

Introduction to the Centennial English Edition

The original edition of this volume was published as an electronic EVY format file on the Internet in 1998. As professor Charles Sabatos noted twenty years later, "...despite the translator's active attempt to replace Parrott as the authoritative translation, this version reached only a limited readership." It is still true in 2024, a quarter of a century since it was published.

In the Introduction to the first edition of Book One of the "Chicago version", Mike Joyce wrote for both of us: "This new translation and rendition of *The Good Soldier Švejk* is our attempt to make this Central European masterwork accessible to the modern reader of English." He's more literary and well-read than I, and argued well for that approach. That's why I slightly compromised my personal goal of presenting the most faithful translation of the work. Yet, even so, our translation was much closer to the original than the reigning "authoritative translation". I argued that case in the online magazine *Jacket 40* — Late 2010.

The long-brewing idea of producing the Centennial Edition of the "Chicago version" of English translation of *Švejk* was to start being realized in early 2020. Just then came *The Ultimate Unravelling*...

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As the unravelling has been exposing previously hidden or unperceived realities throughout the institutions of the society and personal lives alike, it has produced a positive value. Even its personally agonizing effect of delaying the Centennial Edition project now appears to have been a catalyst for a major, positive breakthrough. It is my hope, that the resulting crystallization and

sharpening of the ideas driving this project, have produced a public good.

“Over the past few decades Americans have been subjected to some of the same social, political, economic, and moral phenomena that Europeans have endured for ages and which are the backdrop to this iconoclastic and soul probing epic. Now more than ever before, Americans will be able to relate to the story and its main character. And they will enjoy doing it.”

That statement appeared on the website devoted to the “Chicago version” in 2012, and migrated from the bottom of the landing page to become the website’s virtual masthead in 2018. Since then, the quintessentially un-American experiences, that my fellow Americans have been living through, have only increased in scope and intensity, reaching unprecedented and destructive levels since the beginning of *The Ultimate Unravelling*. That is why I still believe, with yet greater conviction, that even “Americans will be able to relate to the story and its main character.” Whether they will enjoy it or not, is to be found by each reader alone.

The much diverse Czechoslovak First Republic, a patch carved out of the multiethnic, multilingual — and in this respect modern — cloth of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, full of long-standing grievances and tensions in 1918, was only four years and two months old when war veteran Jaroslav Hašek passed away, 116 days short of celebrating his 40th birthday.

The environment into which Jaroslav Hašek was born, in which he lived and created as well, was engendered by the effects of the industrial revolution and is the background of the novel set in the times of World War I in Austria-Hungary.

The rise of a large working class at the end of the 19th

and beginning of the 20th century spawned a cultural revolution. The Austro-Hungarian Empire ignored the accompanying changes and became more and more decrepit and anachronistic. As the system decayed, it became absurd and irrelevant to ordinary people. When forced to respond to dissent, the imperial powers did so, more often than not, with hollow propaganda and repression.

"In a world where the greedy and ambitious slam the public from crisis to crisis," wrote on Christmas Eve of 2000 Bob Hicks in the Portland Oregonian, "gratuitously wrecking daily life as they destroy states and pull down civilizations, Švejk represents the underground — a passive-aggressive resister who beats the rules of the game by applying his own crazy logic to them. ... Unlike K., fellow Czech Franz Kafka's stunted stand-in for modern intellectual man, the rascal Švejk belongs to the men and women of the workaday world — the bartenders, cleaning women, gamekeepers, petty larcenists, lathe operators, janitors, drunkards, office workers, shopkeepers, undertakers, adulterers, nightclub bouncers, butchers, farmers, cab drivers and others who populate Hašek's imagination as they stumble through the lunacies of the first World War."

All those people, and many like them, still populate our world today. They've been labeled "deplorables" and have proudly taken that insult as their *nom de guerre*.^{*} The increasing number and burden of absurdities they deal with is putting them in a position to relate to and viscerally understand Švejk, i.e. the book, the character, and the method. Untold hundreds of thousands [as originally stated in 2001] and perhaps even millions

* Assumed name, under which a person engages in combat or some other activity or enterprise.

[certainly millions now, in 2024] of Americans experience and operate in "švejkárna". This is a younger derivation of the original term "švejking". "Švejking" is the method for surviving "švejkárna", which is a situation or institution of systemic absurdity requiring the employment of "švejking" for one to survive and remain untouched by it.

In Book One, Jaroslav Hašek paints a picture of a society transitioning from the "normal" state on the way to the catastrophe. He does it by weaving stories and fragments of stories of familiar archetypes of people and their institutions without any apparent rhyme or reason. The book has been hailed as an antiwar book, perhaps even only the second one of the genre after Red Badge of Courage. It's no accident. Hašek started writing it when the war was much on everybody's mind, a little over two years after the end of the WWI. He poured his soul into The Good Soldier Švejk between 1921 and 1922. He breathed his last on January 3rd 1923, fifteen years and nine months before the infamous Munich Agreement.† The official start of WWII, the German invasion of Poland, happened the same month a year after Messrs. Chamberlain, Daladier, Hitler, and Mussolini decided the fate of "people of whom we know little". When Jaroslav Hašek had his hero Švejk report in 1914 that he had read in the newspaper "the dear motherland has been surrounded by a bunting of very dark clouds", could he have envisaged that those clouds would be back so quickly, in 1938, and then again in 1948, and once more in 1968?

† Settlement reached on September 30, 1938 by Germany, Great Britain, France, and Italy that permitted German annexation of the Sudetenland, in western Czechoslovakia – hence the Czech saying "about us, without us", the equivalent of the American "not in the room, not in the deal"

But the book is much more than an antiwar novel:

“The Good Soldier Švejk, in fact, is a truly great satire (perhaps the greatest of them all) on the most central feature of social life in the past century and a half (at least) in most modern industrialized countries—the ubiquitous presence of huge, labyrinthine bureaucratic structures ostensibly set in place to make modern society more efficient, equal, and fair, but, in fact, reducing life for those who have to deal with them to what often amounts to an incomprehensible and out-of-control game whose major players never tire of announcing in noble-sounding prose and stirring poetry the importance of the structure and its alleged purpose but who, in their daily practice, show no signs of any significant humanity in dealing with subordinates or those whom the bureaucracy is supposed to serve. That target is something we all understand (because we have to deal with it, no matter where we live), and thus the impact of this satire extends well beyond the particular social and political realities of the world it depicts.” - Ian Johnston

Jaroslav Hašek drew on his unusual life experiences, powers of observation, and extraordinary memory to expose and ridicule not only war, but anything that wasn't genuine, righteous, natural, or kind. Now it's time for you to take the plunge and enter the world of Švejk.

What Hašek did in his monumental text has been talked and written about, and studied for full one hundred years. To read some of the material to clue yourself into the world of Švejk and Hašek, you can start at <https://www.svejkcentral.com/Analyses>.