

# NEWSLETTER

*The Friends of Czech Heritage*

*Excerpt*

## What Remains of Everyday Life in Czech Historic Houses

by Milan Svoboda

In the time of fast food and drive-in restaurants many old traditions are being lost, some of them resulting in new trends. One such tradition, a subject of my research - how we dine and decorate banqueting tables - remains an interesting cultural and anthropological aspect of our lives. It also offers a logical parallel with the disappearance of Czech aristocratic residences and their occupants, who since 1918 officially do not exist. This is despite the fact that many of their representatives are still living among us today.

The first land reform in April 1919 presaged the forthcoming persecution of the Czech nobility. The Beneš Decrees of 1945 and the communist nationalisations of 1948 led to the disappearance of an entire social class in Czechoslovakia. From today's perspective a curious aspect of the early socialist period was that particular castles and châteaux were made accessible to the public within the framework of an intentional, ideologically deformed view of the upper classes. Their portrayal to a 'proletarian' public often avoided any historical context or detailed explanation of the original use of these houses and furnishings. The architecture and art or craft objects were displayed to the public simply as the product of craftsmen and masons who had been oppressed and exploited by the nobility and later by the bourgeoisie. "It was not just pictures by famous painters, collected in the former gallery in the Château of Roudnice, that delighted members of the Lobkowitz family, but also many beautifully designed and decorated objects which created an 'ambience for living'. Now removed from their historical context, only their craft skill and aesthetic appeal remain - the beauty of materials, forms, colours and their relation to one another, which the craftsman gave them." (Štěpánek, Vlček, 1988, p 18, *Stolníčení (Table Settings)*).

The presentation of castle and château interiors was limited to a mere recitation of art objects in individual rooms and an architectural description of the interior and exterior. A range of items from château collections which from the point of view of a communist regime were controversial and could have reminded visitors of the original owners, their lives and traditions, were intentionally

removed to depositaries. The newly emerging writing on accessible château spaces ignored the original noble owners or presented them as exploiters, often German, who were parasites on the working classes. This mendacious conception completely expunged from several generations of Czechs the fact that the nobility remained a distinct economic player in our country, employing a large number of people and ensuring a decent living not only after the end of feudalism in 1848 but also after 1918 and after the first land reform in 1919.

The myth was founded of the nobility as the oppressor of the people, as a class of idlers who spent their days simply playing in luxurious surroundings. Quite often there were misleading passages of ideology in printed guides exalting the building of socialism and communism after WW2. An eloquent example is given by these sentences from the guidebook *Horšovský Týn - 30 Years of the Homeland Museum*, 1980. Up to the 1990s the museum was situated in one of the historic buildings in the castle grounds, in the so-called Dower House. "Only after the liberation of our country by the Soviet Army in 1945 did Horšovský Týn awake from centuries of sleep. The German population was driven out and the town was again settled by Czechs who enthusiastically set about the task of making up for all the neglect of past centuries." (Grys, Čujanová-Jílková, Kvidera, Menšík, 1980, p 20).

Another specifically Czech phenomenon was the formation of monothematic château exhibitions, in which a series of the exhibits of the same type of

*Afternoon tea is served in the Château of Konopiště in 1894. The lady in white is Sofie, Duchess of Hohenberg (born in Stuttgart in 1868 as Countess von Chotkow und Wognin), wife of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, both assassinated at Sarajevo in 1914. Pieces of furniture and glassware seen here are identifiable in the Château of Konopiště today*



decoration was brought from a number of other castles and châteaux to one location within a single historic property. So, for example, the Château of Litomyšl developed a purely Biedermeier exhibition; in Karlova Koruna in Chlumec nad Cidlinou an exhibition of Czech Baroque was assembled; in the Château of Dačice there was a purely *Empire* display. These exhibitions therefore lost their authentic settings as residential environments and looked like museums.

The Central Bohemian Gallery in the Château of Nelahozeves in the 1970s showed part of the Lobkowicz collections from Roudnice. For example, the collection of historic hunting weapons originally placed on historic racks in the Château of Roudnice was shown in Nelahozeves in glazed display cases as in a museum.

The first wave of returned furnishings occurred thanks to the restitution laws enacted after 1990, when the State began to give back possessions. Within the framework of the return of actual contents to their owners, many items were restored to their original location at the beginning of the 1990s<sup>1</sup>. An exception is the example of the famous painting *Haymaking* by Pieter Brueghel the Elder which, in spite of being returned to its original owner through restitution by 1992, remained for several years in the National Gallery Prague and was released to the Lobkowicz family in spring 1997.

As part of a special project within the houses managed by the National Heritage Institute, the second wave of house contents returning to their place of origin has been in progress for a number of years now. Today it comes as something of a surprise to discover that the confiscation of aristocratic property after 1948 often led to the preservation of almost complete collections and house furnishings. In western continental Europe and in the UK the loss of the contents of great houses was mostly caused due to economic reasons. By nationalisation the contents of Czech aristocratic residences avoided similar pressures. Thus, in many cases the furniture and fittings

<sup>1</sup> The term 'origin' in the lists of furniture holdings indicate the place where the National Culture Commission in 1948-51 carried out the confiscation of a given furniture collection, and where the items were kept by the State agencies of the time, eg. the Château of Slatiňany. The idea of provenance is considered to be the place where a given piece of furniture was made, for example 'Italy, Venice'

successfully survived the period of socialism to be either returned to the rightful owners or displayed in various State, municipal or Church-owned exhibition spaces. It proves to be a source of amazement among foreign art historians who admire the richness, completeness and authenticity of the contents of Czech châteaux and castles.

The socialist tradition of presenting aristocratic residences to the public proved to be strong and persistent even after the change of regime in 1989. In some cases a residue of this approach continues today focusing on the artistic and historical value of exhibits. Objects of everyday life are intentionally left out. However, with the new generation of experts coming to the management of historic houses and the arrival of new, young owners of private properties, presentation to the public has been undergoing many changes. The ideological approach has been dropped in favour of a return to the principle of authenticity both in the architecture of the houses and in the presentation of their interiors. The last few years have shown a new trend where the already authentic presentation of both exteriors and interiors goes beyond a description of what we see, and delves into the stories of people and personalities who built and created the houses. An aspect of this trend is a focus on recreating the everyday life in a historic house from the point of view of both the owners and the staff responsible for its running.

It is the presentation of everyday life that in the last ten years has brought attention to the mostly forgotten art of dining and table setting. Thanks to its variety and attraction for visitors, it provides an inexhaustible source of possibilities to diversify and specialise when creating new installations and exhibitions. They in turn bring in more visitors and experts to Czech castles and châteaux, offering an opportunity to see a number of valuable objects hidden and 'forgotten' in depositories for years. Suddenly they are making an unexpected appearance, telling stories of the people who lived in the house, their customs and traditions, a witness to what life in the house was like. And it is the table decorations that are among some of the best of the 'forgotten' objects.

The centrepiece of a banqueting table through the centuries expressed the power and status of the owner. It is said that Emperor Charles IV when hosting important foreign visitors had a cake brought into the banqueting hall with live musicians inside it. The legacy of the faded world

of aristocracy, including the culture of dining, has survived mostly thanks to the bourgeois middle classes, while specific banqueting traditions are being maintained at Prague Castle. President T. G. Masaryk had a special porcelain dinner service, as did President Husák. A bespoke dinner service ordered by President Václav Havel, made by Thun, a Czech company, is still being used at the Castle accompanied by traditional Moser glassware, all in the spirit of past centuries.

During the course of my work in the heritage industry I have met many representatives of the aristocracy who lived between the two World Wars and were able to provide invaluable information for my research. Since 1993, together with a team of experts, I have been participating in a number of special installations in historic houses, presenting fully-laid banqueting tables with original tableware and decorations. The first was at the Château of Nelahozeves in 1997, visited by Václav Havel, where the centrepiece - until then a museum piece from the Lobkowitz collection, one of the most valuable in Czech lands - was displayed on the table for which it was designed. In 2016 we presented a Christmas banqueting table at the Château of Vizovice, and in 2018 at the Château of Kynžvart visitors could see table decorations from the collections of the Austrian Chancellor Klemens Wenzel von Metternich. The installation was a reminder of a banquet in honour of the Emperor Ferdinand V, who visited Metternich in his summer palace in September 1835. In 2018 a Christmas banqueting table was set up as a commemoration of the 50<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand d'Este (18.12.1863), heir to the throne, at his family seat of Konopiště; in the same location in 2019 a banqueting exhibition featured an Easter theme and its symbolism. The following year in the dining room of the Château of Krásný Dvůr a banqueting table was recreated, commemorating a visit to the country seat of Count Jan Rudolf Černín by the Emperor Franz I and his daughter Louisa, consort of Napoleon Bonaparte, in July 1812. A dining room laid out for dessert, Baroque-style, was shown at Konopiště in 2021. Many more installations are planned and new ways of presentation are being explored to bring this rather neglected part of cultural heritage to the public.

**Milan Svoboda** *is the former deputy director of the National Heritage Institute. He lectures at the Institute of Ethnology at Charles University in Prague*





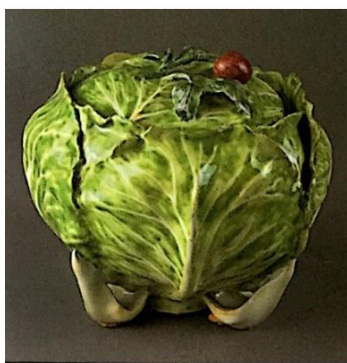
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*Clockwise from above: formal dining on the grandest scale in Bohemia - banquet in the Vladislav Hall of Prague Castle on the occasion of the Coronation of the Emperor Ferdinand V on 12th September 1836; display food, a recreated centrepiece made out of sugar paste in the shape of the Gothic Revival Temple in the English park at the Château of Krásný Dvůr; banquet reconstruction at Jaroměřice nad Rokytinou; wooden figure of Christ on a donkey, from the Château of Konopiště, used on a sideboard with wheels to symbolise his arrival in Jerusalem; recreation in Blatná Castle of an Easter Sunday luncheon table, set with gilded eggs, a Paschal Lamb and a large hot cross bun*







*Clockwise from above: surtout de table in the shape of a basket of abundance with two goddesses, from Prince Metternich's collection on display in the Château of Kynžvart, mid 19th-century, Thomire Manufactory, Paris; large centrepiece made from silver-plated metal, from the Château of Lešná near Zlín, 1873, made by Vinzenz Mayer's Söhne company in Vienna; surtout de table in the shape of a what-not with three nymphs, end of 18th century, Thomire Manufactory, Paris, on display in Kynžvart, Metternich Collection; two display vessels in the form of vegetables from the Château of Kozel, dated 1750-1760, produced in Holíč; two display vessels, Castle Sychrov, dated 1750, produced in Strasbourg*

