8 Defender of Women’s Rights

Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk was preeminent among men in Bohemia in the late nineteenth century as an advocate of women’s rights.1 Masaryk spoke out boldly and in radical tones against the enslavement of women in all spheres of life, including the home and family. In speeches and articles, and in his journal, Nasě doba, he hammered away at what he considered false beliefs about the inequality of women and criticized unjust limitations on women’s place in society. In a manner which endorsed the major claims of the contemporary women’s movement and anticipated many of the demands of the feminist movement of the future, he called for absolute equality for women in all spheres – equal responsibility of men and women within the family, equal access to education and the professions, equal pay for equal work, the enfranchisement of women, and full participation of women in public affairs. He condemned prostitution and what he called ‘polygyny’ (mnohoženství), i.e. sexual relations with more than one wife or with several women. He was severely critical of prevalent views about the nature of love and of sex expounded both by official Catholic doctrine and by socialist theory, which, he felt, demeaned women and distorted love and marriage. He also condemned ideas expressed in modern literature, which encouraged sexual laxity. Alois Hajn, active in contemporary Czech progressive politics, later described him as ‘a pioneer of the ideas on the women’s question’ whose words created ‘a veritable revolution among Czech youth’ at the time.2

INFLUENCES ON MASARYK’S THINKING

In the forming of Masaryk’s viewpoint on the women’s question a number of influences were at work. The first was the position of women in Bohemian society during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Women suffered many liabilities, such as an inferior place in the family, discrimination in the economic sphere, limitations on educational opportunities, denial of the franchise, and discouragement from participation in public affairs, not to mention prevailing opinions that women were inferior to men and should rightly suffer inequality. Nonetheless, from the 1870s on, women’s associations were formed, and a strong women’s movement came into existence. By 1900 women were able to secure education at all levels, to enter the professions, and to participate to a limited degree in public life. By 1914 women had already begun to advance toward emancipation to a greater degree than in other parts of the Austrian empire.3 At the turn of the

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century, when Masaryk concerned himself with the question, there was, however, still much to be done to achieve genuine equality of men and women.

More direct and personal was the influence exerted by his wife, Charlotte Garrigue Masaryk. Masaryk himself spoke of the impact on his own life of his mother and of his wife. He told Karel Čapek of the great influence of his mother, a ‘wise’ and ‘devout’ woman; he also said of Charlotte that ‘our whole marriage was cooperation.’ During their courtship in Leipzig, where she was studying music, the couple had often read together and had been greatly attracted by the ideas expressed by John Stuart Mill in The Subjection of Women (London, 1869). Charlotte later translated this book into Czech. After their marriage Masaryk adopted Charlotte’s maiden name as his middle name and later gave it to each of his children.

Charlotte was a woman of marked intellectual capacity and a highly developed social conscience. Brought up as a Unitarian she was devout and deistic; like Masaryk, her religion was highly personal and free of any respect for Church dogmas or practices. After coming to Prague, she learned Czech well, studied Czech literature and history, and became an ardent patriot. She had a wide knowledge of literature, but her great love was music. She played the piano and wrote several articles on Smetana, her favourite composer, then not held in high repute. She was a strong advocate of women’s rights and became active in the Czech women’s movement, and in other social work. She was deeply concerned with social problems, and, unlike her husband, joined the Social Democratic party and took part in its activities.

During their married life Charlotte and Tomáš continued to pursue their common intellectual pursuits, often reading or playing music together, and attending concerts. Charlotte worked in close cooperation with Masaryk in his social and intellectual activities and is said to have left many ‘traces of her spirit’ in his writings and in his plans. Hajn later wrote that Charlotte had been not only ‘a wife but a helper and collaborator in all his life’s work, a close friend and comrade’. Masaryk himself later declared that his views on women had been ‘determined by the living model of my wife’; ‘she had been the most decisive influence on the maturing of all my views and on my character’. One of his major statements on the women’s question, Polygyny and Monogyny, he said, was ‘as a matter of fact my wife’s work.’ He was once quoted as saying that in the women’s question ‘I am only a peddler of my wife’s opinions.’

Inseparable from this was the influence on Masaryk of his strong personal beliefs on marriage and the family. In one of his earliest writings he stated that the family was ‘a real school of love for one’s fellow-man’ and of ‘altruism and of work.’ He laid special stress on the role of the mother; ‘mother love is actually the basis of all human society’. Many witnesses testified that Masaryk’s married life was a model of a happy and harmonious marriage. One of his closest friends and admirers, Jan Herben, wrote of their marriage as ‘rare and beautiful’, undisturbed by serious conflict.