

In the workshop that Jan Špidlen shares with his father, family history mirrors that of their homeland



GÜNTER BARTOS

Jan Špidlen
Prague, Czech Republic

I AM IN THE FOURTH GENERATION

of my family to work in our lutherie business, and our workshop has been based in this Prague building for 80 years. My grandfather purchased the house in the 1920s to set up his workshop. He stayed here throughout the Second World War but in the 1950s the Communists took over the building. At that point business became very difficult so my father, Přemysl Špidlen, decided to keep just the room in the

foreground of the picture. During the 1980s, when I joined the business, we were able to expand into the second room with the large window. The light is much better in there so this is where we now do all the making; the other room is used as a library and showroom. I do feel very aware of my predecessors. The two black and white photographs to the left of the door are of my grandfather and his father, and their tools, templates, furniture and violins can be found all around the workshop.

The workbenches that my father and I use are pushed together beneath the window. My father's bench, on the right, is very old: my great grandfather commissioned it when he returned to Prague from Russia and was setting up his business in about 1910. It was made out of some wood he had that was meant for a double bass back plate. My bench is on the left. Beside it are some shelves of varnish bottles, and our notice board with reminders of various things we need to buy and the numbers of our favourite restaurants. There is also a photo of my two children, who are aged nine and eleven. I would like it if they wanted to follow me into the family tradition of violin making, but I wouldn't push them into it.

We keep our wood, along with some machines, in a small room just off the workshop. Our bridges are suspended on a string across

the window. They are handmade; we hang them there to catch the sunlight in order to age the wood. The double bass in the doorway is an Italian manufactured instrument given to us by a family friend. It was in pieces so we fixed it, but we decided not to sell it. Sometimes my children play it when they come into the workshop. It's not a special instrument but it's a nice shape so we keep it here as a kind of mascot.

Most of the certificates over the doorway in the showroom are my violin making diplomas – though the one on the far left is to certify a bungee jump I did in 1998. That was the only time I ever tried it. The violin plate mounted on the wall on the right was a present from my mother to my father. She commissioned the artist Iva Hüttnerová to paint a picture of him on to it.

The showroom is also full of books, many of them handed down to us from my grandfather. Most of the photos in the large frame are of my father with well-known string players that he has met during his career, including David Oistrakh, Yehudi Menuhin, the Smetana Quartet, Josef Suk and Shlomo Mintz. Some of them were his clients. We also keep a small collection of instruments by Czech makers in a small room made into a safe leading off from the main workshop.

One of our most prized possessions is Jan Kubelík's old violin case, which is tucked away for safekeeping. It used to hold the 1715 'Emperor' Stradivari violin and it is covered in stickers from the different countries Kubelík visited. When he died in 1940 his son Rafael inherited the Stradivari but he wasn't a violin player so he used to store it in our shop. It was a source of great inspiration for my grandfather and father. When the Communists came to power in 1948, Rafael left the country. He took the violin but left the case behind. This workshop has certainly seen some history.

Interview by Catherine Payne

NEXT MONTH >> Isabelle Wilbaux in Montreal, Canada

