

## The Queen of the Castle

The Sixties at Rožmberk by Jana Sommerlad

For 700 years Rožmberk Castle has towered over the River Vltava, the cradle and a home to the illustrious Lords of Rožmberk, whose power, wealth and influence shaped the history and the landscape of southern Bohemia. They built the castles of Český Krumlov, Třeboň, Hluboká, Jindřichův Hradec, Telč and Nové Hrady, and transformed the land by planting forests and establishing countless fishponds that bring prosperity to the region up to the present. The Rožmberks ruled the south of the Czech Kingdom for almost 400 years until 1611 when Peter Vok died without an heir. The castle was confiscated by Ferdinand II after the battle of the White Mountain (1620) and the defeat of the Czech Estates' uprising. It was then given, together with Nové Hrady, to General K.B. Buquoy, who commanded the Imperial forces at the White Mountain and in whose family it remained until 1945. As a result of the Beneš Decrees, the family had to leave Czechoslovakia and the castle was then taken into the state ownership.

In February 1966, with the Buquoys' possessions and original furniture remaining in place, Nora and Čestmír Mlíkovský arrived at Rožmberk as property managers. He was a banned film director, Nora had just given birth to a son and dropped out of university. Jobs were not difficult to find and with the help of a friend Čestmír who could not be trusted because of his suspect politics and ideology, walked in to the most romantic employment option available. A castle that until recently could have been one of his film sets became a real stage replacing the cinema audiences with live visitors and allowing his creativity to flourish again. Nora became the chatelaine and the chief guide.

The head of the administration office in České Budějovice, later a successful art historian in Vienna, proved to be a liberal-minded boss who didn't interfere with their day to day running of the castle or the new events and drama-filled visitor tours that they devised. The modest budget – which depended on priorities - was spent entirely at Nora's discretion, divided between the restoration work, repairs, cleaning and paying the guides. Although they had a permanent caretaker and a housekeeper, both had to lend their hands whenever necessary – Nora doubled up as a cook and a cleaner scrubbing the wooden floors and

polishing the furniture alongside the housekeeper, Čestmír as a guide, general repairman and the director/scriptwriter for the night tours that featured historical figures, headless knights and the famous White Lady of Rožmberk, Perchta. The daughter of Oldřich II of Rožmberk, she was married to a cruel lord and suffered great poverty and abuse. Her well-documented life in the 15<sup>th</sup> century provides a good illustration of the low and difficult position women endured in the Middle Ages. She is also said to appear in other castles built by the Rožmberks.

Staged in the Crusaders Gallery with the help of the guides or local people in costume, these short dramatic acts quickly propelled the castle into the premier league of the most visited monuments. The old torture chamber that Čestmír had converted into a bar where the visitors could relax after a tour added to the castle's attractions, and a new gallery opened in a disused kitchen brought in artists as well. Demand for the popular night tours soon became too high to satisfy. The local community lent its support and enjoyed a great many concerts and events organised by the castle keepers. There was never a lack of real drama at the castle either. The wiring was old and inadequate and the local volunteer fire brigade with its antiquated fire engine could never have saved the castle, had a fire broken out. Just before the birth of Nora's daughter lightning struck, blowing out all the castle wiring and damaging a small house by the entrance. The mountain climbers they hired to fix the lightning conductor discovered it wasn't earthed at all.

Some two months into the job the Mlíkovskýs found and opened up a blocked, narrow hallway that made the route of the guided tour more practical. They also discovered a fragment of medieval wall by the castle gate, and generally improvised freely on the approved information guide. Originally only in Czech, they had it translated into German by a local guide and also provided guided tours in French and English. "We had only a few German and Austrian visitors and none of the Buquoy family ever came to see their old home, but their old housekeeper continued to live in the castle", says Nora. "She lived to the age of a hundred and had known the life in the castle before 1945, but preferred to keep quiet: probably for political reasons."

In summer the castle was open to visitors six days a week with Nora guiding up to ten 45-minute tours



**Rožmberk** is one of the oldest castles in South Bohemia, begun by the Family of Vítěk of Práche around the mid-13th century. The medieval layout consisted of the Lower and Upper Castle. In 1522 the Upper Castle burnt down, with the exception of the freestanding defence tower Jakobínka. An extensive reconstruction in 1556 led to the facades of the Lower Castle acquiring a Renaissance finish. Imperial General Charles Bonaventura Buquoy requested the gift of Rožmberk in 1620, following the Battle of the White Mountain. In the years 1840-1857 the Buquoy family carried out a reconstruction in the spirit of the romantic Gothic style.

a day, as well as looking after her by now two young children and cooking for all the extra guides. Mondays were a day off but didn't always work out as such. On one occasion a group of pensioners was not going to be put off by the 'Closed' sign and noisily demanded entry. Fully prepared to turn them away, Nora opened the castle door when the mother of an old friend among the group recognised her and the tour, naturally, went ahead.

There were regular groups of workers, nurses and miners visiting the castle - the miners often a bit tipsy by the time they arrived, school trips, students and tourists stretching Nora's mental and physical resources. Her favourite time came at the end of the season towards the end of October when the academics, art historians and restorers arrived at the castle to do their specialist work.

Everything changed radically with the Russian invasion of 1968 and its aftermath. The castle was spared any damage thanks to the caretaker who had pointed the army in the direction of the narrow and steep path, failing to mention the main approach to the castle was further up the road. Other castles, such as Děčín, fared much less well. Post invasion the new district management started exercising much tighter control. They sent inspectors, set various traps to prove the castle keepers' wrongdoing, and subjected Nora to probing interviews in order to verify her political suitability for the job. The information guide was rewritten to accommodate historically inaccurate stories and

a bust of Lenin and the Russian flag were to be displayed in front of the newly discovered medieval wall. Marital problems didn't make things easier either and Nora decided to quit.

"My kitchen sink in the castle looked out over the village whose buildings made me think of a stage set for the Bartered Bride", says Nora. "This made it especially difficult to leave. I had been there for five years, save two months. It was hard work but I loved it. Did I believe in the White Lady? Yes, we all did although I never saw her. She saved my little boy from tumbling down the castle hill."

"We moved back to Prague in November 1970 and I found a job in the Institute of Hygiene as a librarian. My son took a long time to settle. He missed his home, beloved dog and his schoolteacher. Also he had been the 'prince of the castle' and now the Prague boys thought him a country bumpkin. I didn't miss all the cooking but I really had enjoyed the work. Rožmberk seems now like a dream."

*Čestmír Mlíkovský died twenty years ago. Nora lives in Prague and continues to take a keen interest in Rožmberk Castle and the work that has begun under the supervision of the current keeper.*

Rožmberk Castle is open from April to October.

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