

...BRIDGES... Number 8, 2007: Descending into the Garden

Can you imagine attending church every night of the week? If you grew up in an earlier era in a milieu where revival-style services were held for several nights in a row, you may have a sense of this possibility. However, a week-long series of events, which took place at the local church that John and I regularly attend, was of an entirely different sort. I was aware that plans were underway for a “biennial” on behalf of the diaconal center in the Stodůlky district of Prague that is directly related to our congregation. In ordinary times, the pastors and some members of the church periodically visit this center, which provides a work – and in some cases, a living and school – setting for young people with multiple disabilities. Likewise, guests from the center occasionally present special music at worship, and their handcrafted creations are available for purchase following Sunday services before Christmas and Easter. However, the biennial was an extraordinary event, designed to raise a substantial amount of money to restore, improve, and expand the building that houses the center. Indeed, as soon as I entered the sanctuary on Sunday morning, May 18th, I knew that something remarkable was about to occur. An intriguing example of religious art near the worship area seemed to be specially-made for the narrow wall space where it had been hung. Its earth-toned depiction of a benedictory figure enhanced the worship setting in an inviting way. Thus, I was eager to return that evening for the start of the biennial, which would feature an exhibit of 70 artistic works and a variety of cultural programs.

Although I did not know what the opening festivities would be like, I instantly felt at ease as I wandered through a familiar space that had been transformed from a worship setting into an exhibition hall. I joined a number of other people in gazing at various works of art composed of diverse of styles and media; there were still-lifes, landscapes, abstracts, woodcuts, oil paintings, water colors, photographs, fabric designs, and some creations that I cannot quite describe. In particular, I saw that two of the paintings were the work of Miroslav Rada, the celebrated creator of epic depictions of biblical themes who persisted in developing a unique style throughout the communist era when religious art was not “in favor” in official circles and when his distinctive style was not always appreciated by the Christian community. When synod guests had visited Rada’s atelier earlier in May, I was delighted to see photos of a massive portrayal of Christ’s passion that Rada began to paint a few years ago without knowing if he would have the strength to finish it. He had completed that work in fine form and has begun new projects that continue to reflect the integrity and power of his art. After I hurried to look at Rada’s highly-valued work, I strolled around the room, letting various pieces of the exhibit claim me as if I were their own.

However before I finished that delightful activity, the master-of-ceremonies drew our attention to the area of the room from which worship is usually conducted. That young seminarian reminded us of the objectives of the biennial before inviting various people to bring greetings. For example, Joel Ruml, the moderator of the Evangelical Church of Czech Brethren, creatively reflected on the biennial’s theme, which invited its guests to “Descend into the

Garden,” in terms of the fact that the sanctuary where the exhibition was set up is actually a “basement.” Then, a man whom I had often seen on the evening news was introduced. Mr. Karel Schwarzenberg – who had become the Czech Republic’s Minister of Foreign Affairs (Secretary of State) while we were in the United States in 2006 – was wearing his distinctive bow tie and initially seemed to be a bit ill at ease. However, after uttering some official words, he ventured a well-received witticism and warmly affirmed diaconal service.

The words offered by such distinguished guests were important. However, for me, the most memorable aspect of the evening was mediated by “Syrinx,” a flute choir that performed several classical selections. Several young women – who included one of our ministers’ daughters – stood in a semi-circle, and following the lead of an older master performer, drew us into the rhythms of joy and contemplation—and dissonance and harmony—which punctuate our daily lives. The sounds were richer and fuller than any flute music that I have ever heard, and the familiar tones of Debussy’s *Claire de Lune* cast a deep calm over the packed room. As I left the building I knew that this biennial would provide its participants with extraordinary encounters with the textures of light and shadow that characterize the lives of the people who are part of the diaconal center at Stodůlky and every one of us who has been created in the image of the one who declares: “I am the Lord, and there is no other. I form light and create darkness, I make weal and create woe, I am the Lord who do all these things” (Is 45:7).