

The Great Horse of Prague

The Story Behind One of the World's Tallest Equestrian Monuments

By
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Straddling the banks of the Baltic-bound Vltava, Prague is a Gothic and Baroque jewel. Created by a roll call of colourful characters, including evil emperors, firebrand clerics, royal alchemists and obsessive astronomers, it's a city hard to resist. Not surprisingly, in the wake of 1989's Velvet Revolution visitors have poured into the Czech capital, to experience once again the 'golden city of a hundred spires'.

My own first visit to Prague came in 2004, when I commenced research for a guidebook to the city's hidden corners. To avoid the overpriced honeypots of the old town (Staré Město) I elected to stay in a hotel in the working class district of Žižkov. Once an Art Deco theatre the building had only recently been converted, having fallen apart during the Communist era, when it was pressed into service as a cultural centre; another aspect of the Golden City's recent reinvention.



Looking out of the window the view was not a typical one. No Gothic gargoyles or Baroque steeples here; instead, a low hill topped by a huge equestrian monument. Although I didn't know it I was about to discover that this extraordinary location speaks just as eloquently about the history of Prague as any of the city's more famous landmarks.

Turning to my history books I quickly discovered the hill to be Vítkov Hill, named after Vítěk of Hora, owner of one of several long-vanished vineyards established here by Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV (King Charles I of Bohemia) (1346-1378). The monument itself, meanwhile, depicted Jan Žižka, a charismatic general during the so-called Hussite Wars (1420-1436), waged between the Bohemians and the occupying House of Luxembourg. It was on this very hill on 14th July 1420 that Hussite peasant forces – led by the one-

eyed Žižka – successfully repelled a superior Catholic force under Sigismund, the titular King of Bohemia, who had been ordered by Rome to crush the Protestant heretics of Bohemia. The victory made a hero of Žižka, indeed so successful a leader was he that his Hussite forces eventually extended their sway as far as the Baltic coast, necessitating an interregnum in Bohemia that lasted for the next fifteen years (Czech nobles famously “defenestrated” several members of the city council in opposition to Sigismund's accession and a lack of reform in the Catholic church). With Žižka's death in 1424, however, Hussite unity became strained, resulting eventually in bitter civil strife and the fratricidal destruction of radical Hussites by their moderate brothers at the Battle of Lipany in 1434. The latter were eventually coaxed back into the Catholic church in return for some religious freedoms, and Sigismund was recognised as king.

Vítkov Hill was only a short walk from my hotel and a brisk walk took me to the foot of it. Walking upwards I began to realise just how imposing the statue of Žižka on his horse really is. Cast in bronze and now blue-green with verdigris it was unveiled on 14th July 1950, exactly five hundred and thirty years after the Battle of Vítkov. Visible for many miles around my research told me that the statue was the work of sculptor Bohumil Kafka, and that it still ranks as one of the tallest equestrian monuments in the world. So what was the tallest, I mused, as I reached the top of the hill? Well, at the time it would have been that of Jose Gervasio Artigas (1764-1850) in Uruguay, soaring to a lofty eighteen metres. This was dwarfed in 2009, however, when a forty metre high equestrian statue of Genghis Khan (1162-1227) appeared outside Ulan Bator in Mongolia.

But back to Jan Žižka's monument. It comes in at a rather unimpressive nine metres in height, but what it lacks in stature it more than makes up for in style: whilst somewhat martial in its proportioning, the detailing of musculature, mane, and harness is masterly. It's worth noting, too, that the monument (excluding its dozen or more metres of stone pedestal) weighs an impressive 16,764 kilograms, with Žižka's massive sword accounting for 110 of them!

I paused beneath the great horse's muzzle and sat down to continue reading. The monument to Žižka was commissioned by Czechoslovakia's Communist rulers, for whom the rebel general made a convenient anti-Western hero. It almost goes without saying that they hoped the presence of the monument, looming over the proletarian district of Žižkov, would greater endear the regime to the native population.

Rearing up immediately behind Žižka is the so-called National Monument (Národní památník), a seemingly contemporaneous concrete structure more than one hundred and forty metres long. Designed by Jan Zázvorka it was actually erected between 1929 and 1933, as a cenotaph to those Bohemians who died fighting the Austro-Hungarian Empire during the First World War. The monument was inaugurated on 28th October 1938 – twenty years after the founding of the First Czechoslovak Republic in 1918 – but almost immediately closed by the Nazis, who disapproved of such patriotic posturing.

I read on. In 1953 the National Monument was commandeered by the Communists, and converted into a memorial to the Heroes of the Working Class. For a time even the embalmed body of Czechoslovakia's first Communist President, Klement Gottwald (1896-1953), was displayed here, in imitation of Comrade Lenin's preserved remains in Moscow's Red Square. Poor preservation techniques and rising maintenance costs led eventually to Gottwald's corpse being cremated, and in 1990 his ashes were returned to his family for burial in Prague's Olšany Cemetery.

Despite such tumultuous history, I found Vítkov Hill to now be a peaceful place, and one slowly being liberated from the totalitarian propaganda associated with it. The Žižka statue and the National Monument appear to be shaking off their Soviet-era connotations, leaving them free to once more remind those who walk up Vítkov Hill of their true pre-Communist origins.

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