

# LIVING CULTURAL PLURALITY: A TRIBUTE TO JOSEF JAŘAB

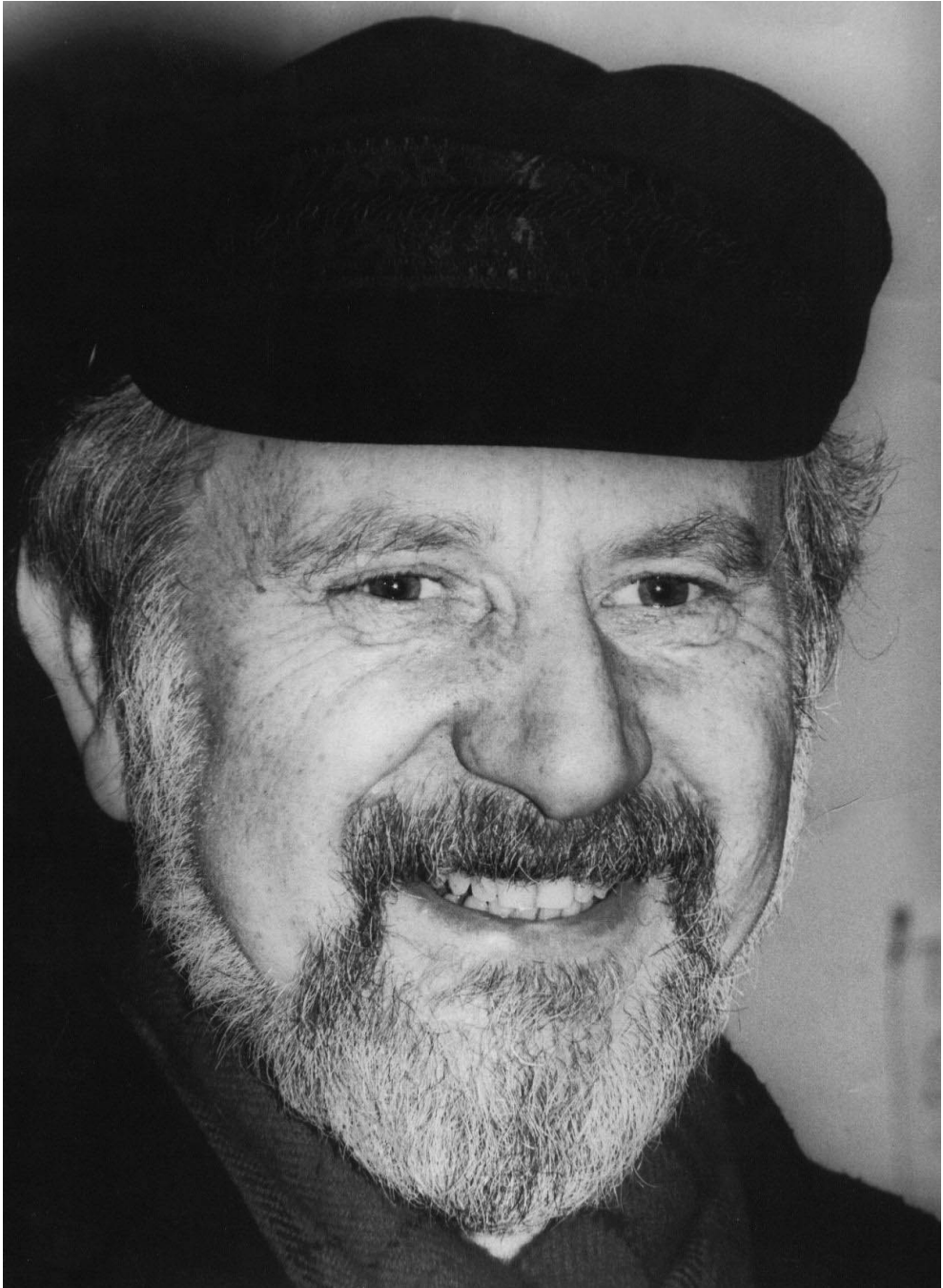
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## I

Our maiden issue of this journal is dedicated to Josef Jařab, the leading European American literature scholar. Those who know Josef Jařab will agree that he fully deserves our dedication. No other Czech scholar in the field of American studies has achieved so much, and the range of his accomplishments is unique even in the European context. Faithful to Ralph Waldo Emerson's belief that the American Scholar should learn from Nature, absorb the best from the Past, link Thought and Action, and inspire Men and Women, he grasped the opportunity in the historical moment during the "Velvet Revolution" and became, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, a leading figure on the campus of Palacký University, Olomouc. Deservedly, in December 1989 he became the first democratically elected Rector of the university since 1948 and later was driven by the historical momentum into politics. When his third term as Rector ended in 1997 (now university regulations allow only two successive terms), he concurrently held such prestigious posts as Rector of Central European University in Budapest (1997–99) and Senator in the Czech Parliament. Let us recall at least some of his most important achievements as a teacher, scholar, administrator, and politician.

## TEACHER

We had the privilege of being Josef Jařab's students not only in the Ph.D. program but also during our undergraduate studies in Olomouc in the early 1980s. His courses in American literature were an open window to the exciting world beyond the Iron Curtain. His were the courses that we looked forward to. We will always remember especially his legendary Wednesday afternoon lectures, open to the public, which became a cult event and meeting place for young intellectuals. Believe it or not, more than one young man would take his girlfriend to "JJ's" lecture instead of to a pub or to the cinema. These Wednesday lectures, like jazz performances, contained a great amount of joyful and entertaining improvisation and often took us off from the analyzed text through surprising associative jumps and speedy detours to various sides of American culture and society. Who ever heard of a lecture that was more amusing and thought-provoking than the novel that was its subject? Then reading the actual books was sometimes a sort of disappointment. Josef Jařab also opened to us the world of ethnic authors, especially African Americans,



**Josef Jařab**

Photo taken by students during the “Velvet Revolution,” appeared for the first time in the Palacký University samizdat magazine *Přetlak* on December 18, 1989

and made us acquainted with many American poets we had never heard of before, reading up to then mostly standards by Whitman, Poe, or Emily Dickinson, and, of course, the rebellious beatniks who enjoyed such extreme popularity in our country.

#### ACADEMIC DIGNITARY

Due to his personal contacts at Harvard University established during his 1989 stay, Josef Jařab was able to secure the donation of the entire personal library of Nathan Huggins, the former director of the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute, to Palacký University. This collection became a solid basis for the research of African American history and literature in Olomouc. The inauguration of the library took place during a colloquium of the Collegium for African American Research that was attended by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Werner Sollors, Lawrence Levine, Berndt Ostendorf, and other notable American Studies scholars. In 1996 he initiated the establishment of the Center for Comparative Cultural Studies, funded with the support of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic and the British Council. Josef Jařab was also the founding member of the Czech and Slovak Association for American Studies, which survived the separation of Czechoslovakia, and he became its first President. A clear recognition of Josef Jařab's international reputation was his election, in 2000, as the President of the European Association for American Studies (EAAS)—the first one ever from a former Warsaw Pact country.

During his stewardship as Rector he did much to make Palacký University a meeting place for academia and the outside world of cultural life and politics. He held public talks with the leading figures of the Czech social, cultural and political life, filling the large ceremonial hall of the Philosophical Faculty. In those dialogic performances he adroitly used his wide knowledge, great sense of humor, quick wit, and sense of improvisation and rhythm.

#### ADMINISTRATOR, POLITICIAN AND MAN OF THE PUBLIC

As the first democratically elected Rector and the leader of the “Velvet Revolution” at Palacký University he found himself in a unique position to bring about great changes. He rehabilitated the university teachers who were dismissed during the communist purges and reinstated them to their original positions, in some cases promoting them to top academic posts.

He began an extensive expansion of the university. It was his idea to take over the building of the former armory and change it into a modern university information center and library, as well as to acquire the former Jesuit College, an immense but dilapidated three-story Baroque building, and bring it into its current renaissance as the university Art Center, housing the art, music, film, and drama departments, and offering spaces for public concerts, conference receptions, and theater performances. In 1996, he organized a congress of rectors of European universities in Olomouc. During his term of office, Palacký University was awarded the prestigious Hannah Arendt Prize as

the best academic institution as regards the implementation of educational reform and research.

Very few people can combine academic careers with administration. Josef Jařab could do both and still find the energy and time to become a top-level politician. Because of the revolutionary atmosphere, he was naturally drawn into the world of regional politics (for instance, he helped to negotiate the withdrawal of the Soviet army from Olomouc, where the largest Russian contingent in the Czech Republic was situated). It is difficult enough to be elected into the Senate of the Czech Republic if one is not a member of one of the major political parties, and it is even more difficult to be re-elected under the same conditions. Josef Jařab succeeded, and with no intent to be passive. In 2001 he became the member of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg, in December 2002 he was appointed Chairman of the Committee for Foreign Affairs, Defense, and Security of the Czech Senate. His merits gained official recognition in 2005 when he received the Woodrow Wilson Freedom Award from the US Embassy in Prague. He was the first Czech who received this prize, and so far the last.

#### SCHOLAR

Josef Jařab is author, editor, and co-editor of many books, including anthologies and volumes of essays. He has written numerous studies, reviews, and papers, both in Czech and English, on American authors, American ethnic cultures, cultural pluralism and multiculturalism, as well as dozens of articles on education reforms and issues concerning the transformation of higher education. He called for a compatible university education in Europe that would profit from academic freedoms and institutional autonomy but at the same time would become more open to the needs of society which would bring it the desired priority status among funds-distributing politicians. Among the most prestigious publications in that field to which he contributed are *Transforming Higher Education* (1997, ed. Madeleine F. Green) or, recently, a special issue of *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, a British scholarly review (2008). In his essay in *The New Frontiers of Europe* (2005, ed. Daniel S. Hamilton) he shows that in Europe divided by the Iron Curtain “*culture became alternative politics*” and even now, one of the relevant political goals should be the creation of “*a European cultural area*”<sup>1</sup> with its rich diversity.

Josef Jařab has been a guest of countless radio and television broadcasts. Fifty of his conversations with prominent visitors at Palacký University were collected in the book *Večerní rozmluvy* (Evening Talks, 1998). In the field of American Literature and American Studies he contributed, for example,

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1. Josef Jařab, “Culture, Knowledge and European Unity,” in *The New Frontiers of Europe: The Enlargement of the European Union – Implications and Consequences*, ed. Daniel S. Hamilton (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation; Washington: Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2005), 94, 98 (italics in original).



Josef Jařab with Allen Ginsberg in Olomouc

Photo: Pavel Herynek

to *Slovník spisovatelů: Spojené státy americké* (A Dictionary of Writers: The United States of America, 1979, by Zdeněk Vančura and others), *Eugene O'Neill: A World View* (1979, ed. Virginia Floyd), *Od Poea k postmodernismu* (From Poe to Postmodernism, 1993, ed. Martin Hilský and Jan Zelenka), *Spontaneous Mind: Selected Interviews, 1958–1996* (2001, ed. David Carter; interviews with Allen Ginsberg), and *POETic Effect and Cultural Discourses* (2003, ed. Hermann Josef Schnackertz). He edited several anthologies used by generations of students as well as teachers, translators, and editors, which have achieved almost cult status. The very first one was the still-famous *American Poetry and Poets of Four Centuries* (1976, revised editions in 1982 and 1989). His *Masky a tváře černé Ameriky* (Masks and Faces of Black America, 1985), an anthology of African American literature, was nationally sold out in approximately thirty minutes, keen readers waiting on the day of publication in queues in front of bookstores from 5 a.m. Four years later, the situation was repeated with an anthology of modern American poetry in Czech translation, named after one of Theodore Roethke's poems *Dítě na skleníku* (Child on Top of a Greenhouse, 1989); the anthology was supposed to be published three years earlier by the Jazz Section, the rebellious branch of the Czech Musicians Guild, in its extremely popular semi-official book series *Jazz Petit*, but the leaders of the organization were arrested by the Communist secret police and the manuscript was confiscated. Among the

volumes Josef Jařab co-edited are *Antologie americké literatury* (Anthology of American Literature, 1985, with Eva Masnerová and Radoslav Nenadál), *Race and the Modern Artist* (2003, with Heather Hathaway and Jeffrey Melnick), and *America in the Course of Human Events* (2006, with Marcel Arbeit and Jenel Virden), the volume from the 2004 EAAS conference held in Prague. He prepared two representative selections of Allen Ginsberg's translations into Czech: *Slovy a dechem* (With Words and Breath, 2000) and *Karma červená, bílá a modrá* (Karma in Red, White, and Blue, 2001), complemented with commentaries and an introduction.

The scope of the academic interests of Josef Jařab is truly impressive—he has published articles and book prefaces on 19th century icons such as Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, and Edgar Allan Poe; on 20th century modern figures such as Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Leslie Marmon Silko, Dee Brown, and Louise Erdrich; on beatniks and experimental writers, ranging from Ken Kesey, Gary Snyder, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and John Hawkes to E. L. Doctorow, Toni Morrison, and Raymond Carver. In spite of the wide range of interest, Josef Jařab's main concern remains American poetry and African American literature.

In his literary criticism we can discern several dominant preoccupations: cultural pluralism and the relation of minority cultures to the dominant mainstream culture. He addresses these themes in various essays, for example in "Understanding African-American Culture: A Central European View" (1997), later reprinted in *Americas Abroad*, a special double issue of *Annals of Scholarship*, and "Modernity, Modernism, and the American Ethnic Minority Artist," his introduction to *Race and the Modern Artist*. In the former essay, originally a lecture delivered at James Madison College, he points out that the first author to introduce the concept of cultural pluralism was Horace M. Kallen, a Jew from Silesia. In the 1920s, Kallen criticized the pressure to assimilate as antidemocratic and argued that ethnic minorities contribute in an important manner to the American dream and enrich America. In Jařab's opinion, Kallen underrated the relation of ethnic cultures to the dominant national culture and conceived this relation in static terms, while in reality it has a dynamic character and involves the process of mutual exchange and enrichment, fostering "new syncretic forms of existence and performance."<sup>2</sup> There can be no doubt that American culture has always had this character, even at the times when the intercultural dialogue has not been sufficiently visible.

It is evident that Josef Jařab does not subscribe to any contemporary school of theory. He is essentially a literary and cultural historian. His main attention is to the world of ideas, the relation between the text and its literary, cultural, social, and political contexts. He is interested in the genesis of text as well as in the personality of the author. For him, biographical data and the

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2. Josef Jařab, "Understanding African-American Culture: A Central European View," *James Madison College Scene* 3, no. 3 (Spring 1997): 4.

cultural background come to serve as legitimate tools for the understanding and interpretation of text. His interest in the authors often springs from the fact that he has personally met them. Thanks to his personal contacts we could host in Olomouc such literary celebrities as Robert Coover, Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder.

In Czech we have a saying: tell me which book you read and I will tell you what you are like. The same can be said of literary criticism: tell me what you can see and evaluate in the text, and I will tell you who you are. When Josef Jařab writes about Toni Morrison, in his 2001 afterword to the Czech edition of *Paradise*, that she attempts “an interpretation of a historical experience which is free from the traditional burden of race, gender, and class, and avoids a schematic vision of human fate and history,” and when he points out “the danger of closing up in the worlds, which in their effort to be different and better, only recycle the old structures of exclusion and discrimination,”<sup>3</sup> he, at the same time, speaks about his vision of the world and of the role of literature, and, therefore, also about himself.

## II

This volume has brought together papers of some of Josef Jařab’s students, now American Studies and American Literature teachers and researchers at various universities of the Czech Republic, as well as contributions by his academic friends abroad: a personal recollection by Heinz Ickstadt, whom Josef Jařab succeeded in the office of the President of the EAAS, and an essay by Werner Sollors. Sollors, a long-time friend of Jařab’s, addresses the interesting topic of American writers in Europe, including the two Jařab befriended, hosted in Prague and Olomouc and translated or at least edited: Yusef Komunyakaa and Allen Ginsberg.

The topic of this issue reflects Josef Jařab’s main fields of interest: jazz, poetry, ethnic literature, and democracy. Šárka Bubíková asks whether people can freely change their ethnic identities, using as examples characters in Gish Jen’s *Mona in the Promised Land* and Michael Dorris’s and Louise Erdrich’s *The Crown of Columbus*, as well as two novels by Philip Roth. She takes an optimistic position, arguing that in these recent Chinese American, Native American, and Jewish American novels, identity is seen less as a fierce struggle for survival and more as a mask, performance, and a way of the creation of the self, which possesses a hybrid nature. Stanislav Kolář in his analysis of Henry Roth’s novel *Call It Sleep* argues that this novel has outgrown the limits of an ethnic novel and offers a wide pluralistic panorama of immigrant America that can be the proverbial “Golden Land” as well as a hostile space where newcomers can easily become lost. Kolář also calls the book “a multilingual novel,” which, although written in English, creates

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3. Josef Jařab, “Ponobelovský román Toni Morrisonové: Iluze ráje, nebo přízrak střetů?” in *Ráj* [Paradise], by Toni Morrisonová (Praha: Vyšehrad, 2001), 320. Translated into English by Michal Peprník.

an impression that the story is told in Yiddish. Petr Kopecký has found all the favorite themes of Josef Jařab in the poetry of Gary Snyder, and looks for affinities between the works of the two creative men. He shows that although they may have drawn on different poetic sources and life experiences, both share an eco-poetical principle of inclusiveness linked with the stress on democratic openness and heterogeneity, all of this springing from a close, intensively experienced relatedness to Nature. Alexandra Hubáčková taps a similar vein in her article about writings of indigenous people in English but she takes a different turn. Using the hypothesis of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf that each language shapes the reality it refers to, she claims that the use of English, “the enemy’s language,” changes thinking and behavior of indigenous people. However, Native American authors learned to use English in new, specific ways, at the same time reviving their original languages and saving them from extinction. Tomáš Pospíšil’s essay also takes up the ethnic issue in his comparative study of two films by African American directors, Spike Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* and Paul Haggis’s *Crash*, arguing that the color line is far from fading and cultural stereotypes still frequently come to the surface in emotionally-loaded situations.

The editors regret that space limitations did not allow the inclusion of many of the fine and thought-provoking essays that flooded in after we advertised the call for papers to pay tribute to Josef Jařab; most of them definitely deserve to be published and read. But we hope this is not the final word of our appreciation—and, which is more important, Josef Jařab is still here to teach us, inspire us, and open new doors and windows of American Literature and American Studies for us.

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