

MARTIN ŠRAJER / 14. 12. 2023

# Saint Wenceslas in film

The first idea for a film inspired by the life of St. Wenceslas allegedly appeared in the same year our republic proclaimed independence – 1918. But a film about the life of the patron saint of the Czech state was filmed ten years later, in the same year when the St. Vitus Cathedral was finished – to commemorate the St. Wenceslas jubilee. *St. Wenceslas* (Svatý Václav, 1929) was made by Milenium-film founded in the autumn of 1927. The company's focus was originally supposed to be much wider, but in the first couple of years, it devoted all of its resources to make “the first Czechoslovak historical epic.”<sup>[1]</sup> The company planned to use the financial and symbolical capital earned by this project for further expansion.

A film libretto competition was held under the auspices of the Academy of Sciences. Based on their submissions to the competition, filmmaker Jan Stanislav Kolár and opera singer Josef Munclinger were chosen to write the script and direct the film.

The constantly increasing budget of this ambitious culturally-educational project amounted to more than 4 million crowns. Interior scenes were shot in the AB Ateliers. With the assistance of experts, two of the biggest film sets of their time were built at the Strahov stadium – Václav's and Boleslav's castles, as seen in the archive footage documentary *How Films Used to be Made* (Jak se u nás kdysi filmovalo, 1954). The film received 3 million crowns by the Ministry of Finance in the form of zero-interest loans.

The government's participation in the project is manifested for instance by respecting Masaryk's interpretation of the legend of St. Wenceslas which accentuates the Wenceslas' humanism and pro-western rather than Catholicism and connection to the church (just like a later film about St. Wenceslas initiated by the Nazis conformed to the ruling ideology).

Exteriors were shot for instance in Prokopské údolí, Šumava primeval forest, and Křivoklát. In addition to lack of funds, the shooting was impeded by disagreements

between the two directors. Next to experienced Kolár, Munclinger, who had no previous experiences with film direction, didn't feel like a valuable crew member. That's why he decided to leave the project in November 1929 with severance pay.

The grand premiere of *St. Wenceslas* was eventually held a year after the jubilee, in April 1930 in the Adria cinema. At the premiere, the film was accompanied by a 40-piece orchestra. But the response of the viewers home and abroad didn't match the expended resources.

Due to the rise of popularity of sound films, a renewed premiere with orchestral music composed by Jaroslav Krička and Oskar Nedbal was expected to save the film's box-office performance. But its production was terminated, due, among other things, to copyright disputes. The film was a flop and Milenium-film incurred debts for many years. In 1940, the project was terminated with an outstanding debt of more than 3 million crowns.

At the same time, after Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia had been proclaimed, the cult of St. Wenceslas became more attractive. It was misused to ideologically justify the occupation, or more precisely the obedience to the invaders.

The allegiance of Czech nation to the Third Reich was symbolically pledged at the equestrian statue of St. Wenceslas at the Wenceslas Square. A St. Wenceslas Award was created (one of its recipients is for instance Otakar Vávra), Wenceslas was portrayed at the Protectorate 5000 Crowns banknote towards the end of the war, Czech fascists formed a military unit St. Wenceslas' company trained by Wehrmacht officers.

Problematic was in particular the fact that Wenceslas paid a tribute to the Duke of Saxony Henry the Fowler for protection of Czech lands. According to the Nazi interpretation of history, Wenceslas demonstrated a remarkable forethought – he was one of the first people to realise the advantages of alliance with the German empire. The September holiday was now meant to demonstrate that the Protectorate was now a vassal state to Germany.

Misinterpretation of one of the symbols of the Czech state was spread also by the statements of collaborating politicians (e.g. the Minister of Education Emanuel

Moravec) and period press articles (*České slovo*, *Národní politika*). This distorted tradition first culminated when the Deputy Protector of Bohemia and Moravia Reinhard Heydrich was presented with the keys to the chamber storing the Czech crown jewels in November 1941. The second culmination was supposed to be the release of the epic film *Duke Wenceslas* which would show the Czech saint as “the first prudent propagator of Czech alliance with the Empire.”<sup>[2]</sup>

Live-action films made during the war in Czech studios served primarily to distract audiences. Comedies, melodramas and costume dramas had no connections to the current situation. With the exception of *Jan Cimbura* (1941), openly propagandistic films with scenes of Jewish pogroms were not made. It was the director of the said film, František Čáp, who was appointed to direct *Duke Wenceslas*.

The only film project initiated directly by the invaders<sup>[3]</sup> was supposed to present the legend of St. Wenceslas according to the aforementioned German interpretation in which Wenceslas is a loyal and humble friend to Germany. But we can only speculate how exactly this distortion of history looked like and what was the role of fratricide Boleslaus who in the Nazi interpretation represented the futility of resistance. The script, written by Čáp together with actor Zdeněk Štěpánek and art historian Alžběta Birnbaumová, unfortunately wasn't preserved in the Lucernafilm archives.<sup>[4]</sup>

Available materials, however, suggest that the film was supposed to be a historical epic and, with a budget of more than 20 million crowns, the most expensive film in the history of Czech cinema. The lead role was given to Karel Höger, Václav's treacherous brother was to be portrayed by Vítězslav Vejražka and Duchess Drahomíra by Marie Glázrová. Other crew members such as cinematographers (Ferdinand Pečenka, Karel Degl), architects (Jan Zázvorka, Karel Škvor) and sound engineer (František Šindelář) had also already been picked. The pre-production process, including casting and prop design and manufacture, was deliberately protracted and sabotaged in order to stop the production. Misleading budget increases eventually had the desired effect. One of the official reasons for terminating the project in July 1944, after two years of work, was “shortage of material.”<sup>[5]</sup>

The only preserved footage includes some 10 minutes of trial exterior silent shots filmed probably in August and September 1942. We see a praying priest, tied up men

led somewhere by horse riders, cutting down corn with a sickle and Wenceslas in a vineyard (for mere nine seconds).

What's important in the context of František Čáp's filmography and its queer interpretation, is the presence of many semi-naked male bodies mining for gold, stone and digging river clams. Czech audiences were able to see these fragments stored now in the repository of the National Film Archive thanks to historian and archivist Karel Čáslavský who showed them in the 200<sup>th</sup> episode of his show *In Search of Lost Time* (Hledání ztraceného času).

The only Czech film conforming to Nazi ideology was – apparently also thanks to Čáp and his crew – never made. But despite that, *Duke Wenceslas* (along with *Jan Cimbura*) came to the spotlight when Čáp was investigated for alleged collaboration with the Nazis after the war. The Association of Czech Film Workers initially accused Čáp of propagating Nazism and Antisemitism, but he was eventually acquitted and allowed to film *Men Without Wings* (Muži bez křídel, 1946), an occupation drama awarded at the Cannes festival.

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## Literature:

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Jan Rataj, Politické proměny symboliky svatováclavské tradice a tradice 28. října v moderních československých a českých dějinách. In: Bednář, Miloslav (ed.), *Spory o dějiny II*. Prague: Masarykův ústav AV ČR 1999, pp. 84–94.

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## Notes:

[1] Petr Hasan, *Ušlechtilý, dobrý, krásný. Římskokatolická církev a kinematografie v českých zemích 1918–1948*. Prague: Národní filmový archiv 2021, p. 70.

[2] Jan Rataj, Politické proměny symboliky svatováclavské tradice a tradice 28. října v moderních československých a českých dějinách. In: Bednář, Miloslav (ed.), *Spory o dějiny II*. Praha: Masarykův ústav AV ČR 1999, pp. 84–94.

[3] If we disregard the anti-Bolshevik adaptation of *Colonel Švec* (Colonel Švec, 1929) and antisemitic *Maryčka Magdonova*, two projects which were never realised.

[4] Jaroslav Lopour, *Filmy soukromých výroben v zestátněné kinematografii. Roztočené a nedokončené protektorátní projekty a jejich osudy po roce 1945* (Films of Private Producers in the Nationalized Cinematography. Unfinished Projects from the Protectorate Boehmen und Maehren Period after 1945). Brno: Masaryk University 2015.

[5] *ibid.*