
Charles University Commemorated the Self-Sacrifice of Jan Palach

On January 16, 1969, Jan Palach, a student of the Charles University Faculty of Arts, set himself on fire as a protest against the Soviet-led occupation of Czechoslovakia and the demoralization of the society under the totalitarian regime. He died of his injuries three days later. Even after two days of physical and spiritual suffering, during which doctors were trying to save his life, he did not regret his actions, saying: "My deed has fulfilled its goal." The radio documentary *My Brother Jan* offers a look inside the thoughts and ideals of this young man and a detailed account of the last weeks, days and hours of his life. The documentary was played at one of the events that commemorated his death 42 years ago. The event was hosted by the Student Council of the Charles University Faculty of Arts.



Michal Ježek from the Student Council (left) introduced the director of the Palach documentary, Mr. Marek Janáč.

The author of the 2009 documentary, Marek Janáč from Czech Radio, discussed the process of making of the programme. He was inspired by a song by the Czech popular singer Karel Gott called "My Brother Jan". "This made me wonder who Jan Palach's brother was and what he was like." Interviews with Palach's brother, his fellow students and witnesses of his self-immolation are juxtaposed with the official police records and expert evidence on Palach's psychological profile, written by psychologists and psychiatrists for the secret police. Janáč also included archival radio broadcasts that show the changing approach of the government-controlled media, from cautious reporting of the event to the complete suppression of information about the self-immolation of another student, Jan Zajíc, that followed a month later.

As the documentary shows, Palach's family was deeply hit by the enormous tragedy and took decades to come to terms with it. "Do you understand your brother's self-sacrifice?" Janáč asked Palach's brother Jiří. He answered: "I don't know

if it was even worth it. I felt like that when I was watching the whole nation bow down during the Normalisation era, when I saw that most people didn't care – even now, when I hear people say that they had been better off under communism.” The Faculty of Arts never forgot its student's sacrifice. This year, his memory was honoured by a quiet ceremony, candles were lit and flowers were put under Palach's memorial plaque outside the Faculty of Arts.







Along with members of the Student Council, Rector of Charles University Mr. Václav Hampl and the Dean of the Faculty of Arts Mr. Michal Stehlík brought flowers under the bust of Jan Palach outside the Faculty of Arts building on Jan Palach Square.

Later that evening, a mass dedicated to Jan Palach was held in the Church of St. Thomas in Malá Strana, where the requiem for Palach took place 42 years ago, shortly after his death.



(Marie Kohoutová)

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