

# MMT NEWS

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## THE MONUMENT TO NATIONAL LIBERATION, ŽIŽKOV

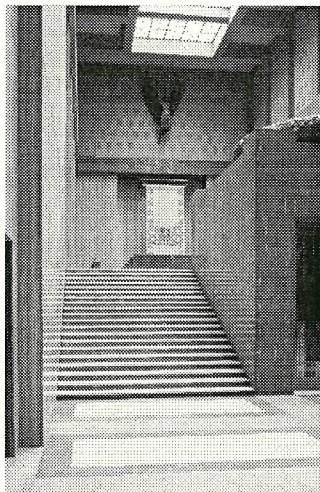
The Monument to National Liberation on Žižkov, overlooking the city of Prague (fig. 1) was conceived as a ceremonial national mausoleum in the early years of the 20th century and over the subsequent decades its significance and role in political thought and meaning took on new associations representing shifts in political ideology and power. On a prominent raised position oriented west, it faces the Royal Castle and Cathedral of St. Vitus across the river Vltava.

Its role as a mausoleum was perhaps most impor-

*Fig 1: The Monument*

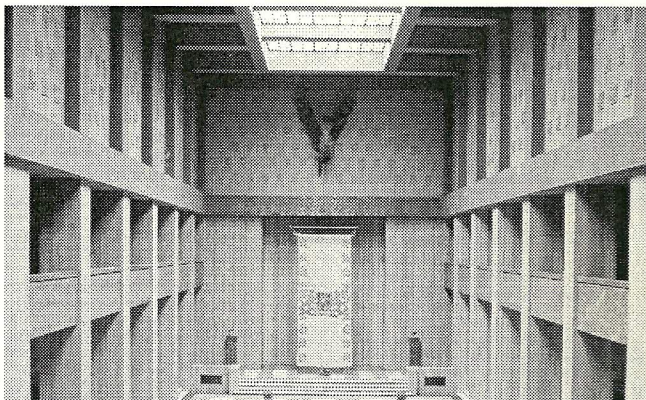
tant during the Communist era of the 1950s and 1960s, when it became the honorary last resting place of the leaders of the 'Czech, Slovak and national working class movement', although from the inception of its design, this integral function was intended.

The site for the memorial was the place where Jan Žižka gathered Hussite warriors on a hill to the east of Prague in the fifteenth century to defeat foreign invasionary forces. On 14 July 1420 at the Battle of Vitkov, Žižka led his warriors, outnumbered by ten to one, to defeat Papal forces led by the Emperor Sigismund. This significant event would be recalled several centuries later when in the late 1860's over 15,000 people attended a rally on the Žižkov hill in support of political demands



*Fig 2: Entrance and stairs to the Ceremonial Hall*

Over fifty entries were submitted, but the beginning of the First World War halted progress, and it was not until the 1920s that the idea was revived, this time to acknowledge the bravery and sacrifice of the soldiers and citizens of the newly formed



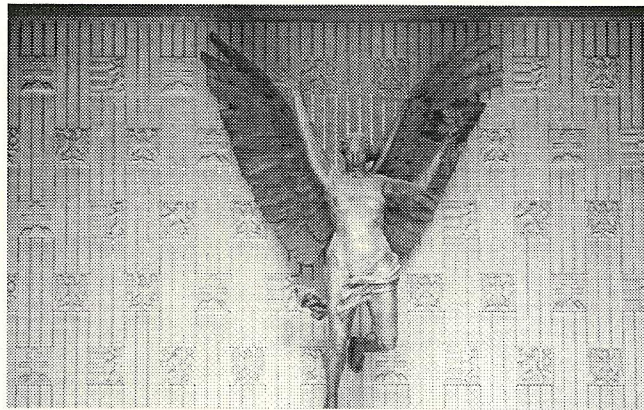
*Fig 3: The Ceremonial Hall*

nation of Czechoslovakia, who had fought for freedom against the forces of the Hapsburg empire.

Further competitions for the memorial were announced in 1923 and 1925, this time to include a building, with the intention that it contain a memorial hall for burial of national heroes of the new Czechoslovak nation. The design by Jan Zázvorka, a pupil of Jan Kotera, was selected in 1925, though it was some four years before work began. The main elements of the design included two great halls within the large rectangular granite faced block. To the west, in front of the main ceremonial entrance, a large equestrian statue of

for a Czech nation, free from the oppression of the imperial Austrian government in Vienna.

In the late 19th century proposals for a commemorative statue of the warrior Žižka were discussed and in 1913 a competition was held.



*Fig 4: Victory by Karel Kotrba*

Jan Žižka was to be placed upon a raised plinth above the tomb of an unknown soldier. These were linked to the building by a raised balustraded terrace, with steps leading down to a levelled ground area extending along the spine of the hill to the west.

The monumental geometric modernist exterior was echoed inside by interiors of stripped classical form and proportion, with surfaces sheathed in coloured marbles and mosaics. Construction began in 1929 and the shell of the monument was largely finished by 1933, while work on the decorative finishes of the interior continued through the 1930s. Nearly all was complete, with the exception of the great statue of Jan Žižka, and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, for the 20th anniversary of independence in October 1938.

The upper of the two great interior spaces, the Ceremonial Hall, (figs. 2 and 3) was intended for memorial gatherings and state meetings, and designed as a longitudinal space, similar to the nave of a church with a raised floor at the east end, and rows of seating arranged through the length of the interior. A bronze sculptural figure of 'Victory' by Karel Kotrba was raised high above the floor at the east end of the Hall (fig. 4) and at the opposite west end an organ was placed at gallery level.

The Central Hall, reached by stairs leading down from the entrance and situated directly below the Ceremonial Hall, was intended as the final resting place for legionaries who had fought to defend the newly formed republic, and whose remains were to be placed beneath and within rows of richly coloured red marble slabs and sarcophagi.

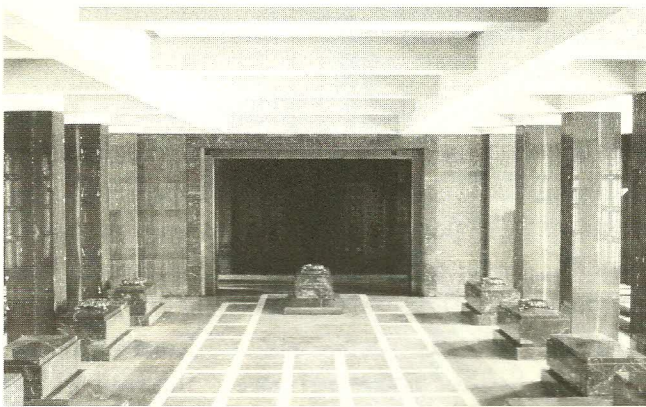


Fig 5: Central Hall

The hall was arranged into a central nave and aisles (fig. 5), and its walls, floor and columns lined with different coloured marbles. Four giant sculpted marble relief panels executed between 1936 and 1938 by Karel Pokorný commemorating fallen Czech and Slovak Legionaries were mounted at the east and west ends of the aisles (figs. 6 and 7).



Fig 6: Central Hall, side aisle

At the west end of the Central Hall two doorways lead into a columbarium, its walls lined with square white marble slabs (fig. 8). In the centre of the floor lie four great black marble sarcophagi, and three bronze candelabra designed by Jaroslav Horejc. Two bronze statues symbolising 'Loyalty' and 'Heroism' by Otakar Švec stand against the east wall.

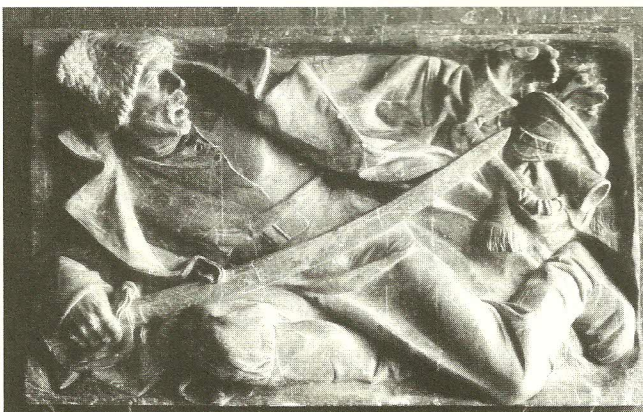


Fig 7: Soldier, by Karel Pokorný

Three special chambers lie to the east of the Hall. The one in the centre originally was intended as the mausoleum for Tomáš Masaryk the first President of the Czechoslovak Republic, though he declined this in preference to burial at the cemetery at Lány. To the north through bronze and glass doors (fig. 9) lies the Hall of the Fallen People which was decorated in 1934 with mosaics by Max Švabinský, symbolising the sacrifice of the common people of Czechoslovakia during the First World War. The great bronze doors are decorated with modelled relief panels by the sculptor Jaroslav Horejc, who was also responsible for the candelabrum standing in-between (fig. 10). At the

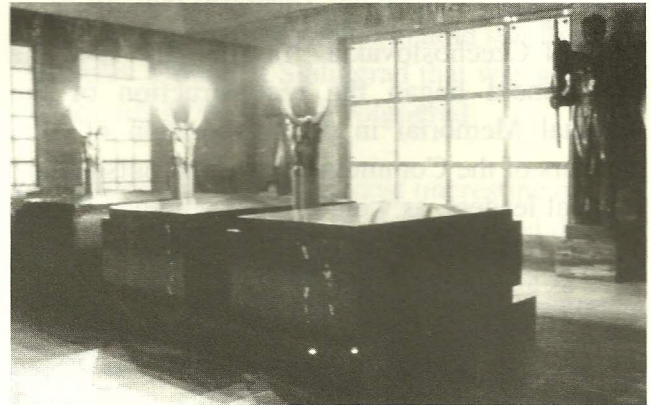


Fig 8: The Columbarium

entrance on the east and west walls great white marble slabs are inscribed in gold with verses by Vítězslav Nezval, while in the centre of the north wall, raised on a high marble plinth stands Jan Štursa's bronze statue 'The Wounded' of 1917 (fig. 11).

Ironically, the completion of the interior in 1938 to commemorate the 20th anniversary of the formation of the new nation occurred at just the moment when the countries of western Europe agreed to its annexation by Germany on the eve of the Second World War. Shortly before a decree by the Nazis calling for the destruction of nationalistic symbolic sculpture and decoration, some contents and decorative elements were removed from the monument while others such as the great marble relief panels by Karel Pokorný mounted on the aisle walls of the Central Hall and the mosaic panels were covered beneath painted plaster surfaces to hide them. Nevertheless many

