

Historic Bohemia: The Friends of Czech Heritage Tour

24th September – 4th October 2018

by Barbara Peacock

A chance meeting between Ian Kennaway and myself in 2006 led to the founding of The Friends of Czech Heritage. Both Ian and I had travelled in the Czech lands and were struck by the richness of the Czech architectural and artistic heritage but also by the sad plight of so many buildings after over 40 years of Communism and the legacy of the Second World War. Now over 10 years on, The Friends have funded over 40 restoration projects ranging from great houses to garden buildings and have held 25 volunteer working parties in different parts of the country.

Our tour of Historic Bohemia was sponsored by the NPÚ, the Czech National Heritage Institute, in recognition of The Friends' contribution towards the continuing restoration of the country's patrimony, and was superbly overseen by Ian Kennaway and masterminded by Milan Svoboda, who accompanied us throughout and who was a fount of knowledge on the country's history. To the participants the tour was a thrilling journey of discovery. In ten days we were introduced to a rich variety of periods and landscapes and had privileged access to some of the most stunning interiors of Central Europe.

Foremost must be the great Chapel of the Holy Cross on Karlštejn, built *circa* 1348 by the deeply religious Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV as a repository for the Imperial coronation treasure and his highly prized collection of holy relics. The castle, situated on a hilltop, was designed on three levels rising up the hill: first the burgrave's residence in the first court, the Imperial Palace in the second court, thence to the Marian Tower, and finally, dominating the whole complex, the Great Tower, with the precious Chapel of the Holy Cross, the most sacred and most splendidly decorated part of the castle. The approach was designed as a pilgrimage route, leading noble pilgrims, including the Emperor himself, up the hill, through the individual, mutually connected shrines, to the most holy shrine of all, the Chapel of the Holy Cross. Created within a tower in the strongest part of the castle complex, and



The tour participants in the Vrtha Gardens, Prague

approached by long flights of stairs and 4 doors with 19 locks, the chapel is a consummate achievement of mediaeval art. Designed to represent the Heavenly Jerusalem, the ceiling is gilded and inset with stars of Venetian glass and the walls are covered with semi-precious stones set in gilded plaster. Lamps and candlelight would be reflected on the polished surfaces of the precious stones, on the glass stars of the ceiling, and on the gilding of the walls. Superb panel paintings of apostles, popes, martyrs, prophets and kings by the great court artist Master Theodoric and his studio fill the chapel and represent the whole Company of Heaven, who guard the treasure. Karlštejn is one of the most popular tourist destinations in the country, but our visit took place after hours, and seeing the chapel in the numinous light of early evening was an unforgettable experience.

Another of the great mediaeval treasures of Bohemia which we were privileged to see is the magnificent early 13th-century reliquary chest of St. Maurus. St. Maurus was a 3rd-century Roman soldier who was executed for his faith, and who was greatly venerated in the mediaeval period. The reliquary chest was originally created for the Benedictine Abbey of Florennes in what is now Belgium to hold the purported remains of St. John the Baptist, St. Maurus and his co-martyr, St. Timotheus. The chest miraculously survived numerous attacks on the abbey, even escaping destruction in the French Revolution, until in 1838 it was bought by Duke Alfred de Beaumont-Spontin and eventually taken to the Beaufort castle of Bečov nad Teplou in Bohemia. However, in 1945 the Beauforts were accused of collaborating with the Nazis and had to flee the country, hiding the reliquary under the floorboards of the Bečov



The Chateau of Kratochvíle

mediaeval chapel, presumably hoping one day to recover it. There it lay forgotten until 1984 when a tip-off led to its dramatic rediscovery.

The wooden core of the chest or *chasse* was oak, covered with gilded silver plate and exquisitely decorated with sculpted figures of the apostles and saints. At one gable end stands the figure of St Maurus, bearing his sword, the beautifully sculpted folds of his robe following contemporary Romanesque sculptural tradition. The expressive figures of the apostles stand within classical arches, each one holding his attribute. The lid of the chest is decorated with medallions in enamel, illustrating Old Testament scenes, all interwoven with delicate filigree ornamentation incorporating classical gems. With the destruction of countless such shrines in the Reformation, the survival of this beautiful late-Romanesque reliquary chest is of international importance, and its lengthy restoration a triumph.

The Renaissance was represented by Kratochvíle in South Bohemia, a beautiful moated villa, built for Vilém of Rožmberk, one of the greatest patrons of the period and owner of vast estates in South Bohemia. The architect was Baldassare Maggi, the foremost Renaissance Italian architect working in the Czech lands, and the villa is enriched with superb plasterwork by Italian stuccadors, illustrating stories from Roman history and mythology. Particularly interesting is the dining hall, filled with paintings of hunters and animals, including an elephant and a rhinoceros, the latter

probably inspired by Dürer's famous and influential woodcut of a rhinoceros, published in 1515. In former times, the house was a dead museum, filled with glass cases displaying the history of the cartoon, but recently it has been much more appropriately furnished as a Renaissance house with Renaissance furnishings.

Bohemia excels in craftsmanship in wood and is known for its superb Baroque libraries. The Premonstratensian Monastery of Strahov in Prague has two wonderful libraries, the Theological Library and the Philosophical Library with great illusionistic painted ceilings and fitted with the splendid original Baroque bookcases. The Philosophical Library containing over 42,000 books is the jewel of the monastery and must be one of the most magnificent libraries of Europe. Its superb walnut bookcases were installed 1794-7, whilst the vast illusionistic ceiling painting by the great Viennese artist Franz Anton Maulbertsch depicts The Struggle of Mankind to know Real History. The Library soon became famous throughout Europe. One of the first women to be allowed entry was Lady Emma Hamilton, with her husband, Sir William, and her lover Lord Nelson, when they stayed in Prague in 1800 on their journey *à trois* back to Britain from Naples.

The monastery also holds a valuable collection of paintings, which once included Dürer's famous *Madonna of the Roses* (now in the National Gallery, Prague). Vladimír Rösel gave us a superb talk on

the collection, whilst the afternoon ended with a recital by the abbey organist, Vladimír Roubal. We also enjoyed memorable visits to two other libraries, where we were shown some of the treasures from their priceless collections: the famous Nostitz Palace Library in Prague, and the private Lobkowicz Library in Nelahozeves, both libraries formed by aristocrats who were great patrons of the arts and contributed immeasurably to the cultural life of Bohemia.

Historic gardens also featured on our tour. Garden historian Inka Truxová led us through the lovely Baroque terraced gardens below Prague Castle and the famous Wallenstein Palace garden with its extraordinary grotto, whilst at Krásný Dvůr we saw the great 18th-century landscape park created by Count Černín. Here we enjoyed a sumptuous picnic in the newly restored pinnacled Gothick Prospect Tower commanding wide views of the surrounding countryside.

In the late 18th and 19th centuries the Gothic Revival was a favourite style for country houses. This was splendidly represented at Hluboká, the vast turreted hunting lodge built by the Schwarzenberg family, where we were shown the recently restored guest apartments, once intended for aristocratic visitors. Both Hluboká and Konopiště, the home of the ill-fated Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie, assassinated in Sarajevo, are remarkable time-capsules filled with the original furniture and *objets d'art* that once graced these houses and which vividly evoke the period. Our visit to Konopiště was at night by the light of a full moon and was particularly poignant. Here we saw Sophie's wedding dress, the family photo albums of the couple's pre-war visit to Britain and the toys and personal possessions of the three children which they were forced to leave behind when they were evicted from the country in 1919.

No visit to Bohemia would be complete without including Český Krumlov, a charming Renaissance town crowned by its great castle dramatically poised on a mighty rock above the Vltava. Here the piece de resistance is the remarkable Rococo court theatre, complete with its original props, stage sets and machinery and costumes, and one of very few to survive in Europe. However one of the most unforgettable interiors in the state rooms is the extraordinary Masquerade Ballroom, peopled in paint by the Viennese artist Joseph Lederer in 1748. Here aristocrats in masquerade costume are



Inka Truxová speaking in the gardens below Prague Castle

depicted enjoying the festivities of a masquerade festival, whilst figures from the *commedia dell'arte* intermingle in colourful folk costumes.

Our visits also had many light moments. Particularly memorable was an afternoon spent at Kynžvart, the country house of Chancellor Metternich. After feasting on wine and cake in a garden temple, we were ushered into the house when the great doors leading to the *piano nobile* were suddenly flung open and there at the top of the stairs was Milan, transformed as a butler, balancing trays of prosecco and welcoming us to the splendour of the state apartments.

Our tour vividly brought home all that has been achieved in the Czech Republic in the last 20 years in terms of the restoration of buildings and the way they are presented to the general public. Gone are the barren displays of former years; now the houses and their contents are increasingly set within their historical and social context and in the context of the families who built them, an aspect long ignored but one which enriches the visitor experience. We were also aware of the enormous challenges faced by private owners who have received back their property in restitution, but often in an advanced state of decay, after many years of wilful neglect, and who are courageously undertaking the formidable task of restoration.

All who participated in the tour express their warm thanks to the Director General of the NPÚ Naděžda Goryczková for her warm welcome and reception and generous financial support, and to all the historians, curators and archivists who so generously gave us their time and expertise. In particular we would like to thank Ian and Milan, without whose dedication, this fascinating and stimulating tour would never have been realised.



The Friends' Tour of Historic Bohemia

From the top, Český Krumlov; the Reliquary of St Maurus at Bečov nad Teplou; the Chapel of the Holy Cross in Karlštejn Castle

