

My Czech Lands

A series in which people talk about what the Czech Republic means to them

I have always had a passion for the country house and its associated landscape. As co-director of Wessex Fine Art Study Courses I have led numerous groups on architectural tours to see buildings in Britain and abroad, but nothing prepared me for the astonishing variety, quality and sheer number of houses – *zámky* - that I was to discover in the Czech lands in the years following the Velvet Revolution of 1989.

In Bohemia and Moravia there are probably more great houses per square mile than in almost any other country in Europe. My first visit was in the early 1990s, when Prague was still like a Baroque stage-set, with few shops or cafés. The beautiful street Nerudova, part of the King's Way leading up to the castle, preserved almost entirely its eighteenth-century appearance, with no disfiguring shop signs, and only a few tourists.

Travelling in the countryside then was like going back fifty years; there were very few cars, and the quiet and beautiful landscape of hills, forests, lakes and pastures, punctuated with dramatic views of castles seemed like the setting of childhood fairy tales.

In the country I visited Český Krumlov, still then in a state of sleepy decline. Other highlights were the Renaissance town of Telč, where I was a lone observer in its beautiful square of elaborately gabled and arcaded houses, the mighty baroque castle of Vranov, set dramatically on a rocky cliff above the river Dyje, and the great turreted Gothic revival Hluboká, the former home of the Schwarzenbergs.

Armed with a map which marked all the houses open to the public in red, and all the closed ones in yellow, I determined over the next years to see all the 'open' houses and as many of the closed ones as possible. These visits prompted numerous adventures. On one occasion, having travelled many miles to see a particular 'closed' zámek, the young men who had brought the huge bunch of keys found to their discomfiture that none of them fitted the massive lock. Determined not to be beaten, I found that by lying flat on my back I could painfully ease myself through the space under the great gates, and found myself in a ravishing but decayed Renaissance courtyard, leaving my frustrated companions outside!

Where were the families who once lived in these now-empty museum buildings? I was curious to find out, but at that time the compulsory guided tour of 'open' houses rarely mentioned the family and merely drew attention to the assemblage of miscellaneous objects in the individual rooms that the visitor was expected to admire. Nothing was set in context or related to its period, and the original function of the rooms was never discussed, or indeed was probably not known, due to the wanton destruction of important documents, such as letters, diaries and inventories.

The confiscation of German property in 1945 and of all private property after the Communist *coup* of 1948 meant that the state then had in its care thousands of great houses which it had not the means to maintain. About a hundred of the 'best' houses were turned into museums and opened to the public; others became institutions, old people's homes, orphanages, barracks, schools, farms and were often poorly maintained, whilst the rest were allowed slowly to deteriorate. By the 1990s many were in a

deplorable condition. In addition, numerous sales in the 1960s allowed the dispersal of furnishings and paintings at knock-down prices; in this way many houses lost all their original contents and many were turned into soulless museums of agricultural implements, transport and so on.

As I travelled, I was fascinated to see how the situation of the Czech Lands in the heart of Europe meant that ideas and artists from all over Europe - Germany, Austria, Italy and Flanders - contributed to its rich cultural tapestry. It was exciting and unexpected to discover the important influence of Britain in the nineteenth century, as young aristocrats from Bohemia toured Britain to look at the latest ideas in building and gardening, and were inspired by our naturalistic landscape parks and romantic Gothic-Revival turreted castles. This became the subject of my essay *The Romantic Gothic Castle in Britain and Bohemia*, which won first prize in the British Czech and Slovak Association Essay Competition of 2004.

Each visit to the Czech Republic was made with a careful programme of arranged appointments, where I had the opportunity to meet the curators. I spoke little Czech, but German was an asset. Everywhere the curators were devoted to the houses they were caring for, but frustrated at the lack of funds to effect improvements. At this early date there were still very few foreign visitors, or foreign group tours; guidebooks were only in Czech, or sometimes German and Russian, and visitor amenities were minimal.

Developing friendships among curators, and inspired by the architectural *richesse* of the country, I determined to bring over groups. Nevertheless this was not an easy task even in the late 1990s, when the only way of communicating with my charming young Czech helper was via a fax machine in her aunt's factory! Computers and the internet were a luxury then that few could afford. The tours I arranged aimed to show participants both the great variety of châteaux - from mediaeval to Gothic Revival right up to Art Deco, but I also wanted to make them aware of the huge problems the country faced in the restoration of its vast legacy of historic buildings, both private and state-owned. We went to Uherčice, the subject of an article in the Newsletter, pages 13-15, wrecked during its use as a prison and barracks, but bravely taken on by the State in a visionary long-term restoration project. We saw houses that had been restituted to the nobility, many of whom had come back from exile from all over the world to reclaim their former homes, only to find devastation on their doorstep.

What inspired and moved the participants in all these groups was to see the sheer courage and determination of both the state and private individuals to restore their lost rich heritage. There is a sense of history so often lacking in Britain. It is amazing how rapidly the situation has changed in the last fifteen years. Where once there were numerous blackened and decaying *zámky*, everywhere buildings are being restored; thousands of square metres of roofs have been re-laid, stonework repaired and stucco repainted; new rooms have been made accessible to the public, complete theatrical sets discovered forgotten in attics, and restored and put on display; new exhibitions installed; and every year new houses opened that had been closed for decades. Buildings that in other countries would have been regarded as beyond hope are everywhere being brought back to life. It is an astonishing achievement. This task has been undertaken by the state, by municipalities, by individual private Czech citizens, by churches and their congregations, and by members of the nobility determined to restore their old family homes.

In addition, there are now new approaches to the display; the history of the family who once lived in these houses is given much more prominence; curators increasingly display the more intimate family apartments as well as the grand state rooms. These lend life to the visit, revealing glimpses of the daily lives of the families who once lived in these houses. Where possible, original furniture is being returned to houses where it once belonged, thereby creating a much more authentic and scholarly display. This has developed alongside more visitor amenities, attractively produced guidebooks in foreign languages, cafés, concerts and other attractions

The Czech Republic is a small country with limited funds. The enterprise and determination of the Czech people to restore the damage of the past inspired me, together with Ian Kennaway and other colleagues, to set up the UK Friends of Czech Historic Houses, Gardens and Parks, to help in some small way, to fund restoration projects for the country. We are grateful to all those who have supported us so warmly in this enterprise.

Today the Czech Republic stands at an important crossroads. Membership of the EU will certainly bring more money into the country and there will be more opportunities for the funding of major restoration projects. However there are pitfalls ahead. Investors are casting their eye on country houses and parks as possible hotels, clubs, conference centres, golf-courses. It is crucially important that such developments should not be allowed to ruin the places they are supposed to save. Some interiors still have their authentic original eighteenth-century colour schemes. Such authenticity is fragile and conservation and restoration need to be handled with the utmost sensitivity. It would, in my view, be tragic to destroy in the interests of Western capitalism what has almost miraculously survived the Nazis, the Communists and centuries of turbulent Czech history.

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