

Life in South Bohemia

Jiřina was born in 1927 in a small South Bohemian village in the former Czechoslovakia. Bohemia has referred to the Czech lands since the ancient times, but in the late 19th century, the term came to be more associated with artists and their unconventional lifestyle. Becoming known as “bohemians,” many of them passed through Bohemia on their way to major European cities.

Dotted by countless castles and chateaus hidden in deep forests, Bohemia had strong ties to the neighboring Austria, a political reminder of the Habsburg Empire. Jiřina’s village Červená Lhota was no exception with its pale pink Renaissance chateau, a country retreat for the Austrian Schönburg-Hartenstein aristocracy.

Jiřina spent much of her childhood in close proximity to the chateau. Standing high on a rugged rock formation surrounded by a small lake, the only connection to the mainland was a two-arch stone bridge. Jiřina’s family lived in a wood ranger’s lodge tucked away in the woods behind the chateau, close to the winding dirt road leading to a nearby village. The bright white facade of the lodge contrasted with the green leaves of the majestic oaks surrounding the house. Working as the wood ranger for the Schönburgs for 120 crowns (\$6) a month, Jiřina’s father was not only responsible for those oaks, but for all the forests and game in the estate.

The lodge didn’t differ much from any other house of a middle class family living in South Bohemia in the late 1920s. The main vein of the house was a narrow hallway providing entrance to the kitchen on the right, the cowshed on the left and two bedrooms at the end. The family slept in the larger of the two bedrooms, leaving the smaller, festive bedroom for occasional guests and for storing extra duvets filled with feathers from the geese Jiřina often tended after school.

Like every wall inside the house, the main bedroom’s bare walls were painted with whitewash, the cheapest paint that is used in Czech rural homes to this day. In between the two narrow windows hung a large, thick-framed painting of Libuše, a Czech mythical empress, prophesying the glory of Prague. Inside, on the wooden floor that had to be scrubbed every week, stood a wooden table, four chairs, an armoire and three wooden beds: one for the parents, two smaller beds for Jiřina and her brother. The small kitchen housed a large tile stove and simple wooden table and chairs. Lacking electricity, the only source of light was the petroleum lamp on the wall.

The day in the country started early. At 4 a.m., Jiřina’s father was the first to wake up to walk around the woods, watching for poachers steal wood

and kill game. Her mother followed soon after to milk the two cows in the cowshed, haul the manure out and feed all the farm animals: chickens, rabbits, geese, ducks, cows and a goat. Unlike the richer peasants, Jiřina's mother didn't have a stable boy nor a servant maid to help her.

After eating home-baked bread crumbled in a glass of fresh milk for breakfast, the kids left for school. Jiřina's mother would then go outside to hand-cut the grass to feed the animals or do her chores as the wood ranger's wife. It wasn't unusual for the wife to do some of her husband's work. For lunch, she made simple dishes like sweet potato dumplings, potato pancakes, beef stew, pork sausage with cabbage or hare with cream sauce. Because Jiřina's father was allowed to hunt deer and hares, the family ate meat more often than any other middle class family. It was unusual to raise cows and chickens for meat. Providing a steady supply of milk and eggs, many families were dependent on those animals for survival. Wealthier families, including Jiřina's, could afford to raise a pig to be slaughtered for meat that would have to last an entire year.

Once school got out, like all the village kids, Jiřina along with her brother joined their mother outside. Some days they helped haul the grass from the vast meadows on a large wooden barrow up the hill over the creek back to the house. Other days they freed the tree seedlings from overgrown grass or tended cattle so it wouldn't feed on the aristocracy meadows.

Sometimes, while the kids were out and about working, Princess Schöenburg and her entourage passed by the lodge in a black carriage drawn by two stallions. Having to pay respects, the kids were ordered to kiss everyone's hand. As they got older, instead of running towards the Princess, they ran towards the woods. Hiding behind the thick trunks of the oaks nearby, they refused to kiss "the old witch's hand." The Princess often complained to Jiřina's father during the weekly meetings at the chateau, when the bailiffs, squires and overseers reported to Lord Schöenburg. After Jiřina's father came home, he would scold Jiřina and her brother. However, once a year, the kids liked the Princess. It was shortly before Christmas, when she would invite them to her quarters to see the decorated Christmas tree and give them sweaters she knitted herself.

Even though work was hard and poverty rampant, life in the country was relatively safe and secure for most. That is, until March 15, 1938 when Nazi Germany annexed Czechoslovakia. That day was the first time Jiřina's father came to pick up his kids from school. Though they weren't Jewish, he feared they would be taken away. Shortly after, the Gestapo started removing Jewish families, including Jiřina's mother's close friend. Gathered in the Terezín ghetto and concentration camp, thousands of Jews waited to be transported to extermination camps in Poland. Nobody knew what would happen next.

Soon after the official start of World War 2 with the invasion of Poland, Lord Schönburg, allied with Nazi Germany, fired Jiřina's father. Being Czech, he could no longer work for the Austrian aristocracy. Like many others who lost their jobs, Jiřina's family moved out of their home which had come with the job. Returning to their previous house farther away from the chateau, Jiřina's father became an ordinary peasant, picking up some bricklaying jobs on the side. Trained in Vienna, Jiřina's father had no trouble getting hired. The family was also able to supplement the lost salary by selling milk and calves in a nearby village.

Being far away from asphalt roads, families in the country didn't see much of the war, except for some occasional patrols and run-ins with the Gestapo. One day, when the local kids were hanging out by the small white chapel that Jiřina walked by every day to school, Nazi soldiers suddenly opened fire on them. Everyone immediately fell to the ground, and, having avoided all the bullets, pretended to be dead to make the soldiers leave. Such rare incidents however, brought war too close to home.

Being aware of the danger war presented, some of the local peasants, including Jiřina's father, joined the underground partisan efforts. Under the cover of the remote, deep woods, local peasants resisted the war, not even informing their families about the secret activities. From providing food to Jewish families in hiding to passing along information, local peasants helped bring an end to a future full of fear and uncertainty.

It took over seven years until they saw change. In April 1945, Germans from the surrounding villages started to leave and by May, the Soviet and U.S. troops expelled the rest, confiscating their property, including the Červená Lhota chateau from the Schönburgs. With Czechoslovakia liberated, life in the country would soon return to normalcy.