

## Media Briefing and Background Information

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## The Prize on Milan Hodža for 2019 awarded in the name of the Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic

### Description

The annual Prize of Milan Hodža recognizes major contributions to thinking and advancement of Slovak culture that are aligned with the principles of Milan Hodža, former prime minister and co-founder of Czechoslovakia. Recipients since 2005 have included academics, institutions and individuals whose work makes the culture, history and values of Slovakia more visible on the international scene.

### 2019 Award Recipients

CZECH AND SLOVAK CULTURAL CENTER OF MINNESOTA  
CZECHOSLOVAK GENEALOGICAL SOCIETY INTERNATIONAL  
CZECH AND SLOVAK SOKOL MINNESOTA  
RUSIN ASSOCIATION OF MINNESOTA  
MARIT LEE KUCERA, HONORARY CONSUL, CZECH REPUBLIC, MINNESOTA  
DONALD PAFKO *IN MEMORIAM*, MINNESOTA HONORARY CONSUL, SLOVAK REPUBLIC

**Date of Certificate Awards:** August 25, 2019 at CSPS Hall, St. Paul at 11am

### Website links of recipient groups

Czech and Slovak Cultural Center of Minnesota [www.cs-center.org](http://www.cs-center.org)  
Czechoslovak Genealogical Society International [www.cgsi.org](http://www.cgsi.org)  
Czech and Slovak Sokol Minnesota [www.sokolmn.org](http://www.sokolmn.org)  
Rusin Association of Minnesota [www.rusinmn.org](http://www.rusinmn.org)

*Q and A by John Palka of Maple Grove, Minnesota, maternal grandson of Milan Hodža*

### WHAT HAVE THE RECIPIENTS DONE TO EARN AWARDS?

The 2019 Prize of Milan Hodža specifically honors two aspects of the work being done by multiple Minnesota-based organizations and individuals: its highly collaborative nature, and the degree to which Slovakia, Slovaks, and Rusyns are actively included and made visible in a setting whose culture is predominantly Czech. In both respects, the awards committee felt that what is happening in Minnesota can serve as a model of what is possible elsewhere in the U.S. Among the award recipients' multi-year accomplishments have been the creation of a Czech and Slovak Century website and historical timeline, sponsorship of presentations on leading figures in Slovak and Rusyn history, architecture, national identity and culture, and celebratory events such as classical concerts, ethnic dance and folk dress exhibitions, films, as well as genealogical research that has helped reconnect extended families. 2018 marked the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Slovak Republic as a democratic sovereign nation, and the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of

Czechoslovakia. This year also marks the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Slovakia's membership in NATO and the European Union.

## WHO AWARDS THE PRIZE?

Nominations for the Prize of Milan Hodža are collected by the committee that orchestrates the annual Days of Milan Hodža. Typically, these nominations are made by members of the committee or by members of the Hodža family who are not members of the committee.

Once the committee votes, the certificate goes to the prime minister for his or her signature. This is because the annual multi-day honoring of Milan Hodža arose in 2005 on the initiative of the then prime minister, Mikuláš Dzurinda, and has continued to be under the auspices of the prime minister ever since. It has survived a number of changes of government: Dzurinda, Fico, Radičová, Fico, and now Pellegrini. The celebrations have regularly been attended by high-ranking government officials, including the prime minister, the deputy prime minister, the minister of education, and the like.

Altogether, then, the selection of awardees is made by a non-governmental committee, but the prize is awarded in the name of the prime minister and every certificate is signed by the prime minister, as well as by the chair of the committee. From the beginning in 2005, the chair has been Miroslav Pekník, Director of the Institute of Political Sciences of the Slovak Academy of Sciences.

## WHO WAS MILAN HODŽA?

Milan Hodža is widely regarded by people who know history as the most influential Slovak political figure of the first half of the 20th century. He started as a journalist. In 1903, while living in Budapest, he founded a newspaper, Slovenský týždenník (Slovak Weekly), that quickly became by far the most widely read publication in Slovak. Its circulation was around 14,000, which was far more than the circulation of all other Slovak publications of the time combined. He managed this despite the fact the the Hungarian authorities forbade him to sell in news stands and the paper had to be hand-delivered to its subscribers. He covered all of the Slovak counties, all the way to the east, and his delivery men often had to do their work at night for fear of being attacked during the day. The paper was outspokenly political at a time when all publications were censored by the government. What he wrote earned him regular fines and once even a jail sentence.

I tell you all this just to provide a bit of a picture of what kind of man my grandfather was. During his long career in public life he was twice elected to the Hungarian parliament from an electoral district in Serbia. He was an adviser to Archduke Franz Ferdinand, where he pushed for the reorganization of Austria-Hungary in a way that would give more power to the minority nations and thereby lessen the influence of the Hungarians, a plan in which the Archduke was

very interested. Following the Archduke's assassination in Sarajevo and the outbreak of WW I, Hodža was arrested for anti-state activities that included ongoing contacts with Czech colleagues. Fortunately, he was released. He played an important behind-the-scenes role in the establishment of Czechoslovakia. He served in a variety of ministerial posts in Prague, including education (a life-long passion), agriculture twice, and finally prime minister. He was the only Slovak to serve as prime minister during the entire 20-year history of the Czechoslovak First Republic. His government served during the high-tension years of 1935-1938 and resigned under pressure shortly before Munich.

Following his resignation, Hodža went into exile, first in Paris, then in London, and finally in the United States. He had long and serious political disagreements with the president, Edvard Beneš. While both men were in exile, these disagreements escalated into a nasty political battle with very ugly personal overtones. In terms of policy, the main two points of disagreement were these: (a) Beneš was a strong believer in Czechoslovakism, the concept that there is only a single Czechoslovak nation rather than closely related Czech and Slovak nations. For Slovaks, who had for 150 years battled to maintain their identity under an increasingly forceful Hungarian policy of *magyarization* that would have deprived them of their national identity, losing this identity by being merged with the Czechs was unacceptable. Hodža was a very strong proponent of a united Czechoslovakia, but he wanted the country to be structured in such a way that Slovak interests would be protected. They were not well protected during the First Republic, and Beneš declined to promise that after the war this situation would be rectified. (b) Beneš developed warm relationships with the Soviet Union and with Stalin personally. Hodža was a staunch anti-communist and even warned the government of the United States against acceding to the policy of spheres of influence that would give to the Soviet Union control over vast areas of Central and Eastern Europe following the war. Hodža lost the battle with Beneš.

Two more points: (a) Hodža is especially well known in international circles for advocating the concept of a federation of states in Central Europe, an idea that originated during his days of working with Archduke Franz Ferdinand and culminated in a book published in London in 1942 as the bombs were falling, *Federation in Central Europe*. This concept is often regarded as one of the important antecedents of the idea of the European Union. (b) Most of the democratic leaders of the Slovak National Uprising were Hodža's personal and political protégées, so in that sense he has a rather direct link to the main events we will be celebrating on August 24th and 25th.

## RESTORING HODŽA'S NAME

The wartime Slovak State considered Hodža to be traitor and sentenced him to 18 years imprisonment *in absentia*. This was primarily because he was such a strong proponent of a united Czechoslovakia, whereas the wartime Slovak leadership reveled in Slovakia's independence, conveniently ignoring the fact that it was almost wholly subservient to Hitler. The state methodically eradicated Hodža's name from organizations, buildings, and the history books. After the war, the communists did exactly the same, because Hodža was so strongly anti-communist. Consequently, Hodža's name and his place in Slovak history vanished from public awareness.

During all this time, however, historians were keenly aware of what he had done. Once the Iron Curtain came down, they worked to have his body brought home from the Bohemian National Cemetery in Chicago where he had been buried, and to have his name restored to public awareness. Mikuláš Dzurinda, who developed into quite an admirer of Hodža, agreed. The process started with an astonishingly elaborate set of ceremonies in which Hodža's remains were exhumed, returned to Slovakia, and re-buried in the Slovak National Cemetery in the city of Martin. My family and I were part of all this, including all the press and television coverage and later interviews on TV and for various magazines. I cherish the Slovak flag that covered my grandfather's coffin during the transfer ceremonies and was folded by the honor guard and handed to me by their captain after his coffin was lowered into the grave.

All this happened in 2002 under Dzurinda's leadership. In 2005 Dzurinda went further and initiated the annual Days of Milan Hodža. The presentation of the prize is one of the many components of those Days.

#### WHO HAVE BEEN OTHER RECIPIENTS OF THE PRIZE?

Originally there was only one prize each year. The first prize, in 2005, went to Pavol Lukáč, the young historian who most influenced Dzurinda to undertake the big steps that I have described to you. Other honorees have included Ján Langoš, the founding director of Slovakia's Institute of the Nation's Memory (Ústav pamäti národa), an institution dedicated to the collection, preservation, and distribution of documentary evidence concerning the two darkest periods in Slovak history, the wartime fascist state and the entire communist era, and the historian Josef Jablonický, in the 1960s the first man to write a detailed account of the Slovak National Uprising that gave appropriate credit to the democratic forces active in the Uprising as well as the communist ones. The communists had tried hard to grab all the glory and erase the contributions of the democrats. Right up to the the fall of the Iron Curtain, Jablonický was persecuted for revealing the truth. Later he was awarded a whole bevy of Slovakia's highest honors.

In 2011 a second prize was added, this one to an institution or a person deserving special credit for making visible the story of Slovakia in a way that captures public attention, whether within Slovakia or abroad. The first recipient of this prize was the National Czech and Slovak Museum and Library in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.