The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Svatava Pirkova Jakobson, professor emeritus, Slavic languages, has filed with the Secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

John R. Durbin, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
SVATAVA PIRKOVA JAKOBSON

Dr. Svatava Pirkova Jakobson was born in Vienna on March 19, 1908, and died in a Taylor, Texas, nursing home on September 19, 2000. In 1967, after her divorce from the famous linguist, Roman Jakobson, and after many years of teaching Czech language and literature and folkloristics at Harvard, Svatia, as she was known to friends and students, came on a visiting lectureship to the University of Texas at Austin. Enthralled by the Czech communities in East Central Texas, and the rich store of historical, folkloric, and musical materials of which they were the repository, she decided to stay on, and eventually her lectureship became a professorship in the Department of Slavic Languages. Her home in Austin on River Hills Road became a social center of intellectual exchange, in which Texas citizens of Czech descent, UT faculty from a number of disciplines, visiting lecturers, students in Slavic languages and other departments, and local and visiting poets and musicians enjoyed the warm atmosphere, the good Czech cooking and French wines, and often surprising and intense intellectual exchange. The house had been built by a local Czech carpenter under Svatia's close supervision, and became a landmark of intellectual life in Austin. Svatia was at home in a number of languages, and foreign visitors especially, but also aspiring young poets and musicians, made a point of visiting her.

Her father had been a prominent figure in the first Czechoslovak Republic and her ex-husband had been a world-famous linguist and one of the founders of the Prague Linguistic Circle. Their divorce had been an amiable one, and Roman often visited her in Austin. Their life together had been an unusually adventurous one, full of hairbreadth escapes and constant danger, before, during, and after the outbreak of the Second World War. Svatia's fieldwork in folk music and ethnography had taken her to Poland, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Romania. She had also translated into Czech the works of Russian poets of the stature of Pushkin and Pasternak, and the brilliant contemporary Russian prose writer Olesha. Her husband was one of the key founders of modern linguistic science. He was also a Jew and a Russian, and in 1939, the impending Nazi takeover forced them to leave the Brno University of Technology, where they had been teaching, and escape to Denmark. Unfortunately, the Nazi armies were not far behind them. They fled to Norway, with the Nazi armies still hot on their trail, and had to endure train bombings, to hide under harsh conditions in the mountains, and to sleep where they could, often in hay barns. Crossing a bridge into Sweden in a horse-drawn sleigh, they were briefly jailed, but finally reached Stockholm in May 1940. Still in peril, they sought the aid of the American ambassador there and eventually acquired the papers that would permit them to leave for the United States.

Roman taught at Columbia, Harvard, and MIT, and Svatia was a lecturer in Czech language and literature at Harvard. She continued her work in folk music and collaborated with John Lomax and his son Alan, who was curator of the American Archive of American Folksong at the Library of Congress, where she occasionally served as a consultant. While in New York, she wrote a regular column for the Czech immigrant newspaper Nové-Yorkské Listé. In the late 1940's she served as editor-in-chief of the state department sponsored journal America.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that in Austin Svatia fell in love with the Czech Moravian communities of Texas, and with the Czech language and the need to teach it correctly, especially to young people of Czech ancestry who had grown up in Texas. She had strong feelings about these things, and about the local Czech
newspapers that had come to life in Texas. Although she had no children of her own, she was known as the fierce and protective mother of young poets, musicians, and linguists.

Svatia had become a United States citizen in 1952, but in the later 1950s was denied a visa to visit her beloved Czechoslovakia. In 1968, she was granted a visa. It was the time of "the Prague spring," and "socialism with a human face." Unfortunately, it did not last long, and she was plunged unexpectedly, and fairly late in life, into a continuation of the adventures of her younger years, when she was temporarily trapped in Prague as Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces invaded the country. In the resulting chaos, she managed to escape to the west and returned to Austin to continue her teaching career.

For the 1976 Bicentennial Celebration of the American Revolution, Svatia was asked by the Smithsonian Institution to arrange and coordinate the participation of all the Eastern European countries in the folk festival on the National Mall in Washington.

Svatia's warm sense of humor, especially about herself, was legendary. Some of us still remember her account of trying to get to Roman's funeral in Boston in the summer of 1982. Roman had converted to Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and was being buried by the Orthodox Church. The taxi driver, as Boston cabbies are notorious for doing, gave her a wild spin around the city and claimed not to know where the church was as the meter ran up. As time ran on, Svatia burst into tears and told the cabbie she was going to miss the funeral. "Who's funeral?" he asked. "My ex-husband's," she said. "Your ex-husband," he repeated incredulously, "then why are you crying?"

After her retirement from the University in 1978, Svatia continued to work with students, monitoring their projects and extending her own ethnographical studies of the Texas Czechs. She donated more than 3,000 books, hundreds of tapes and recordings, and a large collection of Czech newspapers to The University of Texas libraries. In 1993 she received the Texas Czech Heritage Award for her contributions to the preservation and promotion of the Czech heritage in the state.

Svatia participated in several international congresses on linguistics and folklore. Her articles have appeared in a varied number of professional publications. She was also an indefatigable trekker on the lecture trail, a guest speaker at many universities. One of her most memorable lectures was a brilliant structural analysis of the ceremonial at a Bosnian Muslim wedding that she had researched in her graduate student days at Charles University. She left a vivid memory on all who knew her.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Sidney Monas (chair), Hana Pichova, and John Kolsti.

Distributed to the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the Executive Vice President and Provost, and the President on May 3, 2001. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, FAC 22, F9500. This resolution is posted under “Memorials” at: http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/