“WE STAND ON THE THRESHOLD OF A NEW AGE”: ALICE MASARYKOVÁ, THE CZECHOSLOVAK RED CROSS, AND THE BUILDING OF A NEW EUROPE

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Of the new states established at the end of the First World War, the Czechoslovak Republic was one of the most heralded and most reviled. To its supporters in western Europe and North America, Czechoslovakia’s promise as a liberal democracy had been shown in the wise and stately manner of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the professor and former member of the Imperial Austrian parliament who had lobbied the Allied governments for the empire’s breakup and took office in 1918 as the republic’s first president. To opponents of the peace settlement, Czechoslovakia was the example of how the victors distorted the principle of self-determination to punish their adversaries, creating an artificial state that put sizeable numbers of Germans and Hungarians under the discriminatory rule of the Czechs. To the Czechs themselves, Masaryk was the “President-Liberator” and the multinational state, encompassing the industrial cities of Bohemia and the rural villages of Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia, was territory that their modern, democratic nation would govern capably. As the first director of the Czechoslovak Red Cross, Alice Masaryková, the president’s daughter, pursued this task of building a healthy, prosperous republic and offering the model of a new democratic society to the rest of Europe.

“How beautiful is a land of justice! . . . After the war, there will be life! Full of vitality! The new age will bring something new”.¹ Alice Garrigue Masaryková wrote this pledge to her mother in February 1916 from a prison cell in Vienna. Masaryková spent eight months in Austrian prisons on charges of conspiring in the treasonous activities of her father, Tomáš Masaryk, who had gone abroad at the start of the war to seek Allied support for the dismantling of the Habsburg Empire. Certainly, when she wrote these lines, Masaryková could not have imagined that, within three years, her father would return to Prague as

¹ Alice Garrigue Masaryková (henceforth AGM) to Charlotte Garrigue Masaryková (henceforth CGM), 1 February 1916, letter no. 58, in Hájková and Soukup (2001).
the first president of independent Czechoslovakia and that she would have the opportunity to build this land of justice, this new age, as the founding director of the Czechoslovak Red Cross. Still, Masaryková in 1916 envisioned the conclusion of the war as an unprecedented moment for the Czechs – and for all of Europe. In expectation of this new age, she devoted her days in prison to reading texts on public health and social welfare, pursuing problems that she had studied – and worked to remedy – for more than a decade as a teacher, social worker, and activist in the Bohemian Lands and the United States.

Figure 7. Alice Masaryková, 1921. Courtesy of the Architectural Museum of Ljubljana, Slovenia

Alice Masaryková has long been left in the historical shadow of her father, who served seventeen years as Czechoslovakia’s first president, and her brother Jan, the diplomat whose mysterious death was a shocking early event of the Cold War.² Even today, there is little attention in studies of the inter-war Czechoslovak Republic to her work as director of the Red Cross. Instead, she is discussed (albeit in passing) as confidante of her father and de facto first lady, roles that she took on with the illness and death of her mother in 1923, or for her part in

² Only in 2007 was Masaryková made subject of a full, scholarly biography, with the subtitle A Life in the Shadow of a Famous Father – see Lovčí (2007). Two recent studies of women’s movements in the Czechoslovak Republic, Feinberg (2006) and Burešová (2001), make no reference to her.