

Jaroslav Vařata

## Life Was Beautiful

Memoirs of a Prague and New York Restaurateur

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## Foreword

I remember my grandfather, Jaroslav Vašata, with great love and respect – like so many other people who he used to come to say hello to at his restaurants. He would sit down at the table with them and in his inimitable style he would share a story from his rich life. He loved people and knew thousands of them. Many of these people could surely add many other stories to this book that I did not manage to capture in our conversations.

My grandfather was not only like a second father to me, he was also an older friend. Once, when he was telling me about all the things he had lived through over a glass of wine, I told him that I and many other people believed that his life story should be committed to writing. He was reluctant at first, but then, almost five years later, he gave in to my entreaties.

I recorded his memoirs in a series of taped conversations, which were made under one condition: once I stopped smoking, we would begin. So, I stopped and he started; no doubt, he saved my life like he did of so many others before me. I lived in and around Washington, DC and he was in New York city, so we did not see each other that often. Our conversations in front of the tape recorder thus started in 1985 and did not finish until 1990.

We began to mine his memories of his modest childhood, in the times of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and at the beginnings of his career in Prague after the First World War. He then spoke about his great success in the restaurant business in Prague, and about his role in the Resistance against both Nazism and Communism. We concluded with the whole family's adventurous journey into exile, and with their beginnings – from scratch – in the New World. There were so many stories. Jaroslav Vašata lived a full and rich life and, as these memoirs attest, he helped others wherever he could.

I decided to carry out this undertaking for reasons both personal and historical. The personal reasons came from my love and respect of my grandfather. I wanted our family to have a record of his life. I have also learned something about myself, about my interests and the influence that my grandfather had on my life. For instance, as a boy I learned to speak, read, and write Czech; I went fishing with him, even by hydroplane to northern Quebec; I learned to appreciate the beauties of nature; I began singing Czech folk songs; and I played Mariáš (a Czech card game) like a seasoned gambler. In short, I developed – despite being born in America – a strong relationship with the Czech nation and culture.

Jaroslav was my example to follow—whose strength of character, commercial successes, and unassuming heroism were all but unattainable. His personal qualities are also a reason why I wanted to make his life story public. They are not only immensely interesting, but also important for the history of Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic, especially when it comes to the dark years of Nazi and Communist oppression.

Because the book is based on spontaneous conversations recorded on magnetic tape, I wanted to preserve the authentic, colloquial style of the text. Even though my grandfather never went to a university, he could narrate stories not only in a compelling way, but also with a prodigious memory. His speech reflected a wide range of linguistic styles – those of a village boy, the good-natured lingo of a resident of Wenceslas Square and Žižkov in Prague, the eloquence of a politician, and in the final part of his life, a Czech language influenced by Czech-American immigrants who lived in the U.S. long before him. He seldom lacked an appropriate expression for the occasion. I hope to have captured at least a part of my grandfather’s personality as I and all of his friends knew and loved it.

Shortly before his death in the summer of 1995, my grandfather told me how much he appreciated the activities of the Club of Dr. Milada Horáková, of which he learned during his last visits to Prague. Later on, when I also became acquainted with the Club’s work and with some of its members, it occurred to me that my grandfather’s memoirs could be published by them. In autumn of 1997, I suggested this to the Club’s deputy chairman, Jiří Doležal, and in early 1998, we began compiling the records with the help of Dr. Zora Dvořáková. I am grateful to both of them for their hard work on the publishing of the Czech version of this book.

I also would like to thank our good family friend, Vašek Vašata, for his advice on editing, and my mother Linda Petlanová and my great-aunt Anička Blechová, my grandfather’s sister, for their help and advice. I am sure that my grandfather would be very pleased with the outcome.

Finally, my mother and I would like to thank Jan Hegenbart for his translation of the book from Czech to English. His professional resume is included at the end of this manuscript. Jan completed the work in February 2017 and I did some light editing and formatting after that, then openly publishing the volume online.

**Pavel F. Uhlir, 2018**

## Jaroslav Vařata (1905-1995)

Jaroslav Vařata was born on 24 September 1905 in Brodce nad Jizerou to a family of a mill hand. He would often say, "Being born into a poor family was my first blessing in life."

When he finished secondary school in Nové Benátky, at the age of 14, he started working as an apprentice at the export and import company, Josef Paclt & Co. in Prague. He gained business experience and surprised his superiors with his entrepreneurial ideas. As still a young recruit, he became Director of the entire company and was able to support his mother and siblings. At 20, he accepted an offer to become Manager of the famous Pilsen restaurant, U Procházek, at Letná. In February 1932, Jaroslav Vařata married his boss's niece, Linda Krejčová, with whom he had two daughters, Linda and Jana.

He left U Procházek in the summer of 1934 to become Manager of Černý pivovar at Karlovo náměstí where he remained until the beginning of 1936. On 17 April of the same year, he opened his own restaurant, Vařata & Co., at No. 16 Václavské náměstí with his wife Linda. At 5.17 p.m. on that day, the most modern restaurant in Prague officially opened. A sign on the shop front read, "We are 100 young skilled people and we want to provide you with the best service..." Vařata brought over his co-workers from U Procházek and Černý pivovar.

Vařata's business with a fork as its logo did very well. It attracted customers by the quality of the meals, good service, and reasonable prices. It gradually expanded to include Restaurant Formanka and company restaurants at the Prague Electrical Company and the Pensions Office. In 1938, he leased the Prague Municipal House. Smetana Hall, with its opulent private salons, French restaurant, wine and day bars, and café, represented the pinnacle of Prague's elegant society. The building was also known as Repré (Prague's "Representational House"), where he and his family lived for 10 years.

The events that took place after the Munich agreement, the end of the First Republic, the hopeless desperation of the Second Republic, the German protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, all deeply affected Vařata's patriotic family. However, Repré's leaseholder did not panic; he knew where his place was and he put his entire business to the service of the resistance against Hitler's rule. He helped set up the clandestine resistance organization, the National Defense, and was in contact with the intelligence group around Vladimír Krajina. He generously financed the actions of the Resistance and supplied food from his storehouses to the families of the persecuted, Jews and political refugees. He even hid paratroopers sent to Prague to assassinate Heydrich in the Municipal House. He also managed to prevent the German army from closing down the Municipal House. Through almost suicidal actions, he managed to free himself and his friends from the grasp of the Gestapo. In this daring high-stakes game, he was lucky to survive until the end of World War II. Only very few people in the leadership of the Resistance were so lucky, the one exception being Vařata's friend, Vladimír Krajina.

After the May uprising in Prague in 1945, Jaroslav Vašata became a member of the National Council for the National Socialist Party where he was responsible for trade and businesses (he joined the Party after the War). Until the Communist coup of 1948, he worked closely with the national socialist leaders, Petr Zenkl, Vladimír Krajina, Hubert Ripka, Prokop Drtina, Milada Horáková, Ivan Herben, and František Klátil.

In July 1948, the Vašatas managed to escape Communist Czechoslovakia. They used their British contacts and after a two-week stay in West Germany, they settled in London where they again began serving authentic Czech cuisine at the Czech National House, which they had leased. In November 1951, the entire Vašata family moved to the USA.

At 47 years old, Jaroslav Vašata had to begin from scratch, first as a busboy at a hotel in Chicago. His friend Rafael Kubelík helped him get this position, but Vašata did not remain there for long. The best-known Prague restaurant owner could not stand the mismanagement and the corrupt ways of the staff, so after six months, he moved with his family to New York.

In July 1952, he borrowed money to buy a 5-story walk-up with small restaurant at the street level, called Beseda, on 75<sup>th</sup> Street between 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Avenue. The Vašatas invested all their time and skills into the small restaurant, morning to night with little rest. Vašata's restaurant soon gained a distinctly Vašata-esque appearance and working atmosphere. It was refurbished twice in the 1960s and expanded. It was subject to media attention. It became a New York establishment.

Below Vašata's traditional fork logo and sign "Dej Bůh štěstí<sup>1</sup>", New York gourmets, tourists from around the world, as well as Czechoslovak émigrés, were all able to enjoy his roast duck with dumplings and sauerkraut. Until 1994, Vašata's New York restaurant was a meeting place for Czech-Americans. Among its regulars were Rudolf Firkušný, Jarmila Novotná, Karel Steinbach, Rafael Kubelík, and Ferdinand Peroutka. On top of all the trials and tribulations of running a business, Jaroslav Vašata found time to engage in public services: at the Council of Free Czechoslovakia, the New York Sokol, and other Czech organizations.

Jaroslav Vašata lived to see the fall of Communism and was able to return to his homeland. More than 40 years later, he was able to once more return to Prague, his birthplace in Brodce, his house in Černošice, and to attend the annual meeting of his former employees who had been gathering together every year over all that time.

Vašata's famous Czech restaurant in Manhattan closed its doors a few months before his death. For 42 years, it had been a New York landmark, and had remained open for an exceptionally long time by New York standards.

Jaroslav Vašata died in New York on 16 March 1995 at the blessed age of almost 90. He is buried along with his wife Linda at a cemetery not far from the family residence and the new

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<sup>1</sup> May God grant luck (or joy).

home of four generations of Vašatas in Callicoon, New York, that they had built out of an old farmhouse in a landscape that is reminiscent of the Czech mountains of Šumava.

Jaroslav Vašata was an honest Czech pub owner who worked his way up on his own. He was an exemplary and generous entrepreneur and above all, a sincere and good man.

Ivan Herben wrote about Vašata's unassuming kind heart in the daily chronicle of the *Svobodné slovo* newspaper, under the title "Good men still live", on 8 January 1946:

... a woman whose husband had been imprisoned from 1939 had to subsist for almost six years on handouts from family and friends, and loans. As prices went up, she had to start selling her husband's only asset. These were paintings, originals from Czech masters. It so happened that an unknown collector bought a drawing by Julius Mařák for a good few thousand (crowns). He was no nabob, but a man who had to earn every penny through hard work, from morning to evening to night. The sale took place through a third party and the buyer only later on accidentally found out to whom the drawing used to belong. What a surprise it was to the family of a freed political prisoner when on Christmas Eve 1945, the drawing came back and as a gift to their home with a warm note from the buyer. It was the most beautiful gift under the Christmas tree. It was not the drawing itself, but the knowledge that after the War, which had turned men into wolves against each other, there was still a man who was capable of such a loving and brotherly act. It was not so much the drawing itself, but rather the good heart of the giver that was glowing from the gift. We know well that the good man is going to be rather angry, but we have to reveal at least the fact that the letters of his name are all too similar to the name, Jaroslav Vašata.

**Jiří Doležal, 1999**

## Editors' Note

Under the title 'Life was beautiful', the reader gets his hands on a book of memoirs of the Czech and American restaurateur, Jaroslav Vašata. The book is based on the transcription of recordings of Vašata's conversations with his grandson, Pavel Uhlíř.

The series of recollections that been recorded over the period of five years had to be edited. Some unclear repetitive or less significant passages had to be left out or interpreted. Factual inaccuracies and errors had to be looked up and corrected. The entire edited text was then arranged chronologically into individual chapters by Vašata's grandson.

One problematic aspect was the treatment of language. The point of the transcription was above all to preserve Vašata's characteristic colloquial Czech when it came to grammatical forms, style and vocabulary. We were anxious not to correct colloquialisms on the one hand, but at the same time not to give too much space to expletives.

Vašata's memoirs contain a long list of proper nouns. We clarify most of these by giving basic personal details in the endnotes. Some names from Vašata's circle of friends and acquaintances are however not present in any of the available literature (e.g., Vašek Čihák, Karel Sušanka, Honza Michalčík) The reader will not therefore find them in the endnotes. Another mystery in this respect is the name of Vašata's predecessor at No. 16 Václavské náměstí: Emraiz or M. Reiser?

Among the people who took part in the Resistance with whom Jaroslav Vašata worked, we also lack basic information about the Anička and Emil Zeltner or the agricultural expert Dr. František Kostiuik (date of birth and death). The case of General Erich Friderici is similar.

Regarding the photographic annex that was supplied by Vašata's family, we also added photocopies from the archive of the Czechoslovak National Socialist Party and of a document from the Trade and Business Department.

For consultations on these questions, we are grateful above all to Dr. Josef Tomeš.

We hope that Vašata's memoirs will not only be interesting to readers, but also useful as a historical document.

**Zora Dvořáková and Jiří Doležal, 1999**