



continuous conversion

Žižkov, Home of the Hussites

by Sara Tusek

District Three of Prague, very near the city center, is known as Žižkov, in honor of a famous Hussite general, Jan Žižka. To understand how a mild-mannered priest named Jan Hus, who was burned at the stake as a heretic, inspired the militancy of the Hussite army (led by Žižka) that fought in his name after his death, it's necessary to look at Bohemian religious activities of the 14th and 15th century.

(see the September 2006 issue of continuous conversion for details about Hus)



Hussite military leader Jan Žižka

merchants on the city of Prague, their persecution of leading Bohemian reformers was so deeply resented that the Utraquists marched through the city of Prague in protest. Rocks were thrown from the town hall on the marchers, who then stormed the building and throw the new town council members out the window to certain death in the crowd below. *(This is known as Prague's 1st defenestration.)*

Upon hearing of this act of defiance, Wenceslas had an apoplectic stroke and died, in 1419. His brother, Sigismund, who was already Margrave of Brandenburg, King of Hungary, and Holy Roman Emperor, became King of Bohemia. Having burned Jan Hus as a heretic, Sigismund vowed to drown every Hussite heretic in Bohemia.

Wyclif, Hus, Sigismund and Wenceslas

In the late 14th century, Jan Hus was the rector of the University of Prague, as well as rector of Bethlehem Chapel in Prague. Hus was a student of John Wyclif and was intrigued with Wyclif's claim that the Bible should be translated into the language of the people who hear it in church, rather than being read in Latin. Hus preached that the Bible was the ultimate authority in questions about Christian doctrine, that church services could be held outdoors (not just inside a church building) and that parishioners should be able to take wine in communion, not just bread. For these "heresies," Hus was tried and executed at the Council of Constance in 1415, along with his associate, Jerome of Prague, despite a guarantee of safe passage from Sigismund, Holy Roman Emperor.

In Prague, outraged by Hus' betrayal by Sigismund, 452 Bohemian nobles formed the Utraquist (from the Latin sub utraque specie, meaning "in both kinds") party and covenanted to uphold the teachings of Hus. When Bohemian king Wenceslas IV (son of Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV) imposed a council of reactionary German

Pope Martin tries to eliminate the Hussites

Pope Martin V supported Sigismund's response to the takeover of Prague by the "heretic" Utraquists by declaring three crusades to crush Hus' followers.

In Bohemia, another Hussite party had formed, the Taborites, who were even more fierce than the Utraquists; Utraquists and Taborites formed an army under one-eyed general Jan Žižka of Trocnov to repel the Pope's crusade. This army consisted of farmers and peasants, and Žižka used what was at hand to make soldiers out of them. Farm wagons were used in an ingenious tactic called the wagenburg; wagons were parked wheel-to-wheel forming a circle, much like the American pioneers of the Old West formed with their Conestoga Wagons. The horses and soldiers were kept safely inside the enclosure.

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In battle, the outlying side of the wagon and the undercarriage were armored with thick wooden planks, with holes through which soldiers could shoot pistols and crossbows. Gaps between wagons housed small cannons, which marked the first ever use of artillery in field operations in Europe. At a signal, wagons could be pulled apart and the Hussite cavalry could ride out to fight the enemy in a surprise flanking attack. Žižka trained his troops to perform these maneuvers and set up a system of flags to signal directions to others in the field.

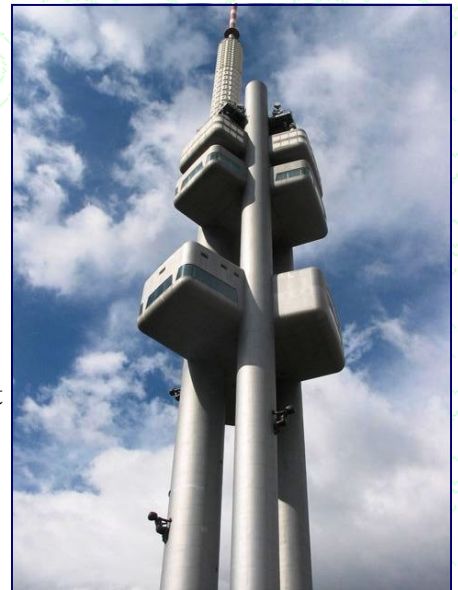
Under Žižka's leadership, the Hussite army defeated the Pope's crusading armies at Sudomer on March 25, 1420, and on the hill of Vitkov (in modern-day Zizkov) on July 14, 1420. Then in the third crusade, in 1421, the Pope's army dispersed in fear at the mere mention of the arrival of the fierce Taborites; legend has it that the Taborites sang the hymn, "O ye warriors of God" and frightened the attacking crusader armies with the song alone. The Hussites also defeat the armies of Sigismund Oct 31, 1420, at Vysehrad and fought the royalists in Bohemia, defeating them at Kutna Hora on April 25, 1422.

Red Žižkov

In spite of the courageous deeds of Žižka's Hussite army, the cycle of Bohemian oppression and rebellion continued for the next 5 centuries. The town of Žižkov grew, developing businesses, schools and churches, including the now-restored Cubist Bethlehem Chapel for the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren.

Only after WWI did the defeat of the Hapsburgs bring political freedom for the residents of Žižkov. Small businesses were established in the new country of Czechoslovakia, and Žižkov became prosperous, along with the rest of the people living in Czechoslovakia. In the interwar years,

*Žižkov's famous TV Tower, photo
courtesy Luis Blanco*



the country was compared with Switzerland in its economic development and political freedom.

WWII, however, dealt Czechoslovakia a hard blow. Adolph Hitler conquered the country in 1939, using its well-developed industrial capabilities to supply the Nazi war machine. Žižkov's factories were pressed into service for the Third Reich. Following the end of the war, Czechoslovakia enjoyed three years of freedom before being absorbed in 1948 into the Soviet bloc, where it languished until 1989.

In those 40 years, Zizkov, always a working-class neighborhood, became "Red Žižkov" because of the many resident factory workers who identified themselves with the Communist government. The character of Žižkov became rougher, as the government relocated many Roma families there because of the problems they had to integrate the Roma into Czech culture. The loyal Communist inhabitants of Žižkov didn't protest the arrival of the Roma, who were known (fairly or not) as "gypsies," people who didn't live a normal settled life, who didn't typically hold a job for long and who relied on thievery and trickery to make a living.

These days, Žižkov is considered the "Brooklyn" of Prague, a somewhat run-down neighborhood that's being stylishly revitalized. And even now, an imposing memorial on Vitkov Hill reminds the visitor that Žižkov was once the place where Jan Žižka defied the armies of the Pope—and won.

