

## **Taking Dědeček Home**

by Danielle Machotka

The cemetery at Vyšehrad, on the outskirts of downtown Prague, is where Dvořák, Mucha and most of Czechoslovakia's other prominent artists and writers are buried. Originally the site of the Prague castle, it sits on a high rock overlooking the Vltava River. Human-sized polished granite headstones stand in neat, flower-filled rows, surrounded on three sides by a colonnade, and anchored on the fourth by a small church. As people navigate the narrow paths, their faces move in and out of the sunlight, mirroring the rhythm of the trees that preside over the silent congregation.

We arrived in the mid-afternoon of a clear, cool day in early May. The lilacs, which are ubiquitous in Prague, were in full bloom, lending a sweet perfume to the air. A few people quietly wandered among the rows of graves, paying their respects to loved ones, or perhaps to those whose poetry or music moved them. Singing unseen in the trees, a thrush accompanied the conversations of a small group that was gathering near the colonnaded walkway, chatting enthusiastically. We approached the assembly, and within fifteen minutes I was introduced to more Machotkas than I thought existed, a situation that was emphasized by the Czech custom of introducing oneself by last name.

"Machotka," the men said as they held out their hands.

"Machotková," said the women.

"Machotka."

"Machotková."

Machotkas and Machotkovás had come from all corners of the Czech Republic for this occasion. Their warm smiles confirmed that we American Machotkas had been missed and were being welcomed home. We had known about each other, the Czech and American sides of the

family, but most had never met. Events that had taken place fifty years earlier had dictated that there would be an American branch of the family, and now that branch was slowly being grafted back onto the tree from which it had broken.



Dědeček (the Czech word for grandfather) worked tirelessly for Czechoslovakia's freedom during World War II, collecting data for transmission to the government in exile and helping to organize the uprising against the German armies. However, the post-war Communist government viewed him as a threat to their fledgling rule, and concocted a trial in which he would certainly be jailed and possibly sentenced to death. He and Babička (grandmother) left Czechoslovakia in 1948 with nothing but their children.

Separated during the escape, the family met again in Germany and came to the United States, where Dědeček died and was buried in 1970. He never again saw the country for whose freedom he had worked so hard. My father returned after the fall of Communism, and became acquainted with some of his father's surviving colleagues and students. It was they who asked my family to bring Dědeček's ashes home, to rest at Vyšehrad.



Three trombones and a tuba solemnly marked the beginning of the ceremony. Dědeček's brass urn sat on a small table in the colonnade, on a black cloth decorated with red and white carnations and sashes in the tricolor of the Czech Republic—blue, red and white. An American flag covered the urn. Below it, a card read simply, "Dr. Otakar Machotka." Two men stood soberly on either side of the table; my father and one other gave the eulogies. Although the entire ceremony was in Czech, the sentiment transcended language. Dědeček had been a gentle, principled man, and

the words that were spoken expressed both fondness for him and respect for his accomplishments. It felt less like a funeral than a graceful celebration of his life.

I looked around at my newly discovered family. People looked thoughtful but not unhappy; there were no tears. Instead, we listened attentively, even those of us who understood none of the words. Whether we spoke the language or not, we all understood the emotion in the eulogies and felt a collective sense of rightness in burying Dědeček here.

The ceremony was calm and dignified, culminating in the moment when my grandfather's life finally came full circle. My father carefully lifted the American flag from Dědeček's urn, while one of the Czech men draped the Czech flag over it, quietly, without comment. All of the feelings that had been surfacing slowly since I had arrived streamed down my cheeks as if they had been trapped for twenty-eight years. I looked around and realized I was not alone. Handkerchiefs and tissues appeared out of pockets and purses to dab eyes that had been dry until now.

One of Dědeček's compatriots picked up the urn, wrapped in the Czech flag. It was heavy, and the strain was obvious in his face, but the significance of the event gave him a strength that allowed him to carry it with touching dignity to the now-open grave, and set it gently on the edge. A few more words were spoken, and everyone broke into the Lord's Prayer, familiar even in a foreign language with its rhythms and intonations. I mouthed the words in English.

The man who had carried the urn to this point then laid it in the grave, next to the urns of five other people from Dědeček's small Social Democratic party. I said good-bye to him for the last time, yet I was moved more by joy than sorrow. This is exactly the way his story should end, I thought. Ninety-six years after he was born here, forty-seven years after he was forced to leave, and twenty-five years after he had died in an adopted country, he was at rest, at home among his people in the Czech Republic.