

## **WALKING PROUDLY IN HIS FOOTSTEPS**

**On the south side of the modest square of my quiet rural Czech village, called Malé Svatoňovice, there's an unpretentious building with a single nondescript door.**



**Go through that door and you are suddenly and unexpectedly in the most superb two-storeyed museum (1).**

**1**

**A wealth of exhibits there chronicle in detail the life of two brothers - Karel Čapek, the Czech author, and his brother Josef, the Cubist painter (2). It opened in 1946 in this their family home and their statue is in the square outside.**

**2**

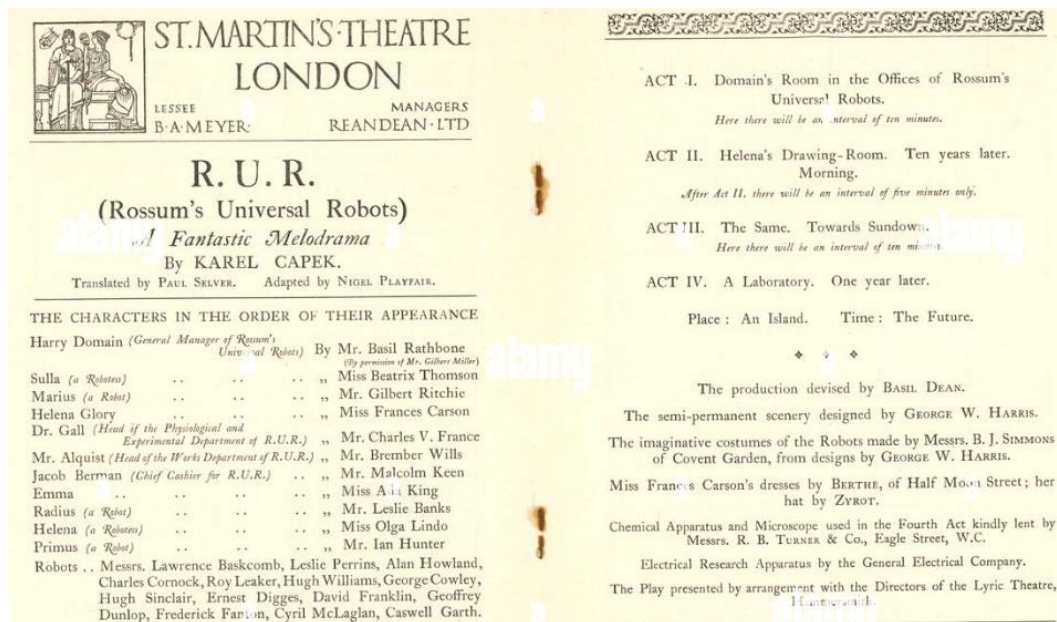
**And it is about Karel Čapek that I want to talk today - you will see some images illustrating my words on the big screen**



**- because it is 100 years this month - June 2024 - since Čapek was here in London in this very lecture room at the School of Slavonic and Eastern European Studies.**

**Čapek came to London for two months in May 1924, invited by his friend Otakar Voěadlo who had begun his work as a lecturer at the then School of Slavic Studies at the University of London three years earlier.**

**Vočadlo chose his time perfectly. Čapek's science-fiction play *Rossum's Universal Robots* had opened in Prague to widespread praise in 1921. Then, to equal critical approval, just eighteen**



**months prior to Čapek's visit, it was staged at St. Martin's Theatre, in English, by the leading London actor-manager Sir Nigel Playfair. (3)**

**3**

**The drama played successfully in New York too and R.U.R., as it quickly became known, was widely acclaimed : science fiction was the flavour of the early 1920s.**

**Čapek was already a literary celebrity, much in demand, when he arrived in London. I am definitely not – so why am here 100 years later ? Let me explain.**

**Since I was 14 I have been regularly to the 'Čapek Society' which meets in the Museum each Friday evening , a group of all ages who proudly explore and discuss the life and works of Karel Čapek, our distinguished fellow villager. I make no bones about it...I am an unapologetic Čapek fan !**

**Earlier this year the Čapek society generously provided funds for me to make a two-month journey to England in order to follow in Čapek's footsteps around the sights of London and, later, other parts of the UK.**

**I know that you are all at the end of the first year of your Czech Language and Literature degree course here. I am exactly the same age and am just finishing my first year studying English Language and Literature at the Charles University in Prague.**

So I am proud, if rather nervous, to be here and it is a singular honour it is for me to be invited make this presentation to you this morning, Monday 17 June 2024, on this my own first visit to England.

Čapek and I are at the opposite ends of the spectrum - he an internationally recognised writer, myself an unknown poor student. Students of course are always poor.... all the time....everywhere. So whilst everyone flocked to meet the celebrated Čapek in 1924 and proffered him home-stay hospitality, I have been couch-surfing and buying cut-price sandwiches at 8.00 pm in Sainsbury's.

I want to share with you this morning some of the experiences of Čapek in London which he recounts in words and amusing line drawings in *'Letters from England'* (*Anglické Listy*) and some of my own observations about how Czech and British societies differ.

What feature of London's daily life could Čapek be describing in paragraphs which include the words 'horror, fever, anxious, scared, sickening' ...can you guess? 4



Yes, you got it ....unsurprisingly it was London traffic which he hated most.

He was not impressed. (4)

In marked contrast Čapek, loved the London parks, with Hyde Park and Speaker's Corner delighting him in particular. He was thrilled at the people there.....anyone, everyone, the man in the street.....being free to express their views on topical issues.. Hyde Park as a symbol of democracy has continued to fascinate Czechs and Slovaks and in the Prague Spring

of 1968 the term 'hydepark' was coined as a term for the new informal open-air discussions. It continues today in the name of the interactive television discussion programme 'Hydepark Civilizace' on the CT24 channel ....all because of Karel Čapek !

Čapek went to Wembley, but not to a football match. Wembley Stadium or The Empire Stadium, as it was first called, had been built to stage the British Empire Exhibition. It was opened by King George V on St. George's Day, April 23 1924, amidst immense national pride.

Čapek was not impressed.

He felt that the exhibition was 'colonial' : and that he disliked. The whole purpose of the exhibition was to celebrate the British Empire, but Čapek acidly remarks that the only thing missing from the vast Wembley halls was anyone whose skin was not white.

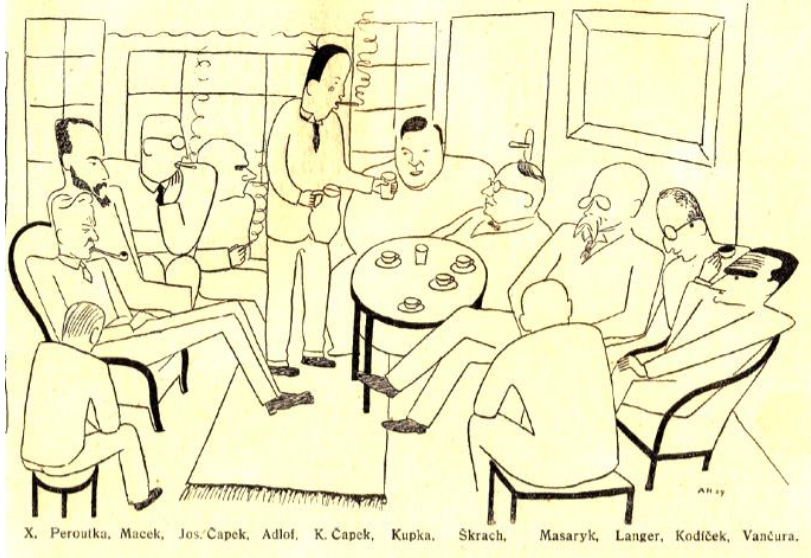
Čapek was not impressed either by the atmosphere of the numerous Gentlemens' clubs he visited in London, remarking on the complete absence of women amongst the ranks of members. I had to smile, when, ironically on May 8<sup>th</sup> this year, 100 years and eleven days since Karel arrived in England, The Garrick Club hesitatingly took the step of admitting women as members. I thought that dinosaurs died out thousands of years ago, but not apparently here in the heart of London !

Visits to these London clubs, and pubs, did, however give him encouragement. There he enjoyed meeting many of the leading English writers and thinkers of the day – the playwright George Bernard Shaw (5), science-fiction novelist HG Wells, Cambridge professor and future

5



**Nobel physics prize winner PMS Blackett and Michael Ramsey, later to be the Archbishop of Canterbury, Head of the Church of England.**



**Back at his home in Prague he expanded his embryonic Friday evening club, ‘Pátečníci’ (6), an informal but regular and enjoyable gathering, attended by leading Czech intellectuals including, sometimes, President T.G. Masaryk himself. London had showed him the way.**

**6 cartoon from 1927 by Czech writer Adolf Hoffmeister of the *Pátečníci***

**Čapek quickly grasped the long-held nuances of English culture – for example, the traditional rivalry between Oxford and Cambridge Universities. With a twinkle in his literary eye he remarks, “I can’t praise Oxford, having praised Cambridge, and my friendship with Cambridge compels me to pour rain, fire and brimstone on conceited Oxford. Unfortunately I rather liked it there !” ‘*Anglické Listy*’ is full of such charming impish humour - a speciality the author brings to every type of writing.**

**Did you realise, however, that Čapek, despite the immense popularity of his plays and books, saw his main calling as a journalist ? He worked for the daily newspaper, Lidové Noviny, and saw journalism as a way to keep in touch with a wide variety of people, and a means of highlighting his passionate belief in the value of democracy.**

**In a newspaper each day he had to write shorter and entertaining pieces on a diverse range of topics each which would grab the readers' attention – I think the literary term is a 'feuilleton'.**

**'Letters from England' could be described a collection of daily feuilletons put together into book form, and later in 1924 the Manchester Guardian did indeed publish the book as a series of sketches of different aspects of England.**

**Ivan Klima in his detailed 2001 biography of Capek confirms "Journalism ensured him a connection not only with people, but with the events of the day."**

**My own visit here has made me realise that there are events in a country's life which happen on a particular day which suddenly make it memorable and significant, for ever in the future, in the minds of its citizens. They are particular to that country.**

**On Monday 27 May, just a few weeks ago, I was couch-surfing in the Isle of Dogs – an area Čapek called 'hideous' – and I shot out to the local Tesco Express to do something I never normally do....to buy a printed copy of 'The Times'.**

**I was keen to glory in the Sunday victory of the Czech team in the World Ice Hockey Championship final against Switzerland which would be reported there. I wanted to take the newspaper home as a souvenir for my uncle. Guess what? The Times did not report even the score.**

**That afternoon there were an estimated 750,000 ice hockey fans in Old Town Square in Prague, as the team paraded the trophy, giving additional further national significance to 27 May. On that date in 1942 the hated German commander of Prague Reinhold Heydrich was assassinated. We Czechs do not celebrate that assassination, but rather grimly remember it.**



**7** By contrast a few days later, on the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of D Day June 6<sup>th</sup> , our President Petr Pavel, with other world leaders, attended the moving celebrations, rather than just commemorations, in Normandy. (7)

I now understand what a significant date that

is for you Brits....and why there was such condemnation of your Prime Minister who went home early to record a political message for his General Election campaign.

English idioms are hard to understand so, when people said ‘Sunak was AWOL’ , I had to google it....and I understood immediately.

Brilliantly versatile writing is the principal reason why Čapek is admired so much. The homely Pizzeria in my village is named after his appealingly simple self- illustrated book ‘*Dášeňka*’ which every single Czech child since 1933 has read and loved.

‘*Dášeňka*’, inspired by his own fox terrier, is a template for children’s storytelling, with a cute and playful puppy at its heart. (8)



**8** I think Čapek would love and laugh at the name of the Pizzeria *Dášeňka* ! How different ‘*Dášeňka*’ is from Čapek’s ‘*Talks with T.G.Masaryk*’ , the philosopher turned politician who is revered by all as the man who became the first President of Czechoslovakia.

Different in subject,  
format, vocabulary, style  
and tone – a masterpiece of



a biography. (9)

**9**

**You have all been studying R.U.R as part of your first year course, so I don't need to tell you how inventive and ingenious it seemed at the time.**

**You may be surprised, however, to know that Čapek also wrote a delightfully informative guidebook *'The Gardener's Year'*. That is why is he depicted holding a watering-can in the statue outside the museum in Malé Svatoňovice.**

**Are they difficult to read in Czech, or in translation, these four diverse examples of carefully-crafted writing ? Not at all. In my view that's why Čapek was such a skilled writer, whatever the subject or format – his work is appealing and makes you want to read on.**

**I want to finish by telling you of something which will make all of us language students smile.**

**Right at the start of *'Anglické listy'*, Čapek, with typical honesty, writes,**

**“Once I had set foot on land I found to my surprise that I did not speak or understand a single word of English,”**

**How encouraging that is to me as a language student. I struggle every day slogging through tedious exercises (10) to improve the accuracy of my English, always wondering whether a noun is “countable” and should have ‘a’ or ‘the’ or nothing at all in front of it.**

**The only certainty is that this “countable rule” has an uncountable number of exceptions !**

**10**



**So take heart, my fellow labourers, you will succeed eventually in learning the spelling of all the cases in Czech nouns – even the ever-versatile Čapek had a blind spot with a foreign language.**





**Finally an invitation from me for this summer vacation – come to the Čapek museum. I will be delighted to host you.**

**11 We can have lunch at the Pizzeria Dašenka, (11).**

**It's owned by my uncle.**

**The spirit of Karel Čapek is there.... and Čapek would surely approve of the 25 per cent discount for students - English or Czech !**