

Czech Routes/Roots: Variations on a Theme

'In London, I painted Prague again from memory, and called the painting Nostalgia.'

Oskar Kokoschka.ⁱ

'We talked [...] of the Czech and Moravian folk dances and customs which Feigl so loved and often painted in London- nostalgic memories of the past. He hummed one of the melancholy tunes, he looked in the large room where we were sitting at a picture of Prague with the Charles bridge connecting the little side of the town with the Altstadt'.

J. P. Hodin

Long since Shakespeare endowed her in *The Winter's Tale* with 'deserts' and a 'sea-coast', 'fair Bohemia', the westernmost and largest historical region of the Czech lands, has been the subject of much mythologising, misinformation and misunderstanding. Indeed, in September 1938, despite being headline news, to the British, Czechoslovakia was at once an exotic and unknown entity. Due in part to a degree of geographical as well as cultural insularity, combined with a centuries old ambivalence towards continental Europe, in a BBC broadcast Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain declared: 'How horrible, fantastic, incredible, it is that we should be digging trenches and trying on gas-masks here because of a quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing!' And yet, as early as the fourteenth century, it had been recognised that he who ruled Bohemia effectively controlled the crossroads of Central Europe and the strategic importance of this beautiful and ancient territory has been the cause of many of the more turbulent chapters in her history.ⁱⁱ

Czechoslovakia was founded in October 1918 as one of the central European successor states of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the end of the First World War. Consisting of Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia and Carpathian Ruthenia, it was a multi-ethnic state with Czechs and Slovaks as constituent peoples. Democracy thrived during the interwar period, so much so that of all the newly established Central European states, only Czechoslovakia preserved a democratic government until the outbreak of the Second World War.

In the wake of the Munich Conference which resulted in the cession of the Sudetenland to Germany, Chamberlain announced: '[...] for the second time in history, a British Prime Minister has returned from Germany bringing peace with honour. I believe it is peace in our time.' Far from sated, however, by such an outrageous act of piracy, Hitler had been emboldened and on 1st September 1939 war began. Nazi occupation of 'rump' Czechoslovakia resulted in mass displacement and by December 1939 some 12,000 refugees from Czechoslovakia were resident in Britain, a figure comprising 6,000 Czechoslovaks, 3,000 Sudeten Germans, 300 other Czech minorities, 1,000 Reich Germans, 800 Austrians and 800 unclassified individuals.ⁱⁱⁱ Of those registered with the Czech Refugee Trust Fund (formerly the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia) - a voluntary charitable organisation responsible for 'refugees whose prominence in opposition to Nazism and Fascism had brought their liberty and even their lives into danger', and who therefore needed 'to be

rescued' - approximately 67% were Jewish, while more than half were 'wholly dependent upon the Trust for financial support' and not allowed to work. One of the many problems to confront the Trust was how to adapt a scheme for short term assistance that had not envisaged accommodating and maintaining refugees for an indefinite period, and certainly not in such large numbers. A solution lay in the hostel system which was more economical than private accommodation. There were seventeen directly controlled hostels at the commencement of the Trust and a further twenty-two were opened in the period to March 1940. These were located largely in London but also as far afield as Wales and Inverness in order to disperse the refugees.^{iv} Despite the fact that, as Jana Burešová notes, "some refugees did not readily adjust to hostel life with its shared, often overcrowded rooms, domestic duties and emphasis on self-sufficiency in order to supplement the 10 shillings which the Trust sent weekly to hostel wardens for every maintained resident", the majority were co-operative and supportive.^v

Following its forced division and partial incorporation into Nazi Germany, the Czechoslovak state did not *de facto* exist and Britain became the centre of the Czechoslovak resistance movement abroad, hosting President Beneš and the Czechoslovak Government in Exile between 1940 and 1945. Chamberlain's shocking pronouncement revealed that despite being headline news, little was known about Czechoslovakia's cultural heritage. Patriotic exiles in Britain determined to remedy this through the activities of multi-faceted entities including social and cultural organisations such as the Czechoslovak Institute. Established at President Beneš's behest and formally opened by Anthony Eden, Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, in January 1941, the Institute was designed to showcase Czechoslovak culture and was responsible for exhibiting the work of several of the artists represented in *Czech Routes* including Bedřich Feigl, Oskar Kokoschka, Freda Salvendy and Geza Szobel, before closing in 1948 following Czechoslovakia's Communist coup. The Institute frequently co-operated not only with the Anglo-Sudeten Club, conceived as "a cultural, social and political meeting place" for those of Sudeten origin and members of the British public, but also with other exile organisations including the Austrian Centre, the Free German League of Culture and the Artists International Association, their members united both by "profession, and probably also [by] refugee status"^{vi}. The Czechoslovak-British Friendship Club along with the Czechoslovak Army's SOKOL branch and regional clubs also played a vital role.^{vii}

It is perhaps not as well-known as it should be that Czechs and Slovaks made a significant contribution to Britain's war effort. 3,500 Czechoslovak pilots, as well as soldiers of the Czechoslovak Brigade fighting in France who managed to escape after her fall, were stationed at Cholmondeley Park, where, in July 1940, the Czechoslovak forces in the UK were officially formed. Between 1940 and 1945 2,507 Czechs and Slovaks served in four squadrons, officially employed by the RAF, and a further 5,623 soldiers served in the Czechoslovak Brigade. Indeed, in 1940 Czechoslovak airmen represented, after the Commonwealth nations, the second largest national contribution (after the Poles) to the Allied Forces during the Battle of Britain. It is fitting therefore, that sculptor Franta Bělský, a number of whose works are included in *Czech Routes*, should have been commissioned to design a war memorial in Prague to the 544 Czechs and Slovaks killed serving with the RAF during war.^{viii} The 1st Czechoslovak Armoured Brigade, founded in 1943, was sent to France not long after the D-Day landings to besiege the 15,000 German soldiers remaining in Dunkirk. The brigade suffered heavy casualties during the siege and it was not until the 9th May 1945 that the German garrison finally surrendered to General Alois Liška.

Post-war, approximately 50% of the Czechoslovak refugees who had been admitted to Britain remained, many applying for naturalisation. Meanwhile pre-war Czechoslovakia was re-established with the exception of Subcarpathian Ruthenia, which was annexed by the Soviet Union and incorporated into the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic. 90% of the ethnic German population was subsequently expelled leaving some 250,000 people, many married to Czechs, some anti-fascists and those required for post-war reconstructive work, resident in Czechoslovakia. From 1948 to 1990, Czechoslovakia was part of the Eastern Bloc and ruled by a Communist totalitarian regime. A period of political liberalisation in 1968, known as the Prague Spring, was forcibly ended when the Soviet Union, assisted by several other Warsaw Pact countries, invaded. In 1989 the Czechoslovaks peacefully deposed their government and, following the Velvet Revolution in 1993, the state was renamed the Czech and Slovak Federal Republic, consisting of two sovereign states, the Czech Republic (Czechia) and the Slovak Republic (Slovakia).

With the accession of both the Czech Republic and Slovakia to the European Union in May 2004, Czech and Slovak peoples gained the right to live and work in any of its member states. The Office for National Statistics estimates that 45,000 Czech-born immigrants were resident in the UK in 2013 while an estimated 60,000 to 90,000 Slovaks were living in the UK as of last year. It is interesting to note the preference of Czech born immigrants for north (as well as central) London, specifically Golders Green, Finchley and Highgate, as indicated by the 2001 census, as well as the presence of the Czech and Slovak Bar and Restaurant in West Hampstead, originally acquired in the late 1940s as a meeting place for Czech and Slovak immigrants, many of whom had fought alongside the Allied Forces during the war, located a mere stone's throw from Ben Uri's home on Boundary Road.

Czech Routes is the fourth in Ben Uri's series of exhibitions designed to highlight the contribution of émigré artists to Britain since 1900, succeeding previous exhibitions on German, Polish and Austrian artists (2017-18). Featuring the work of 21 painters, printmakers and sculptors, many of whom fled to Britain as racial and political refugees from National Socialism, *Czech Routes* marks the 80th anniversary of Hitler's invasion of "rump" Czechoslovakia on 15th March 1939 - the Sudetenland, Czechoslovakia's northern frontier, having already ceded to Germany under the Munich Agreement of 29th September 1938. The exhibition showcases works drawn primarily from the Ben Uri Collection alongside external loans from private collections, and previously unseen archival material, celebrating the contribution of selected Czechoslovak émigré artists to British culture and highlighting their experiences, impact and legacy.

While portraitist and pioneering printmaker, Emil Orlik made his first trip to Britain in 1898, the majority of Czechoslovak artists exhibited, including Franta Bělský, Jacob Bornfriend, Dorrit Epstein, Bedřich Feigl and Walter Trier, along with Austrian expressionist (and Czechoslovak citizen), Oskar Kokoschka, and German photomontagist, John Heartfield, made forced journeys to the UK immediately prior to the outbreak of the Second World War. These also include sculptor Anita Mandl and painter-printmaker Käthe Strenitz, just two of the 669 *Kindertransportees* rescued by British humanitarian Nicholas Winton. Also represented are works by subsequent generations of Czechoslovak artists including Irena Sedlecká, who fled her country's totalitarian Communist regime in the 1960s, as well as those who, between the 1970s and 1990s, have made the positive decision to immigrate to Britain to study and develop professionally, namely contemporary multidisciplinary artists Tereza Bušková, Mila Fürstová and Tereza Stehliková.

The Ben Uri Collection, the most comprehensive and important repository of works by late 19th, 20th and 21st century immigrant artists in the U.K. and the international museum sector, includes more than thirty works by thirteen Czechoslovak artists - Yehuda Bacon, Edith Birkin, Naomi Blake, Jacob Bornfriend, Bedřich Feigl, Leo Haas, Walter Herz, Scarlet Nikolska, Emil Orlik, Freda Salvendy, Käthe Strenitz, Walter Trier and Shraga Weil - of which ten feature in *Czech Routes*. Indicative of the museum's eclectic history of acquisition via gifts as well as by direct purchase, the presence of such works in the collection is bound up too with Ben Uri's rich exhibition history. Works by Bornfriend, Trier, Feigl and Strenitz were included in Ben Uri Art Gallery's *Summer Exhibition of Paintings, Sculpture and Drawings by Contemporary Artists* in 1944, while Salvendy's *Prague* was included in *Ben Uri Collection of Paintings, Sculpture and Drawings* exhibition in 1946. An exhibition of *Paintings by Walter Trier and Sculpture by Else Fraenkel and Erna Nonnenmacher* followed in 1947 with Feigl and Bornfriend, along with Frank Auerbach, Claude Rogers, Josef Herman and Archibald Ziegler, featuring in *Twelve Contemporary Artists* in 1958. Feigl was the subject too of solo exhibitions in 1959 and in 1964 (which included *The Restaurant*), in celebration of his 80th birthday while drawings, lithographs and etchings by Yehuda Bacon, referred to in this instance as an Israeli artist, were shown in 1957 and succeeded by an exhibition dedicated to Käthe Strenitz's paintings in 1961, and subsequently, by *Shraga Weil - Melitta Schiffer*, including *Variations on a Theme* (1957), the following year. The work of Leo Haas was represented in Ben Uri's 1967 exhibition, simply titled, *Graphics* while in 1974 *Graphics by Jacob Bornfriend and Alfred Harris* was mounted at the gallery's Dean Street premises. The latter included Bornfriend's *Prague Series* - based on work he was forced to leave behind in 1939 when he fled to England from Czechoslovakia, as well as his *Jewish Festival* works, based on studies for the mural he painted for the library of Jews' College, London, now in the Ben Uri Collection. In 1975, the year after Scarlet Nikolska immigrated to Great Britain, the Ben Uri Art Gallery held a solo exhibition of her work, while in 1998 *Czech Jewish Artists from the Collection* featured her *Sabbath in Prague* painting along with Walter Herz's *Samson* (1947) and Emil Orlik's *Head of a Man*. This rich history is something that *Czech Routes* has sought both to highlight and to build upon while the museum continues to augment its collection with the objective of assembling the UK's most comprehensive anthology of representative works by immigrant artists to Britain since 1900, in parallel with the work of the Ben Uri Research Unit.

In an article on the subject of 'The Visual Arts and Judaism', celebrated Czechoslovak art historian J.P. Hodin quotes Jacob Bornfriend's inquisitive response to the question 'as to whether the Jewish type as a stylistic feature also represents an element of Jewish art': 'Is there a Czech style, an English style, a Polish style?'^{ix} A rhetorical question of sorts, Bornfriend's retort reveals a distinct ambivalence towards generalisation and classification by creed or country. Without wishing to tackle the subject of a 'Czech style' at present, it is possible, however, to identify in a number of the works explored, nostalgia for a distant homeland as well as evocations of particular kinds of mourning and melancholia. These include Freda Salvendy's *Prague* (1947), a depiction of the Czechoslovak capital in a soft wash of muted watercolours, Scarlet Nikolska's *Sabbath in Prague*, indicative of a kind of affectionate piety for a vanished world rendered in ochres, and browns enlivened by white, yellow and blue and Bedřich Feigl's equally engrossing, *The Restaurant*. Inspired by the Slavonic atmosphere of the Czechoslovak capital and reminiscent too of his Berlin days, Feigl returned repeatedly to the motif of coffee houses and restaurants, which he referred to as 'the marketplaces of life'. Attempting to recreate continental 'kaffe haus' culture in London, Feigl and others gathered

at Cosmo, West Hampstead, perhaps the subject of *The Restaurant*, where one could ‘spend all day reading [...] over a single cup of coffee or consuming Schnitzel and Strudel with fellow refugees’.^x

Nostalgia is evident too in the work of contemporary artists Tereza Bušková, Mila Fürstová and Tereza Stehliková. Bušková seeks in her practice to celebrate and reinterpret Slavic as well as European rituals through the media of print, performance and video. A series of three prints, produced as if they were postcards of the mythical town of *Erdingtonia* (2016), commemorate the clipping of the church - an ancient and almost forgotten English tradition as part of which families would flock to local churches, holding hands with each other in order to encircle it with open arms - by combining English customs with Bohemian wedding celebrations. Fürstová’s *Nest* (2011) and *Town Tree* (2012) examine ‘universal and personal mythologies’. In the artist’s own words, the technique of etching reflects and informs the spirit of her work, for as the image “quietly grow[s]...a fragile silver line emerges from a dark background as if a distant memory was traced from the unconscious”. Both *Nest* and *Town Tree*, in its depiction, perhaps, of Fürstová’s Czech roots, also resonate with the themes of identity, migration and belonging. Similarly, in exploring how moving images can be used to capture and communicate both multi-sensory experiences and embodied memory, Stehliková too enters into a cross-disciplinary dialogue with her contemporaries. Her photographs which illustrate *Railtracks* (2013), a collaboration between writers John Berger and Anne Michaels, chart an elegiac, introspective and palpably atmospheric journey by train through the wintry landscapes of Southern Bohemia. Characterised by their liminality, as well as by their haunting beauty, in evading exact periodisation such images function as mythic histories unbound by time.

The exhibition is notable too for the inclusion of works which evidence the awe-inspiring stoicism of their makers, as well as the indefatigable and inextinguishable capacity of the human spirit to endure. Such works include *Ghetto* (1945/66) and *Life, The Market Place* (1945/66), two of ten works by Leo Haas in the Ben Uri Collection printed after the war using the original plate, which had been created while the artist was imprisoned in Terezín ghetto, north of Prague, as well as *Outside the Prison* (1942) by Geza Szobel, Fernand Léger’s former pupil, and subsequently, a soldier in the Czechoslovak Army in France. Expressed through the use of contrastingly light hearted, convivial subject matter the same spirit is also evident in Franta Bělský’s *Joy-Ride* (1958), Jacob Bornfreund’s *Blue Grey Fishes* (1960), Walter Trier’s *Market Woman*, Oskar Kokoschka’s *Still-Life Studio Exercise* (c. 1950) and *The Donkey*. It is likewise manifest in Dorrit Dekk’s infectiously exuberant ‘*To Tasha*’ (2010) and in Holocaust survivor, Yehuda Bacon’s *Variations on a Theme* (1957), a unique and uncharacteristic celebration of form and colour. Whether forced or free, the routes these Czech-born artists took to Britain, as well as the roots they then set down, deserve to be far better known, for, as this exhibition and accompanying publication have served to illustrate, their presence and their practice in this country have significantly enriched British art and culture and continue to do so today.

ⁱ Oskar Kokoschka cited Agnes Tieze, ed., *Oskar Kokoschka and the Prague Cultural Scene* (Köln: Wienand Verlag, 2016)

ⁱⁱ Peter Cannon-Brookes, *Czech Sculpture 1800-1938* (London: Trefoil Books, 1983)

ⁱⁱⁱ Jana Barbora Burešová, ‘The Czech Refugee Trust Fund in Britain 1939-50’, in *Exile in and from Czechoslovakia during the 1930s and 1940s*, ed. by Charmian Brinson (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009)

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} The Anglo-Sudeten Club and the Czechoslovak Institute generally hosted separate social and cultural activities, The Anglo-Sudeten Club published a newspaper but did not organise exhibitions whereas the Czechoslovak Institute organised exhibitions but had no newspaper.

^{vii} Jana Barbora Burešová, *London's Czechoslovak Institute during World War II*, Unpublished lecture, Research Centre for German and Austrian Exile Studies, Institute for Modern Languages Research, University of London. Lecture, 27th March 2019.

^{viii} The abstract memorial, 14ft high and based on aerofoils, was unveiled by President Vaclav Havel in Prague, on 8th May 1995, the 50th anniversary of Czechoslovakia's liberation.

^{ix} J.P. Hodin, 'The Visual Arts and Judaism', *Art Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Spring, 1964)

^x Daniel Snowman, *The Hitler Émigrés: The Cultural Impact on Britain of Refugees from Nazism* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2002, p.227)