

Bells of Peace for Europe

Bells requisitioned during WW2 for the German arms industry are coming home
by Jarmila Polomská

History is mostly perceived through people's fate but it is often the mute witnesses of dramatic events that bring interesting messages from the past. One such case is the bells from the bell tower of the Church of St. Lawrence in Píšť, Czech Silesia. The oldest surviving bell in the village was commissioned in 1649 by Count Václav Lichnovský of Voštica, owner of the local estates, from the bell foundry of Hans Knauf in Opava.

Píšť had been burned down during the Thirty Years' War and the village, including the church, was being rebuilt. The population was Protestant at the time as the inscription in Old Czech on the bell attests. It also names the maker, the year and the donor. The bell weighs 350kg, its diameter is 82 cm and along the perimeter there is another inscription in Latin - GLORIA PATRI ET FILIO ET SPIRITUI SANCTO ANNO 1649.

As a result of the Counter-Reformation the village eventually returned to the Roman Catholic Church, while history brought in other profound changes. Until 1742 Píšť was firmly a part of the Habsburg Monarchy but when the Empress Maria Theresa lost most of Silesia to Prussia, Píšť found itself in the Prussian territory. Post-WW1 peace agreements

brought with them changes to the European borders and the village was added to the newly established Czechoslovakia. In 1938, immediately after the Munich Agreement, Píšť was taken over by the German Army and became a part of the Third Reich under the name of Sandau (after the local sand deposits).

Those years heavily marked not just the lives of the local people but also the fate of the church bells. In 1940 the German government issued an order to secure metal reserves for its arms industry by using all church bells. The law was applied not only to the Third Reich where Píšť now belonged but also to all the occupied territories including the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Three bells from Píšť cast in 1649, 1723 and 1743 were taken with all the others to Hamburg, to the 'cemetery of bells'. They were replaced in 1943 by three iron bells courtesy of the local inn-owner in memory of her son killed on the front. After WW2 Píšť became a part of Czechoslovakia again and by the year 2000 the iron bells needed replacing.

In 2015 news arrived to the village that two of the original bells had survived the war and were being used in German churches 'on loan'. After the war, for political reasons, it was not allowed to return the bells to the countries controlled by the Soviet Union.

During the war Nazi Germany requisitioned some 42,583 church and 1,193 other bells within the Third Reich, including the annexed Czech border



Bells from all over the Czech lands were taken to Prague for sending on to Germany and melting down for the Nazi war effort. This photograph dates from 1943

lands, and about 33,000 bells from the occupied territories. Over 80% of all the requisitioned bells were irretrievably lost, which makes the survival of two bells from Píšť seem like a small miracle.

The village started a public discussion on whether to bring the bells back or to leave them on permanent loan in the German parishes of Sulz am Neckar and Aichtal-Grotzingen, where they had been placed by the German government to replace their own lost bells. In the meantime Bishop Dr. Gebhard Fürst of Rottenburg-Stuttgart started working on a project 'Bells of Peace for Europe'. A survey of all the bells in his diocese showed 67 requisitioned bells that avoided destruction and were being used by the churches that had lost their own. Some were placed in newly built churches, often used by the displaced Germans. According to the Bishop of Rottenburg-Stuttgart the bells will be offered back to the original parishes in Poland and the Czech Republic, and returned if the parishes wish to receive them. The bells will then be sent back with a blessing for peace in Europe. The German parish returning the bell will receive a new bell with an inscription of the fate of its predecessor and will be blessed as a 'Bell for Peace'. If either a Czech or Polish parish decides to leave their bell in Germany, memorial plaques will be installed in both churches with a bilingual message describing the bells as a symbol of peace.

The bell from Píšť, made in 1649 and used in the Church of Virgin Mary in Aichtal-Grotzingen in Germany from 1954-2021, was one of the first two bells returned to its original church as part of the project; the other bell went back to Frombork in Poland. The second bell from Píšť, cast in 1743, has been left on permanent loan to the church in Sulz am Neckar. Thus the two saved bells from Píšť became a symbol of reconciliation with the past and current effort to retain peace in Europe. At the same time contacts between the Czech and German parishes have been established with plans for exchange visits and cooperation in the future.

The bell cast in 1647 made it back home to Píšť, covered by national media, on 16th October 2021 and was officially handed over in a ceremony by the German Bishop, Dr. Gebhard Fürst. It is hoped that it will be added to the list of national monuments.

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Above, the church in Píšť

Below, the bell returned to Píšť, made in 1649 and used in Germany from 1954-2021

