

Norbert Chapek

Adapted from a sermon by Joan Van Becelaere

Norbert Chapek [Chah' pek] was a remarkable man—a minister, a missionary, a writer, a composer of hymns. He was also a heretic (who knows what that means?), a rebel, and lived a politically dangerous life.

Norbert Chapek was born on June 3, 1870 in Bohemia, which was at that time a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. His family was too poor to give him an education so they sent Norbert to live with his Uncle Victor, who was a successful tailor in Vienna. Norbert was expected to work his way through the university as an apprentice.

Like everyone else, Chapek was raised as a Roman Catholic, the state-supported religion. But, at the age of 18, he rebelled and became a Baptist. His uncle promptly booted him out of the house. The Baptists took the young man in and put him through seminary. Chapek served Baptist congregations in Saxony and Moravia and was very successful in his ministry.

Chapek first became interested in Unitarianism in 1910. He wrote to the American Unitarian Association and asked them to support his efforts to promote liberal religion in Eastern Europe. But at that time the Unitarian Association didn't see much value in international ties and wouldn't listen to his petition. They turned him away cold.

Chapek was a writer and in his writings he supported independence for Czechoslovakia from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which the government did not like. Even his religious writings were considered subversive (plotting against the government) and the police raided his home more than once. Chapek was warned that he was in danger of immediate arrest by Austrian authorities as an enemy of the state.

In 1914, at the beginning of World War I, Chapek moved to the United States, where, for the next three years he was pastor of the First Slovak Baptist Church in Newark, New Jersey. Throughout World War I and his time in the United States, Chapek was an active force in the movement for Czechoslovak independence.

At the end of World War I, the Austro-Hungarian Empire fell apart and Czechoslovakia became independent. Chapek and his wife Maja, like other war refugees, were eager to return to their home country and play a part in the new country. Chapek again asked for help from the American Unitarian Association to build a Unitarian fellowship in Czechoslovakia and this time they gave it to him. He bid farewell to his refuge in the United States and he and Maja set out for Europe.

By February 1922, the Chapeks, working as a team, had organized the Prague Congregation of Liberal Religious Fellowship. Almost immediately, the services were drawing standing-room-only crowds. The Sunday sermon, the highlight of the service, was repeated and debated in a popular Tuesday evening program. With financial help from the AUA and the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, they bought and renovated a medieval palace to hold the growing congregation and its offices. In 1926, Maja was also ordained as a Unitarian minister.

On June 24, 1923, the first Flower Festival was celebrated. This ritual, which is now celebrated annually by UU congregations the world over, started in the Prague

Congregation. The Chapeks developed the flower festival to add an interactive ritual to the services which, by the choice of the members, were simple and had no ritual: there was no singing, no prayers, no collection plate—members actually paid as they entered each Sunday. The congregation found a lot of meaning in the flower festival service and it became a tradition for them.

(If your church doesn't have a flower festival, here is a brief description: Each member of the congregation is asked to bring a single blossoming flower to the service. At the start of the service, the flowers are placed in a large vase in the middle of the hall. The flowers are said to symbolize the members, each unique and free, joining together in fellowship and accepting each other regardless of their differences. At the end of the service, each member takes one flower home.)

In 1939 Maja Chapek left for the United States for what was supposed to be a brief lecture tour. She brought the Flower Festival Service with her and it was celebrated for the first time in the United States at the First Unitarian Church in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Tragically, the Nazis took over Czechoslovakia while Maja was still on tour, which prevented her from returning to Prague. She stayed in Massachusetts during the war, working at the church in New Bedford.

As soon as the Nazi army took control, Chapek became a marked man. He was interrogated by the Gestapo, whose spies listened to every word he preached. For a time he hid his message of freedom in Biblical stories and religious symbolism, and for a while it worked.

Then, on March 28, 1941, Chapek and his youngest daughter Zora were arrested by the Gestapo. They were convicted of listening to foreign radio broadcasts, a treasonous offence. Remarkably, Chapek was only sentenced to a year in prison and his daughter to 18 months. But a Gestapo officer overrode the court's sentence and ordered that Norbert Chapek be sent to the concentration camp at Dachau. Chapek's papers were marked "return unwanted." While at Dachau, it is said that he kept up the spirits of the other prisoners with his humor and cheerful spirit. But on October 12, 1942 he was sent on an "invalid transport," and evidently killed that day either with poison gas or a lethal injection.

Maja Chapek did not learn of Norbert's death until after the war. Leadership of the Prague church passed to the Chapeks' daughter and son-in-law, both ordained Unitarian ministers. Maja decided to work to help the victims of the war and joined the staff of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Agency. She died in 1966.

Here is a prayer that Norbert Chapek wrote just before his death:

"It is worthwhile to live and fight courageously for sacred ideals. Oh, blow, you evil winds, into my body's fire. My soul, you'll never unravel. Even though disappointed a thousand times or fallen in the fight, and everything worthless seem, I have lived amidst eternity. Be grateful, my soul. My life was worth living. The one who was pressed from all sides but remained victorious in spirit is welcomed into the choir of heroes."