CHAPTER 5

Hana Benešová: The Forgotten First Lady

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As the wife of President Edvard Beneš, Hana Benešová was effectively the First Lady of the ethnically diverse Czechoslovak community in exile in Britain from 1938 to 1945. Yet whilst her husband published copious male-dominated political memoirs, Hana, the smart, demure and frequently photographed public figure, remains an enigma. Through a kaleidoscope of commentaries and observations, this paper illuminates some aspects of her life within a socio-political context, focusing in particular on WW2.

Hana Benešová was born Anna Vlčková in 1885¹ in Domaslavice, a north Bohemian village, and might have remained there but for the influence of a well-off aunt, who was unwittingly instrumental in preparing Hana for her future role in life – so different to that of her parents, a dressmaker and railway guard respectively. After completing her studies in Prague, Benešová was sent in 1905 to the University of Paris (the Sorbonne), where she attended lectures on French history and literature – and met Edvard, a left-wing, working-class student from Kožlany, now a small town in western Bohemia. Four years later, they married in Prague.

The couple’s backgrounds became a cornerstone of the partnership, and their early married life set a life-long pattern. Beneš had studied law and received his first doctorate in 1908, then later lectured at Charles University in Prague, while Benešová was the traditional homemaker, so typical of her era: but she reportedly also supported her husband’s activities at that juncture by copying lectures and arranging notes and press clippings.² In due course, the childless Benešová was to devote her care and attention to her husband. The absence of conflicting claims on her time allowed her to become entwined with his chequered political career – and suffer the consequences.

Austro-Hungary then still ruled the Czech Crown Lands of Bohemia and Moravia, and nationalistic opposition to the established order was deemed

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² Government Information Centre, Mrs. Hana, op. cit., 2.
subversive. Nevertheless, elements of the ailing empire’s ethnic subjects sought their independence, and the Czechs were no exception. Benešová’s husband joined his superior at Charles University, philosophy Professor Tomaš Garrigue Masaryk, whose initial political goal was greater autonomy for the Czechs in a future federalised Austrian empire. Such hopes were eliminated, however, with the assassination of the liberal Austrian heir apparent Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his Bohemian wife Duchess Sophie Chotek, by Bosnian Serb nationalists in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914. Taking advantage of the mayhem, covert efforts at home and abroad to gain support for Czech independence escalated when WW1 erupted in November 1914: spurred by Beneš, Masaryk’s goal had transmuted into a quest for total independence by non-violent means. As leading members of the so-called ‘Mafia’ [sic] though, both men were regarded by Austrian authorities as revolutionaries, and their impending arrest caused them to flee into exile in 1915.

Believing (rightly) that Hana Benešová knew where incriminating key political documents had been hidden, the authorities arrested her as a conspirator on 28 October 1915. Beneš had warned her of the possibility, and advised that she repudiate him if necessary. She did not do so, but spent almost a year in harsh Czech and Austrian prisons, K.K. Landesgericht prison in Vienna in the latter instance. Fellow prisoner Alice Masaryk, daughter of the then political fugitive, but future first Czechoslovak president, had been arrested on the same day. Awaiting trial for treason, they supported each other from separate cells by sending notes via an intermediary, until their release.

Alice Masaryk knew and liked Benešová “for her modesty and her home-like[,] warm ways”. Indeed, Benešová became renowned for such attributes, regardless of her official status – which changed drastically following the fall of the Habsburg Empire, and the establishment of Czechoslovakia as a new state

4 King and Woolmans, op. cit., 197–209.
6 Hitchcock, op. cit., 118.
7 Slovakia joined Bohemia and Moravia in 1918, forming Czechoslovakia.
8 Ruth Crawford Mitchell, Alice Garrigue Masaryk 1879–1966 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh, 1980); see Hana Benešová’s account, 72.
9 H. Gordon Skilling, Mother and Daughter: Charlotte and Alice Masaryk (Prague: Gender Studies o.p.s., 2001), 94.