

## Jakobson and Bohemia / Bohemia and the East

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Participants in this conference are fully aware of Roman Jakobson's erudition and breadth of interests, but the general reader, who is mainly familiar with Jakobson's works published after the World War Two, may not realize that phonology and poetics were the only fields that Jakobson enthusiastically pursued. His thoroughly traditional philological education enabled him to work with medieval texts — and this, in turn, allowed him to become a versatile cultural historian of Eastern Europe — a historian *sui generis*, to be sure. It is this aspect of Jakobson's intellectual biography, his historiosophy, that I would like to address here. In the process, I shall focus on his understanding of medieval Czech culture and on his attempt to provide a new interpretation of Czech history. Attempts at (re)defining the sense of Czech history were, of course, not unusual, but Jakobson's was remarkable, if not only for the fact that he passionately argued an idea not very popular among the Czechs in the twentieth century, namely that certain elements of Czech culture are rooted in the Slavic East. This perspective transcends local interests. Jakobson's statements about Czech history are in fact statements about nothing less than the role of the Slavs in European history. That is, Jakobson emerges in his Czech historiosophy as an author of an emancipatory narrative designed to remind the West that it, the West, is not the center of the World, neither in the present days, nor in the past. In this sense, Jakobson is akin to his colleague and friend N. S. Trubetzkoy, who expounded a similar idea very explicitly in his Eurasian writings. Just as in Trubetzkoy's case, Jakobson's discourse is activist historiography, something entirely compatible with the ideals of scholarship of the period under consideration (Toman 1995, 1996).

Let us turn to the early 1920s, Jakobson's first years in Czechoslovakia, where he came as a Soviet diplomat in the summer of 1920. One of his major projects in those early Prague years was a comprehensive study of Czech verse, including its medieval history. Erudite and well-informed

as this study was, its reception among the Czech academia was lukewarm. Jakobson later recalled that Czech philologists were not really interested in being reminded of the grandeur of ancient Czech culture—they viewed the Middle Ages as an era of darkness. Not surprisingly then, when he submitted his *Czech Epic Verse* (Jakobson 1924 [1985]) to the Czech Academy, he was essentially ignored. The manuscript collected dust and was finally rejected for failing to provide an exhaustive treatment of the topic (cf. Jakobson's remarks in his *Selected Writings* 6, p. 527, where he published the original text of this study).

Jakobson's overall goal in those years is concisely worded in a preface to an edition of Czech medieval texts (Jakobson 1927). Jakobson acknowledges the persistence of negative judgments on medieval culture, labels them as cultural survivals nurtured by the ideology of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and sets out to undertake a rehabilitation of the Middle Ages, pointing out, among other things, the value of medieval philosophy, art, architecture, and even natural sciences (Jakobson 1927, p. 7-9). In all these instances, he regards elements of medieval culture as suitable points of departure for contemporary work.

We may speculate that besides Jakobson's own philological inklings, the increasing interest in the Middle Ages may have played some role. Judgments about the virtues and grandeur of the «Gothic» period were becoming a cliché in certain circles (Toman 1994), and one might even argue that Jakobson's vocabulary reflects elements of works such as N. Berdiaev's popular *New Middle Ages* (1924). But Jakobson soon moved beyond a simple reevaluation of the Middle Ages. In another edition of Czech medieval texts (Jakobson 1929a), he not only insisted that Czech medieval poetry should be taken seriously, but added that the influence of Old Church Slavonic literacy on Czech medieval literature also deserved attention.

It might be helpful to recall here that besides being exposed to Western missionaries, the Slavs in the area of today's Bohemia, Moravia and Western Slovakia experienced a brief period of Christianization conducted from Byzantium. In the 860s, the prince of the so-called Great Moravia asked Constantinople for missionaries who would supply the Slavs with «The Truth» and «The Law» in an idiom accessible to them. The arrival of two missionaries from Byzantium, Cyril and Methodius, is generally understood as a positive answer to the request. The two were Greeks, but the language they were using was what we now call Old Church Slavonic, a mission *koine* based on the Slavic dialect spoken in Thessalonica, where Cyril and Methodius originated. Measured in absolute time, the Byzantine mission to Great Moravia was brief. Cyril and Methodius were soon expelled, obviously under the pressure of competing German missio-

naires. As a result, the Slavic West remained an integral part of the Western, i.e., Latinate religious and cultural realm.

In view of the fact that the Cyrillo-Methodian mission was so brief and its traces rare and hard to see, Jakobson's assertion of the presence of Old Church Slavonic literacy in Czech medieval culture might seem tenuous. As is well known, there is plentiful medieval literature from Bohemia, but its recorded beginnings are almost exclusively Latin. Czech texts begin to appear around 1300. So there is a considerable gap to cover between the end of the Mission in the late ninth century and the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries—a formidable challenge to anyone, but Jakobson would eventually expound the theory that the gap was only apparent. And, indeed, there are reasons to speak about a continuation of the Slavic, i.e., Cyrillo-Methodian, tradition during the 10th-12th centuries, i.e., literacy in an idiom close to the local vernacular, and, at any rate, outside Latin. We have solid evidence today of the Eastern rite in the so-called Sázava Monastery (active as a center of Slavic literacy between 1030s and 1097, subsequently latinized) and later in the Emmaus Monastery, founded 1348 in Prague and primarily maintained by Croatian monks. Although not abundantly documented, the very existence of these centers is undisputed (cf. *Z tradic* 1975, Reichertová et al. 1988). In summary then, the ancient Czechs were apparently not a pure appendix of Western Christianity. Not everything was decided in Regensburg or Mainz, the two pre-eminent German bishoprics that looked eastward. Well into the high Middle Ages, the church in Bohemia looked eastward also. And it is among Jakobson's achievements that he helped elevate this fact from obscurity to a received opinion.

In the 1940s Jakobson continued to stress the impact of the Cyrillo-Methodian legacy, emphatically arguing not only for its significance but also for its uninterrupted continuity. The most articulate exposition of this idea appeared after he left Czechoslovakia in a 220-page book published in the middle of the Second World War in New York and entitled *The Wisdom of the Ancient Czechs* [*Moudrost starých Čechů*] (Jakobson 1943). The work remained little-known. Written in Czech and brought out by the New York-based Czechoslovak Cultural Circle, its circulation remained limited to the Czechoslovak community in the United States.

*The Wisdom* revolves around several themes, including a discussion of a whole web of relations among vernacular, nation, democracy, and Slavic commonalty. As one may recall, the Cyrillo-Methodian legacy is meant to be one rooted in language. But clearly, Jakobson's approach to the role of Old Church Slavic in Czech emancipation could not be exclusively philological. West Slavic languages in general preserve little formal heritage of Old Church Slavonic. Russian, on the other hand, is riddled with so-called Church Slavonicisms. Likewise, Church Slavonic, the direct descendant

of the Cyrillo-Methodian tradition that remains the medium of the Orthodox rite, is generally comprehensible to educated Russian speakers, but opaque to Czechs or Poles. Given a lack of a philological basis, Jakobson was thus challenged to approach the issue at a different level. He did so in focusing on the fact that the old Slavic liturgy was conducted in an idiom by and large comprehensible to the participants. In continuing this practice, later explicitly forbidden in the domain of the Papacy, the 10th-12th century Czechs thus emerge as early rebels against Rome.

But again, Jakobson goes farther. He sees in the Slavic—and Czech—desire for a liturgy in a near-vernacular a conscious choice and a reasoned insistence on the equality of all languages and all nations :

Right at the dawn of history, a principle was spelled out, in a simple manner and once and for all, of the equality of all languages, all nations, and all members of a nation—an egalitarian principle, an earthshaking slogan of equality, and a revolutionary Czechoslovak innovation. This happened in the 860s, nine centuries before the French Declaration of Human Rights.

(Jakobson 1943, p. 44)

Byla tu na úsvitě historického života prostě a provždy pronesena zásada rovnoprávnosti všech jazyků, všech národů a všech uvnitř národa, zkrátka egalitární zásada. Světodějně heslo rovnosti, převratně československé novum. Stalo se to v šedesátých letech IX. století, to jest devět století před francouzskou revoluční deklarácí lidských práv [...].

The element of choice made this development in Jakobson's view democratic—the attribute egalitarian actually recedes throughout *The Wisdom*—and its vernacular character made it national. In brief, in *The Wisdom*, Jakobson stresses the idea that the decision for Church Slavonic amounts to nothing less than an early instance of national self-determination with a genuinely democratic underpinning.

Jakobson expressed the same idea in a concise way already in 1939, on the eve of his forced departure from Czechoslovakia :

The right to conduct the liturgy in the national language represents the right of the nation to the highest cultural value in the medieval hierarchy of values, and thus ranges over the totality of values : the entire culture, especially the entire literacy, assumes national traits. From its very beginnings, Cyrillo-Methodianism inseparably connects the national element with an element that is uniquely democratic. The right to the highest spiritual values is made accessible to each nation and to the entire nation.

(Jakobson 1939 ; quoted from his *Selected Writings* 6, p. 133.)

Právo na bohoslužbu v národním jazyce znamená právo národa na nejvyšší oblast ve středověké hierarchii kulturních hodnot tedy i na všechny ostatní oblasti: celá kultura a zejména celá slovesná tvorba se znárodňuje. S prvkem nacionálním je v cyrilometodějství od počátku neodlučně spjat zvláštní prvek demokratický. Právo na nejvyšší duchovní statky se přiznává každému národu a celému národu.

And, finally, very forcefully in his 1944 article «The Beginnings of National Self-Determination in Europe» (published in 1945) :

Equal rights—both of nations and of languages—is the leading principle of the Great Moravian spiritual heritage.

(Jakobson 1945 ; quoted from his *Selected Writings* 6, p. 119)

Clearly, at this point Jakobson's enterprise is far removed from an unreflecting enthusiasm for the Middle Ages—and from the ivory tower of scholarship as well. We are facing the proposition that by embracing the service in the near-vernacular, the «Czechoslovaks» not only emancipated themselves in national terms, but also showed a primordial sense of democracy. The decision underlying this emancipation has a composite quality: on the one hand, it was a «Czechoslovak» innovation, yet at the same time, it was implemented with the help of the Byzantine East. What is thus presented as the ideology of the «Czechoslovaks» and a «revolutionary Czechoslovak innovation» is, by contiguity, also Slavic and Eastern.

Details concerning the reception of Jakobson's book are beyond the scope of this essay (cf. Brabec 1993, Stolz and Toman 1993). *The Wisdom* was reviewed only in Czech American journals, and the echo was, by and large, negative. To be sure, some émigrés were irresistibly taken by the *tour de force* with which Jakobson proceeded, and there were some few voices, mainly from the circles around the London government in exile, which suggested that *The Wisdom* be made a textbook in post-war Czechoslovak schools, but on the whole the book was regarded as primitive, unscientific and propagandistic—all this, *nota bene*, by émigrés who had escaped Czechoslovakia precisely for the same reason as Jakobson had—to flee Hitler. One of the reasons for this kind of reception was, it seems, the book's aggressive anti-German language. In *The Wisdom* Jakobson's apology of the ancient Slavic democracy goes hand in hand with a very severe account of the role of the Germans in the Czech Lands. There is virtually no anti-German source from medieval Bohemia that Jakobson left out. Included are anti-German passages from the early fourteenth-century Dalimil Chronicle, a well-known text that portrays the Germans as manipulative, supremacist and violent. Jakobson's selection also points unmistakably in one direction—the Germans had no business in Bohemia : «German immi-

gration [...] has violated the national homogeneity of the Czech lands, its monolithic Slavic character» (Jakobson 1943, p. 205). I presume that this unreserved identification of Germanness with evil was felt primitive and propagandistic. It is likely that the anti-German diatribe also distracted critics from seriously discussing the pro-Eastern argument in the book.

Why would Jakobson expose himself so strongly ? Why arguments for a sense of democracy in a medieval society ? Why use a modern political term «Czechoslovaks» to refer to the inhabitants of Great Moravia? Why terms like «Czech ideology» ? Why bold links between Cyril and Methodius and Czech Protestantism ? The circumstances in which *The Wisdom* was written scarcely need any special comments—the book originated amidst an approaching Armageddon. But there is a broader context—one that is of course ultimately connected with the war also. This is the official foreign-policy doctrines of the prewar Czechoslovak state, especially as shaped by Eduard Beneš in the 1930s. Jakobson's book clearly reflects certain aspects of Beneš's *Weltanschauung*. Beneš, as is known, was repeatedly returning to the notion of Slavdom (*slovanství*) in his political thinking, trying, in one way or another, to fathom its meaning in the twentieth century. His position was eventually expounded in his *Thoughts on Slavdom* (Beneš 1944[1947]), a book obviously influenced by the atmosphere of World War Two. Beneš's *Thoughts* were an attempt to remove traditional concepts that viewed the Slavic nations as a *Blutgemeinschaft* of sorts. Of course, coming up with a more contemporary conception was not easy. Eventually, modern Slavic nations emerge in Beneš's account as an interest group, primarily defined by common political causes. The following quotation highlights several of Beneš's key-points. In order to forge a new meaning of Slavdom :

[i]t is not necessary to follow unscholarly ways and create distinct romantic ideologies, as was the case with the Slavophiles. It suffices to say that besides the practical necessity of defending oneself against German expansionism, Slavic nations are geographical neighbors, and closer to each other in racial, cultural and linguistic terms than other nations. Every future Slavic politics will thus *primarily* rest on practical needs and concrete political necessities and interests. In this sense, *the signing of our treaty with the Soviet Union* (in Moscow on December 12, 1943) *is a very concrete and articulate expression of professing Slavic policy* : what matters is a suppression of the German *Drang nach Osten* and prevention of a Central-European *Lebensraum* aimed again Slavic nations. At the same, it is patently apparent that no Slavic policy is possible if the strongest Slavic state, the Soviet Union, with its two largest nations, Russians and Ukrainians, is not participating.

(Beneš 1947, p. 267; emphasis in original)

Vytvářet [...] nějaké zvláštní nevědecké, romantické ideologie, jako bylo na příklad slavjanofilství, není třeba. Stačí fakt, že vedle praktické nutnosti bránit se společně proti expansivnímu německému jsou si slovanské národy zeměpisnými sousedy a rasově, kulturně a jazykově bližší nežli národy ostatní. Spočívala by tudíž každá budoucí slovanská politika *především* na prostě praktické potřebě a na konkrétních politických nutnostech a zájmech. V tom smyslu *je podepsání naší smlouvy se Sovětským svazem* (v Moskvě, 12. prosince 1943) *velmi konkrétní a výraznou slovanskou politikou* : jde o zaražení německého Drangu nach Osten a o zamezení, aby se mohl vytvářet tak zvaný germánský «Lebensraum» ve střední Evropě proti slovanským národům. Je zároveň výrazem nezvratného faktu, že jako v minulosti tak i nyní se žádná slovanská politika nedá dělat, nebude-li na ní bráti přímé účasti nejsilnější slovanský stát, to jest Sovětský svaz, vedený dvěma největšími slovanskými národy, Rusy a Ukrajinci.

Besides some differences, there is obviously a number of converging points. Whereas Beneš does not completely ignore traditional criteria of co-sanguinity (including race), Jakobson was clearly beyond these notions. Already in 1929, on the occasion of the First Congress of Slavic Philologists, he distanced himself from a genetic definition of the Slavdom. The only thing Slavic that could be pursued genetically was Slavic linguistic cosanguinity; as for the rest, the verdict was clear: «Slavic peoples know neither a common cultural legacy nor an anthropological base, nor common ethnographic characteristics» (Jakobson 1929b).

For Jakobson, who actually goes farther than Beneš, Slavic commonality was dehistoricized and new concepts came up: initially, a community governed by laws of teleology; later, simply a community based on a choice, on a decision to act together — eine *Entscheidungsgemeinschaft*. (This resembles Trubetzkoy's ideas about Eurasia, which is also ultimately an *Entscheidungsgemeinschaft*.) Here similarities and convergencies with Beneš begin. Obviously, grand, «romantic» constructions are alien to Beneš. Furthermore, Beneš sees the Slavic unity in very pragmatic terms, ultimately as a negotiated alliance. Naturally, in the given political situation, all these exercises at a negotiated Slavdom buttressed the idea of rapprochement with the Soviet Union. And, no doubt, Jakobson's book was also felt as aiming at such a rapprochement by exposing a sentiment of Slavic commonality.

Like Beneš, Jakobson emerges as radically anti-German. An attempt to denounce the German *Drang nach Osten* is quite obvious in *The Wisdom*, where it is passionately exploited and goes beyond Beneš's dry pragmatism. By richly documenting the idea that the Germans were perceived as unwelcome immigrants whom the ancient Czechs dreamed of driving out, Jakobson in turn was nourishing Eduard Beneš's idea that the Germans might be legally expelled from the Czechoslovak Republic.

Jakobson also drew certain parallels between Russian and Czech history, converging with one of Beneš's doctrines, namely the idea that Czechoslovakia will function a bridge between East and West, itself belonging to neither :

The very location of the core of the Czech (and Russian) states provides an imperative prerequisite of the familiar slogan — Neither West, nor East. The entire history of the Czech and Russian states is determined by an oscillation between two poles—surges towards the West constantly repeat, as do the counterreaction.

(Jakobson 1943, p. 9)

Právě v poloze českého (a rovněž ruského) státního jádra jsou dány imperativní předpoklady pro známé heslo ; ani Západ ani Východ! Celé dějiny českého a ruského státu jsou určeny kmitáním mezi dvěma póly : jsou tu stále výkyvy směrem k západu, tu k východu, a neustálé reakce proti těmto výkyvům.

Another of the official ideas of the interwar Czechoslovak state is also echoed in Jakobson's book, namely the idea of Czechoslovakism. Among other things, Jakobson interprets the Great Moravian period as «a period of a full political and cultural unity of both branches of the nation» (ibid., p. 6 f.). Here, «nation» means the Czechoslovak nation with its two branches, the Czechs and the Slovaks—a concept intensively propagated in the early stages of the new Czechoslovak state. (Recall that even F. Trávníček's historical grammar of Czech of 1935 is called *A Czechoslovak Historical Grammar* [*Historická mluvnice československá*].) Much in Jakobson's attitude stems of course from the 1930s, when he associated himself rather energetically with official Czechoslovak policies and not only propagated them, but as far as one can judge, did so in partial coordination with the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign affairs (see Toman 1994, p. 156-167).

Just as Beneš's *Thoughts*, Jakobson's *Wisdom* and other attempts to find a legacy of the East in Czech history by necessity leave a problematic impression. Since *The Wisdom* is erudite and excellently researched, a remarkable quality for a book written «on the run,» one might approach it in a selective way and try to rescue some of its parts while overlooking its ideological content just because it is so obviously determined by the political circumstances of the period. This procedure would of course be fundamentally flawed in view of Jakobson's intent. A marriage of facts and ideology represented a legitimate conduct of activist historiography. Recall that in questions relating to Slavic culture and history, Jakobson — and Trubetzkoy—embarked upon a discourse that ultimately led to a reasoned con-



clusion that some form of valuation, and hence participation, was permissible (Stolz & Toman 1993). It is clear — and it was actually clear right from the moment *The Wisdom* appeared — that it was a passionate piece of activist writing. It begins with a quotation from Christian, a Czech Latin Chronicle from the 10th century, that extols old virtues, followed by Jakobson's statement : «An underestimation of one's own assets can be politely called modesty — and less politely defeatism» (Jakobson 1943, p. 5). Clearly, the struggle against defeatism was the order of the day. But as the 1940s were waning away, some degree of disengagement of scholarship from politics became practicable. «The Kernel of Slavic Literatures» (Jakobson 1953), a lengthy treatise on the possibilities of a comparative study of Slavic poetics, echoes the democracy theme (choice of liturgy in a near-vernacular) only briefly (*ibid.*, 47ff.), while the overall emphasis is on the idea that shared linguistic structures are the only patrimony Slavic people undoubtedly have. This is, strictly speaking, the position Jakobson held already in the 1920s.

A forceful echo of *The Wisdom* resounded once again in 1969, a year after the Prague Spring was contained by a Soviet military invasion. In an informally recorded toast on the occasion of a Comenius conference in Prague (Jakobson 1988), Jakobson revived some themes from *The Wisdom* :

The Holy German Empire of the German Nation would cease to exist, as would that of the Habsburg monarchy and Hitler's «Thousand-year Reich» — all of them tried to deny Constantine's [i.e., Cyril's] ideas, but these ideas are still here, Constantine's name is still alive while the names of the emperors, monarchs and Führers are now hardly remembered. The fate of Constantine's teaching revealed the power of the Word, the permanence of his idea. No one spoiled it, nor could it be spoiled, because it was a value of a different order. «Wisdom speaks in it», as Constantine's deep words say, and wisdom can only be overcome by still deeper wisdom, by nothing else.

(Jakobson 1988, p. 177)

Zanikla svatá říše národa německého, zaniklo habsburské mocnářství i Hitle-rova «tisíciletá» říše, které se snažily popřít Konstantinovy ideje, ale ony tu stále jsou, jeho jméno je stále živé a na všechny ty císaře, mocnáře a vůdce si už dnes sotva kdo vzpomene. Osud Konstantinova učení dokázal sílu Slova, trvalost myšlenky. Nikdo ji nezničil a ani by nemohl zničit násilím, neboť je hodnotou jiného řádu. «Moudrost v ní mluví», řečeno hlubokými slovy Konstantinovýchmi, a moudrost lze překonat jen větší moudrostí a ničím jiným.

Jakobson also praised the Czechs for their democratic qualities : «No nation in the world with whom I am familiar has as much genuine de-

mocratic spirit as yours» [Žádný národ, který jsem poznal, nemá v sobě tolik ryzího demokratismu, jako váš] (ibid, 180).

Indeed, this was an emotional moment of yet another traumatic era in Czech history, and a reminder of highlights seemed to be called for. Jakobson construed Prague as a unique place, a focus of Europe, neither West, nor East, thus effectively releasing the Czechs into their own orbit.

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