

An Interview with Vladislav Zadrobilek

Joseph Caezza

During the 1997 conference on Prague, Alchemy and the Hermetic Tradition a great expectation among Czech attendees concerned the public appearance of the enigmatic Vladislav Zadrobilek. Bohemian hermeticists revere Zadrobilek as one of the greatest living authorities on Czech alchemy. He served as president of the esoteric organization Universalia, authored a number of acclaimed works and edits the outstanding Hermetic journal, Logos. His Trigon publishing company and bookstore make available fine editions of obscure esoteric literature. Present offerings include Cyliani's Hermes Unveiled, both Fulcanelli books and reprinted collections of classic alchemical tomes.

The conference on alchemy accompanied a number of other events commemorating 1997 as the 500th anniversary of the reign of Rudolf II. The Rudolfian era enjoyed the living presence of John Dee, Edward Kelley, Sendivogious, Michael Mair, Hinrich Kurnrath, Martin Ruland (Sr and Jr), Sebald Schwarzer and dozens of other adepts and deceivers. The Opus Magnum exhibit featured prominently among events celebrated during Prague's "Year of Rudolf II". Located in the gothic "House of the Stone Bell" in Old Town Square this event provided a multimedia alchemical initiation experience wherein participants proceeded through four floors using a spiral staircase to experience phases of the great work. Zadrobilek played a key role in organizing this exhibit which displayed obscure books and artifacts. He edited a large format quality bilingual volume monumentalizing this exhibit entitled, OPUS MAGNUM: The Book of Sacred Geometry, Alchemy, Magic, Astrology, The Kabbala, and Secret Societies of Bohemia.

J.C. Can you tell me about your personal background?

V.Z Like you I have enjoyed many diverse vocations. I have worked in metallurgy and also as a gardener. At one time I was also involved with the theater, economics and foreign commerce. I have also been employed in the graphic arts, book restoration and publishing.

J.C. In this country, the original homeland of Budwieser and Pilsner where beer culture achieves an unprecedented reverence you abstain from alcohol and practice vegetarianism. Is this part of your hermetic practice?

V.Z. I stopped eating meat because I did not want to eat dead bodies. Remember that before 1989 we suffered 40 years of communist repression here. I initially avoided alcohol, tobacco and coffee because taxes on these products were used to support international terrorism by the former communists. I discovered many wonderful benefits from abstinence and maintain the practice. There are obviously other motivations for this kind of conduct.

J.C. Last summer during the conference many foreign authorities came here to Prague, the silicone valley of alchemy to tell Czech people about Hermeticism. Was this an awkward situation for some adept Czechs?

V.Z. It does not matter who speaks or where but rather what matters is what is said. Even more than that what matters is what is done. There was a lot of high minded academic talk at the conference and some fine rhetoric. How much of it was new? How many of those speakers actually practice the wisdom they talked about?

J.C. Did alchemy originally come to Prague with the Knights Templars?

V.Z. Prague lies in the heart of Central Europe at the intersection of many crossroads. One theory about the origin of the name of our city concerns the belief that seven holy men from India settled here. They named this place after their sacred native city, Prayag, which is now known as Allahabad. Later the gypsies came here from South India bringing a very strange culture. Of course alchemy came to Prague with the Templars but also with the Jews and foreigners of every variety.

Alchemy also emerged here spontaneously. There were alchemists in the court of Charles IV in the fourteenth century but it achieved even greater popularity during the reign of Rudolf II who sponsored over 200 alchemists. Nobles such as Vilem of Rosenberg competed with Rudolf's preoccupation and sponsored many alchemists.

J.C. Prague seems to be a textbook of alchemy written in the houses and streets of the "Royal Route", the coronation path leading up to the hilltop castle and cathedral. Strategic features near the origin of this route include the house at 34 Celetna Street known as "At the Black Mother of God" where the famous statue of the Black Virgin is displayed just opposite the former headquarters of the Templar order.

Number 8 Celetna Street, known as "At the Black Sun" invokes the notion of golden light hidden in dense dark matter. At the place where Celetna Street opens up into Old Town Square lies two houses jointly known as "At the White Unicorn". This animal often associates itself with the Virgin. What is the significance of the Black Virgin of Prague and what is her role in alchemical practice?

V.Z. I agree with Fulcanelli on this. The black Madonnas are manifestations of the ancient goddesses in her form as Isis, Demeter and Cybele. She represents the black poisonous prima materia. Cybele, the wife of Cronos, mother of the gods of Olympus is also known as Rhea, who's name means fluid. This too is a property of the prima materia. During the Opus Magnum exhibit we placed the Black Virgin of Prague in the basement of the House of the Stone Bell upon a large black cubic stone. This cubic form is the root of the name "Cybele" or "Kubele" as we say it here. Her normal residence on Celetna Street is in a house of cubist architectural design. The moon is associated with these goddesses just as it is with the mother of Jesus. Mary crushes a serpent with her foot. This image indicates the fixation of mercury. People speculate on the alchemical symbolism hidden in the city of Prague. Consider Prague's heraldic coat of arms. An arm comes out of the castle doorway holding a sword. For many Czech hermeticists the sword represents the secret fire of the alchemists. Look at the iron grill work coming down from the top of the door. Does the net-like pattern remind you of anything? Look at the shape of the top of the door where the point of the sword rests. Have you seen this form before?

J.C. The French historian Rene Alleau has proposed that the richly decorated Renaissance house, "At the Minute #3" also known as "At the White Lion" where Frans Kafka once lived on the Royal Route just off Old Town Square contains alchemical symbols relevant to the magnum opus. He compares them to Fulcanelli's explication of encrypted decorations at the Lallement mansion at Bouges in France. Is this an exaggeration?

V.Z. Many coded symbols from the Renaissance were used here by people who did not truly understand them. They were interpreted as hermetic but they are not necessarily alchemical. Self promoting people use alchemical iconography even today without knowing the original intention. There is a lot of misunderstanding. People are always eager to appropriate the wisdom and authority of the great adepts.

J.C. A steady stream of pilgrims come to the Czech Republic from Italy, Spain and Latin America to visit the church of Our Lady of Victory, the home of the "Infant of Prague". This miraculous statue of the Little King holds world class cult status. Are any of the symbols associated with this church relevant to alchemical practice?

V.Z. I do not know. The Infant is a pure Christian symbol that arrived here from Spain in the mid 17th century. These symbols do not necessarily derive from alchemy but they can be interpreted that way. There is abundant Templar iconography in that church. The Infant holds an orb surmounted by a cross. It calls to mind a symbol for the prima materia, the world and the earth. This orb is sometimes perceived as a pomegranate filled with seeds. It implies the hermetic capacity for multiplication. All symbols are ambivalent. Church art may have been modified to correspond with alchemical symbols. In the gothic monastery of St. Agnus for example there are a lot of six pointed stars in the arches similar to the large one on the front of Our Lady of Victory. These are not necessarily alchemical symbols.

J.C. I was intrigued to see enormous stone monuments depicting the fourteen Stations of the Cross in the park on Petrin Hill. The passion of Christ constitutes a viable model for the great ordeal of matter. It provides a perfect system of meditation. Do contemporary Czechs use these symbols for their contemplative work or is the cabalistic Tree of Life a more popular system here?

V.Z. Both ways are possible. Jaros Griemiller of Trebsko's 1578 Czech version of The Rosary of the Philosophers omits all the Christian iconography found in the 1550 Frankfort edition of this text. Yet the Lapis-Christ parallel is generally understood here. A good example occurs when the cock crows while Peter, who's name means stone, betrays Jesus. The cock heralds the rising sun. It plays a significant role in alchemical iconography. During Peter's betrayal the cock crows three times indicating the three stages of the great work. The mass is an interesting parody of laboratory work. But remember that it evolved out of ancient gnostic practices that predate Christianity. One of my favorite gnostic teachings is that the world was created out of God's laughter and that everything inside us and out is divine laughter. The Tree of Life has other significance. Jewish thought is different. It does not accept Christ as the messiah. En Sof, the mystery of the cosmos is irrational and unknowable. It is similar to a black hole in reverse. Victor Hugo describes it nicely as a shining black hole radiating darkness This is a great enigma. We do not know how darkness became light or how dull matter can become gold.

J.C. Do you have any favorite alchemical texts?

V.Z. The Mutus Liber and the Turba Philosophorum are my two favorite books. There are three basic versions of the Turba. I have an ancient Czech version. It contains many profound insights. The ancients understood that the Earth's atmosphere protects us from UV and cosmic radiation. We need the sky and the clouds to protect the great work from being burned. One must proceed slowly. There is some evidence in the Turba that the ancients understood oxygen. They may also have understood that free electrons compose the spiritual bodies of metals.

J.C. Your personal contribution to the Opus Magnum catalogue included a commentary on the extraordinary Czech alchemical text, Symbola Chiroglyphica. Does the actual practice of this process have any similarity to the laboratory process suggested by The Hermetic Triumph also known as The Ancient War of the Knights? In this regard is it possible for any two alchemists to elaborate the stone exactly the same way?

V.Z. Yes, the first few steps are very similar. At this time I would wish to avoid talking about the actual practical process. We hope to translate this text in the future. Some of the materials are still unknown to us. Yes, I believe any two alchemists could make the stone the same way. But we admit that there are different and very strange paths. For example the coction stage can be prolonged to arrive at platinum instead of gold.

J.C. What is the purpose of Alchemy?

V.Z. There are many post modern answers to this question. Much has been written recently that is just mystification. Transmutation is an indication of something higher. It is a sudden opening to cosmic consciousness and natural harmony. It is similar to the mystical rapture of yoga for example. Alchemy derives from an ancient science. It is an artifact of an advanced civilization that perished long ago because of the mismanagement of matter. Perhaps you've seen the movie, Planet of the Apes. At times I've been obsessively preoccupied with alchemical literature. But we have a saying here: "Luck goes to those who are prepared". Any good alchemical book, for example, The Twelve Keys of Basil Valentine, is extremely valuable. It is a spiritual essence radiating a thought field until our intuition leads us to a similar field. Such books include crowds of the dead and even those who have not yet been born. The future is present in such books. Such books are living beings. Their words wait like cradles that invite us to rest in them. I was acquainted once with a practicing alchemist. This man was very enigmatic. He talked about a 15 year cycle. Each year the cycle begins in March. He was never able to finish the work in only one year. He was always highly charged. After 14 attempts a shining Christ appeared to him and told him something. He knew at this point that he would succeed. I got two letters from him after that. Then he disappeared without a trace. He said at some point we would meet again but up till now he hasn't showed up. I believe he

succeeded in elaborating the philosopher's stone.

J.C. The Opus Magnum exhibit and book which you edited constitute a major accomplishment in the annals of Czech hermeticism. Do you have any plans for similar projects in the future?

V.Z. We may do an exhibit soon about a German aristocrat who once lived in Bohemia, Count Spork. He was a mystic. It is said that he founded the first Freemason lodge in the Czech Republic. Mr. Rittman of Amsterdam and I are organizing an exhibit on Rosicrucianism for the year 2000.

J.C. I'd like to thank you not only for making time for me here today but also for your life's work of keeping the dream alive. Thank you Vladislav Zadrobilek.

This interview was conducted April 19th, 1998 at the Prague home of Vladislav Zadrobilek located a stone's throw from his Trigon bookstore located at: Umelecka 2, 170 00 Praha 7. Grateful thanks to Michal Pober for arranging this interview and to Peter Buga'r for serving as interpreter-translator. Grateful thanks also to my soror mystica, my beloved Miss Natalie Collins who served as a constant inspiration during this pilgrimage.

Note: A number of interactive CDs on historic aspects of Bohemia have recently become available. Of particular interest are (1) Bird of Paradise, which features Michael Mair's Atalanta Fugens (2) Prague: The Royal Route and (3) Legends of Prague. Selected items will be reviewed in an upcoming issue of The Stone.

The bookdealer, Todd Pratum presently offers, Rudolf II and Prague, edited by Eliska Fucikova (1997) co-published by Prague Castle Administration, Thames and Hudson and Skira, 392 p. This is a catalogue of the general Prague exhibition of which the Opus Magnum exhibit was a part. Todd Pratum will offer the Opus Magnum catalogue in the Fall of 1998.

OPUS MAGNUM: The Book of Sacred Geometry, Alchemy, Magic, Astrology, Kabbala and Secret Societies of Bohemia, edited by Vladislav Zadrobilek, Trigon (1997) bilingual (Czech-English) 328 p.(This book accompanied an exhibit by the same name held during Prague's 1997 celebration of the "Year of Rudolf II".)

"A wise man says that a long time ago, after the creation of this world, the most beautiful angel longed to be more powerful than God. At that time the archangel Gabriel punched this rebellious angel of light in the head and knocked a shiny gem out of his crown. The stone of light flew and lit up the stars, which created the Milky Way. The one who had lost his right to his name because he was not carrying the light, now followed it. Down, close to the earth he crashed in his anger, and like that he created the Bohemian valley. A fragment of the stone of light was dropped in the hill where Vysehrad stands today. There, at the secret place, unknown brothers pray on a certain day of the year, and accept the hidden light."

D.Z. Bor *On the Threshold of Nobility*

This quote heralds the opening text of Opus Magnum, a bold and brilliant exploration of Bohemian alchemy. The premiere chapter describes a geological cataclysm which occurred more than 100 million years ago when an enormous meteor formed "The Prague Impact Crater" 200 by 300 kilometers in size. Green vitreous meteoric fragments known as moldivite or semiprecious valtavine rich in iron hydroxides still abound in this region. The text goes on to detail how the layout of Old Town Prague follows the design of Jerusalem and how many of its churches were constructed at strategic locations in accordance with the laws of sacred geometry to affect a mystic enchantment. A penetrating analysis of cathedral architecture and the art of master stone masons crowns this opening chapter on the sacred space of Bohemia.

A probing inquiry into alchemy's Gnostic, Hermetic and Presocratic roots examines the philosophy behind the practice. One reads on the subject of Heraclitian Fire from which everything comes and returns to:

"This fire refines and reveals everything; its flaring up is the direction toward the unity of everything in One, while its going out means the differentiation of all the particulars of the world. The flaring up is every individuals struggle for the real present and a transformation opposite to dreamy or leisurely going along or flowing off."

Alchemy emerged from the tension between myth and reality, the senses and meaning, perception and cognition. This same tension separates matter from spirit. Fire serves to reintegrate this tension. For the ancients the problem of oneness intrinsically follows awareness. The profoundness of such discussions soars miles above the plethora of contemporary literature on this subject.

A section on doctrine presents alchemical fundamentals with an intriguing twist. Salt appears as the central mediator between mercury and sulfur in a rotating mandala scheme. This contrasts with the more familiar less dynamic linear hierarchy that situates mercury between sulfur and salt. The bullet point format of the text describing this model calls to mind an abbreviated version of Paracelsus' Alchemical Catechism.

An exhaustive historical survey presents details on the men and events that shaped mystic Bohemia. A growing tradition achieved its highest level during the reign of Rudolf II. He sponsored over 200 court alchemists and inspired competitiveness among nobles to promote the royal art. The contemporary hermeticist, Dr. Benedict Janes contributed a chapter outlining the more recent history of Martinism, Freemasonry and related secret societies. Dr. Janes, one of the founders of the organization, Universalia, presents compelling details on the presence of the perennial philosophy which has survived Nazi persecution, Communist repression and even the crowds of hedonistic tourists that today run rampant through the sacred streets of Prague.

The unique feature of Opus Magnum entails never before published illustrations from several classic Czech alchemical tomes. Foremost among these rank *Symbola Chirogyphica* which bears vague resemblance to *The Hermaphroditic Marriage of the Sun and the Moon, Sabaoth*, a highly original German manuscript and two idiosyncratic Czech versions of *The Rosarium Philosophorum*. Outstanding commentaries to John Dee's *Hieroglyphic Monad*, *The Keys of Solomon* grimoires and the VIth and VIIth Books of Moses add yet more value to this volume.

Chapters on Doctor Faust in Prague, Kabbala, the Golem myth, astrological aspects of Prague and the Fraternity of the Rosy Cross attend to the myriad peripheral aspects of alchemy. Valiant scholarship attempts to distill the reality behind these myths. For example inflated stories about the magician, Zito, who performed in the court of Charles IVth transplanted themselves upon Dr. Faust. The legend of the Golem monster created by the Polish Rabbi, Eliahu Baalshem of Chem migrated to the great Kabbalist mystic, Rabbi Low, of Prague. The well known myth about revelations from the illuminated tomb of Father Rosenkreutz, at the heart of Rosicrucian tradition, may be an incarnation of the older myth wherein Apollonius of Tyana discovers the Emerald Tablet in the tomb of Hermes. One recalls the belief that both the Emerald Tablet and the Holy Grail were carved out of the gem fallen from the crown of Lucifer. Yet another echo of this initiatory egregory comes from 17th century England where a peasant discovered a deep illuminated crypt inhabited by a sage. The location of this happening became known as "the grave of the Rosicrucian".

Are these myths related to contemporary folklore that describe how the pagan prophetess princess, Libuse, sleeps with her army of knights in catacombs beneath Vysehrad, Prague's hilltop fortress, quietly waiting for Bohemia's hour of need? This too appears as a modern metamorphosis of older Czech legends connected to St. Wenceslas, Mt. Blanik and the castle fortress Melnik. Like the green glassy meteorites strewn about the Bohemian landscape these myths resonate with the alchemical

admonition from the acrostic, VITRIOL. Visita Interiora Terrae Rectificando Invenies Occultum Lapidem translates to: "Visit the interior of the earth by rectification you will find the hidden stone".

The editor stresses in the introduction the novel nature of the illustrations and the highly original text. These erudite articles as ingenious as they are only serve as footnotes to numerous never before published pictures that bear the full force of the revelation. One can take any given page of this book, meditate for hours and be driven to rapture by the infectious intensity of its insights.

During the summer of 1997 over 70'000 people visited the Opus Magnum exhibit at the House of the Stone Bell in Prague's Old Town Square. Such popularity testifies to the value of the material monumentalized in this book. Destined to become a collector's item only a few copies remain of the original 2000 printed. It takes its place next to Roob's recent Hermetic Museum, Fabricus's Alchemy: The Royal Art and Klossowski de Rola's Golden Game but offers the unique Bohemian vision.

NEKROLOG

13. prosince 2010

Vladislav Zadrobílek (78) český básník, nakladatel, malíř a hudebník Rodák z Prahy prožil dětství v Hradci Králové. V Litoměřicích se vyučil zahradníkem, díky této profesi se ocitnul v Choustníkově Hradišti, kde se začal zajímat o osobu barokního mecenáše hraběte Šporka a o jeho Kuks, což v roce 1999 zúročila velká výstava, jemu věnovaná.

Za normalizace vystřídal řadu povolání jako strojník v čistírně plynu, svářeč, kulisák, elektrikář a antikvář. Byl členem industriální hudební skupiny Žabí hlen, jejíž význam docenily loni jím vybrané soubory nahrávek.

Publikoval pod pseudonymem D. Ž. Bor. Napsal básnické sbírky Velká denní hudba (1963), Zadrhlo zahrldo (1996) a Planky (2009), za Klonování času byl v roce 2005 nominován na státní cenu za literaturu.

Je mimo jiné autorem esejistické knihy Dítě andělů: Otokar Březina - život jako dílo (2000) a monografie Bdělost, toť vše! Gustava Meyrinka cesta k nadmyslnu (2002).

Významně se věnoval hermetismu a alchymii, psal články do sborníku Logos a do časopisů Analogon a Tvar. První práce publikoval v samizdatu, mezi lety 1971-1989 vydal 34 různých titulů včetně Josefa Váchala, Ladislava Klímy a Vladimíra Boudníka. Před dvaceti lety založil nakladatelství Trigon.

Z jeho sbírek i vlastního surrealistického díla například vznikla expozice Dary & Nedary před čtyřmi roky v pražském Domě U zlatého prstenu. Loni se dočkal první samostatné výstavy v Galerii Emila Juliše v Černčicích u Loun. Před několika týdny vyšla jeho vzpomínková kniha Časobraní.

Zemřel v sobotu 11. prosince v Praze.

O autorovij Profily osobností, které opustily tento svět, připravuje Jan Rejžek

© 2010 MAFRA, a.s., ISSN 1213-1385 © Copyright ČTK, Reuters, AFP. Publikování nebo šíření obsahu je zakázáno bez předchozího souhlasu.