



# The CommUUnicator

Newsletter of the Unitarian Universalist  
Fellowship of Waynesboro

## Norbert Capek and the Flower Service

By Stephen Maxwell

Norbert Capek was born in 1870 in Bohemia (now part of the Czech Republic). He was the product of a religiously mixed family—his mother was a Catholic; his father, an agnostic. Norbert initially practiced Catholicism, became disillusioned, then followed the Baptist faith.



Ordained as a Baptist minister at the age of 25, he led congregations in Saxony (Germany) and Moravia and, “spreading the word,” founded others in Ukraine, Budapest and elsewhere in what was then the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Meanwhile, influenced by his

religious studies, he became more and more liberal in his thinking. During a 1920 meeting with Tomas Masaryk, who, following WW I, was to be the founder of modern Czechoslovakia, Capek learned about Unitarianism, and sought, unsuccessfully, to gain support from the American Unitarian Association to establish a liberal religious presence in his country. Threatened with arrest by the Austrian government, he emigrated with his wife and eight children to New York City in 1914, where he was appointed to serve a Baptist church. While there, he was twice tried for heresy by a

church tribunal. The tribunal did not remove him, and he relocated to the First Slovak Baptist Church in Newark, NJ. Like many UU’s, he continued to question his faith and, in 1919, resigned his post, writing: “I cannot be a Baptist anymore, even in compromise. The fire of new desires, new worlds, is burning inside me.”

Norbert’s first wife, Marie, died shortly after their arrival in the U.S. In 1919, he met and married Maja Oktavec, a fellow Czech expatriate, graduate of Columbia and employee at the New York Public Library. The family lived in Belleville, NJ. They urged their children to explore a variety of local Sunday schools, and the children settled on the First Unitarian Church of Essex County, in nearby Orange. Norbert and Maja attended services there and obviously liked what they found – “clear heads, but warm hearts, too” - signing the membership book in January 1921. They did not stay long – later that same year, they returned to the newly independent nation of Czechoslovakia, whose president was Tomas Masaryk. Before leaving, Norbert met Samuel Eliot, president of the AUA, who committed his organization’s support for Capek’s mission in Europe.

The Capeks settled in Prague and founded what they dubbed the Liberal Religious Fellowship. The congregation grew to nearly 3,000, with eight other missions. On June 24, 1923, they celebrated the first Flower Communion, in response to the complaint of some congregants that the services lacked a spiritual dimension. It included the practice we have of bringing a flower, placing it in a central

vase and taking home a different one, symbolizing the uniqueness of everyone – and their beliefs - coming together to celebrate that uniqueness in communion with one another.

In 1926, Maja was ordained as a Unitarian minister. The Czech government officially recognized the Unitarian Church of Czechoslovakia in 1930. Norbert wrote several books; he considered “Toward a Sunnier Shore” (1929) the best, and published a second edition ten years later, as the shadow of Nazism loomed over Europe. The Capeks decided it would be best if Maja left Prague for the U.S. in 1939, where she could coordinate relief efforts. In 1940, she was called to serve as minister of North Unitarian Church in New Bedford, MA. It was Maja who introduced the Flower Communion to Unitarian churches in America.

Norbert Capek expressed his religious philosophy in this way: every human soul cries out for harmony with the Infinite; “every person is an embodiment of God and in every one of us God struggles for higher expression;” “unitarian religion...should mean the next advanced cultural level of a certain people [and should] place truth above any tradition, spirit above any scripture, freedom above authority and progress above all reaction.”

It should come as no surprise that the Nazis viewed Capek’s writing and speaking as a threat to their world view. In March 1941, he and his youngest daughter, Zora, were arrested by the Gestapo and charged with treason. The court did not bend to the will of the Gestapo, finding the pair guilty of a much lesser offense – listening to proscribed radio broadcasts – and sentenced Norbert to one year in prison, including the eleven months’ time already served. (Zora received an eighteen-month sentence because she was found guilty also of sharing notes about the

broadcasts with others.) Norbert had reason to hope he would be released in a month, but he was too influential a person for the Gestapo to lose control of. An officer overruled the court and had him transported to the Dachau concentration camp with the instruction “return unwanted” – a death sentence. He arrived July 5, 1942, and evidently on October 12 was killed in the gas chamber.

Norbert Capek was a martyr for his Unitarian faith and is celebrated as such by his original congregation in Prague. When Kristin and I went to Prague in 2019, we visited the church, where a bust of Capek holds pride of place. Norbert Capek is memorialized whenever the Flower Communion is celebrated.

*This article was compiled from material written by Richard Henry in “Norbert Fabian Capek: A Spiritual Journey”; the Wikipedia article “Norbert Capek”; and an article by Teresa and David Swartz on the UUA website “The Story of Norbert Capek’s Flower Ceremony.”*



*A large attendance of 75 congregants participated in this year’s flower service. If only these lovely blossoms had not been accompanied by COVID! Take care everyone.*

