



Engaging Youth in Czech Culture
The Power of Volunteerism
By
Carol H. Hochman

Since the beginning of the 19th century, youth organizations have been viewed as a source for bringing social change in countries around the world. Young people caught in the middle of social and political turmoil have often played an essential part in the institutional change happening in their governments. The actions of young people in former Czechoslovakia is an example of this dramatic change. As regimes shifted during the first half of the 20th century, so did the participation of adolescents and children in formal youth organizations. The nature of this participation was often based on the evolving meaning of volunteerism. One definition of volunteerism includes the belief that it is unpaid work for people beyond family and close friends, carried out for the benefit of the surrounding environment. The work is considered to be unpaid, and charitable in nature, even in cases where expenses or a symbolic reward is given.

The origins of a belief in charitable deeds in the Kingdom of Bohemia, (known today as the Czech Republic) began in the 9th century with the arrival of two Christian missionaries, Cyril and Methodius. As Christianity spread throughout the region, so did the concept of helping those outside the immediate circle of family and friends. Under the rule of the Habsburg Monarchy, established in 1526, the Roman Catholic Church became the most important religion in the region. During the period of urbanization that took place in Europe during the 19th century, and influenced by the teachings of the Catholic Church, the people of the multi-ethnic kingdoms within the monarchy formed Christian-based charitable organizations in response to the living conditions of people who migrated from the countryside to towns and villages. Volunteers responded to the needs of the migrants for orphanages, institutions for women and educational facilities. Over time, as the influence of the church declined, Czech communities separately came together to form charitable societies or “associations” that provided support to the poor and needy with a focus on educational,

cultural and outdoor activities. These charitable organizations became so popular that it became an honor to be a member.

During the long rule of the Habsburg Monarchy, there were periods when more liberal programs were permitted. One such period existed in 1848 when the monarchy granted citizens of Bohemia the legal right to form voluntary civic associations to address society's needs and to support the arts, education, and sciences. The monarchy however soon recognized that this decision could weaken them politically and quickly reversed their decision. Nevertheless, the people of the Czech lands persisted and, in 1867, regained the right to form civic associations. By 1870, there were more than 3,000 associations and more than 10,000 by 1890.

Building a New Czech Community

In 1918, with the founding of Czechoslovakia, President Tomas Garrigue Masaryk emphasized the political and social significance of volunteerism. In 1921, he supported establishment of a branch of the YMCA, which is now the world's oldest youth organization. Under Masaryk's leadership, civic associations thrived, including the popular Sokol movement, an all-age gymnastics organization. Formed in 1887 under the auspices of the Habsburg monarchy, by 1930, Sokol clubs had 630,000 members and played an important role in the development of Czech nationalism and patriotism. In spite of the Nazi interventions, in 1948, there were over 6,000 associations, clubs, and societies in Czechoslovakia that were an integral and active aspect of citizens' social life.

After the war, the communist government continued intervention in the affairs of the people of Czechoslovakia. In 1951, the regime passed a law that dramatically limited the freedoms of the people to form associations, including the YMCA, and by the 1960s, there were only a few hundred of these societies in existence. Religious organizations experienced the most significant restrictions. The properties of voluntary organizations were confiscated and organizations either ceased to exist and were forced to incorporate into the mission of the communist National Front to build a socialist society. Cultural associations supporting Czechoslovak-Soviet friendships were permitted, but any association that could threaten the control of the communist government was quickly eliminated. Many people were forced to take part in so called "voluntary projects" but in time grew to resent this form of forced "voluntary" activity.

One of the strongest youth associations that captured the interest of the young people of Czechoslovakia was the scout and guide movement. Founded in 1909, by Robert Baden-Powell, a British citizen, scouting became a worldwide youth movement based on volunteerism and became known internationally as the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. The outdoor camping and hiking activities of this scouting program were already popular with the youth of the Austro-Hungarian

Empire. Dr. Antonin Svojsik (1876-1938) an educator born in Prague, recognized this interest and in 1911, published a handbook, *Základy junáctví* ("The Foundations of Scouting) to organize the first scouting program in his homeland. In 1914, a month before the start of World War I, Dr. Svojsik successfully established an independent association for boys called *Junák-Český skaut* and a separate organized girls' association a year later.

By 1936, this Czecho-Slovak Boy and Girl Scouts Association had grown to 70,000 members strong, becoming the third highest membership of any Scout Association in Europe and the seventh highest in the world. As the popularity of the organization grew, Dr. Svojsik, started planning the next worldwide Scouting Jamboree in Czechoslovakia, but everything changed with the start of WWII.

The Rebellion of Being Good

During the German occupation of Bohemia and Moravia in WWII, civic associations were banned, including Sokol clubs. The Nazis also forbid the use of the name "skaut." Only the Czechoslovak name "*Junák*" was permitted. The scouting camps in the beautiful wooded hills and valleys of the Sudetenland, which were so ideal for scouting activities, were taken over by the Nazi Youth Organization whose members were in training to join Hitler's army. Many Czechoslovak scouts chose to show their loyalty to their Scouting ideals by joining the resistance movement, fighting against the Germans at home and abroad. More than 700 Czechoslovak Scouts died in this endeavor. Scout leaders also faced arrest by the German Secret State Police, who raided the camps and imprisoned the leaders in concentration camps where many of them died. During the six years of German occupation, the Czechoslovak *Junák* scouting association suffered dramatic losses. This would be the first of three times that Czech scouting would be forbidden. First, under the Nazis and then twice by the communist regime.

Before the communist regime came into power in 1948, *Junák* was re-established for a few years. In a short amount of time membership grew to over 100,000, a remarkably large youth organization for such a small country. At the time, the *Junák* youth movement became the second largest association in the world. When the communists came into power, all independent youth organizations founded before WW II, including *Junák* and *Sokol*, were declared illegal. Youth organizations that had nurtured the best qualities and civic virtues of their respective members, including generosity, work for the community and volunteerism, were seen by the communist regime as dangerous and therefore banned. The Communist Youth Movement was instituted in place of the Czechoslovak program of scouting. Membership in the already well organized *Pioneer Organization of the Socialist Youth Union* was introduced and, although the Czechoslovak Pioneer (*Pionýr*) organization stated membership was voluntary, every child was

expected to join starting at the age of six. Children were required to wear the Pioneer uniform, a light blue shirt and an easily recognized red neckerchief

Pioneer activities were similar to those of the Scout and Sokol gymnastic movements but, in the beginning, activities included events such as national competitions that promoted the socialist state. Festivals were held inviting children to participate by reciting poems that reflected the Pioneer mission. The winning pioneer received a prize and media attention along with a positive reference for a future career. Summer camps were especially popular, where children from other Eastern Bloc countries were introduced to each other. Children participated in these activities, often unaware of the political implications attached to their participation. In some cases, children were involved in the most controversial activity, being encouraged to denounce their parents for lack of loyalty to the Communist Party.

As the 1960s approached, young people aged fifteen to twenty-five, who had participated in the Young Pioneers program, were expected to become members of the Czechoslovak Youth Union, another organization devoted to grooming youth for possible membership in the Communist Party. Upon joining the organization, members were required to wear white shirts with a red neckerchief, and expected to salute their leadership. The idea of a salute to leadership proved unpopular among Czechs and Slovaks and as membership in Young Pioneers became voluntary in the late 1960s, the number of participants began to drop. However, members of the Czechoslovak Youth Union, with their futures in mind, continued their efforts to promote socialist patriotism.

The Czechoslovak Youth Union developed a program that included activities that provided voluntary help for the manufacturing industry. Ideologically work needed to appear voluntary; however, the nature of the work was physical and manual in nature. Organized work brigades of young people were frequently seen cleaning debris and repair of damaged buildings or working on cooperative farms where workers were needed, especially during harvest time. Youth also participated in public activities which were meant to benefit society as a whole, such as creating poster walls praising socialist life and the Soviet Union. It was expected that all efforts would be rewarded with opportunities for free education and guaranteed employment, as well as participation in a variety of social, cultural and sports activities. However, under communist ideology, the long-standing tradition of volunteerism continued to experience change. Adults and young people were led to believe they should be involved in community improvement and that they were obligated to do something for society.

The 50 years of both German and then Russian intervention in the affairs of the Czechoslovak people had dramatically transformed society as well as the values of the youth movement that

Antonin Svojsik had originally established in 1911. Participation in politically oriented organizations was viewed as an expression of loyalty to the state. Non-participation in the state-run youth organizations was considered resistance and would likely mean exclusion from career advancement in later life. In 1949, trials were once again held against *Junák* leaders who were sentenced to years of imprisonment in communist concentration camps. The Czechoslovak scouting program, *Junák*, like other associations, had been forced to go underground as Czechoslovak society adjusted to a new way of life.

During the late 1960s, the communist system of state power that controlled private and public life gradually became less centralized and there was a renewed interest by citizens in public affairs. Civic associations to address the problems of society re-emerged and became active. Youth organizations such as Scouts and Sokol were also activated along with other civic associations and organized locally to address the problems of society. A period of reform in Czechoslovakia, known as The Prague Spring, was quietly taking place.

The Transition of Czechoslovakia from a Socialist Society to Civil Society

During the communist regime, Czechoslovak socialist society promoted itself as a modern and seemingly progressive country in which the negative elements of capitalism had been abolished. The interests of the state and interests of ordinary people were perceived as the same. However, Socialist oppression was temporarily interrupted by a reform movement known as The Prague Spring. From early January 1968 until August 21, 1968, a period of political liberalization and decentralization of government authority in Czechoslovakia took place. Before a period of so called "normalization" could be established by the communist government, Czechs and Slovaks took advantage of the loosening of restrictions on society and began forming civic associations. Citizens were focused on creating associations that supported the revitalization of the arts, education, science and economic culture. By the end of the Prague Spring all such activities were banned again by the regime. But the concept of voluntary social organizations had returned with increased citizen support. Large state-funded organizations like the Czechoslovak Youth Union, were able to decentralize operations by splitting into several independent associations: the Union of High School Students and Apprentices, the Union of Working Youth and a very active Union of University Students.

However, by the early 1970s, most associations had been infiltrated by communist supporters and operations were centralized in the establishment of the Czechoslovak Socialist Union of Youth, reaching a membership of over 1.5 million by the 1980s. But the principles of socialist patriotism within the youth movement had been shaken during this period of political liberalization. The Prague Spring had also inspired music and literary works and people like

Vaclav Havel, Milan Kundera, the Plastic People of the Universe, and Charter 77, began making their contributions in the underground culture of Czechoslovak society. The transition to democracy and civil society had begun.

The Revolution of 1989

The Revolution of 1989 changed everything. The communist regime was pushed out and Czechoslovaks looked to form a free society. In 1989, Vaclav Havel was elected as President of Czechoslovakia, and again as the first President of the Czech Republic from 1993 to 2003. International support also came from intellectual visionaries like George Soros, an investor and philanthropist who created the Open Society Foundation which he established along with the Central European University (CEU). In 1991 at the invitation of President Vaclav Havel, Soros established a campus of the Central European University in Prague. CEU, a graduate-only institution, focused on programs in social science, law, and the humanities that would facilitate the transition from dictatorship to democracy. Because of political and financial conflicts between Soros and the Czech government, in 1993 the operations of the Prague CEU campus were moved to Budapest.

Another visionary in support of a free and democratic society was William H. Luers, U.S. Ambassador to Czechoslovakia from 1983 – 1986, and his wife, Wendy. Ambassador Luers and his wife established a close and lasting relationship with Vaclav Havel and his supporters, many of whom were members of the dissident group known as Charter 77. Four years later, after the 1989 revolution, the Luers would join other Americans in the United States who were organizing projects to empower and support the Czechoslovaks in rebuilding their democratic government and social and civic system.

In January of 1990, the Ford Foundation called a meeting of 50 people from all across the U.S. who were interested in the current affairs of Czechoslovakia. The group included Bill and Wendy Luers and George Soros. It was determined that a point of contact was needed to establish a 501 (c)(3) non-governmental organization to support the Czechoslovak dissidents that had organized under the leadership of Vaclav Havel as Charter 77. George Soros provided the financial aide to establish nonprofit offices in New York and Prague, selecting Wendy Luers as the point of contact for managing programs. When Czechoslovakia split into two independent states on January 1, 1993, a nonprofit office was immediately created in Bratislava. Both offices operated under the umbrella organization, The Foundation for a Civil Society (FCS) in New York City with Wendy Luers serving as founder and President.

The Foundation for a Civil Society mobilized both human and financial resources to strengthen civil society, the rule of law and free-markets in Czechoslovakia. Under Wendy's leadership, and with the support of the Open Society Foundation, several programs were organized in the early 1990s to support the democratization process. The Masaryk Fellowship Program, one of the first programs organized by the Foundation for a Civil Society, sent 450 American college students who, over five years, taught English in the Czech Republic and Slovakia. By 1994, over 3,200 Czech and Slovak students had benefited from the program and new friendships between Czechs, Slovaks, and Americans had been formed. Also in 1990, independent offices were established in Prague and Bratislava to function as affiliates of The Foundation for A Civil Society, both offering services as nonprofit organizations (NGOs) within their respective countries. In 1997, the Via Foundation was established as an official Czech nonprofit based in Prague and the Pontis Foundation officially based in Bratislava. Today, both foundations are self-sustaining NGOs building on the work initiated by the Foundation for a Civil Society. Both continue their work in strengthening civil society and development within the philanthropic sector of society. Via and Pontis have created successful community development programs, based on the voluntary support of citizens and young people who are providing the services recognized as part of a growing civil society.

Changing Attitudes

While attitudes about volunteering were slow to change among the adult Czechoslovak population, researchers noted there was a trend toward more active participation on the part of young people. Adults were more likely to believe that volunteers were not needed if the state fulfilled its obligations with regard to social services. However, young people viewed volunteering as a new phenomenon and were motivated to get involved based on the democratic values of free choice and individual interest. Once again, youth serving as volunteers were becoming the catalyst for creating a change in society that would strengthen civil society.

Psychologists conducting research in the noticeable interest of youth in volunteering, speculated that this might prove to be a brief period of just two years, typically appearing as an episodic part of early adolescence, and then subside. However, the interest of young people was stronger than anticipated and was making a difference in public attitudes about voluntary public service. Public attitudes toward nonprofit organizations, or NGOs, also began to change during the early 1990s as specific nonprofit organizations became a visible part of Czech society. "Zivot 90" (Life 90) started providing services for senior citizens, along with other related nonprofits establishing retirement homes for the elderly. Olga Havel, former First Lady of the Czech Republic, became a pioneer of charity work and in the 1990s, established her own foundation. The Olga Havel Foundation (OHF) helps people with disabilities and those abandoned or discriminated against,

by facilitating their integration back into society. The humanitarian aid organization, “People in Need” provides support for people affected by war and natural disasters worldwide along with its work to reduce poverty and social exclusion in the Czech Republic. Since its establishment in 1992, People in Need has had a presence in nearly fifty countries and is one of the largest NGOs in Central and Eastern Europe.

The mission of the Via Foundation during its 23 years of operations has remained focused on increasing voluntary citizen engagement in community affairs and to encourage philanthropy in the Czech Republic. To accomplish this goal, Via has provided small grants and technical expertise to over 1,650 local associations and community projects in more than 260 cities, towns and villages throughout the country. Volunteerism is an essential part of the success of each funded project, as is working collaboratively for the good of the community

Via has also organized successful fund raising campaigns in both the Czech Republic and the United States thereby making its program operations self-sustaining. Since its founding 22 years ago, Via received sufficient funds needed to support more than 5,000 projects in one-fifth of all the towns and villages in the Czech Republic. In 2019 alone, Via awarded \$785,000 in grants to communities throughout the country – the highest total in a single year. Via continues to celebrate the spirit of philanthropic giving of both time and monetary support to Czech citizens everywhere.

Via’s Young Philanthropists program for ages 6 to 26, is an example of youth philanthropy at its best. The effort of the young people involved in this program demonstrate the definition of philanthropy as “voluntary action for the public good.” In the six years since the Young Philanthropist program began, more than 1,000 young people all over the Czech Republic have been introduced to the ideas of philanthropy and “giving back.” Working as volunteers, young people experience helping someone in need, feel pride in their shared achievements and learn that they can make a difference. Via Foundation team leaders help these young volunteers to develop leadership and communication skills, as well as fundraising and event organizing.

In 2019, more than 270 young people, divided into 15 philanthropic groups, held 55 charity events whose proceeds supported disabled classmates, senior citizens, mothers in crisis, as well as endangered elephants and turtles. These events raised \$23,627, and with additional support from the Via Foundation, reached a total of \$39,860. Charity events that took place in 10 different regions of the Czech Republic and included concerts, dance performances, craft markets and family game afternoons. Online fundraising events extended donation opportunities to people who were not able to take part personally in these events. Over the past seven years,

Young Philanthropists have raised \$220,000. Even more importantly, 85% of the young participants continue holding charity events even after their projects with Via have finished.

The Duke of Edinburgh's International Award program is another example of an NGO engaging youth in volunteerism. A prestigious educational youth program that operates in over 140 countries around the world, was founded in the United Kingdom in 1956 by Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh. The Prague-based office has been in operation since 1995 engaging young people ages 14 – 24 years of age. It was designed to attract boys and girls not interested in joining organized youth movements like Scouting and not interested in wearing a uniform. Individuals compete against themselves to achieve competency in three areas: skill development, physical movement, and volunteering. Each year the Czech Senate holds a ceremony to recognize the achievements of young Czechs in this program by awarding a personal certificate known in the Czech Republic as the "Edie."

The "I Am Kind" program sponsored by the Karel Janeček Foundation in the Czech Republic organizes online programming for participation in World Kindness Day held each year on November 13th. Children throughout the Czech Republic, ages 3 – 18, register and perform their good deeds which are published on the foundation's website. In 2019, 628 teams from 267 cities across the Czech Republic took part in this event. A total of 17,381 children performed good deeds in just one day.

Young people around the world are coming together to create a youth movement and a youth agenda that includes giving a voice to the voiceless and stressing the importance of social inclusion. The Eighth Annual Youth Forum sponsored by the United Nations in April of 2019, focused on the theme "Empowered, Included and Equal" recognizing young people as agents of change who can be guided in helping build a better, more inclusive world. According to U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, young people can be a lightning rod for change.

The New Dawn of Volunteerism in Europe

Four years after the Revolution of 1989, after decades of absence from the political process of the Western world, the Czech Republic joined the United Nations in 1993. Soon after the United Nations called for action to address social, economic, and humanitarian issues worldwide using the best practices of voluntary service, and established the year 2001 as the International Year of Volunteers. The idea of volunteerism became a way of creating a dialogue between citizens and the institutions of the European Union. In 2011, the EU organized the European Year of Volunteering to draw attention to the importance of community building and citizen involvement.

Each member country of the EU was asked to designate a government agency to participate in developing guidelines for the EU Youth Policy program. Such organizations already existed in the Czech Republic: The Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (*MŠMT*), became an active member of the EU Youth Policy program. During 2011, it welcomed the ten-day EU tour of young people to Prague to share their stories of volunteerism in their respective countries and engaged with policy-makers to discuss issues for the future of volunteerism.

The [Czech Council of Children and Youth](#), (CRDM), founded in 1998 in cooperation with *Junák*, became an umbrella organization of programs for children and youth in support of EU Youth Policies and today oversees the programming of nearly 100 active Czech nonprofits focused on youth development. Since becoming a member of the European Union in 2004, the Czech Republic, has also become an active participant of EU Youth Policy and the development of a National Youth Strategy which lists as one of its goals the promotion of young people's potential as participants in societal development. A priority in achieving this goal includes "support for youth volunteering, which stimulates active and responsible citizenship and contributes to social cohesion by creating bonds of trust and solidarity." The EU also reports that volunteering of young people has quite a long tradition in the Czech Republic. One estimate suggests that perhaps half of all voluntary activities in the country have been and continue to be carried out by young people and youth organizations.

Interrupted by the Nazi occupation of WW II and the communist period of state-enforced volunteerism, the people of the Czech Republic have never lost sight of the value of true volunteerism as part of a democratic civil society. A continuing example of this belief is the fact that membership in Junak-Czech Scouting, first organized by Dr. Antonin Svojsik in 1911, has been steadily growing and is anticipated to reach 100,000 members during this decade. Known today as the *Czech Scouts and Guides* program, it's planning to bring scouts from around the world to the Czech Republic for the 27th World Scout Jamboree to be held in 2031, fulfilling the [dream](#) of Dr. Svojsik who, before the start of WWII, was interrupted in making the same World Scout Jamboree plans.

Engaging Youth in Czech Culture and Philanthropy: Cross-Cultural Ties

Another youth movement that has been organizing and growing in the last decade worldwide are schools for teaching the Czech language to young children. With the support of the Ministry of Education and the Office of Expatriate Affairs of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Czech language schools for children have been established all over the world, including over two dozen in major cities in the United States and Canada. Operating as the [Czech Language Schools in North America](#), young people of all ages are taught to read, write and speak the Czech language. Schools also

teach the history, traditions, cuisines, and customs of the homeland, reaching out to the nearby compatriot communities for their voluntary support. Schools bring together local Czech communities to celebrate traditional customs and holidays. The annual conference of Czech Schools in Northern America includes representatives from the Czech government, Czech educators along with language school directors and parent volunteers who give their time and support to organizing and maintaining their respective language learning programs.

Cesky a Slovensky Svet, the Pittsburgh Czech and Slovak Language School, founded in 2015 as a Saturday morning school for preschoolers and teens, recently added a new project to an already busy schedule. Inspired by the Young Philanthropists in the Czech Republic, the students of *Cesky a Slovensky Svet* have organized voluntary projects to benefit the local community. Working as a team of children and adults, they have prepared and delivered over 260 sandwiches to a local homeless shelter and participated in a spring clean up project along a city riverfront hiking and biking trail. Recognizing the value of the philanthropic giving of time and service, the students of *Cesky a Slovensky Svet* are dedicated to participating in projects that benefit their local Pittsburgh community. They are another example of Czech youth preparing for a future that recognizes the value of giving time and effort to voluntary actions.

The Evolving Meaning of Volunteerism

Volunteerism has traditionally been defined as an act of donating time, labor, money, or items to a person or charity without expectation of compensation. As participants reflect on their own feelings, reactions and motives for volunteering, researchers have noted that a new understanding of the meaning and social value of volunteerism could be emerging.

With regard to the long history of volunteering among young Czech people, researchers believe that a new meaning of volunteerism is taking place at the individual level. The communist government viewed young people as a broad category of “youth” and made youth volunteerism a part of a government social contract. During this period of time, young people felt obliged to participate as volunteers in order to receive the privileges and benefits within a socialist society. The present-day concept of volunteering, based on the values of civil society is in direct opposition to that of socialist society. The NGO sector of civil society bases its belief in volunteerism on the moral actions of individuals and their personal choice as compassionate members of society. Further study is needed to find how the meaning of volunteerism may be changing based on volunteers’ self-examination of their feelings, reactions, and motives since the end of the socialist era of “involuntary volunteering” and the changes that have occurred in society.

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