entered the literary world as the recipient of Franz Kafka's *Letters to Milena*, was the last secretary of *Pøítomnost*.

In the 1930s, in addition to his journalistic activities, Peroutka published an extensive literary work, *Building of the State*, in which he characterized the leading figures, political parties, and trends involved in the creation and the initial years of the first Czechoslovak Republic. He collected his major political and literary essays and published them as books entitled *Who We Are* (1924), *Struggle for Today* (1925), and *Yes and No* (1932). In 1939 he published a compilation of literary critical essays under the title *Personality, Chaos and Bad Habits*.

During the Nazi occupation Peroutka and Jesenská struggled to keep *Pøítomnost* going. On April 5, 1939, Peroutka wrote, "*Starting today we will have to get used to doing 'non-*

*political politics,' as Masaryk used to call it, therefore, collecting all our intellectual and physical strength, our might and fortitude that every small nation depends on during difficult times."* In the summer of 1939 the Nazis closed *Přítomnost* down. Shortly after that, on September 1, 1939, Peroutka was arrested and spent the war in the Nazi concentration camps Buchenwald and Dachau.

After the liberation of Czechoslovakia, Peroutka returned to Prague and renewed the daily *Přítomnost* under the name *Dnešek* and became chief editor of *Svobodné noviny* (formerly *Lidové noviny*). His strong support of democracy clashed with the interests of the Communists; during the February 1948 coup, he was one of the first to be expelled from the Organization of Czech Journalists and Syndicate of Czech Writers. *Dnešek* was banned, and Jan Drda took over *Svobodné noviny*. In the spring of 1948 Peroutka went into exile.

He spent time in London, writing several commentaries for the BBC, founding Masaryk Democratic Union, and writing the essay *Byl Beneš vinen? (Was Beneš Guilty?)*. Later Peroutka settled in New York and became one of the founding members of the Council of Free Czechoslovakia, serving on its first Executive Committee and Board of Directors.

Beginning in the early 1950s Peroutka took an active part in building Radio Free Europe. He was chief editor of Czechoslovak broadcasting and wrote more than a thousand commentaries called "Sunday Talks" that were beamed to Czechoslovakia. At first Peroutka read them; later they were broadcast by other reporters. Peroutka's first speech was at the official opening ceremony in May 1951.

In Czechoslovakia Peroutka was considered the most active enemy of the Communist regime and was often viciously attacked by the media, especially by the Czech press.

Even after he retired, Peroutka continued writing these weekly political, cultural, and literary commentaries, in which he analyzed events both in Czechoslovakia and around the world. They were published as *We Shall Continue* (Toronto, 1984).

In exile Peroutka published several books, one of the most important of which was *Democratic Manifesto* (New York, 1959), in which he fought for preserving humanity and democracy:

Democracy's effort to restore to words their respectable content, to have terms clearly defined again, is more than a political struggle. It is a struggle for a great heritage from past generations—the linking of people by words that correspond to reality.

The novel *A Cloud and Waltz*, in which Peroutka describes his own war experience and looks with critical eyes at the Czech national character during the Protectorate, was first published in Toronto by 68 Publishers. It is a remake of a drama first shown at the National Theatre in Prague in 1947.

Peroutka died of cancer in New York on April 20, 1978, at the age of 83. Jiří Voskovec, the main speaker at Peroutka's funeral, characterized Peroutka's life and work in the following words:

Peroutka was a journalist in the mold of the 19th . . . century, when to write essays, to analyze events or political and cultural manifestoes and polemics, as well as plays, poetry and novels was to engage in closely related disciplines. . . He helped to shape his era; the life of society as the ways of the world, were the constant concerns of his days . . . He knew the terrible power of the press, yet used it responsibly with moderation as an experienced ranger will use his gun, but also with the firmness of a vigilant guardian of truth. . . . Yes, a fantastic, admirable phenomenon. A man, who for more than half-a-century stood-by his own choosing alone-on guard to defend freedom and truth. And he did it systematically, patiently, unreservedly with a devotion self-understood to him.

In 1991 Peroutka's ashes were returned to Prague and buried at the Vyšehrad Cemetery.

History always comprised light and darkness, possibility and necessity, reasonableness and error. Possibilities always had to be developed through conscious effort, results always had to be guarded, errors always had to be rectified. Today we unite to repeat and to revive the old human choice between freedom and unfreedom. Else history would relapse to the level of a pile of incidents and accidents. Then even our ancestors would lose their honor and greatness at our hands.

Ferdinand Peroutka, *Democratic manifesto*

-Hoover Institution Archives, 2007