



Palach family house in Všetaty punctured by a symbolic wedge

Photo: Jakub Jareš

## Commemorating a Martyr: The Jan Palach Memorial in Všetaty

Jakub Jareš

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In October 2019, a new memorial was opened in the former family house of Jan Palach in the small Czech town of Všetaty. With an impressive architecture and a small exhibition, the memorial commemorates the student who, in January 1969, set himself on fire to protest the communist regime. The article places its review of the memorial in the wider history of Palach commemoration in the Czech Republic.

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## Commemorating a Martyr: The Jan Palach Memorial in Všetaty

In October 2019, a memorial was opened in the former family house of Jan Palach in the town of Všetaty in the Czech Republic. It was from this house in the small sleepy town, that the 21 year-old student left on the morning of 16 January 1969 and headed into nearby Prague. There, in Wenceslaus Square, he set himself on fire in order to protest against the post-Prague Spring normalization government and to provoke his fellow citizens to take action against the Soviet occupiers and their domestic collaborators. The Palach house is a simple and modest one; there are thousands of houses like this scattered across the Czech countryside. It seems somehow unsuitable to commemorate such a dramatic history. What is even more interesting is the process by which it was turned into a memorial. Moreover, while other museum and memorial projects of recent years have been delayed due to various obstacles, the creation of [the Jan Palach Memorial](#) encountered no objections and resulted from a wide consensus across the political spectrum of Czechia. But what exactly is this consensus about? What does the memorial tell us about the historical figure of Jan Palach, but also about the contemporary Czech relationship to his story?

The fact is that the commemoration of Jan Palach has a long and multi-layered history which is worth recalling before analyzing this latest memorialization attempt. Before reviewing the new memorial and the small corresponding exhibition, the article will therefore briefly sketch out this history of commemoration and outline the various interpretations that have been attributed to Jan Palach and his action at different times.

### Silenced Symbol of the Prague Spring: Palach Commemoration During Communist Rule

Jan Palach's death in January 1969 generated a considerable political and emotional response from the start. His funeral became a nationwide silent manifestation of discontent, that was attended by hundreds of thousands of people and massively covered by both domestic and international media. A few months later, Gustav Husák's 'normalization regime' came into power and proscribed any further public commemoration of Palach. His grave site in Olšany cemetery in Prague, which was frequently visited both by Czech and foreign visitors, was removed and his remains transferred to Všetaty. During the 1970s and 1980s, Palach was commemorated either privately in Czechoslovakia, or among Czechs living abroad. Emigré groups and individuals organized anniversary meetings, erected statues and published articles and books about Palach's self-sacrifice in order to draw international public attention to unfreedom in their home country. The domestic dissident movement, especially Charter 77, held a somewhat indifferent attitude towards Palach. Some Chartists criticized the exaggerated worship of Palach as a martyr. In their eyes, the martyr image had a rather demobilizing effect; suicide as a protest form was seen as an unsuitable example for active opposition. It was nonetheless the gathering of Charter 77 members on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of Palach's death in January 1989 that led to week-long demonstrations in the streets of Prague, which were dispersed violently by the police. 'Palach week', as it came to be known, strengthened the meaning attributed to Palach not only by the older generation who clearly remembered his act of self-immolation in 1969, but also by a younger generation for whom the long-concealed story of Palach became a symbol of the Prague Spring.<sup>[1]</sup>

After 1989, Palach entered the public imagination quite quickly and significantly. The Red Army Soldiers Square in Prague, where the Faculty of Arts is located, was renamed to Jan Palach Square, together with

dozens of other streets and squares in towns across Czechia. Numerous memorial plaques and statues were revealed, the remains of Palach were transferred back to Prague and president Václav Havel, in 1991, bestowed the highest state honours to Palach. However, throughout the 1990s, this Palach 'comeback' slowed down and only occasional memorial gatherings took place.

## Palach Commemoration: Something for Everybody?

In 1999, a second Palach 'comeback' began when Václav Havel and Miloš Zeman attended the thirtieth anniversary commemoration and students of the Faculty of Arts at Charles University organized a memorial march in the streets of Prague. This was at a time when the Czech political world was at an important crossroad. The political rivals Václav Klaus and Miloš Zeman had signed a so-called Opposition Agreement on 8 July 1998 – a pact that led to the factual division of power between the two strongest parties, the [Czech Social Democratic Party](#) (ČSSD) and the [Civic Democratic Party](#) (ODS), thereby de facto abolishing oppositional control. The arrangement led to many controversial state contracts blamed by some commentators as corrupt and allowed the government to adopt a constitutional amendment that effectively changed the electoral system. Many authors described the political and social consequences of this pact as "neo-normalization", characterized by a "lack of interest in public affairs, the silencing of critical voices and a moral of staying in line."<sup>[2]</sup> The prevailing atmosphere in the liberal parts of society could be described as dissatisfaction, which led some to protest, but caused many others to fall into lethargy. In this respect, the Palach memorial marches of early 1999 and again in 2004 could be understood as part of a revived political contextualization of Palach's self-immolation. This was openly formulated in the student's manifesto presented during memorial march in 2004:

Similarly to the normalization period we give up our responsibility in favour of politicians, including the right to control them. And similarly to normalization times, many of us feel the impossibility of changing anything significant.<sup>[3]</sup>

Palach, as a symbol of political protest against civic lethargy, was thus accommodated to the present situation of a de facto one-party government in post-communist, democratic Czechia. Such open political use of the historical figure of Jan Palach for present-day political mobilization continues to this day. In January 2019, the anti-government student activist group Million chvilek pro demokracii (Million Moments for Democracy) organized another Palach memorial march through the streets of Prague. In their manifesto, published on the [organization's website](#), this new generation of politically active students called for a re-interpretation of Palach's action in 1969 in light of the current political situation in Czechia. In this context, they declared that Palach's self-immolation "is not a full stop, it's a colon: We all must build on it in today's circumstances. What should we do?"

Paradoxically, the very same politicians who are the targets of civic protests – namely Prime Minister Andrej Babiš and President Miloš Zeman – are themselves paying tribute to Palach as well. Babiš is regularly laying wreaths during Palach commemorations and Miloš Zeman expressed his support for establishing the Jan Palach Memorial. Indeed, the unity evident in appreciating Palach by the different and opposing political parties is rather astonishing. For example, all political parties agreed in 2013 when the Czech parliament discussed a law that classified 16 January as a 'national awareness day'. Even seven MPs from the [Communist Party of Bohemia and Moravia](#) (KSČM) voted in favour. The parliamentary discussion on this law demonstrated a variety of different interpretations and political

uses for Palach as a person, and the protest he enacted. The bill was submitted by a group of [right-wing MPs who explained](#) that the law should “pay tribute to the heroic act of a young student, who fought against the totalitarian regime and for the sake of national sovereignty”.<sup>[4]</sup> This exact wording was used in opposition by the chairman of the KSČM Miroslav Grebeníček, who reclaimed Palach for the communists: in his view Palach was a supporter of reform communism and therefore never fought against the regime itself. His [speech in parliament provoked a strong and emotional response](#). The speaker of the Chamber of Deputies from the conservative ODS [expressed her opinion](#), that “self-evident things are not discussed. Self-evident things are accepted with piety, silence and honour”.

Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek was more specific when, during the commemoration ceremony in 2009, he declared that Jan Palach stands alongside with other anti-communist resistors, such as the Mašín brothers, who fought against the regime by way of sabotage, but also killed a number of policemen during their attempt to flee the country.<sup>[5]</sup> In 2019, Prime Minister Andrej Babiš added another variant to the narrative of the resistance fighter when he stressed that “by his acting, Palach expressed a clear protest against Russian (sic) invasion”.<sup>[6]</sup>

Whether it is the fight against past and present communism, the support for reform communism, a warning against a Russian threat, or just as a tool for moralizing, the variety of ways in which Palach is utilized to further independent political agendas is extensive.

## The Genesis of the Memorial in Všetaty

This appropriation and wide acceptance of Palach across political divides became evident also during the negotiations and preparations for the Jan Palach Memorial in Všetaty. The original idea for such a memorial was delivered by a civic initiative from graphic designer Jan Poukar, who founded the organization [Národ pohasl](#) (The Nation is Burned) in 2011. His goal was to purchase the house from private owners (the Palach family sold it in the late 1970s) and to transform it into a memorial. The initiative was born at the time when there was another revived interest in Palach – not only in the earlier mentioned political context. In 2009, a book on Palach appeared, which for the first time consistently historicised his protest (the author of this article was one of the editors).<sup>[7]</sup> In 2013, a successful TV miniseries [“The Burning Bush” created for HBO](#) by Agnieszka Holland further expanded the circle of people interested in Palach’s story considerably.

Národ pohasl was therefore received by a well-prepared and proactive audience. It gained broad support from celebrities such as top model Tereza Maxová, the actress and former president’s widow Dagmar Havlová, the theologian Tomáš Halík and many other prominent artists as well as politicians. This support in turn created considerable attention in the media. Nevertheless, the initiative’s original plan to raise money from private companies failed, as the business world seemed uninterested. The initiative started to raise funds by selling badges and bracelets during some of the Czech music festivals. In the end, lobbying among members of parliament is what led to success. In 2013, the Budget Committee of the Chamber of Deputies approved the amendment proposal of one MP to increase the budget of the Ministry of Culture with the clear intent to purchase the Palach family house. Later, the Ministry of Culture entrusted the National Museum to establish and manage a Jan Palach Memorial.

The National Museum announced an architectural competition for the memorial in 2015. Members of the jury were respected historians, architects, civic activists, contemporary witnesses, artists, museum representatives, and the mayor of the town of Všetaty. They awarded first place to the proposal by

architects Miroslav Cikán and Petra Melková from MCA atelier company, which was realized in September 2019, when the memorial opened its doors to the public.

## Expressive Architecture, Encyclopaedic Exhibit: A Walk Through the Memorial

The Jan Palach Memorial site consists of two parts: the original family house that has been transformed by the architects into a contemplative space, and a new modern building that was erected in the former garden. Here a small exhibition can be found as well as the visitor services and maintenance offices. The input of the architects, Miroslav Cikán and Petra Melková, is strong, persuasive and visible even before you enter the house. All windows are screened in with metal plates and the back wall of the house is punctured by a massive wedge of rusted metal. The architects describe this structure as an intervention; as an “edge of evil” which enters the house from outside and strikes the family. Upon entering the house, there is a sense of astonishment created by the surprisingly empty space. The architects have torn down all walls, crossbars and ceilings, therefore the interior is reminiscent of a church hall. This impression is further strengthened by a sketchily reconstructed staircase, which ends in mid-air (and reminds one therefore of a rostrum) and by a symbolic reconstruction of a family table made out of a concrete block and located right where an altar table would be in a church.

The whole interior is divided by the rusty wedge, which passes through the house, culminating at the dining table. In their original entry to the competition, the architects explained this as a “symbol of a situation when the life of a country, a family and a person was affected externally by an Edge and with it a Challenge.”<sup>[8]</sup> Apart from the wedge and the table, there are just a few other elements. There is a death mask of Jan Palach made by [sculptor Olbram Zoubek](#), a gilded statue of Palach by the same artist (both made in 1969) and the original Czechoslovak flag that was used after Palach’s death to cover his body. The installation of these artefacts along the outer wall, and the temperate lighting in a rather crepuscular space, strengthens the overall sacral feeling of the interior.

This artistic gesture is very much in line with contemporary trends in museum architecture where the building itself is used as a narrative tool.<sup>[9]</sup> The wedge cutting into the house is somehow similar to Daniel Libeskind’s architectural intervention into the [Military History Museum in Dresden](#) and the sacralised interior is reminiscent of his [Jewish Museum in Berlin](#). In the case of Všetaty, the architecture is, in fact, overshadowing everything else.

The actual exhibition in the new building, curated by historian Petr Blažek,<sup>[10]</sup> appears more like a supplement to the impressive architecture rather than the heart of the memorial. Spread across a single room are several stands with built-in touchscreens offering curatorial texts, digitized documents and photographs. Every stand is titled with a motto that refers to Palach’s life, his self-immolation and his afterlife (Family, Hope, Returns, Revenge etc.) as well as with quotes from his protest letters. In stark contrast to the transformation of the family house, the exhibition lacks brevity. Even if the texts are ‘hidden’ in the touchscreens, the visitor is soon overwhelmed by dozens of pages of text written in a rather encyclopaedic style. The authors describe Palach’s childhood, education and travels; the Prague Spring and subsequent Soviet occupation; the student’s consideration of what to do and finally the planning of his protest. The latter is followed by a very detailed description of his self-immolation, of the reactions by the regime and society as well as detailed outlines of both, and the forced forgetting and the commemoration of Jan Palach from 1969 until present day. The only physical objects in the exhibition room are a briefcase and some personal belongings like a toothbrush, a comb and a knife. The life of the Palach family is commemorated by showcasing an advertisement for the pastry bakery

run by Palach's father until the shop was forcibly closed down by the communists in the early 1950s. In sum, the exhibition is, indeed, very informative, but in contrast to the persuasive architectural gesture in the house, it is hardly memorable.

The architectural solution found for turning the old family home into a memorial site is fascinating, brave and unexpected, since the traditional treatment of historic houses is to rather reconstruct some kind of (imagined) original state as if the owner just left the room. On the other hand, the strong statement of the architects, is offering only a narrow interpretation of Palach's personality. The sacrality of the space seems to be confirming his position as a national martyr.

## Concluding Remarks

In her book about the reception of Jan Palach and Oskar Brüsewitz, German historian Sabine Stach showed that speaking about them oscillates between heroization and victimization.<sup>[11]</sup> Depending on the actors and the respective commemorative practices, Palach is variably remembered as a hero of the anti-communist resistance, or – more often – as a martyr who sacrificed his life for the sake of the nation, freedom, democracy, or whatever else is attributed to him. The lines between these two interpretations – hero or martyr – are at the same time somehow blurred. Stach speaks about "heroic sacrifice" (Heldenopfer) in this context.

As we can see in today's Czechia, Palach indeed has many faces. Civic activists use Palach as a model for active civic resistance and therefore often recall the words he said shortly before he died in the hospital: "People must fight against the evil they feel equal to at that moment." On the other hand, in countless articles, books, movies and public speeches the 'sacrifice' of Jan Palach is highlighted. Just to illustrate the frequency of this phrase, you can google the term oběť Jana Palacha (sacrifice of Jan Palach) and you get 24 times more results than if you google protest Jana Palacha (protest of Jan Palach).

In 2019, historian Petr Blažek tried to balance this disproportion by publishing the testimonies of Palach's fellow students, who recalled that one day in August 1968 Palach brought a Browning pistol to Prague and discussed with them whether armed resistance against the Soviets would be a meaningful line of action. This minor detail of Palach's life was quoted extensively by the media and discussed both by experts and ordinary people, apparently because it was so inconsistent with the usual martyr image of Palach. In this respect, the memorial in Všetaty does little to further differentiate the discourse, but rather delivers the most widespread interpretation. This may be one of the main reasons why the creation of the Jan Palach Memorial was met with so few obstacles, in stark contrast to several other planned memorials and museums. For example, the Memorial of Silence in Prague (Holocaust memorial museum), or the memorial for the Czech Germans in Ústí nad Labem, or memorials for those persecuted by the communists (in Jáchymov, Uherské Hradiště) are all harshly contested, and their finalization repeatedly postponed.

Another reason for the lack of controversy lies in Jan Palach himself. In his 21 years, he left no significant work that could be disputed. We know that he was a sympathizer of reform communism, but that was quite normal among students during the Prague Spring and Palach would have probably further developed his political attitudes if he had lived longer. The only relevant written legacy he left behind are four almost identical letters he addressed to a friend, to the Writers Union and to student leaders at his faculty, in which he expressed basic requests that everyone would have agreed with in 1969, except for



the most pro-Soviet collaborators. If you read between the lines, you sense a desire for freedom, which is again universally comprehensible for all people, not only those in Czechoslovakia. In addition, the very act of self-immolation magnetizes and unites people of different worldviews due to its radical nature, the courage required and the inevitability of death that it entails. This openness (or 'variability', if you like) of such a prominent historical figure is easily adoptable to various political positions and the universal comprehensibility of his death, are the main reasons why he compels such broad acceptance even from competing groups and individuals.

Perhaps it is appropriate that the memorial in Všetaty is a place for worshipping Palach as a unifying martyr symbol. However, this neglects the other face of Palach. After all, he considered himself a political activist, who, in a hopeless situation, committed an extreme, but nevertheless deeply political act of resistance. In this respect, it is possible to view his otherwise inimitable gesture and interpret it from today's perspective as an act of civic courage. It is this aspect that could have been more developed in the exhibition component of the memorial. As it is, the exhibition offers only a rather descriptive and encyclopaedic account of historical facts. There is no attempt to universalize Palach's protest and place it in a broader context of political activism in the twentieth century. The memorial could be more than just a place of worship, or just a three-dimensional history textbook. Instead, it could be a place where students and adults can actively engage in programs that facilitate the development of civic skills, values and agency. Such a civic education centre would probably be the most appropriate legacy of Jan Palach.

## Footnotes

1. For more details on the commemoration of Jan Palach between 1969 and 2013 see the thorough and thoughtful book by Sabine Stach, *Vermächtnispolitik: Jan Palach und Oskar Brüsewitz als politische Märtyrer*, Göttingen: Wallenstein Verlag, 2016.
2. Martin Škabraha, Neonormalizace, in [Atlas transformace](#), edited by Zbyněk Baladrán and Vít Havránek, Prague: tranzit, 2008–2010.
3. Quoted by Zdeňka Kuchyňová, [Před 35 lety se v Praze upálil student filosofie Jan Palach](#), Czech radio (16 January 2004), retrieved 3 February 2020. Translation from Czech by the author.
4. [Proposal on the modification of Law No. 245/2000 Coll. on state holidays and national awareness days](#). Proposal No. 873/0 (2000), retrieved 12 February 2020.
5. [Palachův čin pro lidi znamenal naději](#), Lidovky.cz (16 January 2009), retrieved 12 February 2020.
6. Cited in: [Český premiér Babiš v Lucemburku uctil památku Jana Palacha](#), Ceskenoviny.cz (8 November 2019), retrieved 12 February 2020.
7. Petr Blažek, Patrik Eichler and Jakub Jareš, eds., *Jan Palach '69*, Praha: Filozofická fakulta Univerzity Karlovy a Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů, 2009.
8. Miroslav Cikán and Peta Melková, Competiton Proposal, in [Architectural-artistic Competition for the Design of Jan Palach's Monument in Všetaty: Catalogue of the Designs](#), edited by Dagmar Fialová and Jaroslav Richter, Praha, Národní muzeum, 2016, p. 20.
9. Michaela Giebelhausen, *Museum Architecture: A Brief History*, in *A Companion to Museum Studies*, edited by Sharon Macdonald, Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp. 241–242.
10. There are additional contributions by Michal Ježek and Marek Junek; the graphic design is by Jáchym Šerých.
11. Stach, 2016, p. 461.





Palach Memorial: family house, garden and the new exhibition venue (on right)  
Photo: Jakub Jareš



The Palach Memorial, all windows screened with metal plates  
Photo: Jakub Jareš



Death mask of Jan Palach by sculptor Olbram Zoubek

Photo: Jakub Jareš



Box with advertisement for the Josef Palach pastry bakery

Photo: Jakub Jareš





Photo: Jakub Jareš