HOW THE TALKS CAME ABOUT

"I didn't want to lie. . ."

Many people have asked the author of *Talks with T. G. Masaryk* how the *Talks* actually took shape: did the author take them down in shorthand on the spot, did he write them up day by day? How did they come together, in other words, and how did they come about in the first place?

First of all, the author must confess that for a long time he never dreamed of recording what he had the opportunity to hear from the President's lips. Attribute it to a certain slovenliness on his part if you will, but he never carries a pad, he has never kept a diary, and his own papers and memories are a hopeless mess. I am certain you know people like him and would never expect them to maintain careful records of what they hear or see.

And then one day it rained and rained at the President's summer place in Topol'čianky, and the President and his guests were sitting around the fireplace looking at the flaming logs (the President loves to stare into the fire) and talking about this and that, when the conversation turned to the War and who had been in the worst spot when. "The worst spot I was in during the War," the President began, "was Moscow." And then he told about how he'd been sent from revolutionary Petrograd to Moscow since it was so peaceful there, and no sooner did he step off the train than he heard shooting. He headed for his hotel on foot, but was stopped outside the railway station by a cordon of soldiers who said he couldn't go any farther because of the shooting. But he got past them somehow and found himself in a square where rifles and machine guns were firing at one another, Kerensky's men on one side, the Bolsheviks on the other.

"I set off," he told us. "A man walking ahead of me suddenly broke into a run and slipped through a large door that had been opened a crack for him. It was the Hotel Metropole. I tried to slip in after him, but they slammed the door in my face. So I banged on it and shouted, 'What are you doing? Open the door!' 'Have you got a room here?' the porter shouted back. 'We can't let you in otherwise. We're all booked up.' I didn't want to lie, so I shouted, 'Stop playing games and let me in!' He was so surprised he did let me in."

He went on to describe the siege of the Metropole, the fighting in Kiev, and "our boys," as he called the Czech Legionnaires. But what struck the author of the *Talks* more than anything was that one brief phrase "I didn't want to lie." There he was — guns shooting from both sides of the square, bullets raining down on the pavement and buildings around him — there stands Professor Masaryk, and the porter won't let him in. Had he said he was staying there, the porter would have let him in immediately, but not even when his life was at stake would he let himself lie. And when he talks about it, he uses the short, dry "I didn't want to lie," meaning it goes without saying, that's all there is to it.

That was the first time the author of the *Talks* wrote down the President's words. All he wanted to do was save one brief sentence, give someone else a chance to appreciate how beautifully simple and obvious it was. It never occurred to him to go on writing down what he heard. And so it went for several years until one day — again in Topol'čianky — he was sitting and chatting with the President under some old chestnut trees (it was autumn and every once in a while the ripe, russet fruit would drop with a thud on the hard ground) when the mail came. The President got a whole stack of letters, but the author of the *Talks* got one too. From Germany. A publishing house. The Amalthea-Verlag or some-thing of the sort. Anyway, the author of the *Talks* burst out laughing. "You know what they want?" he said to the President. "They want me to write your biography. As if I could. A biographer has to be at least something of an historian; he's got to delve into sources, check their reliability, things like that."

"True," the President nodded. "Writing a biography is hard work."

The silence that followed was broken only by the thudding and bouncing of ripe chestnuts. They reminded the author of the *Talks* of the bullets in the Moscow square and along the main thoroughfare in Kiev. "Though I could put down the things you've told me on occasion," I blurted out. "They'd make a biography by themselves."

"Do whatever you like," he said, laughing.

"You'll help me to fill in the gaps, won't you?"

"I'll do what I can," he said, as if resigned to his fate, and got up out of his chair. "But now I've got work to do."

And that is how the *Talks* came to be written.

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Though writing them took a good deal of doing. When the author had scribbled out everything he could remember, he found he knew quite a bit about the President's childhood (because the President enjoyed reminiscing about it and did so frequently) and a thing or two about his student years, but from then on the material was rather spotty. He would have to get the President to go on a bit about himself.

As a rule the battle was joined in the morning on the Topol'čianky grounds. At about nine the President would make his way through the meadows to his beloved arbor in the sun. The author of the *Talks* had his attack — frontal, usually — prepared in advance. He let the requisite period of silence pass and then came out with, "What was the Manuscripts Controversy* like, anyway?"

After a while the President shook his head, said "Far from pretty," and started wiping his pince-nez.

The author of the *Talks* would await further developments.

"Have you read the papers today?" the President would ask, looking up at him. "Did you notice such and such?" And then he would go on about anything and everything except the Manuscripts Controversy.

Next day the author would have another question ready. "Tell me, did you make progress in the nineties?"

"I made mistakes," the President said laconically and considered the case closed.

So you see, it wasn't easy to get the details of his life out of him, and writing the *Talks* took a good deal of patience. On the part of both of us.

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Even after the author of the *Talks* had written out everything he had heard, there was still too little, still all manner of gaps. He was at a loss.

"Shall I publish it as is?" he asked one day.

"Why not?" said the President with a shrug.

"How about having a look at it," the author sug-gested hesitantly. "For the sake of accuracy."

"If you like," said the President. And that is how the manuscript got into his hands. By the time the author got it back, it included much new material in the President's own hand: supplementary remarks, more reminiscences, new and little known details.

Overjoyed, the author reworked his text and handed it back for revision. It was returned after a suitable interval with further additions, details, and reminiscences.

"This can't go on," he protested. "You're almost doing more work than I am."

"What's the difference?" said the President.

"Well, what about royalties?" he said, weighing the new, heavier manuscript in his hand. "We should at least split them down the middle. Fifty fifty."

The President dismissed the proposal with a wave of the hand.

"Now you've gone and done it," thought the author of the *Talks*, furious with himself. "Offering royalties to a head of state!"

But the following morning the head of state stopped short in the middle of the meadow on the way to the arbor and said, his eyes sparkling, "I know what to do with the royalties you give me! A widow I know has the sweetest, purest children. I've always meant to do something for her. I'll put this money in her name."

That too is part of the history of the *Talks*, don't you

think?

TGM Not Only Talks But Is Silent

The author of the *Talks with T. G. Masaryk* is aware he would be giving the public an incomplete, even distorted image of his subject were he not to write the following chapter. Certain people have ascribed an almost photographic reality to the *Talks*. They are wrong. A photograph or, rather, a talking picture of the *Talks* would look like this: an arbor of birch wound round with climbing roses and juniper bushes; T. G. Masaryk sitting on a coarsely finished bench, his elbows on his knees, silently tugging on his mustache, completely engrossed in his thoughts. The author of the *Talks* is also silent, puffing on his pipe and engrossed in *his* thoughts, for instance, the trajectory of the ladybug crawling up his arm. Eventually the President lifts his head, waves his hand in a circle, and says, "This. . . " which means: what a day, just look at those hills on the horizon, at that maple ablaze so early. The author of the *Talks* nods wordlessly, which means: yes, simply beautiful, there's nothing finer than a brisk autumn morning, the beech trees are turning too, look, look, a squirrel, shh, you'll scare it away.

It wasn't hard to set down from memory what was said on a great many such mornings, but what can't be conveyed is the quiet, the silence the words and unhurried talk came out of. The silence was always there, slipping between words, closing sentences, but it wasn't an oppressive silence, the silence of having nothing to say; it was a thoughtful silence, the silence of a person who needs to ponder something rather than talk about it, who doesn't start talking until he's thought it through, and then talks slowly, hesitantly, translating thoughts into words.

It's not easy, because words are sometimes too tight or too loose to convey thoughts. So he doesn't like to talk, and when he has to say something he says it tersely, in as few words as possible; slowly, the better to find the right words in the brooding pauses; and disjointedly because thought lacks the mechanical connections of speech. There had to be a great deal of silence for the *Talks* to come about. Only the author knows how incomplete the printed form is: it lacks the counterpoint of silence.

It is a September morning. The President is sitting in the birch arbor, hat in hand, musing. Children's shouts are coming from the village, a hawk is soaring beneath the heavens, a maple leaf is sailing quietly down. The President lifts his head as if to say something, but instead merely waves a long finger in a circle and sighs, "This. . . " I know what you mean: you mean that you find it all so beautiful, that you love the sun, the ripeness of autumn, life's cheerful voice, and, most of all, that in times like these you think of God.

Right. But how to put it on paper without words?

Clearly T.G. Masaryk is not the talkative type. He is not the type that needs to talk in order to think, that thinks by means of talking or writing. A born orator is a person who comes by his ideas as he speaks, that is, his ideas stem from speech, speech having its own connections, its own flow, whisking his thought along. Masaryk is not a born orator. In his case there always seems to be a gap between thought and utterance. He finds putting thoughts into words more a burden than a relief: it forces him to abandon the flow of his ideas. Crossing the divide is tantamount to splitting himself in two: he must speak as well as think, come up with words, translate the contents of his mind into verbal constructs. It doesn't feel quite natural, it makes him insecure, the way a right-handed person feels when forced to do something with his left hand. Often he set forth a very definite idea in a rough, even sketchy manner; often he failed to finish a sentence or finished it with the wave of a hand, the shrug of a shoulder, or a vague "and the like," thereby slipping away from the flow of speech and back to the flow of thought. In grammatical terms, he often used aposiopeses (sentence fragments) and anacolutha (syntactic inconsistencies within a sentence). His punctuation is a matter

of deeply pondered shreds of quiet. Don't be impatient, don't pounce on his dashes: you never know when a carefully devised word will emerge from them. A thinking man is a man of many thoughts, not of many words.

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As I say, there is a tangible schism between thought and utterance in Masaryk. He needs only to think: he must more or less force himself to put his thoughts into words; he doesn't like to talk and finds it difficult. This makes itself felt in his speech in two ways. First, whenever possible he uses a statement he has made before, one of his own formulations. He has personal expressions, though with time he tends to shorten and condense them. These are his famous brachylogies, his mental abbreviations. Once he has thought something through and made it his own, he doesn't like going into it again in detail. That is why he encapsulates certain ready-made opinions in "ideograms." When he calls someone "an unpleasant person," for instance, the words contain a blanket condemnation of eccentrics and their way of life; they contain all the pique and indignation he can muster. The words "a decent person" are also unusually rich in meaning, implying moral integrity, common sense, reliability, courage, in short, any number of precious qualities. But the greatest praise he can give is to call someone "a beautiful person." There is an ancient, classical quality to those words.

The second consequence of Masaryk's taciturnity is just the opposite: a certain groping for words. Whereas some people make do for a lifetime with a supply of ready-made phrases, opinions, and formulations and can pull one out of the hat for every occasion, Masaryk is constantly searching for words, pausing before using them, hesitating to utter them, as though uncertain whether they fully express what he has in mind. Characteristic of the effort he puts into conveying his thoughts orally is his tendency to string together synonyms. He will say, for instance, "A state, a republic, a democracy needs such and such," where each word corroborates, delimits, and supplements the previous one. A state, yes, but a republican one; yes, a republic, but a republic that is democratic to the

core; a democracy, yes, but a democracy in harmony with the state and its order. There are times when one finds a concept treated in terms of both content and scope, an attempt to define a concept together with its use. Another way of putting it would be that he thinks and speaks more in "contents" than words. By stringing words together, he wishes to bring across the breadth and depth of the content of what he has in mind.

He dislikes verbalisms; he shuns anything in speech or thought deriving from word play; he avoids similes, metaphors, analogies, and, in particular, hyperboles. He likewise dislikes such games of verbal logic as forced antitheses, conceptual dialectics, and problems provoked or resolved by words alone. Wherever he encounters them, he dismisses them with a wave of the hand and a "Mere scholasticism." Translate this into the language of politics and what do you get? Actions, not words.

He dislikes writing as much as he dislikes speaking. He once said about himself, "I'd have been satisfied to read and study, and if to write, then for myself — in short, to learn." And after an illness: "I was glad I didn't have to talk to anybody. At least I could think."

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But when he does talk it's always with a purpose. When a new idea comes up in conversation, he will listen for a while and then say, "Such and such a book has been written on the topic," which means, "What's the point in talking when we can read?" But he loves to listen to an expert talk, an expert in anything, so long as he really knows what he's talking about. "An interesting person" is what he calls anyone who can tell him things he didn't know before. He will make himself comfortable and listen to such people with great pleasure. He will even interrogate them, and he is otherwise extremely reticent about asking questions of people (appar-ently he thinks of questions as intruding upon their silence). He will listen enrapt to the most technical of expositions and then say, "I liked the way he threw himself into what he was saying; I liked the brightness in his eyes."

We must never talk about what we don't know. When

asked about something outside his expertise, he will invariably say, "I don't know," and he crossly qualifies as "an ignorant person" anyone who ventilates ideas and opinions on matters in which he has insufficient knowledge and experience. Masaryk has no patience with such people.

For practical reasons the *Talks* contain many more apodictic statements than he actually made. He is more likely to introduce a point with the words "I think," "the way I would put it," or "as I see it." Sometimes he doesn't respond at all; he merely gives an "I don't rightly know" shrug of the shoulders. But the following day he'll come out with, "You asked me yesterday about such and such. Well, I've given it some thought, and it's thus and so," and days later he'll come back to it: "Remember when we were talking about such and such? Well, I think I ought to add that. . ."

As I see it, everything he says belongs to one of two basic categories. The first consists of the certainties, firm principles, and truths he has settled upon. These he expresses forcefully, with uncommon terseness and brachylogical concision, emphasizing his point with a clenched fist or an energetically raised finger. The second consists of meditations, probings, the endless road to knowledge, endless criticism and self-criticism. And I can't tell which is more characteristic: the clear-cut, steadfast certainty of a man of firm knowledge and beliefs or the never-ending pursuit of truth.

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Because that is what it all boils down to: for Masaryk, speaking means speaking the truth. And believe me: the very style of truth — the way it is expressed — differs from the style of half-truths, lies, or ignorance. Truth has nothing to hide or veil with words, it does not need to be decorated, prettied up. The word is not a garment to clothe thought; it does its best to be thought itself or at least a report on the content of thought. When Masaryk speaks, he reports on what he is thinking: he is sober, concrete, and as succinct as possible; he refuses to let the words carry him away. Normally our thoughts are fragmentary, but we talk about them in complete, coherent sentences; we say more than we actually thought. Masaryk, on the other hand,

thinks his thoughts through before uttering them. The utterance must wait; it never precedes thought. The tempo, texture, and syntax of his speech are determined by the thought process. There is no verbal assembly line at work, no pyrotechnics born of verbal encounters; each sentence emerges slowly, word by word and after long intervals. Such a sentence is no formal, logical mold to pour thoughts into; it is the result of a thought clearing its own path, pausing, vacillating, then forging ahead on its own. Masaryk's sentences must be read slowly and in several breaths. Take your time with them and they will repay you not only with their full meaning but with the personal intonation and spirit of their maker.

Let me repeat that thought clears its own path in everything Masaryk says. I repeat it because the *Talks* are quite misleading in this respect. They were not so coherent as they appear: no topic was exhausted in one sitting and in the order in which it appears. Masaryk's thought follows its own path; it has its own cadence, you might say, to which it almost invariably returns. Every one of the talks eventually led to politics or God, to current events or eternity. Masaryk would lure the author of the *Talks* away from various points to these two primary ones, which seem to be constantly on his mind: they are present even if he is talking about other things, and when the opportunity arises he quietly steers the conversation back to them. This dual *terminus ad quem* is by no means self-contradictory; he remains true to himself in both, both representing a single reality but perceived now *sub specie aeterni*, now *sub specie* current events. For Masaryk, religion consists first and foremost of humanity, loving your neighbor, serving your fellow man, but politics consists of making humanity and love a reality. It is only a short step from one to the other. He never mixes the two — in his religiosity he is ever the believer, in his politics ever the politician — but the two are never in conflict; neither gains the upper hand. He is what is commonly called uncompro-mising, and to be as uncompromising as he is you must have principles all of a piece.

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It is typical of his thought and means of expression that they eschew radical antitheses. Say he is talking about democracy and dictatorship. You might expect him to set one against the other, treat them as polar opposites, but no: he muses a bit and says, "Don't forget that a democracy can't do without dictatorship and a dictatorship invokes democracy." And so on down the line. He sees no conflict between theory and practice; he does not treat reason and feeling as mutually exclusive; he does not exclude the coexistence of faith and science; he does not separate politics and morality; he does not oppose body and soul; he finds no dualism between the temporal and the eternal. He brings all these artificially disconnected, polarized concepts back together, enabling them to permeate and complement one another in the single, integral, whole, and concrete reality from which they came. He stresses their wholeness, their integrity. We must accept all reality, take it as a whole: such is Masaryk's "concretism" and pluralism.

What we still need is a term to convey not only the concreteness and plenitude but also the totality, the synthesis and equilibrium, the serenity and all-encompassing, indissoluble nature — to be brief, the classical essence, to be even briefer, the harmony — of his thought. He feels no need to reconcile antitheses and bridge opposites because his system does not produce them; he feels no need to seek out a final wholeness because wholeness is his point of departure. His noetic is a noetic of the whole: he recognizes the *whole* person, with everything that person has to offer. His metaphysics is a metaphysics of the whole: he accepts the "material world and the spiritual one, the inner world of personal consciousness and the consciousness of the masses, the world of the soul, God." His commandment of love is a commandment of the whole: love fully, with all your being, love God and man, love all mankind; his humanity is universal love. The present is a piece of history; the past and the future are alive in us; we live every instant in eternity; such is the fullness and wholeness of our lives. Fullness and wholeness, again and again, at all times and in all things. A static ideal, I would say: where everything forms a whole, an aggregate, neither life nor history is a matter of constantly moving from one thing to another but of perfecting and deepening something enduring. This is what he himself

terms his platonism. The main thing is not so much that there is motion as what it is that moves and changes and what endures despite the motion. And how are we to understand the element that endures even in development if not as a plan, a purposeful ideal? Development is not change, it is a process of perfection. Nor must we be thrown by misfortunes and temporary crises, for are we not at the very inception of development?

Let's say we oppose faith and science. Science denies faith and wishes to replace it with knowledge. But here Masaryk raises a monitory finger: there is science and science, faith and faith. Science denies blind faith, superstitious, unthinking faith; moreover, science can be officious, overbearing, and pseudo-scientific, claiming to know everything. True science and true faith are not mutually exclusive. How like Masaryk to say that there is no antagonism between science and faith, only between science and pseudo-science, between true, conscious faith and mechanical, idolatrous faith; there is no conflict between freedom and discipline, only between true freedom and anarchistic freedom, between slavish discipline and the discipline of mutual assistance. The list could be expanded. Human ideals never exclude one another in their ideal form, in their wholeness and perfection. By thinking things through and perfecting them, we foster their synthesis. Another classical element: there can be no conflict in fullness and wholeness. By becoming ever more familiar with reality, by guiding our actions with ever greater knowledge and love, we draw closer and closer, step by step, to the objective harmony of the world — to God's order, as Masaryk the believer puts it.

He has a curious concept of time. Should he open a conversation about politics with the words "If we look back a little in time. . ." don't expect him to talk about the early days of our Republic or about Körber. "Looking back a little in time" means going back to the Roman Empire or the medieval church. All history is an argument for today; all history is, as it were, taking place today. He refers to Plato as if the *Politics* had come out just last year and were still all the rage in political theory.

Yet time for him encompasses not only the history of mankind but its future as well. He is constantly thinking ahead:

what tomorrow will bring, what things will be like ten years from now, a century or two from now. Everything we do moves history forward; we are paving the way for the future. We must therefore ask ourselves not only what history is but also where it is heading.

He has almost no memories. Like every elderly person he enjoys reminiscing about his childhood, but he would much rather look into the future. It is indicative of his metaphysical faith that he sees the entire course of the world as a progression towards something better, a process of perfection. The Golden Age does not lie behind us; it is the goal of all human efforts. We must not be impatient if we cannot reach out and touch it; we must not lose heart. God's mills grind slowly, he reminds us. If that patient, valiant hope is not true optimism, I don't know what is.

Still, nothing we can do now should be postponed: no conviction that things will be better in a few thousand years absolves us of the responsibility to do everything within our power to improve conditions today. Even if we live in eternity, we must live full, integral lives. Only by living in the here and now do we learn and love. That, we might say, is the key to Masaryk's thought.

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Rather than provide an outline or analysis of Masaryk's philosophy, I have tried to present more or less the spiritual background or space against which the sentences and chapters of the *Talks* came into being. On the one hand, it is ten o'clock on a September morning in the year such and such and the President, having finished reading the papers, is about to embark on the duties that "go with the job" of being president. On the other, a more universal time is hovering over the birch arbor: Plato talks to us, and Augustine; whole eras, whole centuries come together; we hear measured, thoughtful deliberations on current events like the fall of the Roman Empire, the rise of such and such a world power, the liberation of the human spirit; Hus* battles for the truth, George of Poděbrady* for peace, Comenius* for education. Everything that has ever happened here at home and out in the world

comes into play, just as we form our image of the day from the morning papers or as an artisan takes a look around his shop to make sure everything is in place before he sets to work. Yes, everything is in place, the history of all times, the voices of all teachers, man proposing and God disposing. And after going on for a while about this or that topic, the President starts thinking about work.

He thinks about what has to get done, about this and that concrete task, but hovering over the day-to-day political situation, which he is actively and lovingly involved in, is something like an enormous space: his all-encompassing conception of humanity and divinity, of harmony and providence. He may lose his temper, he may discourse on the events of the day, he may simply be silent — that great overriding order is always present. Sometimes what he says sounds almost dry: no big words, no fire-and-brimstone sermons, no conceptual hocus-pocus, just the facts, straightforward definitions, concrete criticism, practical common sense. But pay close attention and you'll hear more: the vast, sweeping, radiant space above resonates with each sentence; each word is a link in a powerful system of knowledge, faith, and love, a clod of earth, a piece of a temple under construction. Each sentence can be weighed like a block of stone, but we shall fail to understand it fully if we fail to see the pillars and buttresses, the steeples and spires of the structure as a whole. Only then can we appreciate the beautiful, wise order present in even the most simple building block.

That is what is meant by "Silence with T. G. Masaryk." Let us listen less to the words than to the deep, quiet resonances, for they are the genuine content, they the whole, utter truth. Even when the topic of conversation is something as, well, pedestrian, earthbound as politics, the resonances are there. Can't you hear the din of history and the commandments of God? Together with Plato's republic and Jesus' sermon on the mount, the great hierarchy of the Church and the bustle of secular concerns, the relief of freedom and the quiet tenacity of reason. The resonances it takes to make harmony! Reading Masaryk, reading him harmonically, involves both talk and silence: talk about the temporal world so crucial to us and silent contemplation of the eternal. Anyone