Comments at the Opening of the Honorary Consul of the Czech Republic in Philadelphia.

Thank you to Deputy Foreign Minister Smolek and Consul General Rames for this great honor and for appointing me as the new Honorary Consul for the Czech Republic in Philadelphia. Thank you also to Peter Longstreth, President of the Consular Corp Association of Philadelphia, and Karel Smekal, Deputy Consul General of the Czech Republic in New York.

Let me start my comments by plagiarizing something I recently heard a speaker here at the Union League say in preparing his audience for what they were about to hear. This speaker quoted what King Henry VIII said to each of his wives on the wedding altar “Don’t worry, this will be brief!” That said, there are a few themes I would like to spend time on:

- First, I will touch on the importance of the addition of the Czech Honorary Consul to the Philadelphia Area, based on this country’s special connection of our city
- Second, I would like to pay respect to my predecessor, Peter Rafaeli, who did such a wonderful job as Honorary General Consul for the Czech Republic
- And last, I would also like to help you all understand my connection to the Czech Republic and what I look forward to in becoming Honorary Consul for the Czech Republic in Philadelphia

Let me speak first to the special connection the Czech Republic shares with Philadelphia. Just a little over one-hundred years ago as World War I was concluding and the map of Europe was in the process of being fundamentally changed with the emergence of new & free nation-states, a group of representatives from eleven nationalities came to the United States seeking new allies for their cause. Thomas Masaryk was among those representatives, and he put forward the idea that this group, (they called themselves the mid-European Union), should hold a public meeting at Independence Hall to draw attention to their cause. So on October 26, 1918, in front of Independence Hall, the aspiring leaders of these nations, surrounded by new flags and children attired in their nations respective folk costumes, assembled, and Thomas Masaryk read the Union’s “Declaration of Common Aims”, which fostered the ideals of government by consent, self-determination, and civil rights. These were truly new aspirations for their peoples, who had lived for hundreds of years under authoritarian Monarchs.

After the event at Independence Hall, which for a few of you who are not Philadelphians, is located only ten city blocks or so from where we are at this moment, the group of representatives moved onto a location which is even closer to us – actually right down the block on Broad Street at the Bellevue Stratford Hotel. There, during lunch, Thomas Masaryk received a telegram informing him that he was to be appointed president of Czechoslovakia. Two days later, after the Philadelphia meeting, the independent nation of Czechoslovakia was born. That, I think you will all agree, is a truly unique and historically important connection between Philadelphia and the Czech Republic! And if you should walk past the Bellevue Hotel this evening, you will notice it sits on a little street named Masaryk.
Place. If you find that interesting, I want to put in a plug for a wonderful book written by a local scholar who is here this evening with us, Kevin McNamara. Kevin’s book is called “Dreams of a Great Small Nation”, and it chronicles a lot of the history of that era in a fascinating read.

You can say that the Czech Republic and the U.S. share many values today and before I go on, I would like to recognize the outstanding work of my predecessor Peter Rafaeli, who unfortunately could not be here with us this evening. Peter represented the interests of the Czech Republic and Czechs in Philadelphia wonderfully for a very long time. I truly have big shoes to fill. Peter was not only instrumental in his day to day tasks as Honorary Consul General, but he also played a great role in keeping history alive so that we recognize the remarkable sacrifice of people who serve as symbols of human solidarity and courage across borders. If you are unfamiliar with Peter’s work here, I suggest you pick up a copy of the book “Lottery of Life” or watch the moving documentary Nicholas Winton: The Power of Good, which in 2002 won the International Emmy Award. The book and movie detail the rescue mission which Sir Nicholas Winton (a British Oscar Schindler of sorts) embarked on in personally saving hundreds of Czech Jewish children in the months immediately before World War II. Sir Winton was a humble man and never sought recognition for the heroic actions he took, but many people felt his story needed to be told as a remarkable example of what one devoted, principled individual can achieve in changing and improving the lives of others. Peter Rafaeli was deeply involved in putting projects together, which did just that, and this shows the strong cultural impact an Honorary Consul can have. It is in fostering shared values that we form the foundations on which peace, progress, and prosperity between nations depend. I hope in my role as Honorary Consul of the Czech Republic that I do at least half as well as Peter did, and that the Czech American friendship continues to flourish!

So, many of you may wonder what type of connection a guy like me with a name like Alexander Montanaro has to the Czech Republic. Well, I do have very deep connections. They started over twenty-five years ago, when I first crossed the border into the Czech Republic, and every year since I have been going back. In fact, my history with the Czech Republic started with what I believe is that country’s greatest export to the United States: my wife, Zdenka, with whom I am married 23 years as of today! Our children were raised as Czech Americans, fluent in both languages, and the whole family still spends much of its summer in the Czech Republic. As a result, the country has been a second home to me. I must also say that having spent time every year for over the last quarter century, I have had the wonderful opportunity to see the Czech Republic emerge as one of the true success stories of the post-Cold War European landscape. The country certainly suffered long and hard – first under the fascists when the Nazi’s invaded, and then after World War II, through decades of communist oppression. Today, the Czech Republic is a prosperous, technologically and culturally advanced, democratic, free-market country in the heart of Central Europe. In fact, the Czech Republic has been enjoying some of the fastest economic growth rates as well as the lowest rate of unemployment in the developed world for some time now. It has been fascinating and wonderful for me to be a first-hand witness to this, and it will be wonderful to be involved with the Czech Republic in my new capacity.

Let me conclude by saying what I plan to do as Honorary Consul for the Czech Republic in Philadelphia. As many of our audience members are familiar from their respective Honorary Consul roles, I view my responsibilities as falling into two main pillars:

- Aiding the Czech population in and around Philadelphia, and
- Furthering bilateral relations in commercial, economic, and cultural spheres
This second pillar is extremely important, as it will continue the deeply rooted tradition of friendship between Czechs and Americans! On that note of friendship, we have a beautiful Czech flag cake provided by the wonderful bakery here at the Union League, which I would like to ask you all to enjoy with me in the name of Czech and American friendship. What better way to celebrate shared values between nation than with cake! I would like to invite the Deputy Minister and Consul General to join me in cutting the ceremonial first slice! Finally, to our guests, please enjoy your cake, the wonderful company, and the opportunity to celebrate Czech-American friendship this evening!

Alex Montanaro
Honorary Consul of the Czech Republic
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