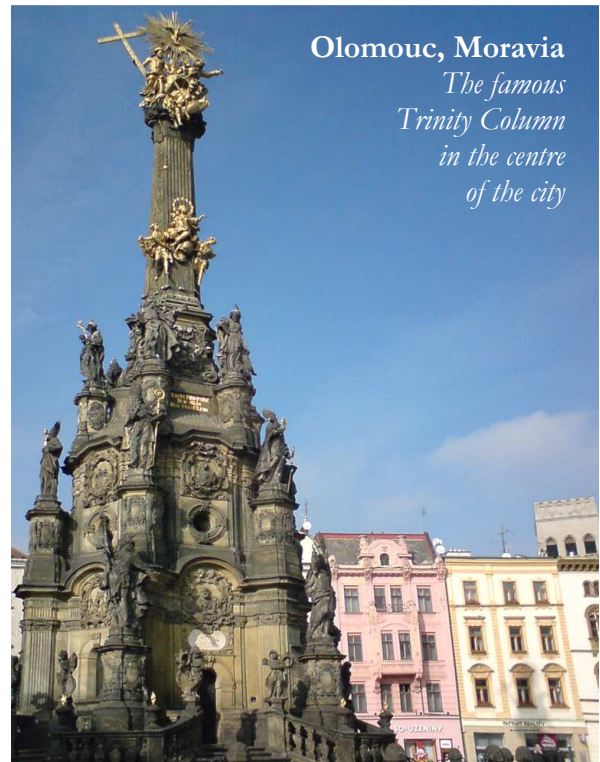


## Two Decades of Freedom – *after Twice as Long of Life without It*

I believe that Olomouc, the town I live in, is a beautiful, ancient place full of Baroque architectural monuments, including the Trinity Column, which is on the list of the UNESCO-protected heritage. It is also the seat of the second oldest university in the country, founded in mid-sixteenth century. Palacký University, as it is called now, is my *alma mater* – as a young man I studied and at present I teach English and American literature there. In 1989 the Velvet Revolution catapulted me from the position of official marginality into the position of Rector of the School, Vice-Chancellor as you would have it in England. This was an unexpected challenge and a chance to transform the university into an institution of our dreams, one ruled by liberated reason and common sense, a place recognising academic freedom and, to a reasonable extent, enjoying university autonomy. This came after long and hard years of totalitarian rule by the Communist authorities.

The task was complex and demanding, as we were to learn. But it was also exciting and elevating. I thought that after the collapse of the regime and the closing of the Institute of Marxism-Leninism, we should do something radical to demilitarise the city. Imagine that in January 1990 there were still some thirty thousand Soviet soldiers based in a town of one hundred thousand inhabitants. It looked like a fortress. Our newly elected President, Václav Havel, was getting ready to negotiate with Mikhail Gorbachev in Moscow over the withdrawal of the occupation troops from Czechoslovakia. We wanted to show that we supported him in his efforts. With our students and the new city representatives we organised a demonstration under the slogan “Thank you for the visit!” Then, to my surprise, in the mail I received a letter from the headquarters of the Soviet occupation forces summoning me to their office. In anger I wrote back explaining that their “Comrade Rector” had been replaced by a freely elected university administrator who would not take orders from foreign military officers.

To my growing surprise, just one hour later there was a telegram message personally delivered to me by a Russian soldier inviting “Mr. Rector” for a cup of tea - same time, same place. Being aware that the University would need the building of the Soviet headquarters, as we planned to reopen the Divinity



Olomouc, Moravia  
*The famous  
Trinity Column  
in the centre  
of the city*

suppression of the Prague Spring in 1968, I decided to accept the ‘invitation’. My meeting with general Meshcheriakov proved to be a highly dramatic experience.

For two hours I tried hard to explain to him that we cannot and do not want to cancel the demonstration and petition-signing that demanded the withdrawal of his troops. This was a free, democratic decision of thousands of citizens of Olomouc and vicinity, I tried to make him understand. To his threats that their might be bloodshed during the demonstration I only could say that we are not armed and I believe his soldiers cannot start shooting without his command. I even showed sympathy when he stated that they do not have anywhere to go back home to, but had to remind him that they had come uninvited to begin with.

Totally exhausted, we were reaching the end of our confrontation when the general said, “Alright, we may leave but when the Germans come here you will call us again.” Obviously he meant what he was saying. So I should not have been shocked when to my response that we would have difficulties in choosing between the two occupations he drew his gun and pointed me out of the room. In slow, hopefully dignified, movements I left the building, which I never should have visited on my own, and which I visited again after the occupation troops left, a few months later, and we moved in our

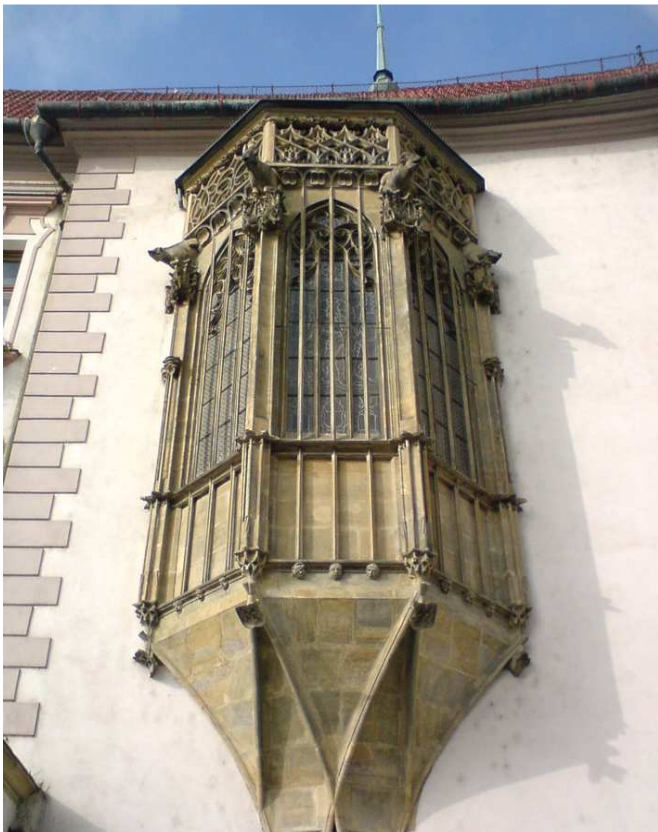
Teacher Training College.

The demonstration brought out tens of thousands of people into the square and adjacent streets, the largest crowd I ever had a chance to address. The event developed peacefully but I realised that in addressing crowds of such size you are forced to say more what they want to hear, than what you had intended to say. So I preferred to return to the classroom.

Anyway, the university continued to grow - from some five thousand students to nearly five times as many at present, so that Olomouc truly became a university town. In negotiations with the government we have won a few more buildings left behind by our own national army, and thus we continued our effort of demilitarising Olomouc. One totally dilapidated barracks has been renovated as a seat of the University Art Centre, and an armoury from the times of Maria Theresia has been turned into the first University Information Centre in the country, very much in accordance with the historical recommendation of the wise bishop of the Moravian Brethren, Jan Ámos Komenský (Comenius), who prayed that people everywhere should “make libraries out of armouries,” a message well worth considering.

### **Josef Jařab**

Rector Emeritus of Palacký University, Olomouc



**Olomouc, Moravia** *The Town Hall*