
Our New Neighbor: Tomas Garrigue Masaryk

By Gary Scott ('01)

The Cosmos Club has a new neighbor. He stands on a small Federal Park reservation at the intersection of Massachusetts Avenue, Florida Avenue, and Q St, NW. He is Tomas Masaryk, liberator and first president of Czechoslovakia, 1918-35. The son of a coachman, Masaryk took a Ph.D. at the University of Vienna and became professor of philosophy at the Czech University in Prague in 1882, where he taught until 1914. In 1878 Masaryk married Charlotte Garrigue, an American student he had met at Leipzig University. After their marriage he incorporated her name into his own, becoming Tomas Garrigue Masaryk. He visited America several times. He wrote on intellectual and social freedom for women, campaigned against anti-Semitism, and in his writings espoused Czech independence. At



the beginning of the First World War, Masaryk went into exile, working to liberate the Czechoslovak people from imperial Austrian rule. He became commander-in-chief of the Czechoslovak Legion, comprising troops assembled from Czechs living in the United States, Britain, and France.

At the end of the war Masaryk visited President Woodrow Wilson in Washington and successfully convinced the president that the liberation of central European nations from the Hapsburg rule would be a desirable outcome of the war. While in America, Masaryk wrote the Czechoslovak Declaration of Independence, which he issued in Washington, D.C., on October 18, 1918. His vision for Czechoslovakia was based on democratic American ideals. With President Wilson's support, Masaryk became president

of Czechoslovakia in 1918. He served until 1935, resigning for reasons of ill health. Masaryk died in 1937 and did not see the yoke of oppression fall again on his beloved country with the Nazi invasions at the beginning of the Second World War.

Vincenc Makovsky sculpted the statue from life in 1937, Masaryk's last year. It was afterward housed in storage in the National Gallery in Prague. It was first cast in bronze in 1968 during Czechoslovak liberalization. The statue has never been publicly displayed in either Czechoslovakia or the present Czech Republic. The statue is a gift of the Czech Republic, which was authorized by H.R. 1161 and signed into law by President Bush, November 5, 2001. On September 19, 2002, the statue was dedicated by Vaclav Havel, president

of the Czech Republic and Michal Kovac, former president of the Slovak Republic, along with the American Friends of the Czech Republic; and it was accepted by Madeleine K. Albright, the former secretary of state, who is herself of Czech parentage. A small park is currently being constructed around the statue by the EDAW firm of Alexandria, Virginia, with funds being raised by the American Friends of the Czech Republic.

Tomas Masaryk's academic writings, his teaching, his role in history, and his devotion to democratic ideals might well entitle him to posthumous membership in the Cosmos Club. He is a good neighbor, worthy of emulation, and embodying the ideals of the Club—the ideals of sound scholarship combined with public service.