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THE WILSON MONUMENT IN PRAGUE

By Robert W. Doubek



Albin Polasek and his assistants worked on the original Wilson Monument in 1927.

If liberator President Tomáš G. Masaryk was the father of Czechoslovak independence in 1918, its godfather was U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. He collaborated with President Masaryk to create Czechoslovakia, and the Czech people revered Wilson for his leadership and vision. Prague's main train station, built in 1909, was officially named for Wilson in 1919.

Upon Wilson's death in 1924, Americans of Czech descent organized an effort to erect a monument to him in Prague. To sculpt a statue they chose eminent sculptor Albin Polasek (1879-1965), who was born in Frenštát, Moravia, studied at the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts, and headed the sculpture department at the Art Institute of Chicago from 1920 to 1950. The famous Czech architect Bohumil Hübšmann designed the monument's pedestal and base.

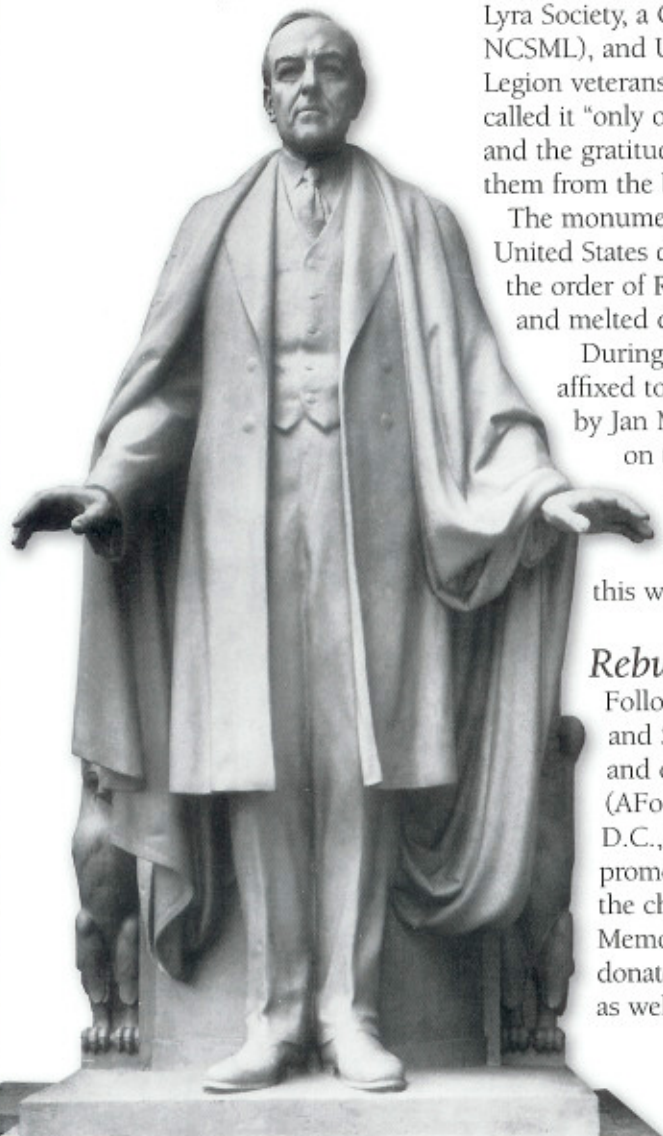
The resulting Woodrow Wilson Monument stood in Vrchlický Park facing the train station across Hoover Street. The 3.5-meter bronze statue stood on a 4.5-meter granite pedestal and base, and inscribed in both Czech and English were Wilson's words: "The world must be made safe for democracy." The monument was dedicated on July 4, 1928, and the day was proclaimed a national holiday in Czechoslovakia. The program included singers from the Lyra Society, a Czech men's choir from Chicago (whose archives reside at the NCSML), and U.S. Ambassador Lewis Einstein. Sokols and Czechoslovak Legion veterans in uniform surrounded the monument. President Masaryk called it "only one of the innumerable symbols of the Czechs' love for America and the gratitude of our people to Woodrow Wilson for helping to liberate them from the bondage of centuries of oppressive Austro-Hungarian rule."

The monument stood for over 13 years, but on December 11, 1941, the United States declared war on Germany, and that night it was torn down upon the order of Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich. The statue was carted away and melted down.

During the brief period of freedom after the war, a plaque was affixed to the remaining portion of the pedestal and was dedicated by Jan Masaryk on July 4, 1946. It read: "From 1928 there stood on this place a monument in honor of Woodrow Wilson President of the U.S.A. This monument was destroyed by the Germans in 1941 and will be re-erected by Americans of Czech descent in U.S.A." After the communist coup in February 1948, even this was destroyed.

Rebuilding relationships

Following the Velvet Revolution in November 1989, the Czech and Slovak peoples set out to reclaim their heritage of freedom and democracy. In 1995 American Friends of the Czech Republic (AFoCR), a non-profit organization, was founded in Washington, D.C., to assist the Czech people in their transformation. After promoting Czech membership in NATO, AFoCR in 2001 took up the challenge to create a symbol of U.S.-Czech ties. The Masaryk Memorial was dedicated in Washington, D.C., in 2002, with funds donated by Czech and American companies, cities and organizations, as well as individual Americans of all heritages.



AFoCR in 2006 proposed the idea of rebuilding the Wilson Monument in Prague. Czech Ambassador Petr Kolář endorsed the project to Prague Lord Mayor Pavel Bém, who responded enthusiastically. The city has undertaken a complete renovation of the train station, and the Metropolitan District of Prague 1 is improving Vrchlický Park. The Woodrow Wilson Monument will be the capstone of this transformation. The project was formally approved by the Prague City Council in August 2007. Lord Mayor Bém stated:

“We want to rebuild the monument for many different reasons. Firstly, because of our respect for Woodrow Wilson, and, secondly, because of respect for our friends in the United States and for our emigrants.”

Along with the City of Prague and Prague 1, a key partner is the Albin Polasek Foundation (APF) in Winter Park, Florida, where Polasek retired in 1950. For the Wilson Monument, the APF has contributed use of the copyright of the statue and has provided a large collection of photos from its archives. To carry out the project, AFoCR has formed a team of Czech professionals in Prague in the disciplines of architecture, law and public relations. The Czech Technical University has created digital photos of the original statue in order to verify exact angles and dimensions. An exciting discovery was made when the original full-size plaster bust of the statue was found in the Czech National Museum, ensuring that an exact copy can be made.

In July 2008, 13 Czech sculptor teams submitted proposals to recreate the statue. A selection committee representing the project's stakeholders chose the team of Michal Blažek, Václav Frýdecký and Daniel Talavera to receive the commission in February 2009. The creation of the full-size clay model of the statue is underway, and this work, followed by the bronze casting, is expected to take 18 months.

Because an addition to the train station was built in the 1970s, the original location of the monument is no longer available. After discussions with AFoCR, Prague 1 in December 2008 approved a new site in Vrchlický Park, facing the station addition. Concurrently, the designs for the monument's base and pedestal are being developed by AFoCR's architects. In September 2009, they verified the optimum height of the pedestal by raising a full-size Styrofoam model of the statue to alternate heights with a forklift.

The overall budget for the project is \$975,000. Toward this goal AFoCR, with the leadership of Chairman Fred Malek, held gala dinners in Houston, Texas, in November 2008, and in Chicago in November 2009. In Houston, former astronauts Eugene Cernan and James Lovell received AFoCR's Civil Society Vision Award. The recipient of the award in Chicago was Chicago Mayor Richard M. Daley.

An opportunity for donors to be recognized is the “Walk of Freedom” that is planned as part of the monument. The names of individuals and organizations that contribute \$2,500 or more will be inscribed on paving stones leading to the base and pedestal. All donors — of any amount — can name an organizational affiliation. If the total for an organization exceeds \$2,500, its name will be included on the “Walk of Freedom” in Prague. (Contributions to this project are welcome and can be made through the AFoCR Web site at www.afocr.org.)

As the counterpart of the Masaryk Memorial in Washington, D.C., the Wilson Monument will complete the symbolization of the joint democratic values of, and the ties of friendship between, the American and Czech peoples. The monument will commemorate the rebirth of Czech democracy after decades of suppression. Its dedication will coincide with the completion of the renovation of the station in 2011 or 2012. ■



The first Wilson Monument was dedicated on July 4, 1928, by a grateful Czechoslovak nation.



The Wilson Monument stood from 1928 until December 11, 1941, when it was ordered destroyed by Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich after the United States declared war on Germany.

The author stands with a casting of the original plaster bust for the Wilson sculpture, which was found in the National Museum in Prague.

