

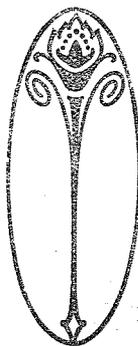
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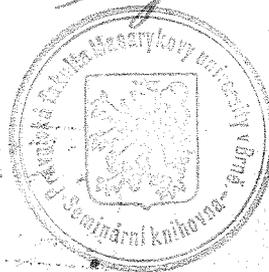
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THE POLITICAL RIGHTS
OF WOMEN
IN THE CZECHOSLOVAK
REPUBLIC

BY
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Weg d. S.



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F. P.

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The Political Rights of Women in the Czechoslovak Republic.

The position of women in the Czechoslovak Republic today in respect of political rights may be regarded as the realization of the boldest hopes of those who have laboured for the civic rights of woman and of the hopes of all who have desired to see civic equality forming the basis of the State. Since the war ended women have been placed on complete equality of rights with men, all differences of class and standing have vanished so far as concerns the political rights of citizens of the Republic. A universal, equal, direct and secret franchise, active and passive, has been introduced. The Charter of the Czechoslovak Constitution adopted on February 29, 1920 by the National Assembly — the so-called Revolutionary Parliament — lays down in its first paragraph: "The people is the one and only fountain of state authority in the Czechoslovak Republic". Paragraph 106 states: "Privileges based on sex, birth, or profession are not recognized."

Paragraph 9 says: "*The right of voting at elections to the House of Deputies* is enjoyed by all citizens of the Czechoslovak Republic, irrespective of sex, who have attained the age of 21 years and who fulfil all the other conditions laid down in the Rules of Franchise relating to such elections."

Paragraph 10 states: "All citizens of the Czechoslovak Republic, irrespective of sex, who have attained the age of 30 years at least and who fulfil all the other conditions laid down in the Rules of Franchise for elections to the House of Deputies enjoy the *right of being elected* to that House."

Paragraph 14 states: "The right to vote at elections to the *Senate* is enjoyed by all citizens of the Czechoslovak Republic, irrespective of sex, who have attained the age of 26 years and who fulfil all the other conditions laid down in the Act of Parliament relating to the composition and Jurisdiction of the Senate."

Paragraph 15 says: "Citizens of the Czechoslovak Republic, irrespective of sex, who have attained the age of 45 years, and who fulfil all the other conditions laid down in the Act of Parliament relating to the Composition and Jurisdiction of the Senate *enjoy the right to be elected* to the Senate."

Similarly the Local Government Act of the Czechoslovak Republic of 31. January 1919 in its opening paragraph states: "The right to vote at the elections to local councils is enjoyed by all citizens of the Czechoslovak Republic *irrespective of sex.*" Paragraph 4 runs: "Every citizen who has the right to vote at the elections to local Councils and commissions enjoys also the right to be elected" — in this case again irrespective of sex.

Thus the Rules of Franchise governing elections to the House of Deputies and the Act of Parliament relating to the Composition and Jurisdiction of the Senate (both dated 29. February 1920) bestowed on all citizens, in consonance with the Charter of the Constitution, the right, irrespective of sex, both to elect and to be elected.

It follows as a matter of course that the *right of political association* is guaranteed by the Constitution to all citizens.

There are few places in the whole world where such a radical change has taken place in the position of women with regard to political rights. We have to remember that up to the time of the Revolution (Oct. 1918) Bohemia formed a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. By the laws of the Empire it was expressly prohibited for women to be members of political associations or to form such associations. In more recent times (1907) the franchise laws for election to the Vienna Parliament were amended and women were expressly excluded from the suffrage although, till then, women who were landed proprietors had enjoyed the right to vote.

In Bohemia women enjoyed to a limited extent, the right of voting at local elections and at elections to the Bohemian Diet:

indeed they even succeeded, with the support of some justice-loving Bohemian men, in getting women elected as members of the Diet of the then Kingdom of Bohemia, but not a year passed in which they had not to fight in defence of these rights, for the Vienna government was continually aiming at their abolition.

And now the Republic guarantees absolute equality of rights.

This equality has not been won by violence or by a surprise attack. It has grown from tradition — a fact which so much enhances its value in our eyes — it has been prepared and worked up to through many years by the women's movement, and is therefore all the more logical and founded on a solid basis.

There have been times in our history — the days of the Hussites and the days of the Bohemian Brethren — in which a real brotherly and sisterly relation of the two sexes to each other actually existed — a living interest on the part of women in the sufferings of men, an equality of strength and determination in the work for justice, for liberty of conscience and later for the liberty of the nation. Side by side with the male warriors of God of Hussite days we see also women warriors; side by side with the Bohemian Brethren of the days of Comenius we see also Bohemian sisters.

We are not blind to the fact that in the daily round of today we are no longer so true to this tradition as we were in those former times. The irresistible pressure of successive Austrian Governments who favoured the Germans and Hungarians as elements capable of eradicating the national sentiment of the Czechoslovaks and of moulding them into a single uniform mass — of converting them in short into *Austrians* — subservient to the incompetent Habsburg sowed its tares also among us. But in the moment that the Czechoslovak nation was liberated and could decide for itself on the future fabric of its State, the old Czech spirit of justice re-awoke in the breasts of its legislators.

We may therefore make bold to say that the victory won by women is not a "revolutionary" victory in the evil sense of that word, in the sense, that it is something which future development may deprive them of.

Our whole revolution was perhaps unique of its kind. It cost

not one drop of blood and took place without any destruction of property whatsoever in the economic sense. And yet through it there arose to freedom a nation which had been oppressed for centuries and it would only have been human nature, if in the intoxication of freedom they had made use of weapons of blood in order to revenge themselves on those at whose hands they had suffered persecution.

In the meantime this liberated people have bestowed by their new Constitution, absolute equality of civic rights *even upon their former oppressors*.

This fact alone will possibly suffice to prove how deep is the fountain of their justice, how strong a bulwark of Right this little land, wedged up in the middle of Europe, is. Whilst in Hungary revolution followed on revolution, whilst in Germany Bolshevism has alternated with reaction and again with socialism of a mild form, whilst in Austria battles were fought in the streets of Vienna, the Czechoslovak Republic has all along stood firm on the foundation of true democracy and of justice, in matters social and racial, to all.

How does the equality of rights of women work in actual practice?

It was established even before the war ended. There had arisen throughout the whole country "National Committees" which prepared the revolution and which subsequently took over the executive power in the State. These Committees were composed of delegates from every political party and among the members of the "National Committees" there were very many women — some even taking high office in the Committees,

There arose also economic-political institutions. The Vienna Government of the Habsburgs, as is well known, looked upon the Czechoslovak lands as their granary and regardless of how the war itself had exhausted supplies, regardless of the famine prevailing in all Czech regions, carried off all that they possibly could. The "economic councils" composed, in this case also, of delegates from the political parties became institutions for assistance and defence

The idea of establishing these "economic councils" originated in the brain of a woman, they relied on the co-operation of women

who were members endowed with full rights, of all their committees and central offices. (The "Economic councils" still exist as semi-official organs of public control over food supply and it is laid down that one-fifth of their members must be women. The present chairman of the central organization is a woman.)

Similarly we meet with women at the close of the war, in all corporate bodies, and occupying responsible positions to a degree unknown before. It is indeed true that Czechoslovak women even in the eyes of the Austrian Government were ripe for political responsibility. Otherwise they had not been condemned as they were to death, interned and persecuted just as were the men and Czech men found in them a steadfast support and self-sacrificing co-operators.

Immediately on the Revolution taking place — 28 October 1918 the cooperation of women in the work of political institutions took an official form.

The Central "National Committee" declared itself appointed by the will of the people as a *law-giving* National Assembly and women obtained here too their places. Of 269 members of Parliament only 8, it is true, were women, but they played a very honourable part, at a period of great responsibility, in the laying of the foundations of the State.

It is interesting to record that it was the socialist women members in particular who were the most active in the new National Assembly

The National (Czechoslovak) Socialists were represented by two women, the Social Democratic Party by two, the Agrarians by two and the National Democrats by one. The daughter of the first President — Dr. Alice Masaryk — in consideration of her social labours and her sufferings (she had been imprisoned by the Austrian government) was sent up to the National Assembly by the unanimous vote of all parties.

She subsequently retired from Parliament in order to devote herself to her work as President of the Czechoslovak Red Cross, a task which she is accomplishing in a manner which brings credit on the name of woman. In her stead another woman — a Social Democrat — came into the National Assembly.

In the sittings of parliament they were successful exponents of their own views and the views of the parties to which they belonged, they presented Bills before parliament and frequent successes attended their efforts. To mention only one or two points: women proposed plans for the betterment of the social conditions of students; for the taking over by the State schools and places of education hitherto conducted by monasteries, convents or other church organisations; for placing girls' middle schools under State control; for converting into state institutions, reorganising and extending, women's technical and industrial schools and schools of domestic economy; for establishing central refuges for Children and Children's Homes; for introducing day instruction in apprentice schools; for prohibiting evening and Sunday instruction; and for regulating the legal position and the conditions of advancement of women teachers in the national schools.

They further brought in Bills for the punishment of corruption, for the abolition of licensed houses of ill-repute, for the stern punishment of secret prostitution, for compulsory reporting and treatment of sexual diseases and for the systematic disinfection of public buildings, schools etc. and also of private dwellinghouses etc.

The most of these proposals were crowned with success sometimes complete sometimes partial. The problem of prostitution is now one of those which is in course of being seriously solved.

In June 1919 the *first elections* took place — the *elections to local and municipal bodies*. They took place according to the system of fixed lists of candidates, that is to say, the names of the candidates are arranged in a certain order by the political parties on lists which it is not allowed afterwards to alter. The executive committees of the parties have thus the power, according to whether their standpoint towards women is a progressive one or not, to place women's names in such a position on the list that they have a prospect of being actually elected.

Women who take no part in the political activities of some party or other, or who are not organized, are excluded from the possibility of election.

If we realize that the parties are organizations, which make

systematic political effort possible, that they are groups of persons who have similar or identical views on the ordering of the affairs of the state and that it is the task of the party to effectuate the principles of its programme in the State and that the individual can only give due effect to his good ideas when he gathers round him organized co-workers — if we realize this, we see that behind the fixed lists of candidates there is a sound principle, it is only necessary that all parties be imbued with justice towards women.

From the elections we gather the following interesting statistics.

The number of *women voters* was much larger than that of men voters. Of the total number of voters 2,746,641 or 54% were women and only 2,302,916 or 45.6% men. Also the *duty of recording their votes* was better fulfilled by the women than by the men. 90.4% of men voting as against 92.6% of women. The number of women organized in the ranks of the various parties varies from 20% to 70% according to private statistics about 12% of those elected were women.

One of the objections to bestowing the franchise on women was the argument that they would vote conservative, The opposite has proved to be the case. After the elections the socialist parties recorded their thanks to women for their victory a victory which actually saved the country from convulsions for as soon as the broad masses of the people were enabled to take up the administration of the local areas in a due degree they bore patiently all the horrors of post-war famine and the ever-increasing rise in prices.

The Social Democratic party received 32.5% of all votes, the National (Czechoslovak) Socialists 17.3%, other Socialists 2.3%, in all 52.1%.

The women members of local administrative bodies occupy themselves principally with problems of pauperism, housing, health, food supply, and education. They preside over the committees dealing with these matters. They are also members of city Councils, occupy the post of deputy mayors and three are "starosty" i. e. burgomasters.

Their influence is widely felt in the communities. Through them investigations are made as to the conditions in which the poor live and are housed, housing reforms are introduced, schools, and baths, established, care of mothers and babies organised, assistance given

in their household duties to women who are in ill health, courses arranged in nursing, for mothers, nursemaids and servants (a thing previously non-existent) soup supplied to needy children etc.

The development of the work is hindered by the financial straits in which the communities find themselves as a consequence of pre-war and war-time administration as well as by the increased needs of all communities. Self-help cannot possibly meet the demands made. The entry of women into the town councils signifies further the incoming of justice to women employées who were formerly looked upon as a necessary evil, a remedy only for dire need, To day they are coworkers with men and in enjoyment of the same rights as the latter.

Women have also been appointed "Commissioners" in district administrative committees.

The first elections to Parliament (House of Deputies and Senate) did not take place till the end of April 1920. and it is therefore impossible for the moment to give precise statistics relating thereto. So much, however, is certain; — that women took a great part in these elections. They took place according to the system of fixed lists of Candidates as above explained. Out of 302 members elected to the House of Deputies 13 — that is 4% — were women. Out of 150 to the Senate 3 — that is 2% — were women.

Member of the House of Deputies arranged according to the various political parties and the number of seats allotted by each party to women.

1. Czechoslovak Parties.

| Seats | National Democrats | Czechoslovak Socialists | Social Democrats | Agrarians | Clericals | Modráček party | Tradesmen's party |
|------------|--------------------|-------------------------|------------------|-----------|-----------|----------------|-------------------|
| men | 18 | 21 | 70 | 39 | 32 | 3 | 6 |
| women | 1 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 1 | — | — |
| % of women | 5.26% | 12.50% | 5.40% | 2.50% | 3.03% | — | — |

2. German Parties.

| Seats | Social Democrats | Bourgeois party | Farmers party | Christian Socialists | Freethinkers |
|------------|------------------|-----------------|---------------|----------------------|--------------|
| men | 28 | 15 | 11 | 10 | 5 |
| women | 3 | — | — | — | — |
| % of women | 9.67% | — | — | — | — |

3. Magyar Parties.

| | Christian Socialists | Magyar Socialists | Farmers party |
|------------|----------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| men | 5 | 4 | 1 |
| women | — | — | — |
| % of women | — | — | — |

The proportions in the Senate.

1. Czechoslovak Parties.

| Seats | National Democrats | Czechoslovak Socialists | Social Democrats | Agrarians | Clerical party | Tradesmen's party |
|------------|--------------------|-------------------------|------------------|-----------|----------------|-------------------|
| men | 10 | 10 | 40 | 20 | 18 | 3 |
| women | — | — | 1 | — | — | — |
| % of women | — | — | 2.44% | — | — | — |

2. German Parties

| Seats | Social Democrats | Bourgeois party | Farmers | Christian Socialists | Freethinkers |
|------------|------------------|-----------------|---------|----------------------|--------------|
| men | 15 | 7 | 6 | 4 | 3 |
| women | 1 | 1 | — | — | — |
| % of women | 6.25% | 12.5% | — | — | — |

3. Magyars Parties.

| Seats | Christian Socialists | Magyar Socialists | Farmers |
|------------|----------------------|-------------------|---------|
| men | 2 | — | 1 |
| women | — | — | — |
| % of women | — | — | — |

These statistics for the House of Deputies comprise 268 seats, 32 being at present vacant; for the Senate 142 seats 8 being as yet vacant,

These figures are vere instructive.

It is clear that public opinion in the various parties has been influenced by the opposition to women's suffrage displayed by the French government and by the men of Switzerland; otherwise women would certainly have gained a larger number of representatives.

The figures further shew the *extremely mixed* composition of society in regard of language as well as of parties in the Czechoslovak Republic, These are two reasons why fewer women can-

didates were placed in assured places on the lists of candidates; the men feared that the complicated conditions demanded the election of politicians of previous experience. The women naturally did not find this explanation satisfactory.

If the Republic had not introduced the system of Proportional Representation, the smaller parties would have failed to secure any representatives.

The elections therefore give an accurate picture of the composition of the population and an opportunity for all the component parts to collaborate in the consolidation of the State.

The "revolutionary" National Assembly was purely Czech. The Germans and Magyars were at that time, although co-citizens, in revolt against the Republic: they refused to recognize it and proclaimed certain districts as independent; the Magyars indeed even took up arms against the Republic.

And yet the Constitution has given equal electoral rights to all. By taking part in the elections they have acknowledged their citizenship of the Czechoslovak Republic; they have recognized that the nation of Huss, of Comenius and of Masaryk is loyal and ready for friendship, that even when the Czechs had the political power absolutely in their hands they did not abuse it even against those who were for centuries their foes and until quite recently their sworn foes.

It is very difficult for foreigners to understand the composite and complicated conditions of our country — and all the more so as they gain their information about us from the press of our enemies.

It is a great thing to be the heart of Europe, but it is at the same time a responsibility and a danger.

England is separated by the sea from all other states; it is secure like America which need fear no enemy at its gates even on its short southern frontier. Spain, France and Italy likewise have scarce one vulnerable frontier.

But we are surrounded completely on all sides by foreign powers.

We are like an island in the midst of surging waves, we feel the shock as if we were of the breakers. How many foreigners penetrate across the frontiers to us! But we do not force them of

abandon their original sentiments of race and nationality. We have always erred rather on the side of an excess of hospitality,

But this centre of Europe, perhaps in virtue of its geographical situation and the collision of most varied influences is like a gigantic workshop in which these influences are re-moulded and give rise to progressive ideals.

We anticipated the Reformation in Germany by a whole century with our Hussite movement led by John Huss who stood for pureness of life, liberty of conscience and liberty of conviction. — It was from among us that John Amos Comenius — "The teacher of the Nations" was born in the 16th century. He composed his great life-work — a revolution in the culture of nations — with the object of promoting universal peace, and that, at a time when such an idea was still quite foreign to other nations.

He not only was the author of the idea but in his immortal works elaborated a method of its realization.

And the Czech Declaration of December 8. 1870 continuing the work of Comenius proclaimed even then the Wilsonian principle of to day — that of the right of nations to self-determination. It stated: "All nations, whether great or small, have an equal right to self-determination and their equality ought to be equally respected. Only by the recognition of equal rights and by reciprocal respect for the unfettered self-determination of all nations can their rights, liberty and fraternity, universal peace and true humanity flourish."

The University of Prague was the first complete university after that of Paris, possessing all faculties and it was altogether the first in Central and Eastern Europe and that not only chronologically but also in virtue of its splendid organization.

We have created our own characteristic national Art, we have built up a perfect educational system, we have scarcely an illiterate — and all this *against the will and under the displeasure of Austrian Governments.*

Our women founded a High School for girls which was the *first* to be founded in the former Austrian Empire Vienna afterwards followed our example. All this, too, was done in the face of the opposition of a hostile Government.