

## The Legacy of Svatava Jakobson

By Roger Kolar

I first encountered Mrs. Jakobson in 1972 when I signed up for her First Year Czech course. (By the way, we always called her Mrs. Jakobson, never by her given name.) From our first meeting I was immediately captivated, as I believe most of her students were. I have often wondered what it was that drew us to her. I think that for me it was her flamboyance that I found so appealing. The way she spoke, the way she acted, the way she dressed, the way she laughed, were unlike the way any woman I had ever known did those things. She was eccentric, and I loved it.

But flamboyance alone is not something that endears someone to you for life. There has to be more. With Mrs. Jakobson there were many things more. I'll share a few of my impressions if I may.

Mrs. Jakobson had a vast knowledge of all things Czech. She was expert in Czech history, folklore, music, art, architecture, and of course, language and literature, and she was eager to share that knowledge with us. Tidbits of all of these were sprinkled throughout her language class, and her culture course offered a full serving. Her own enthusiasm about these things inspired us to want to learn more. Many of us were inspired to research Czech subjects in other courses we were taking. I myself wrote my master's thesis in architectural history on an aspect of Czech architecture.

One of Svatava's qualities that I found particularly captivating was her aesthetic sense, her unique sense of beauty. She appreciated beauty as the rest of us do: beauty in art, beauty in music, beauty in nature, beauty in literature. Somehow, though, her sense of beauty seemed more acute than ours. She seemed to see

things we didn't see, and hear things we didn't hear. She perceived things on many levels at once, and taken together, they always seemed to add up to beauty.

Let me give you an example of what I mean: Svatava loved hearing Czech choirs singing Czech hymns in small churches in our Texas-Moravian communities. No matter the quality of the voices, she always described the experience as beautiful, because she saw beyond the immediacy of the songs and choirs. She saw in the performances hundreds of years of history, language and culture, and tied to that the immigrant struggles that spawned these churches, these choirs, and this culture. For Svatava, everything was connected.

And the power to describe the beauty she saw was marvelous. What a storyteller she was! She would describe everything—scenes, buildings, landscapes, people—in the most richly expressive terms, and in minute detail. Her intonation and gestures added to the remarkable experience.

I remember her description of an afternoon dance in an old dance hall somewhere out in the country. She spoke of watching the elegant couples waltzing, and of looking beyond the dancers through the windows to cultivated fields to the far horizon, and beyond that the blue Texas sky. I can't begin to describe the scene as she did, but I know that what she was seeing was the connection between the farmers now dancing in the hall, who had previously been toiling in those fields. As always, with Svatava there were connections.

In that story she spoke of the Texas sky. In a very short time after her arrival here she grew to love Texas as we natives do. She loved the Texas landscape, the Texas mystique, and she loved Texas music. When *Asleep at the Wheel* released "Miles and Miles of Texas," she had to have a copy of the record, and when Michael Martin Murphy released "Alleys of Austin," she had to have that record as

well. Also, she was a champion of the Vrazel Band, and she arranged for them to play at the Folklife Festival in Washington, D.C.

Another testament to her love of Texas was her choice of a rude cedar-chopper cabin on River Hills Road for her home. The house had fieldstone walls, a crudely built fireplace for heat, and rough cedar posts to support the second floor. She saw the house as a piece of folk art and a perfect repository for her own extensive collection of folk art from around the world. She renovated the house with the help of a Czech carpenter from Taylor, making sure to retain its original charm, but making it uniquely hers. Her account of the renovation process provided many humorous stories, her carpenter not understanding her propensity to do things in unconventional ways. I remember her telling of her exhaustive search to find the perfect Matisse pink for her front door.

(SLIDES)

Life in the house was good for those of us who visited there, attending dinners and parties, particularly the epic Christmas party. For several years Svatava's Christmas party was the highlight of the holiday for many of her students, former students and friends from around the state. I think that life there was a little harder for her dealing with the absence of air conditioning, utility problems and occasional issues with wildlife. She told the story of once having been about to step into her bathtub when she saw a rattlesnake coiled at the bottom of the tub at the drain.

One of Svatava's favorite pastimes was driving around, or being driven around, the countryside east of Austin looking for Czech farmsteads. Joel Crier, one of her students who often took her on such expeditions, told me once of such a drive. As daylight was waning, they passed a large pasture with grazing sheep. Svatava

thought that the scene was so beautiful that the farmer had to be Czech. She insisted that Joel find the farmhouse to learn who the owner was. Joel knew that he had to comply, though he was apprehensive having to approach a stranger's home at nightfall just to ascertain his identity.

Of course her main reason for finding Czechs in the countryside and small towns was for conducting and taping interviews. This she did tirelessly, and the result was boxes and boxes of cassette tapes containing those interviews. Those recordings, of course, are a central subject of this event.

Now, if you will allow me, I would like to say a few words about Svatava's post academic years.

Svatava retired from the university in 1978. An indication of the high esteem with which she was held by her colleagues at the University is a concert of Czech music that they arranged in her honor when she retired. The concert held in Hogg Auditorium, featured the Shepherd String Quartet, a pianist, and presented compositions of Suk, Janacek, Smetana, Fibich, Martinu, and Dvorak.

(SLIDE)

After retiring, Svatava continued working with students, monitoring their work and advising them on their projects. In fact, she was a reader for my own Master's thesis that wasn't finished until December of 1979. And she continued living in her home on River Hills Road for fourteen years after her retirement.

Unfortunately, as she progressed in age, managing her household and her finances became difficult for her. Though she had an adequate pension from the University, she began to have financial problems, due in part to her generous giving to charities, particularly animal charities.

Fortunately, in 1990, Helen Oelrich stepped in to organize Svatava's finances. She, in effect, became her day-to-day personal accountant. Then, in 1991, a New York friend of Svatava's convinced her to send two of her Haitian paintings to New York for sale at auction at Sotheby's. The two paintings sold for \$55,000 and helped bring Svatava into solvency. A year later she sold her home and moved to the Rebecca Baines Johnson retirement center where she lived for fourteen months.

During this time I worked with Helen to get Svatava moved, to set up her new residence at RBJ and to deal with her personal effects that didn't move with her. About 3,000 books were given to the University, as was an extensive record collection. Of course the tapes that you all know about were transferred to UT at that time as well.

As Svatava's physical and mental health deteriorated, we moved her to an assisted living center where she stayed only six months before going to the SPJST Nursing Home in Taylor in December of 1993. All of her moves were coordinated with her closest relatives, a niece and a nephew in Prague, and with her attorney. The years in the nursing home were the most difficult for us and for all her former students that visited her there. Witnessing the ravaging effects of advancing dementia is always a sobering thing, but especially when it affects someone remembered for such vibrancy.

Svatava died on September 19, 2000. A memorial service was held on September 30, eleven days after her death so that her niece and nephew could arrange to get here from Prague. The service was held in the garden of the Umlaf Sculpture Center in Zilker Park. A string quartet played Dvorak and Mozart. There were readings from scripture and from Karel Hynek Macha's *Maj*. Former students and

professors shared memories, and finally, a group of former students sang *Boze, Co's Racil*.

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Svatava's will had stipulated how many of her things were to be disposed of, and where things were not specifically indicated, her family and attorney helped us in the disposition. One curious and unfortunate stipulation in the will was a clause that indicated the name of a specific professor who was to choose where her paintings were to go. By that time, the professor was long gone from UT, and I hoped that the attorney would be unable to find him so that the paintings could stay in Texas. Sadly, he was eventually located at a university in Pennsylvania, and he insisted, despite my pleading, that the paintings be sent to his university in Pennsylvania. So that's where the paintings are now, I presume.

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Wanting to create somewhere a lasting memorial to Svatava, we arranged for a large assortment of furnishings, personal effects and folk art to be given to the SPJST Museum in Temple where they were displayed in the Svatava P. Jakobson Reading Room, a sort of mini-recreation of her River Hills living room. This gift included a collection of textiles that she collected during her field work in central and Eastern Europe. The reading room was dedicated in a ceremony on March 9, 2003 with Svatava's nephew, Michael Basch in attendance.

Svatava Jakobson was a remarkable person who lived life to the fullest. My account of her final years is not intended to add a somber note to these proceedings, but rather to complete the story of this extraordinary woman.