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# Anniversary of Jan Palach's Death

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January 2017 commemorates the 48th anniversary of Charles University student, Jan Palach, setting himself on fire in protest against events in the former Czechoslovakia in 1968. As each year, Charles University has prepared a few commemoration events for the occasion – placing them on a symbolic site, Jan Palach Square, the address of the Faculty of Arts where Palach studied and the place in which his memorial plaque is displayed.

Palach, only 20-years-old and with little history of political activism, chose to pay the ultimate price through the means of self-immolation in Wenceslas Square on 16th January 1969 in response to Soviet and Warsaw Pact tanks arriving to end the Prague Spring of 1968.

This radical act, not specifically aimed at the Kremlin but as a response to the beaten-down nation, caused an enormous reaction throughout Prague and abroad, with Palach's name being recognised globally for his sacrifice.

The Faculty of Arts student, who referred to himself as "Torch No.1" in his final letters, believed that censorship should be abolished and promoted free speech, something that still flows through the veins of Charles University today. He wrote in his final letters that if his demands were not met, people should start an ongoing strike, and the street gatherings and remembrance marches following his death show just how moving his act was.

Although Jan Palach's choice of sacrifice was one of the most prominent in modern history, he was not the first, nor the last person using self-immolation as a form of protest. Palach's act was shaped by Buddhist monks protesting during the Vietnam war. Thich Quang Duc, demonstrating against the banning of the Buddhist flag in 1963, burned himself to death at a busy intersection in Saigon to show that even Buddhists needed to stand up to inequality. In February 1969, another Czechoslovak student Jan Zajíc, who referred to himself as "Torch No.2", set himself on fire in one of the houses on Wenceslas Square. only a month after Jan Palach's death. The date of his act was carefully selected – it was the day of the twenty-first anniversary of the Communist takeover in Czechoslovakia, 25th February.

Those of you studying in the Faculty of Arts are probably familiar with the memorial plaque at the Faculty of Arts main building, but there are many other memorials throughout the Czech Republic to remind us of Jan Palach. For example, there is a memorial in the upper part of Wenceslas Square where his act took place (Palach did not die there, however; the place of his death being a close-by hospital), and a memorial of two torches was created in January 2016 at Staroměstská metro station, just next to the river. Some Czech towns have also named their streets or squares in memory of Palach. Should you like to learn more about Jan Palach, you may visit the exhibition on history of Charles University in Karolinum. Amongst others, it also contains 20th century exhibits relating to Palach, showing just how important his beliefs and ideals were and remain to the University itself. Another great source is the multilingual website Jan Palach (<http://www.janpalach.cz/en/>).

Sincere, selfless and strong; Jan Palach showed all these qualities, and his protest for the people of the former Czechoslovakia will be forever cherished.

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