

**Norbert Capek, Maja Oktavec Capek  
and the Flower Service**

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

Today I am going to share the story of the Flower Service. We heard last week about how important it is to share our stories in order to begin a dialog of social justice. I did not expect this story that I will tell today, about the beginnings of the flower service, but the more research I did, the more compelling I found this story and then I realized that the story of the flower service is also the story of Norbert Capek's third wife, Mája Capek. Most of my research is from the 1999 book published by the UUA, written by a UU Minister in Utah, Richard Henry. Richard Henry's book is mostly about Norbert, the husband, and Henry's book is the only biography published on Norbert Capek. There are no books on, Mája, the third wife of Norbert, although I was able to find a little information on her on the internet.

One of the issues that I would like to explore today is that it is Májka, as much as Norbert, whom we have to thank for this Flower service, today. Norbert introduced the Flower service in Czechoslovakia in 1923.

Májka was also a Unitarian minister. She left Czechoslovakia in February 1939 after the Munich pact of 1938. She held the first flower service in the United States in Cambridge Massachusetts in the early 1940s. She served for three years as minister of the North Church in Boston, Massachusetts.

Májka was very influential with Norbert. It is believed that Májka encouraged Norbert to become a Unitarian in 1921. Májka did not stay in Czechoslovakia, and face the Nazi's, as her husband, Norbert did. The Richard Henry book does not cover Májka's early life, so I am not able to address much of Májka's life in the same detail as I am able to address the life of Norbert. I have a lot of interest in the life of Májka, now. A few years ago, I discovered that the UU Water service has

feminist roots in the 1970s. It is interesting to me that the spouse of Norbert Capek, Mája Capek, introduced the flower service in the United States.

Another issue that I came across is how the Unitarian church that was founded by Norbert in the 1920s survived communism between 1945 and 1989. I am also interested in knowing more about the role of the Prague Unitarian congregation during that period.

I do want to spend about five minutes--maybe ten minutes--reviewing the life of the Norbert and Mája Capek before we get into the flower service.

### **Early life**

Norbert was born in 1870, an only child into a Roman Catholic family in southern Bohemia. His father was a tailor in a poor village, which meant that his customers were poor. However, the tailor had a brother who was a tailor in Vienna, who had better dressed customers. Norbert was bright, but the decision was

made because of economics to send him to be a tailors' apprentice, rather than have him continue his academic education. On Sundays, when he wasn't working, Norbert would visit different churches, and he began to read about religion.

### **Early career**

At the age of 18, Norbert left Catholicism for the Baptist church and was ordained a minister, although he did not graduate from the Hapsburg seminary. Čapek traveled widely as a Baptist evangelist, from Saxony in the west to the Ukraine in the east. In Moravia, the free Christianity and the Moravian Brotherhood influenced him. He began holding Baptist meetings, and he called his congregation the Moravian Brethren.

### **1899 leaves Baptist church**

Although Norbert's Baptist congregation grew to 250 people, in 1899 he left the ministry and the Baptist church. This would be the first of the three times (that I could count) that he parted with the Baptist church to work as a journalist. He edited a

newspaper on religious and psychological counsel together with editorial comments about local events, marriage and parenting advice. He also wrote a lot of songs, although his songs rarely mention Jesus.

Norbert married for the first time when he was about 28, but his first wife died at age 31 after having six children. She died in June 1906, so he hired a governess to take care of the six children for the summer, named Marie, and then he married Marie in September.

Norbert also wrote for a journal whose major concern was to encourage intelligent dialogue about issues in education and religion. Norbert had such good responses to his articles on religion that he decided to attempt to form a new religious movement.

He corresponded with a philosophy professor at the University of Prague, Thomas Masaryk, whose emphasis was on the importance of the religious foundations of Czech culture and national

identity. Norbert asked Professor Masaryk for advice on starting a new religion. Masaryk was a Unitarian, who became President of Czechoslovakia between 1918 and 1935. Masaryk encouraged Norbert's thinking from a Unitarian viewpoint.

In 1905, Norbert was back with the Baptists, but by 1910, he was estranged, again from the Baptists.

In 1910, Norbert tried to interest the American Unitarian Association in financial aid to start a Unitarian church in Czechoslovakia. But he would not receive AUA funding to start a Unitarian Church in Czechoslovakia until 1921.

## **WWI**

The war clouds of World War I were gathering, and Norbert began to suffer because the Germans did not like his writings. He parted with the Baptist church, in Czechoslovakia, for the second time in his life about 1914.

## **United States during WWI**

The American Baptists had offered Norbert a position, so in 1914, Norbert and Marie fled to the United States. But Marie suffered a cerebral hemorrhage while singing in church soon after they arrived in the United States. Norbert was widowed again, this time with either eight or nine children -the Richard Henry book was a little ambiguous about exactly how many children he had. We know that one of his 11 children died. Norbert socialized with other Czech expatriates at the Slavic Reading Room of the New York public library. The New York Public Libraries made an effort to hire native language speakers as librarians in neighborhoods with large immigrant populations, so the librarian that Norbert met was another Czech expatriate, Mája Oktavec. Norbert and Maja were married in 1917 and their only child together, Lubor, was born in 1919. In 1919, Norbert and Mája begin collecting clothing and money for Czech relief, although at this time, Norbert is still a Baptist. The Unitarian

Service Committee would later grow out of the Czech relief effort.

### **Leaves Baptist Church for Second Time**

After Norbert left the Baptist church for the third time in his life, in 1919, he worked as a journalist for a Czech language newspaper and he worked as a personal counselor. People would come to see him about their personal problems. He also played a role during World War I as a "Four Minute Man" for the US Army's Committee for Public Information delivering information in four-minute speeches on the war in movie theatres between reels.

He was still without an academic degree, so he found an institution, which would give him a doctoral degree for his "life experience." He received the mail order degree of Dr. a year after he applied. A copy of his doctoral dissertation has never been located in any dissertation archives.

He was no longer interested in the American Unitarian church, because he felt that the liberal religions did not have the same missionary zeal as the Baptists. However, the Capek children began attending a Unitarian Sunday School and Norbert and Mája couldn't stay away, so Norbert and Mája joined the East Orange Unitarian Church. Norbert was immediately introduced to the president of the AUA, Dr. Samuel Elliot.

### **Return to Czechoslovakia to start Unitarian Church**

Norbert revived his interest in motivating the AUA to support a Unitarian church. He wrote a letter to the AUA president, Samuel Elliot. In 1921, the AUA Board Directors voted to fund about \$3000 a year to fund a Unitarian Church in Czechoslovakia. In 1921, Norbert and Mája returned to Prague to start the Unitarian church.

The first meetings of the Czech Unitarians were in a temperance restaurant. The fellowship grew quickly. Norbert had prior experience in starting churches. The early worship services were

lectures on various topics. The minister did not wear a robe and there were no elaborate rituals.

### **Flower Communion**

In 1923, Norbert created the Flower Communion. Each member would bring a flower to the church, where it was placed in a large central vase. At the end of the service, each person would take home a different flower. This symbolized the uniqueness of each individual, and the coming together in communion to share this uniqueness. It is thought that Norbert may have seen some other kinds of flower services while he was in the United States, but he is credited with developing the Flower Service in its present form.

Flowers actually became the most widely used symbol of Czech Unitarianism. The most obvious use of the symbol of flowers was in the Flower Communion, but flowers are also used in the symbol of the Czech Unitarian Association. (Samojsky, 1999) The symbol of the Czech Unitarian Church is of a sunflower reaching

toward the sun....does the UUFR have a symbol? Maybe we need one.

### **Growth of the Church**

In 1924, the fellowship purchased a building, which had been a medieval palace, on 8/186 Karlova Street, near the Charles River in Prague. The British Unitarians and the American Unitarians loaned the Czech Unitarians \$50,000 for the purchase of the building.

The Unitarian Church was popular in Prague after World War I because there was a need to get away from the dominance of the Roman Catholic Church. In the 1920s, this was called "The Overthrow." The Unitarian church in Prague grew to 3200 members. It became the largest Unitarian church in the world. It was a megachurch.

In 1926, Májka was ordained as a Unitarian minister.

### **Churches Financial Situation**

By 1933, the Czech government, responding to the rise of Hitler, curtailed all but the most essential expenditures in order to increase its own military strength, including a state loan to the Unitarians.

During the 1930's the church's financial situation had grown worse, but in 1939, a church member who was planning to flee the country and could not take his money with him, loaned \$75,000 to the church. So the churches financial problems were alleviated.

Gestapo agents attended the services, since Prague was under the siege of the Nazis, so Norbert had to be very careful with his sermons.

## **WWII**

Nazi Germany annexed part of Czechoslovakia in 1938. In February 1939, after the German troops had entered the country, Mája Capek left Prague and went to United States to lecture and raise funds for the Czech relief. She served as minister of First Unitarian Church of New Bedford, MA for three

years. Májá introduced the Flower Communion to the United States in Cambridge Massachusetts, although I do not yet know the date of this.

In 1939, the AUA offered Norbert a position of minister-at-large for the Unitarian fellowship in the United States. Norbert replied to the AUA that he did not want to desert his people, and that he would remain.

So, Májá chose to leave and Norbert chose to stay. In 1939, Norbert was almost 70 and Májá was 51. Lubor would have been 21.

## **Májá**

This relationship interests me. Are Unitarians fundamentally feminist? Would we be celebrating the flower service if Májá had not left and introduced the flower service to the United States? Wouldn't it be interesting to know how the conversation went in the Capek household when the decision was being on whether Maja would go to the United States. Maja did have the

option of leaving had options. She had contacts in the United States. She had a network. She had spent more time in the United States than Norbert. How did Norbert encourage Májka? Did Norbert say "I want you to stay" or did he say, "I want you to leave?"

As a young person, Maja had made her own opportunities, just as Norbert had. She had begged to study library science at NYU. She found herself a great job in the New York Public Library while she was in her 20's. She married a man 18 years older than herself, who was already quite famous.

It was quite the ethical dilemma the two of them faced, as they decided that one should stay and one should go.

### **Imprisonment**

The Gestapo finally had a reason to arrest Norbert in March 1942. Norbert was charged with listening to a broadcast of the BBC. Norbert was given a relatively light sentence and sent to Dresden prison. The poem in the program was written March 31,

1942 from the Dresden prison. The first line of this poem is quoted widely. I will read this poem as our closing words today.

In May 1942, Reich's Protector Heydrich, "the Butcher of Prague" was assassinated. The Nazis retaliated by sending prisoners with light sentences to the concentration camps. In July 1942, Norbert was sent to Dachau. In October 1942, Norbert was transported to the Castle Harheim and killed with poison gas. Seven of Norbert's letters from Dachau survive. The Gestapo required that each letter include the line, "I am well and in high spirits." Prisoners were not allowed to correspond with relatives abroad, so Norbert had no contact with Májka during the last months of his life. The survivors of the prisons where Norbert was held reported that Norbert was quite the motivating and inspiring prisoner. Norbert's daughter, Zora, did survive the labor camp.

### **Májka after Norbert's Death**

Mája suffered from back problems, but she worked at the headquarters of the AUA in Boston and then for the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency as a displaced Persons Specialist until 1950. She retired to live with her son, Lubor, in California. Lubor is still living—I found him on Spokeo. Mája died in 1966. The UUA Website Biography page states, “A writer has been assigned to write a biography of Mája Capek and that it will be online as soon as possible.” I’m personally looking forward to this. Maybe I will ask the UUA when the biography will be ready.

### **The Unitarian Universalist Service Committee**

The Czech Unitarian Society's rescue and relief efforts during World War II became the genesis of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. I am interested to find out how the American Unitarian Association funded the startup of other Unitarian churches in other countries, as it did in Czechoslovakia.

### **Communist Era**

Because Unitarians had purchased the building on Charles Street in downtown Prague with the financial help from the United States and Great Britain, the Communists could not confiscate the building during the period of Communism between WWII and the Velvet Revolution in 1989. The Prague congregation focused on Eastern religions during this time. We heard about the harsh conditions under communism in the Czech Republic from Melina Van Sant last summer. I would be interested to know if there were any other kinds of activities within the church during this era, besides the study of Eastern religions.

### **History of the Flower Service in the US**

I attended my first flower service in 1993, although I'm a lifelong Unitarian Universalist. I don't remember attending a flower service at any of the UU churches that my family attended in the 1960s or 1970s. This book on Norbert Capek was published in 1999. It's my theory that the Flower service didn't become really widespread until the 1990s.

Is there anyone who attended a flower service earlier than this?

A minister I know from Star Island said that he began holding a flower service prior to 1970.

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### **Flower Service**

Now we will begin the flower service.

This flower service may take different forms, depending on the size of the congregation. In a large congregation, you simply place the flower in a vase, but in a small congregation such as this, we each will speak a few words about the flower that we have brought, as we place the flower in the basket.

Please come to the front and tell us about your flower, and then place your flower in the basket/vase here at the front. After that, we will consecrate the flowers, and then we will distribute a different flower to each of you. Don't worry if you didn't bring a flower. There are extras.

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