

The Czech Republic: In The Heart of Europe

JAROSLAV ŠTIKA AND JOSEF JANČAR

For many years, Čech wandered through Europe in search of a new home for his people. One day, from the summit of Mount Říp, he saw beneath him a pleasant land of rolling hills and fertile plains. The area was protected by mountains – the Giant Mountains (Krkonoše) and the Ash Mountains (Jeseníky) in the north, and the Beskids (Beskydy) and Maple Mountains (Javorníky) in the east – and by the seemingly impenetrable Bohemian Forest (Šumava) in the south. Three great rivers, the Elbe (Labe), Oder (Odra), and Morava, watered the country. As he scanned the landscape beneath him, Čech smiled knowingly. This was where his people would settle. Years later his descendants named the land – and themselves – Czech, in honor of the great ancestor who brought them there.

T

he legend of Čech is an integral part of the folklore of the Czech Republic. It provides the Czech people with a sense of unity and continuity in this small land in the heart of Europe. And historians believe that the legend contains more than a kernel of truth regarding the origins of the Czech nation.

They claim that some 1,500 years ago a group of Slavic tribes migrated northwest into Central Europe. The strongest of these tribes was the Czech tribe, which settled around Velehrad and eventually founded the state of Great Moravia. Two Greek monks, Cyril and Methodius, introduced Christianity in the 9th century; about a hundred years later, Great Moravia was replaced by the Principality of Bohemia, which evolved into the Czech Kingdom, with its royal seat in Prague.

For more than 300 years, the Czech Kingdom achieved prominence under the Premyslid dynasty. One 14th-century monarch, Charles IV, was even chosen Holy

Roman Emperor. For a short while, Charles succeeded in turning the Czech Lands into the political and cultural center of the empire. He relocated the Holy Roman capital to Prague and built the great castle of Karlštejn and the famous stone bridge (now known as Charles Bridge) over the River Vltava. In 1348, he founded the first university in Central Europe, later to be called Charles University. Rudolf II, a Hapsburg monarch, also achieved prominence later as a patron of the arts, sciences, and the occult.

Yet, despite the prominence of their kingdom, the Czech people found themselves in constant confrontation with their more powerful German-speaking neighbors to the north, west, and south – even today, the borders with Germany and Austria account for two-thirds of the circumference of the Czech Republic. The Battle of the White Mountain in 1620 saw the final defeat of the Czech Kingdom. Its territories were absorbed by the Hapsburg monarchy of Austria, and most of the aristocracy, as well as scholars and artists, were executed or exiled.

The Czech Lands remained under Hapsburg domination for almost 300 years. A new, German-speaking aristocracy replaced the local nobility and church hierarchy, and by the late 18th century even native officials and the middle class were almost entirely assimilated into the dominant German society. The Czech language fell into disuse in the major urban centers; few books and virtually no poetry were published in Czech during that time.

Nevertheless, traditional Czech folk culture survived. Each region had its own local dress, architecture, foods, customs, songs, dances, and folk stories. Czech culture and local Czech dialects thrived in the rural areas.

**The Czech Republic:
Tradition and
Transformation** has been
made possible with the sup-
port of the Ministry of Culture
and the Ministry of Foreign
Affairs of the Czech Republic,
the Embassy of the Czech
Republic in the United States,
the Trust for Mutual
Understanding, Samson
Brewery from the south
Bohemian town of České
Budějovice, and the Ford
Motor Company Fund, and
has been produced in collabo-
ration with the Open-Air
Museum of Wallachia.



The Czech Republic comprises three historical territories – Bohemia, Moravia, and a portion of Silesia. Despite the Czech Republic's newly gained independence, it has a 1,000-year history as part of the Czech Lands. From 1918 to 1992, it was part of Czechoslovakia and still shares many cultural traditions with its neighbors in the newly formed Slovak Republic.

However, like most of Europe, the Austrian Empire was undergoing major political and social upheaval. Serfdom was abolished in 1848; industrialization and greater trade and educational opportunities led to the expansion of large towns into cities such as Prague and Brno. In the face of rapid modernization, traditional culture in the urban centers and the newly established industrial areas around Plzeň (Pilsen), Kladno, the mining town of Ostrava, and several other areas gave way to new traditions such as workers' associations, which sometimes included guild costumes and songs.

By the latter half of the 19th century, the effects of modernization reached the rural lowland villages and then even the more remote foothills of the country. People started saving their traditional costumes for special occasions and began wearing "town wear," the less expensive civilian clothing now common in all of Europe. In most villages, traditional songs were no longer sung, local customs were no longer observed, and new houses were no longer built in the traditional style.

It seems ironic that the very trends that almost led to the demise of traditional Czech

culture also led to its revival. Along with industrialization and better educational opportunities, modernization also brought with it a spirit of patriotism and pan-Slavism, formulated in a movement known as the National Revival. Older folk traditions, some of which still survived in the remote mountain areas, played an important role in furthering this revival and formed the basis of many outstanding works of art and music. Composers Bedřich Smetana, Antonín Dvořák, and Leoš Janáček and writers Božena Němcová, Jan Neruda, and Alois Jirásek, among others, incorporated the sounds and stories of the Czech countryside into their works, winning them national and even international renown. The National Theater was established to ensure that native cultural works would be performed. While the Romantic and patriotic fervor sweeping Europe during this period often inspired xenophobic tendencies, Prague remained a cosmopolitan center of cultural, racial, and national tolerance, the home of internationally acclaimed writers such as Franz Kafka and, later, Karel Čapek and Jaroslav Hašek.

Both traditional folklore as well as its nat-

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Vernacular Architecture in the Czech Republic

JIŘÍ LANGER



Photo courtesy Mr. J. Martinák

In Mr. Martinák's workshop in the town of Stárec u Třebíče, you can see a statue of St. John of Nepomuk. Mr. Martinák must create a copy of this statue.

Any mention of architecture in the Czech Republic may bring to mind the magnificent, centuries-old church towers of Prague. However, many other examples of Czech architecture exist, different from Prague's and lovely in their own right. Czech villages, each with its farms, wine cellars, bell tower, and church, are known for their diverse architectural styles, which vary throughout the country according to topography and date of origin. Neighboring Germany, Poland, Slovakia, and Austria also have had a strong architectural influence on Czech structures. Some villages can boast relics of Renaissance architecture or impressive examples of the Gothic style from centuries past. In northwest Bohemia and other wooded areas, one finds alpine-style log cabin houses reminiscent of German mountain villages. These sturdy structures

cover under one roof the living quarters as well as the stables, barn, and hayloft. In other regions, construction materials range from clay to brick to stone. Houses are sometimes decorated with colorful paint or geometric patterns. Most notable, perhaps, is what is known as South Bohemian Peasant Baroque. Houses built in this graceful style are characterized by their gentle, rounded stucco facades standing in peaceful rows along the village green. They are often painted in subtle pastel colors with white stucco ornamentation on the facades, and are flanked by a wide portal leading to the courtyard within.

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Wooden belfries in Moravia were communal gathering places in small villages that did not have churches. Their bells tolled to announce births, weddings, and deaths. When Czechs came to Texas in the 1800s, they constructed belfries in their new communities to remind them of their homeland.



Photo courtesy Wallachian Museum



Drawing by Tony Svehla

Houses built in the South Bohemian Peasant Baroque style are typical of farms along the Austrian border. These farms often have separate living quarters, a main house and a barn or smaller building where the parents of the current farmer may live.

ural evolution into contemporary forms helped forge the new Czech national culture. In 1895 Prague took pride in the opening of the Czechoslavic Ethnographical Exhibition. Historically, the Czech Lands consisted of three territorial and administrative regions: Bohemia in the west and Moravia and Silesia in the east. For six months these three regions displayed their local costumes, tools, architecture, folk art, songs, dances, and customs. Some 2.5 million people visited the exhibition, including 450 Czech Americans, who presented the new lives they had made for themselves in America.

To prepare for this exhibition, regional committees collected diverse examples of folk costumes, embroidery, tools, and household items, while song and dance troupes were organized under the aegis of leading Czech musicians and choreographers. Throughout the exhibition, Prague witnessed colorful processions and celebrations ranging from harvest festivals to traditional wedding ceremonies.

The Czechoslavic Ethnographical Exhibition was a great success. After centuries of Austrian political and cultural domination, the Czech people began taking pride in their own culture. Newspapers gave extensive coverage to the exhibition itself and to the debate it sparked. Some people feared that traditional Czech culture was facing inevitable extinction, and devoted enormous energy to recording what remained of the traditions before they vanished. Most people, however, claimed that these cultural traditions could survive, and channeled their efforts into preservation, education, and the transmission of traditional practices.

Although the Prague Exhibition and the concurrent local events sparked a renewed interest in traditional culture — some 160 regional museums were established in the exhibition's wake — this fascination with things Czech gradually waned in favor of more urgent national issues. The philosopher Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk gained widespread support for the idea of complete political independence for the Czech and Slovak peoples.



Photo by Amy Horowitz

With the outbreak of World War I less than 20 years after the exhibition and the collapse of the Hapsburg monarchy precipitated by the war, Czech nationalism became a pragmatic reality. On October 28, 1918, the Czechoslovak Republic became an independent state, with Tomáš Masaryk as its first president. The Czech Lands of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia were joined by neighboring Slovakia and a small, westerly region of the Ukraine. The new state leaned toward the West, and within just a few years it became one of the most advanced industrial nations of Europe, as well as a bastion of democracy among the emerging nation-states of Central and Eastern Europe.

Independence sparked a revival of patriotic sentiment, including a commitment to the folk traditions of the past. Regional folk festivals, such as the Moravian Year and the Wallachian Year, enabled the people of each region to investigate their cultural past. Time-worn folk costumes were repaired, and the younger generation approached their elders to teach them the songs and dances of their villages.

World War II saw an end to the short-lived Czechoslovak Republic. Even before the war began, Czechoslovakia was partitioned: the Sudetenland region adjacent to Germany and Austria was annexed to Nazi Germany, and a fascist regime was installed in a now-separate

Prague is often called the city of a thousand spires. Here churches and synagogues, bridges, cafes, and homes span hundreds of years of architectural and artistic styles. The Čech Bridge, built in the 20th-century Art Nouveau style, foregrounds the Hradčany Castle. This castle combines Roman, Gothic, Renaissance, and Baroque elements.

The pine forests of the Beskydy Mountains in eastern Moravia are home to Wallachian culture. The people of this region may be descendants of Romanian shepherds who migrated west several hundred years ago.



Photo by Amy Horowitz

Slovakia. What remained of Czechoslovakia became the nominally autonomous German Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Nazi Germany sought to bring about the gradual Germanization of the Czech population and the total liquidation of the country's Jewish and Romany minorities. Many Czech civilians responded by participating in the resistance and later in the partisan groups that operated throughout the country.

World War II ended on May 8, 1945. But liberation from six years of Nazi German rule did not end the foreign domination of Czechoslovakia. At secret meetings of the Allied powers, Europe was divided up: Britain, France, and the United States were to dominate Western Europe; Eastern Europe, including Czechoslovakia, was relegated to the Soviet sphere of influence. Social agitation, supported by Soviet interests, soon led to the formation of a totalitarian Communist government, which limited private ownership and enterprise and personal and creative freedoms.

Despite the new regime, the years following World War II saw another revival of Czech national pride. Numerous folklore ensembles

were established and, as in the years following independence, the younger generation turned to their elders to teach them the customs and traditions of the past. Traditional songs and dances were documented with the assistance of the older generation who remembered them personally, and elderly people were often asked to demonstrate these disappearing arts at folk festivals. At the same time, Czech folklore underwent something of a metamorphosis. While some folk ensembles attempted to recreate the dances of the past, many others incorporated complex new choreographic arrangements, often in the spirit of Soviet state ensembles. These new folk ensembles received considerable support from the Communist Party and the state-run media, and were often sponsored by large industrial plants. The Czech people responded angrily to Communist (often foreign) interference with their national culture, first by condemning the flamboyant state-sponsored productions, and later by making denigrating references to "the burden of folklore." "Down with the *čerpák*" (a decorated wooden vessel used by herdsmen) became a rallying cry. In 1968 Alexander Dubček led the democratic-leaning elements

of the Communist Party leadership in an attempt to break with the Soviet Union. Proudly declaring his intention of creating "socialism with a human face," Dubček started to enact popular democratic reforms known as the Prague Spring. But in August, 500,000 Soviet and Warsaw Pact troops occupied Czechoslovakia and put an end to the "uprising." With the restoration of the totalitarian regime, thousands of prominent Czech cultural figures fled the country, among them film director Miloš Forman and writers Milan Kundera and Josef Škvorecký. Many of those who remained suffered long prison terms for participating in or supporting the democratic experiment. Nine years later, in 1977, leading Czech cultural and scientific personalities issued *Charter '77*, documenting human rights abuses in the country. Writer Václav Havel, now president of the Czech Republic, was a key figure in the publication of *Charter '77*.

In 1989, the people of Czechoslovakia rose again in peaceful protest against the Communist regime. Among the leaders of the protest were intellectuals who had remained in the country after the invasion of 1968. In the years immediately following the "Velvet Revolution," Western cultural productions, some of dubious quality, inundated Czech society. The reaction has been a new interest in traditional folklore — the Folklore Association of the Czech Republic now lists some 12,000 active members of folklore ensembles. It seems that the Czech people remain loyal to the culture that, in 1895, some claimed was on the verge of extinction.

In fact, most Czech citizens still know hundreds of folk songs. Time-honored customs have survived, even if only as aesthetic or amusing reminders of a proud past. Traditional weddings are still held in rural areas and to some extent in the urban centers from where they had once disappeared.

In other areas, the transmission and transformation rather than disappearance of older folk traditions served as a mechanism of maintaining contemporary regional identity. The most westerly of these areas is Chodsko in Bohemia. This region borders on Germany,

On the Role of Culture

Since the time of Communism, when culture was viewed as a part of the so-called superstructure, culture has been always and everywhere the least respected sphere of human activity; some people tend to regard culture as a luxury and as an ornament of life, to which one contributes only leftover resources. Therefore, I would like to call attention to the fact that culture is a fundamental instrument of a self-confident society. The measure of our accomplishment in any endeavor depends on the state of our spirit, on our self-awareness, on the manner in which we are free and responsible. We cannot only proclaim individual freedom and at the same time overlook the framework in which a human being clearly understands and articulates individual freedom. We cannot rely on the background, ethics, fantasy, and self-confidence of a citizen, and at the same time overlook the circumstances from which this individual originates. Culture belongs neither to the basic foundation of society nor to its superstructure. Culture is everywhere and influences everything.

– *Excerpt from an address by
Václav Havel, President of the Czech Republic,
delivered to the Czech Parliament,
March 14, 1995*

and the local folk culture exhibits some parallels with that of Bavaria. Characteristic of Chodsko's music is the bagpipe (in contrast, the music of Blata in southern Bohemia is dominated by brass bands); the most common dance is the *kolečka*, in which dancers turn in a circle. Chodsko celebrates its own folklore festival in the town of Domažlice, while neighboring Strakonice can be called the bagpipe capital of Europe — bagpipers from across the continent gather there regularly to exhibit their skills.

Moravia boasts an even richer folklore.

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Culture and Art on the Road to Democracy

KRISTINA ŽANTOVSKÁ

KRISTINA ŽANTOVSKÁ graduated as a dramaturge from the Theater Academy of Prague. She worked as a free-lance contributor to and editor of several magazines, was editor-in-chief of the quarterly lifestyle magazine UM, and served as acting administrator of the Czech Information and Cultural Center in New York.

In the Czech Lands, freedom above all has meant spiritual freedom. It was therefore no coincidence that intellectuals and artists were always in the forefront of the fight for freedom. Words gave courage to implement changes; words were the political instrument used to uplift the morale of the nation.

By the power of sermons preached by Master Jan Hus, a great Reformation movement was launched in Bohemia. For his words Hus was pronounced a heretic and burnt at the stake in 1415. Two hundred years later, the great "Teacher of Nations," Jan Amos Komenský (1592-1670, better known as Comenius), a scholar and promoter of the idea of the democratization of education and modern methods of teaching, was driven from his homeland for his words. The systematic Germanization of the Czech nation and the suppression of Czech language and culture (after the repression of the Reformation in Bohemia in 1620) led to the 19th-century movement of Czech intellectuals and artists called the National Revival. Through their works writers, poets, historians, musicians, playwrights, and painters helped to awaken the Czech nation's consciousness of the legitimacy of its history, its language, and its culture. Since Czechs had no effective political power within the multinational Austro-Hungarian Empire, art and education served as politicizing factors in the rebirth of Czech society. The National Revival movement culminated in 1918 in the constitution of the sovereign state of Czechoslovakia and in the election of its

first president, the philosopher and scholar Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk. With the founding of a new democratic state all spheres of culture flourished.

Fear of the word and independent thought also characterized Nazi Germany. Losses suffered by the Czech nation in the intellectual sphere during World War II were tragic for its culture and its future.

The Communist regime, installed in 1948, feared the word, too, using censorship and imprisonment to silence a number of Czech intellectuals, including the current president of the Czech Republic, Václav Havel. And it was the Czech intellectual and artistic community which played a decisive role in the 1968 attempt to reform the political and economic system and which — after the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact tanks and the consequent escalation of Communist terror — was harshly persecuted. As the regime decayed, censorship weakened, and the cultural community raised its anti-regime voice more and more distinctly. In the days of November 1989, these were the first people prepared for changes and willing to implement them. Theaters became tribunes of public discussions, and actors, writers, playwrights, artists, and musicians the apostles of history in transformation. Václav Havel, a playwright, writer, and philosopher, became the head of state. He is a symbol and personification of the continuity of the history of a nation whose respect for words and for the power of ideas has withstood all that was antagonistic to the principles of freedom and a democratic society.

The fertile region of Haná has experienced a revival of local traditions that had practically disappeared in the 19th century. Perhaps the most popular folklore in Moravia comes from Wallachia and Moravian Slovakia. The folk cultures of both regions share much in common with neighboring Slovakia, although in mountainous Wallachia the local traditions are more influenced by the culture of the Carpathian herdsmen who inhabit the region. The focal point of this folklore revival is the town of Rožnov, where the Open-Air Museum of Wallachia demonstrates local folk arts to half a million visitors every spring and summer.

Moravian Slovakia lies in the hinterlands close to the Danube River. Each June, its town of Strážnice hosts one of Europe's oldest and largest folklore festivals. Along the Slovak border is the Hornácko region, consisting of ten villages in which traditional folklore, especially music and dance, has been less influenced by contemporary forms. It is the home of many outstanding performers, including Romany musicians.

Silesia lies to the north of Moravia. Western Silesia, including the town of Opava, was once a cosmopolitan region inhabited by Czechs, Poles, and Germans. Local folklore reflects this multicultural, urban environment. In contrast, the folklore of eastern Silesia is strongly influenced by Slovak mountain culture, which has been transmitted in its older forms particularly in those villages along the Polish border where Polish folk culture had a strong impact on the local traditions. As in Chodsko, bagpipes are the musical instrument of choice in eastern Silesia.

While each region of the Czech Republic has its own distinct folk culture, certain regional folk songs have gained national status and are heard throughout the country. The most popular of these songs originate in Moravian Slovakia, Wallachia, and Chodsko, although songs from other regions are also commonly heard. Bands and vocal ensembles are important in the dissemination of folk culture and appear frequently on national television. One band, the Moravanka Brass Band, has been imitated by hundreds of other bands

throughout the country. Similarly, certain regional costumes have gained national acceptance, such as the folk costumes of Plzeň, in Bohemia, and of Kyjov, in southern Moravia, which can be seen in festivals in Prague.

Another important element of local folklore is holiday celebrations. Research conducted in 1982 indicated that certain Christmas and Easter customs are observed throughout the country. Southern Moravians in particular still practice a broad repertoire of these folk traditions. Almost all the customs associated with the annual holiday cycle that were described by ethnographers in the late 19th century have been transformed and survive up to the present day in varying degrees. Although the persistence of most customs can be attributed to the strong bonds of tradition, credit must also be given to local cultural associations, whose members consciously preserve some elements of traditional folk culture as part of their national cultural heritage.

For instance, many magical rites were once associated with Christmas. These are still observed, although their original intention has long been abandoned. As with many folk traditions, their survival is based more on the aesthetic and entertainment value of the particular custom than on the custom itself. Many customs have undergone certain modifications: for instance, Christmas Eve was once celebrated by strolling about the town singing carols, but this practice is now more common on the feast days of saints, particularly Saints Barbara, Nicholas, and Lucy, all honored in December. Caroling and other folklore festivities are still common in early January to honor the Three Kings of the Epiphany.

Many rituals related to the holidays were and still are based on an agricultural society. On Christmas Eve, for instance, before sitting down to a feast, farmers fed cows and horses bread dipped in honey and garlic to ensure plentiful harvests. Although this custom is no longer observed in most towns, another related custom endures. In the past, the Christmas table was decorated with a bowl containing all the different types of grains and legumes cul-

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tivated by farmers throughout the year. After the meal, the grain was distributed to the hens to ensure that they laid eggs in the coming year. In the modern Czech Republic it is still common to decorate the Christmas table with a bowl of regional produce. Another Moravian rural custom associated with the Christmas meal is to fasten a chain around the table before supper; the chain represents the family's hope to remain together in the coming year.

Until the beginning of the 20th century Saint Stephen's Day, which usually falls after Christmas, was the one day in the year on which farm hands could leave one master for another. Under the Communist regime, private farming was abolished, and people no longer went "into service." Nevertheless, in many families the women still give the men gifts of shoes or trousers, with which they can "go into service" with a new master. In fact, this custom has even spread to the cities; in some places schoolboys now go "into service" with their godparents for the day.

As with Christmas, Shrovetide is a time for masquerade processions and caroling. Many of the dances associated with this pre-Easter festivity — some included soaring leaps to ensure high stalks of flax and hemp — have disappeared, particularly those with magical elements. However, carnivals are still held in many villages and small towns where they are sometimes organized by modern folklore ensembles. Groups from around the Czech Republic and abroad gather to demonstrate their Shrovetide processions at a folklore festival in the Moravian village of Strání.

While most of the traditions associated

with Easter are of a religious nature, Easter Monday remains a popular folk holiday. On that day, boys walk through the streets carrying plaited willow switches and playfully beat the girls. The girls then reward them with painted Easter eggs, an ancient fertility symbol. Less common are the agricultural festivities associated with Whitsun, the seventh Sunday after Easter, at which bonfires are lit to frighten away the witches. Other village celebrations include the feasts celebrated in honor of the saint to whom the village church is consecrated.

One of the driving factors of a small state's search for identity in the modern world is the fear that its identity might be lost. In the Czech Republic, the search for identity tends to take the form of a return to folk traditions of the family, village, region, and country at large. Czechs' search for a contemporary identity combines admiration of their "older" cultural traditions with receptivity to innovation and the transformative elements of world culture. The question posed after the Czechoslovak Ethnographical Exhibition of 1895 — whether Czech folk traditions were doomed to extinction or would grow and flourish — has taken on new meaning a hundred years later in 1995. The Czech Republic recently emerged from 50 years of totalitarian rule. Many traditions have disappeared against the backdrop of the modern world; many others have been transformed almost beyond recognition. Still, in a land where citizens often elect artists, poets, and dramatists as their national and local leaders, the vital role of culture seems to be at the heart of Czech identity and society itself.