

## How to Deal with a Complicated History - Is Brno and its Festival a Good Example?

by Petr Kalousek

The history of Europe in the 20th century is unfortunately to a great extent the result of tragic events, which continually affected individual countries and have left behind many deep wounds. This is particularly the case with the 1930s when in the course of a few years the whole of Europe found itself at war as the result of the ascent to power of the Nazi regime in one country. During this war and its consequences not only combatants on both sides died but the civilian population was also systematically decimated as a result of the warped ideology. I am thinking of the horrific and completely unjust annihilation of Jews during the Holocaust, but also of the violence meted out to civilians after the war, perhaps simply on account of the language that they spoke.

In the City of Brno, the second largest in the Czech Republic, people of various beliefs and languages had lived side by side for centuries until the Second World War. Roughly speaking these were Czechs, Germans and Jews, but over time it was really a question of groups that identified themselves through the language that they spoke most frequently. Bilingualism was fairly normal. These groups often joined together in their own cultural, sport and other associations, which acted as rivals with those of other communities, but nevertheless they lived together in the same city. Nationalist impulses were evident by the second half of the 19th century, and later the First World War was a further milestone, followed by the creation of Czechoslovakia and of course the rise to power of Hitler, and the Second World War. During the latter almost the entire Jewish population disappeared following transportation to concentration camps, Czech patriots and resistance fighters were murdered by Nazis, and in the months after the war the so-called 'Driving-out' of the German-speaking population took place. The most tragic days of the expulsion were the 30th and 31st May 1945 when the Brno death march occurred. Between the years 1939 and 1945 Brno lost 50,000 members of its population - almost a fifth, many of whom were members of its social elite and intelligentsia.

From a self-assured and functioning metropolis with a diverse citizenry and considerable prestige it became in the course of a few years an

undistinguished provincial centre in the European context. In the following 40 years this became worse because of the communist regime, which preferred the undistinguished and inactive void with an unaware populace.

The communists also intentionally distorted or completely concealed the post-war events, especially given that some of the perpetrators of the violent post-war excesses were actually communists and their sympathisers. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of communist regimes in Eastern Europe one might have supposed that there would be a quick reconnection with the blind alleys of history, and that previously suppressed themes would immediately be opened up. The opposite was the case. Society henceforth clammed up about certain historical events: one could say that most people simply knew nothing about the post-war events, there was no one to tell them.

When in 2000 Ondřej Liška (later Minister for Education) directed a request to the then city leadership to express its attitude to the 'Driving-out' it was met with incomprehension. Ten years after the Velvet Revolution neither the people nor the politicians had the courage to respond. Fifteen years later, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the end of the Second World War, we addressed the new City Hall leadership and organised the *Year of Reconciliation*. Tens of event organisers took part in this, the events themselves recalling what happened in the years 1939 to 1945. The then leadership of the City in the persons of Mayor Petr Vokřál and his deputy Matěj Hollan actively supported us, and thanks to them the Municipal Council adopted the so-called *Declaration of Reconciliation and a Shared Future*, in which it expressed regret for the post-war violence in Brno.

To write the text of this declaration together with my colleagues was a stimulating exercise, and the degree of satisfaction on the occasion of its acceptance was immense. For supporting these activities Mayor Vokřál was awarded the highest state honours by Germany and Austria. It is interesting, and to some degree equally sad, that today - five years later - the council is still the only political body in the Czech Republic that has officially addressed this issue.

The team working on the declaration quickly came up with a new initiative of starting the *Meeting Brno Festival*, designed to present a thematic history of



Left, the German House in Brno in 1900, demolished in 1945.

Right, the scaffolding version of the German House, erected in the same location in 2017



the region which, due to its geographical position, so convincingly illustrates history of the whole of Europe. Within the festival we remember events and personalities of the past but the aim is to engage in a dialogue with current movers and shakers and to discuss parallels for the present, and a vision of the future. We organise discussions, workshops, 'thematic walks' and each year also use various artistic forms and genres such as theatre, music, dance, film and literature to highlight a theme. Our festival is a meeting place for top artists, politicians, celebrities and diplomats with as close contact with the public as possible. Every year we try to bring to the public something from the past that may have been forgotten, perhaps due to the post-war composition of the population. In 2017 we presented the so-called German House by building a scaffolding 'replica' of a building that between the years of 1891-1945 was the social and cultural centre of the German-speaking population. (It included a large concert hall which to date has still not been replaced). Before and during the war it housed Nazi organisations and, damaged by bombing, it was later pulled down as a symbol of Nazi ideology. To date the site remains empty.

An important co-operation was established in 2017 by inviting members of the prominent Jewish industrial families of Löw-Beer, Tugendhat and Stiassny to Brno. These families had a fundamental influence on the development of the city from the second half of the 19th century, as well as its face today. None of them returned to Brno after the war. While the city of Brno is proud of their villas (the Löw-Beer and Stiassny villas and the UNESCO-listed Tugendhat Villa), some of the family members had never visited the place of their origin. It was Mrs. Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat, daughter of the couple who built the famous house, and the director of the Czech Centre in Vienna, Mojmír Jeřábek, who came up with the idea of a family reunion. We were hoping for a few of the invitations to be accepted but the result turned out to be stunning. One hundred and

twenty people, aged 2-80, from four different continents arrived in Brno, embracing an opportunity to meet their relatives, often for the first time, and see where their ancestors came from. The reunion proved very successful with the public too and sold out every single seat of the large City Council Chamber.

In 2020 we opened a visitor trail in the footsteps of the Löw-Beer family and organised a day event at the 'Schindler Factory' in Brněnec/Brünnlitz to introduce a project of a memorial to Schindler's Ark, Shoah and the Löw-Beer factory. Made famous by the Stephen Spielberg film, the factory is now acquiring a meaningful function. Mrs. Daniela Hammer-Tugendhat was the patron of the festival in 2020. We are currently working on the programme of *Meeting Brno 2021*, including making the recently excavated basement of the German House accessible to the public, and contacting visitors of interest. However, the Covid-19 pandemic makes the size of the festival and its team uncertain. Public finances in the Czech Republic are reaching a critical state due to populist politics and it is very difficult to secure funds for all cultural events, including our festival. Culture should be regarded as a key industry with a large post-crisis potential and a means of upholding moral and intellectual values. Please keep your fingers crossed for us. We want to continue with activities that show and remind us how populist politics in the past caused tragic consequences. Remembering historical events and their parallels with the present can help to sound a warning against populism and the false nationalism once again waking up in Central Europe. We want to believe that the *Meeting Brno Festival* is and will be a good example of how to deal with a complicated history and its legacy for the benefit of all who wish to see and learn.

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*Article translated from the Czech by Jana Sommerlad and Stephen Conlin*