



My Bohemian Heritage: The Music and Art of Chicago's Cerny and Vasak Families

Jetta Marie Vasak

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“Unless we document the lives of those who came before us, they will forever be forgotten.” My Bohemian Heritage highlights two families who contributed greatly to the art and musical culture of Chicago in the early 1900s. Ms. Vasak first focuses on A. V. Cerny, her grandfather, who founded the first Bohemian Conservatory of Music in Chicago. His father, Jan, was a violinist who owned the Prague Orchestra. A.V. Cerny was an exceptional teacher and educated a whole generation of musical artists as soloists and as members of orchestras. Indeed, his own child, Milada, a child prodigy, began piano at the age of 3, becoming a virtuoso pianist and touring the United States at about age 9 and Europe at about age 10. Her younger sister, Zdenka (the author’s mother), was heralded as “The Greatest Bohemian Violoncellist” in the world. The art-nouveau artist, Alfons Mucha, a personal friend of A.V. Cerny, often stayed at their home, and generously painted portraits and posters of A.V.’s two eldest daughters while teaching art at the Chicago Art Institute. A.V. Cerny was also a personal friend of Antonin Dvorak, and founded the Dvorak Quartet in the 1890s and later The Society for the Uplift of Chamber Music. Music and conversation filled their home. Through their doors and at their dining table appeared many of the most talented people of the era, bringing their cultural preferences for a variety of Bohemian delicacies, prepared by Grandma Cerny, all while playing chamber music, card games, and sharing many late-night stories. Among them were Rudolf Friml, pianist and composer, and Jan Kubelik, violinist, called “the Paganini of the 20th century.” When Zdenka Cerny eloped with Otakar Vasak , who had immigrated from Prague at age 24, it had been “love at first sight.” Thus, a small section of love letters adds color to otherwise black and white photos. In compiling these personal vignettes, Jetta Vasak passes on a small portion of her family story, while providing a window into the personal lives and times of these interesting people who contributed their gifts and talents to the rich and diverse culture of early Chicago.

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