



Miloš Zeman in Jerusalem

by Dr. Jiri Valenta

BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 1,021, November 29, 2018

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Shifts in perceptions among European Jews on where they feel safest is not due entirely to demographic change. It also has to do with Eastern European leaders like the Czech Republic's Miloš Zeman, who, in the tradition of the country's founder, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, has become not just a strong voice for his people but a true friend of the Jews.

Czech President Miloš Zeman's historic speech to the Israeli Knesset on November 26, 2018, in which he stressed that his country is not only Israel's best friend in Europe but one of its best friends in the world, came on the heels of an important report released by the American Jewish Distribution Committee (JDC) on November 20.

The JDC report concluded that there is an ongoing historical shift in the perceptions of Jewish elites in Europe. Whereas a century ago they viewed Western Europe as a sanctuary for European Jewry, they now feel far safer in Eastern Europe. Analysts attributed this phenomenon to demographic changes in Western Europe; the influx of Muslim refugees in the wake of the wars in Iraq, Libya, and Syria, and the rise of radical Islam.

While this is undoubtedly a major factor, there is another element that must not be neglected by Western policymakers, particularly in Washington. That is the Herculean effort of some Eastern European leaders, above all, the Czech Republic's Zeman, Hungary's Viktor Orbán, and several leaders in Poland, to engage in what Zeman has called "the civilization struggle."

In view of the demographic upheaval wrought on Western Europe by the massive Muslim immigration, and in defiance of the EU's opprobrium, these leaders continue to defend the sovereignty of their nations against the rise of Islamism by prohibiting entry to Muslim migrants.

Miloš Zeman, the first Czech president ever to address the Knesset, is at the forefront of this struggle. At the Knesset, he was given the honorary title, "Defender of Jerusalem," by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In 2012 he was one of the first politicians in the world to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

The story of the Czech Republic's evolution into Israel's best friend in Europe suggests that leaders matter in the struggle for freedom and liberty. Zeman's visit to Israel was in the tradition of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the founder of the democratic modern Czechoslovak state in 1918 on the ruins of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A true friend of the Jews, Masaryk became the hero to many Jewish Americans because of his defense in 1899 of a Jewish peddler accused of the ritual murder of a young Czech girl. At that time, Czechoslovakia was still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Welcomed by American Jews during a visit to New York 1907 as a Slavic hero, he was not a hero to his countrymen. The anti-Semitic Czech and German Reds were marching daily outside his Prague apartment and his own students demonstrated against him.

After 1918, Jewish life flourished in imperfect yet democratic Czechoslovakia, which hosted World Zionist Congresses in 1921, 1922, and 1933. A 1927 visit by Masaryk to Jerusalem, during which he showed interest in both Arabs and Jews, not only symbolized his support for the Zionist cause but highlighted the new and special relationship between the Czech and Jewish peoples. Chaim Weizmann wrote, "Every Zionist should study the history of the Czech national movement and of the Czech struggle for national existence. In the late 1930s Czechoslovakia became a land of freedom."

Then came another dark period in Czech modern history. The Munich Agreement of 1938 led to a massive rise in native Czech anti-Semitism. As in 1899, Masaryk was again labeled an instrument of Zionism during the Second Republic (1938-39) and the Nazi occupation. During this time, anti-Semitism permeated Czech society.

Then came yet another dramatic change after the liberation from the Nazis. After WWII, while the US and the Soviet Union laid the diplomatic and political groundwork for Israel's establishment, Masaryk's son, Jan, in the face of both British and American diplomatic opposition to Jewish immigration, opened the Czechoslovak borders to tens of thousands of Holocaust survivors from Poland. Reaching DP camps in Germany and Austria, they went on to mandatory Palestine, then to Israel, where they joined the struggle for a new Jewish homeland.

But then the Czechs did even more. In defiance of the British naval blockade, they sold both arms and planes to the Jews in Palestine, vital war materiel that helped the nascent Jewish State rebuff the Arab attempt to destroy it at birth. So vital were these

weapons that David Ben-Gurion commented, "Without [them], we would not have survived."

This support notwithstanding, the large wave of anti-Semitism that surged in 1938 did not subside until the 1967 Six-Day War, when Czech students welcomed the Israeli victory. It encouraged them in their own struggle for liberty from the Soviet empire. With the defeat of the 1968 Prague Spring, in which a young Miloš Zeman had actively participated, rabid anti-Semitism and support for radical Arab regimes resurfaced, with Czechoslovakia becoming a "second home" to the PLO.

After the end of the Cold War, new Czech president Vaclav Havel stopped sending arms to the PLO. Havel was a great dissident, playwright, and revolutionary. He approved the 1991 Sanford Ziff Freedom Flight of Soviet Jews to Israel through Prague and received three of them in Prague Castle.

Unfortunately, Havel listened to Middle East experts who convinced him to act as an intermediary between Yasser Arafat and Israeli leaders. Moreover, despite the objections of some senior foreign ministry officials, Prague sold 450 T-72 tanks to Syria in 1991. It also signed an agreement to build a large tank plant in Libya that did not materialize due to the lack of Libyan hard currency, and it approved selling the radar system Tamara, as well as some nuclear technology, to Iran in 1994. That sale was subsequently canceled only because the US planned to block Czech entry into NATO. Arafat returned to Prague in April 1990, and Syria, Libya, and Iran continued to receive Czech arms.

The real change came when Zeman became Prime Minister in 2002. He compared Arafat to Hitler, and when he became president, he enlarged the scope of his support for Israel. As Netanyahu put it in 2012, "the Czech Republic is a true and fair friend. We have many friends, but I don't think we have better friends than the Czech Republic in Europe."

Zeman's election in 2018 was close, but in the end the Czech people confirmed its support for his policies, including friendship with Israel. Unfortunately, his close economic relations to Russia and China have been used by his foes to try to prevent President Trump's making a historical visit to Prague; this despite his having just announced a 2% contribution of Czech GDP to the military budget. He has also made cooperative agreements with NATO to fight terrorism in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Following Zeman's speech to the Knesset, the time has come for Trump to acknowledge Zeman's efforts in making his part of Europe safer for his people and for Jews. As the US is competing with Russia's Rosatom for a contract to finish the electric power station in the Czech Republic's Dukavony, Trump could offer support for a contract that Zeman cannot refuse. Trump could also visit Prague and Budapest,

signifying his recognition of the new historic shift in Europe – a shift that aligns with the Trump Doctrine on immigration and anti-Islamic terrorism.

Dr. Jiri Valenta is a Senior Non Resident Research Associate at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. A Council on Foreign Relations member in NYC, he was formerly a tenured associate professor in the Department of National Security Affairs of the U.S. Postgraduate Naval School, and Director of the Institute of International Relations, a post-revolutionary think tank in Vaclav Havel's government in Prague.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family