Famous Alumni & Former Staff

Jan Patočka (1907–1977)  
Czech philosopher, one of the last students of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger

Patočka studied at the Faculty of Arts in Prague, in Paris, Berlin and Freiburg. He was one of the last students of Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger. One of his tutors was also Eugen Fink and the two became lifelong friends. In 1968, he was appointed professor at Charles University, but for political reasons, he was only allowed to lecture in 1945-1950 and 1968-72 and otherwise taught private, illegal seminars at home. He was involved in the creation of Charta 77 and together with Jiří Hájek and Václav Havel was one of its first speakers. He died in hospital after a demanding interrogation by the communist police over his involvement with Charta. Academically, Patočka focused on philosophy of history, phenomenology, and on the works of the seventeenth-century Czech educator, philosopher, and writer Jan Amos Komenský.

Růžena Vacková (1901–1982)  
Art historian, archaeologist, and political prisoner

Růžena Vacková studied classical archaeology, aesthetics, and art history at the Faculty of Arts. During WWII, members of her family were executed by the Nazi authorities, and she herself was imprisoned towards the end of the war and sentenced to death, but the sentence was not carried out. In 1947, she was appointed Special Professor of classical archaeology at the Faculty of Arts, as the second woman to ever achieve this rank in the Czech academia, after the historian and Byzantologist Dr Milada Paulová. In February 1948, Růžena Vacková was the only member of the staff who joined the students’ manifestation against the communist putsch. Since 1950, she was not allowed to lecture the Faculty anymore. In 1952, she was arrested and sentenced to imprisonment of twenty-two years in a fake political process with Catholic intellectuals – the alleged offence was “espionage for Vatican”. She refused to apply for amnesty and spent fifteen years in prison. In 1977, aged seventy-six, she was one of the first people to sign Charta 77. She wrote treatises on classical art, theatre, and art theory.

Jan Palach (1948–1969)  
Czech student who self-immolated himself in protest against the invasion of Warsaw Pact armies

In order to arouse his fellow citizens from moral apathy after the invasion of Warsaw Pact armies which crushed the democratic developments in Czechoslovakia in August 1968, Jan Palach doused himself in petrol and set himself alight in Wenceslas Square on 16 January 1969. He died of his injuries three days later. The funeral of Palach turned into a major protest against the occupation. A month later, another student, Jan Zajíc, burned himself to death in the same place. The square where the Faculty of Arts is located is named after Jan Palach, and so is the Faculty of Arts central library.

Milada Paulová (1891–1970)  
Czech historian and Byzantologist, the first woman professor at Charles University
Milada Paulová studied history and geography at the Faculty of Arts. In 1918, she obtained a doctor’s degree in philosophy, as the first woman to receive the degree after Alice Masaryková. After finishing her studies, Paulová worked as an Academic Assistant at the Faculty of Arts and was the first woman ever at Charles University to assume this position. She visited Yugoslavia and gathered important materials concerning the political activities of Yugoslavian and Czechoslovak emigrants during WWI. In 1925, Paulová was the first woman in Czechoslovakia to receive the degree of Assistant Professor (docent) in the field of general history of Eastern Europe and the Balkans. In 1934, she was appointed Special Professor and became Regular Professor in 1945. She spent long periods doing research in Yugoslavia, France, and the United Kingdom. She wrote a number of books and articles concerning the history of Yugoslavia, the Czechoslovak-Yugoslavian relations, and Byzantium.

Karel Čapek (1890–1938)
Czech writer, journalist, playwright, translator, and photographer

Čapek studied aesthetics and French at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University (1909-1915), earning a Ph.D. in philosophy with a dissertation entitled “The Objective Method in Aesthetics in Relation to the Visual Arts”. He served as editor of a number of journals (Národní listy, Nebojsa, Lidové noviny), director and dramaturge at the Vinohrady Theatre, and the first head of the Czechoslovak PEN Club (1925-1933). His diverse oeuvre includes novels (The Absolute at Large; War with the Newts) and plays (R.U.R.; The Life of the Insects; The Makropulos Affair), short stories, travelogues, essays, and translations from European literatures. He died in December 1938, several months before the Gestapo could arrest him. Together with his brother, the painter and poet Josef Čapek, they invented the word “robot”.

Jaroslav Heyrovský (1890–1967)
Czech chemist and recipient of the Nobel Prize in chemistry in 1959

In 1909, Jaroslav Heyrovský enrolled at the Faculty of Arts to study chemistry, physics, and mathematics. In the following year, he left Prague to study at University College, London (1910-1913) where he took his BSc. degree in 1913. He completed his studies – interrupted by the First World War – in Prague, earning his Ph.D. degree at Charles University in 1918. In 1922, together with a Japanese colleague, Heyrovský invented the polarograph, an instrument for the automatic registration of measured quantities. In 1952, Heyrovský became a Professor and in 1950-63 served as the Director of the Institute of Polarography of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. His life motto was “Work, Finish, Publish”. He received the Nobel Prize in 1959.

Edvard Beneš (1884–1948)
Czech politician, Czechoslovak President (1945-1948)

Beneš started his studies at the Faculty of Arts in Prague. In 1909, after a study visit to France, he earned his Ph.D. in philosophy with a thesis entitled “The Origin and Growth of Modern Political Individualism”. Following his habilitation in 1912, Beneš became an associate professor at the Faculty of Arts. After the outbreak of WWI, he organized the home resistance movement. In 1915, he left the country to work abroad with T. G. Masaryk and Milan Rastislav Štefánik. On 28 October 1918, Edvard Beneš was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs of the newly independent Czechoslovak Republic. He served as the second Czechoslovak president in 1945-1948.

Alice Masaryková (1879–1966)
Czech politician and sociologist, founder and first President of the Czechoslovak Red Cross
Alice Masaryková was one of the first female students at the Faculty of Arts. After earning a degree in philosophy, sociology and history, she continued her studies in Berlin, Leipzig and Chicago. In 1918, she was elected member of the first Czechoslovak National Assembly. In 1919, she founded the Czechoslovak Red Cross, serving as its President for the following two decades. Alice Masaryková was also an active fighter for a better social status and education of women.

Bedřich Hrozný (1879–1952) was a Czech orientalist and linguist who deciphered the ancient Hittite language and identified it as an Indo-European language. Hrozný studied Akkadian, Aramaic and other languages, including the cuneiform, at the University of Vienna, where he later became Professor. In 1917, Hrozný published a description of the Hittite language, showing that it belonged to the Indo-European family. In 1925, Hrozný led a Czech archaeological team that discovered 1,000 cuneiform tablets in Turkey and excavated the ancient Hittite city of Kanesh. From 1919 to 1952, he was Professor of cuneiform and ancient oriental history at the Faculty of Arts. After WWII, he was appointed rector of the Charles University.

T. G. Masaryk (1850–1937) was a Czech politician, first Czechoslovak president, philosopher and sociologist. Masaryk received his PhD. at the University of Vienna in 1876, and completed his habilitation at the same university in 1879. In 1882, he was appointed Professor of Philosophy at the Faculty of Arts in Prague. With the fall of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918, he was elected President of the Czechoslovak Republic. Masaryk wrote several books, including The Czech Question (1895), The Problems of Small Nations in the European Crisis (1915), The New Europe (1917), and The World Revolution (1925). Masaryk’s life motto was “Do not fear and do not steal”.

Josef Jungmann (1773–1847) was a Czech philologist, lexicographer, writer and translator. After graduating from a Piarist grammar school, Josef Jungmann continued his studies at the Faculty of Arts in Prague (1792–1795). He started his professional career as a grammar school teacher. In 1840 he was appointed Rector of the Prague University. Throughout his life Jungmann sought to lay the theoretical foundations for a new direction of the Czech language. He is considered one of the leading personalities of the “second generation” of the Czech National Revival.

Bernard Bolzano (1781–1848) was a German-speaking Czech mathematician, logician, theologian, and Catholic priest.
Bolzano studied mathematics, philosophy and physics at Charles University. Later, he also took on theology, becoming a Catholic priest in 1804. In 1818, he was elected Dean of the Faculty of Arts. He held strong pacifist opinions and campaigned for a total reform of educational, social, and economic systems that would be conducive to peace. When he refused to recant his beliefs, he was dismissed from the university in 1819. Bolzano’s treatise *Paradoxien des Unendlichen* (The Paradoxes of the Infinite, published posthumously in 1851) was greatly admired by many eminent logicians, including Georg Cantor and Charles Sanders Peirce. His main opus is *Wissenschaftslehre* (Theory of Science, 1837) which deals with philosophy of science, logic, epistemology, and scientific pedagogy.

Jan Hus (c.1369/1370–1415) Czech medieval preacher, religious thinker and reformer

In 1393, Hus obtained his bachelor degree from the Faculty of Arts, and in 1396, he became Master of Liberal Arts. In 1401, he was elected Dean of the Faculty of Arts and later served as Rector of the Charles University. He is the author of the spelling reform that introduced diacritics into the Czech language. In his religious writings, he criticised the moral decline of the Catholic Church, and adopted some of the ideas of John Wycliffe. The Church declared Hus’s teachings heretical and the Council of Constance delivered him to the secular powers to be burnt at the stake in July 1415.

*Photo Source: National Museum, Wiki Commons; Photograph of Růžena Vacková: Courtesy of Mr Alexander Gjurič*