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## Ante Trstenjak in Prague

Ante Trstenjak, a Slovenian art student, came from Zagreb to Prague's Academy of Fine Arts to study painting in 1920. It was the year that Prague had rapidly begun to change; a new law was adopted, creating the "Great Prague," where many of the previously independent villages joined Prague's existing districts and quarters. In 1922, the Royal Town of Prague became Prague the capital, a provincial town slowly transformed into a large city. This expansion was accompanied by an architectural metamorphosis. The institutions of the new Czechoslovak State needed new representative buildings, so magnificent structures were erected, built in the style of the "National Decorativism"—Czech art deco. Not far from Neruda Street, where, during his studies, Trstenjak lived with Božidar Jakac (1899–1989),<sup>1</sup> Jože Plečnik (1872–1957) participated in the refurbishment of Prague Castle.

The period during which Trstenjak stayed in Prague was not only the time of a building boom, but also of social unrest. The city outskirts were surrounded by the "Red Belt",<sup>2</sup> a ring of makeshift colonies and poor laborers' slums. Social issues and revolutionary hopes accompanying the birth of the new state resulted in the General Strike of December 1920 and its violent suppression. In Prague, especially among the youth, the Communist Party had become notably popular, and young radical artists such as Vítězslav Nezval, Karel Teige, and Jaroslav Seifert, united in the avant-garde association, Devětsil. Social anxiety was accompanied with nationalistic anxiety. In Prague, triumphant Czech nationalists clashed with members of the small, but culturally significant German-speaking community. Prague housed the largest Jewish community in Czechoslovakia, and despite the irreconcilable nationalistic agitation, Prague society and its artistic circles consisted of people who acknowledged the blending of various national identities, and who also spoke and created in several languages.<sup>3</sup> This cultural melting pot of the 1920s was accompanied by the establishment of many jazz clubs and bars. Trstenjak, even though he had to struggle with his own existential problems at first, was vastly influenced by Prague's cultural life.

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<sup>1</sup> Maja VETRIH, *Ante Trstenjak, akademski slikar: življenje in delo*. Murska Sobota 1998, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup> Bohumil MELICHAR, *Rudá Praha. O příčinách volební úspěšnosti KSČ*. Diplomová práce: FF UK, Prague 2017, p. 147.

<sup>3</sup> Ines KOELTZCH, *Praha rozdělená i sdílená. Česko-německo-židovské vztahy 1918–1938*. Prague 2015.

Numerous foreigners also formed Prague's cultural environment. During this period, it was crucial for Czechoslovakia to establish and foster relationships with certain foreign countries. The Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was one of the first states with which Czechoslovakia entered into a diplomatic relationship.<sup>4</sup> In fact, a Czech-Slovenian relationship and cultural exchange had been developed long before the establishment of an independent Czechoslovakia.<sup>5</sup> Both the Czech and Slovenian nationalistic movements delimited themselves against the dominant German-language culture and their own minority position within Cisleithania—the western part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

During the 19th century, many Slovenian students were invited to study in Prague. They were strongly supported by Jan Václav Lego (1833–1906), founder of the Czech-Slovenian Club, and whose lifelong interest was to bring both nations culturally closer.<sup>6</sup> The number of Slovenian students in Prague, focusing on humanistic, technical, and artistic studies, steadily increased, especially towards the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, because support fellowships were established for them.<sup>7</sup> From the end of the 19th century until World War I, several Slovenians studied at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, including Josip Germ (1869–1950), Ivan Vavpotič (1877–1943), and a future member of the Mánes Association of Fine Artists, Fran Tratnik (1881–1957).<sup>8</sup>

In the era of the First Czechoslovak Republic, Prague became even more attractive for Slovenian students of the arts. However, the cost of living was so high that without scholarships and other forms of support it was very difficult for them to survive there. Even Trstenjak lived in extremely modest conditions at first with his Academy schoolmate Stane Cuderman (1895–1946). He later moved to Neruda Street with his friend and future successful painter and graphic artist, Božidar Jakac, where he lived for three years. He was lucky to have a benevolent landlady to whom he was not required to pay a high rent.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, the harsh conditions in which many students were forced to live resulted in the

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<sup>4</sup> Jan JAROŠ, *Budovy zastupitelských úřadů ČSR v meziválečném období; strategie jejich výběru a získávání*. Prague 2006, Univerzita Karlova, Filozofická fakulta, Ústav hospodářských a sociálních dějin, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> František JORDÁN, *Češi a Slovinci v 19. a na začátku 20. století (jejich vztahy veřejné a politické)*, in: František HEJL (ed.), *Otázky dějin střední a východní Evropy*, Brno 1971, p. 263.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 281–282.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 282.

<sup>8</sup> Lenka PRCHALOVÁ, *Slovinští výtvarní umělci u nás (1850–1950)*. Brno 2006. Masaryk University, Filozofická fakulta, Ústav slavistiky, pp. 72–76.

<sup>9</sup> Maja VETRIH, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

establishment of the Club of South Slavic Students of the Academy of Fine Arts. Its statutes were approved on 20 October 1921. The club, over which Trstenjak presided for some time, ensured for its members not only material help, but also organised lectures, obtained books and scientific journals, and held exhibitions. It was at the first of these exhibitions of the Club where Trstenjak had the opportunity to present seventeen examples of his artwork. Ivan Kos (1895–1981) and Jaro Hilbert (1897–1995) displayed their work there as well.<sup>10</sup> All of the aforementioned Slovenian schoolmates were taught by Czech-German artist Franz Thiele (1868–1945) in his atelier. Trstenjak came to him from a respected artist, naturalist, and decorative painter, Vojtěch Hynais (1854–1925). Hynais belonged to the generation of famous nation-oriented artists, however, at that time, his work was already considered outdated and Trstenjak did not enjoy the freedom he needed to create his art.<sup>11</sup> Actually, Trstenjak's opinion on formal education is well illustrated in his letter addressed to his girlfriend from Prague, Eugenie Heřmanová: "The School does not mean all—it is impossible to learn when the element is not present; but if it is here, I must seek to cultivate it—this is sought, at least I think so, by everyone who means it honestly with the arts."<sup>12</sup>

Trstenjak portrayed Prague's streets and monuments in several of his works, inspired by the 1920 Willi Nowak watercolour, *Prague*. In 1923, he painted *View of Prague from Hradčany*, *Prague in May*, and others.<sup>13</sup> Along with his vedute and cityscapes, he also made portraits. In 1922, he created two self-portraits and a portrait of his Academy colleague, Jaro Hilbert. In that same year, he painted a watercolour of a man, which was entitled *Contemplative*. His graduation work was *Drowned*, having an apparent influence of expressionism. However, it was impressionism that had a larger impact on Trstenjak. He was greatly inspired by the work of Prague's impressionists, such as Antonín Slavíček (1870–1910), who focused mainly on landscapes. He liked the impressionistic Slovenian artists, and was enchanted by the work of French painter, Paul Cézane (1839–1906). As for Prague's artistic groups, he was especially fond of the Mánes Association of Fine Artists; he was impressed with its non-provincial character, the acceptance of foreign members, and its

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<sup>10</sup> Lenka PRCHALOVÁ, op. cit., pp. 68–71.

<sup>11</sup> Maja VETRIH, op. cit., pp. 16–18.

<sup>12</sup> Maribor Art Gallery documentation, from the personal folder of Ante Trstenjak, Ante Trstenjak—a letter, Paris, 28/3/1925.

<sup>13</sup> Lenka PRCHALOVÁ, op. cit., pp. 89–90.

focus on world at large, not solely on Czech art.<sup>14</sup> The exhibitions representing Czech and foreign artists influenced Trstenjak more than the Academy studies.<sup>15</sup>

Trstenjak's desire to broaden his horizons in the arts inspired him to travel immediately after graduating from the Academy. During his studies, he had already travelled in Bohemia, and with his friends he had visited Warsaw, Krakow, and Dresden. After graduation, he went to Dalmatia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in the summer of 1924, Paris, a city he had long dreamed of visiting. In the following years, he made many more journeys, including trips to Italy and Lusatia. He also enjoyed travelling along the Adriatic Sea. In 1932, he finally settled in Prague, but whenever he had the chance, he continued to take both long and short trips abroad.

In 1933, Trstenjak married Eugenie Heřmanová, a young doctor he had met during his studies. For years, she had patiently continued to be his girlfriend and greatly supported him in his pursuit of the arts, joining him on several of his journeys. In 1934, their son, Mirko, was born.

While abroad, especially in Paris, Trstenjak worked diligently, visited many galleries, met other artists, and learned new techniques. Thus, in two years he returned to Prague as an experienced painter who had had the opportunity to exhibit his works in many countries. Starting in 1926, he began to present his artwork in Prague quite regularly. In 1929, the Adolf Černý Czech-Wendish Association in Prague held an exhibition, *From Sorbian Lusatia*, at the Tyrš House. Josef Páta (1886–1945) promoted him within the French environment as the "Painter of Lusatia," by publishing a brochure with black and white reproductions of his paintings.<sup>16</sup> Trstenjak continued to have a friendly relationship with this outstanding Sorb specialist for many years.<sup>17</sup>

In his studio on Korunní Street, in Prague's District Vinohrady, Trstenjak painted his favourite watercolours, as well as created various oil paintings, prints, drawings, and mixed media works. Thematically, he still focused on landscapes, cityscapes, and portraits, and he regularly exhibited his works. Again, he met many colleagues and became a member of an

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<sup>14</sup> Maja VETRIH, op. cit., p. 18.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Maja VETRIH, op. cit., p. 23.

<sup>17</sup> Památník národního písemnictví, Páta Josef, A letter from 1929, inv. no. 397, acc. no. 1/82; Páta Josef, A letter from 1936, inv. no. 495, acc. no. 56/81.

art group, which would come to be known as the Marold Association of Fine Artists. For him, pre-war Prague was the cultural heart of Central Europe.<sup>18</sup>

Trstenjak's life, full of art and travel, from which he had sought inspiration, was abruptly interrupted with the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Nazis. The war years, during which he participated in the antifascist resistance, subjected him and his family to great terror. Eugenie was of Jewish origin and both she and her family were severely afflicted by the Nazi persecution. In 1943, her mother was transported to Terezín and later to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp.<sup>19</sup> The Nazis tried to force Trstenjak to divorce, which he refused to do. It was their interracial marriage that had long protected Eugenie from being transported—eventually she was sent to Terezín as late as February 1945.<sup>20</sup> In October 1944, Trstenjak was imprisoned in Klettendorf (Klecina) forced labor camp near Wroclaw. In January 1945, as the camp was being evacuated, he managed to escape from the "death march" and returned to Prague. Until the end of the war, he was able to hide in Na Bulovce hospital posing as a patient, thanks to a friend who was a doctor.<sup>21</sup> Eugenie Trstenjaková survived to see the liberation of Terezín,<sup>22</sup> where she had contracted spotted fever; tragically, most of her family perished in Nazi concentration camps.<sup>23</sup>

After the war, Trstenjak became vice chairman of the People's Front of Yugoslavia in Prague. During this period, he met many friends who were now able to come see him from Yugoslavia, and he soon travelled there as well. As early as 1946, he participated in a delegation of the Front to Belgrade, where they presented Josip Broz Tito (1892–1980) with Trstenjak's painting titled *Prague*. In 1950, being a Yugoslav citizen, Trstenjak was deported from Czechoslovakia. This was a severe blow for the painter. He briefly visited Prague again only in 1966.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Maja VETRIH, op. cit., p. 24.

<sup>19</sup> Kárný Miroslav (ed.) *Terezínská pamětní kniha. Židovské oběti nacistických deportací z Čech a Moravy 1941–1945. Vol. II*. Prague: Terezínská Iniciativa, Melantrich, p. 1122.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 1302.

<sup>21</sup> Maja VETRIH, op. cit., p. 55.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 24–25.

<sup>23</sup> National Archives Czech Republic, Collection Policejní ředitelství Praha II – všeobecná spisovna (1941–1950), kart. 11752, sig. T 2193/2, Ante Trstenjak, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> Maja VETRIH, op. cit., pp. 26–27.

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