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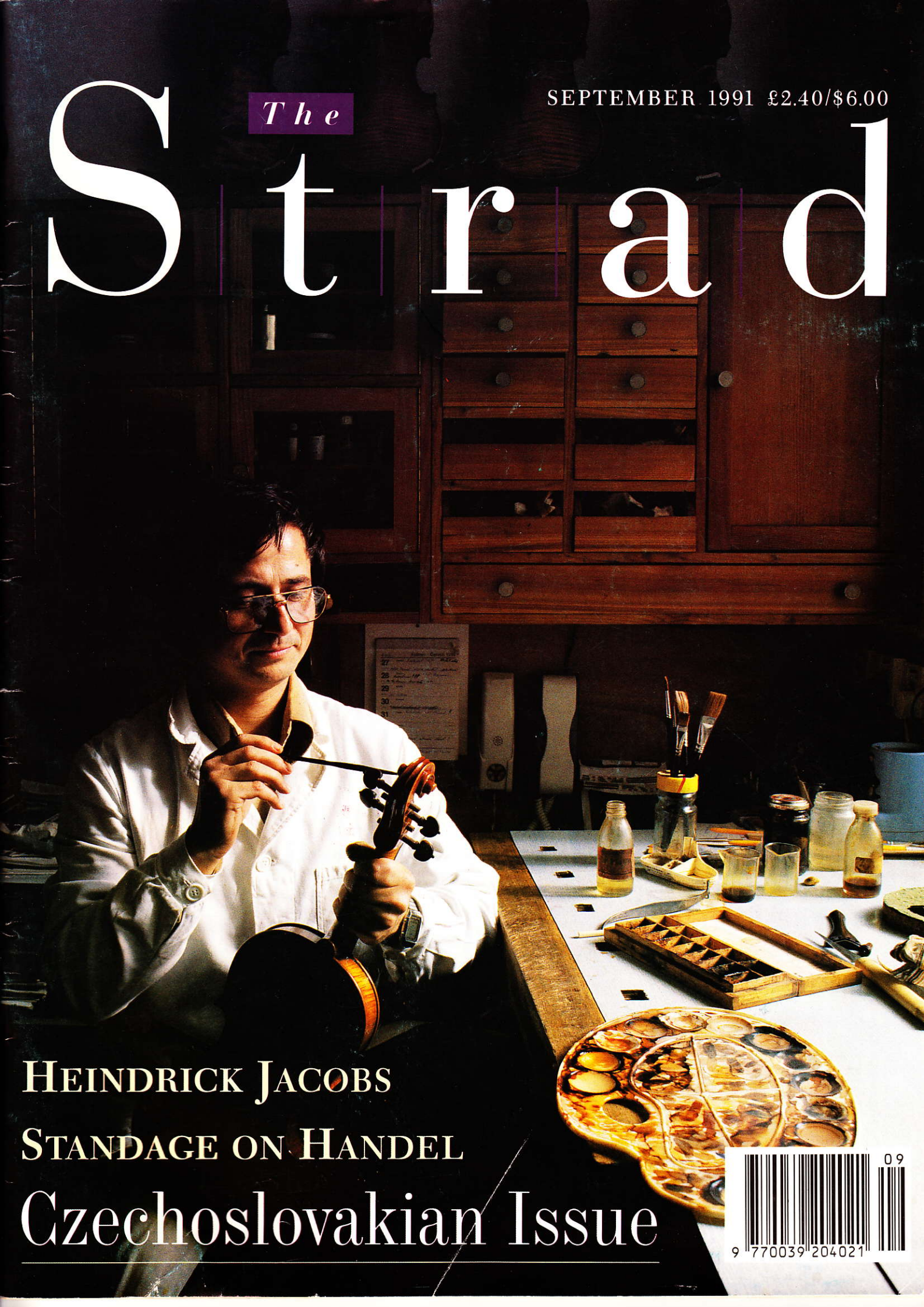

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Like Father like Son

MIRKA ZEMANOVÁ MEETS CZECHOSLOVAKIA'S TWO RENOWNED FATHER-AND-SON LUTHIER TEAMS: THE ŠPIDLENS AND THE PILAŘS, AND DISCUSSES THE UNUSUAL LIFE OF A VIOLIN MAKER IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA BEFORE AND AFTER THE VELVET REVOLUTION. PHOTOGRAPHY BY **MALCOLM CROWTHERS**

Today, the name of the Prague school of violin making is justly renowned throughout the world. The craft had already been practised in the city before the Augsburg-born Tomáš Edlinger arrived in Prague towards the end of the seventeenth century, but it was he who trained several outstanding luthiers including his son Josef Joachim, whose instruments were the first to make the Prague school famous abroad. Since then a plethora of highly-skilled craftsmen have produced a vast number of beautiful and highly valued string instruments. And in the nineteenth as well as in the twentieth centuries many Czech luthiers made their name abroad: František Špidlen and Jindřich Vitáček lived and worked in Russia, Antonín Pilař in Berlin, and Josef Vedral in The Hague. The descendants of the last two still carry on their fathers' business: the Vedral workshop in The Hague has been renowned since the 1920s when Hubermann, Thibaud and Casals used to visit it.

Přemysl Špidlen

But writing in 1991 about Czechoslovakia's present-day foremost luthiers one is inevitably tempted to leave the technicalities of the luthier's craft aside. Other questions immediately spring to mind: how have the Czech luthiers survived the 42 years of Communist rule, peacefully overthrown in the November 1989 'velvet' revolution? What has changed since, and how do they see their future in the newly established free market economy?

The 71-year-old Prague-born Přemysl Špidlen is the doyen of Czech luthiers, although his spontaneous manner and cheerful laughter absolutely belie his age. He comes from a family of great luthiers: his grandfather František won the post of Luthier to the Moscow Conservatoire in 1897 and became the best craftsman of his time in Russia before he returned to Prague. Přemysl's father Otakar was a first-class luthier and an able businessman with a particular interest in old instruments, and Přemysl's uncle Jindrich Vitáček, who had also settled in Russia, became known as the 'Russian Stradivari'. In Otakar Špidlen's prospering and highly reputed Prague workshop, young Přemysl saw many truly outstanding instruments change hands before World War II, 'Stradivaris, Guarneris and others, the best and the most expensive.' Renowned virtuosos such as Jan Kubelík (father of the conductor Rafael Kubelík) and Váša Příhoda used to visit frequently, and Přemysl had developed an interest in the craft since childhood. A keen sportsman (his father once sent Přemysl, greatly enjoying himself at an Alpine resort, the famous telegram reading 'I don't want my son to be a skier, I want a luthier. Come home at once.'), he also studied violin playing and the theory of music. In 1940, at the age of 20, he passed his exams and became a luthier. Somehow, the family got through the war.

Communist rule began three years later, in 1948. Although the Špidlens still managed to continue their craft, and Přemysl was able to send his newly made instruments for competitions abroad, private enterprise on a greater scale and hence owning a shop was out of the question. Before the war, the family scrimped and saved for years to pay a mortgage on a large house in Jungmannova Street, a prime location in central Prague, where the shop, the workshop and the family flat were situated. Once Otakar Špidlen died in 1958 ('rather tragically, and during the time of the worst political problems'), the house was expropriated.

At that time Přemysl Špidlen also became once of the founder members of the Society of Master Luthiers in Czechoslovakia. This was the only way to survive: members of the Society were registered as freelance artisans, and thus were able at least to continue in their work, although the instruments they had made could only be sold through a state-owned enterprise, Artia. In 1960 as well as in 1963, Přemysl Špidlen won the gold medals at the prestigious competition in Liege; in 1962 he also won the first and the third prize at the International Wieniawski Competition in Poland's Poznán. A number of high state awards and titles followed; Špidlen's art simply had to be noticed. Even after the 1968 Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia the Communist authorities dared not prevent him from travelling to numerous renowned luthier competitions in Cremona, New York, Salt Lake City and other cities, where he served as a distinguished jury member.

Now, in the new, democratic Czechoslovakia, the house in Jungmannova Street where he still lives and works with his 23-year-old son Jan, already an accomplished luthier, is finally to be returned to the family in the so-called 'restitution' process. Would he like to expand the business to include a shop again?

'We would eventually like to expand,' says Přemysl Špidlen. 'But there is a snag - there are no old, really fine instruments on the market in Czechoslovakia.' During the years of the Austrian rule, the twin provinces of Bohemia and Moravia were among the richest in the Austro-Hungarian empire as far as the arts and crafts were concerned, 'and there was an enormous number of outstanding instruments, violins, cellos, all very beautiful and of great value,' he explains. But much of what was left after World War II has gradually been sold abroad. 'In the last ten, twenty years, everyone tried to smuggle something out of the country in order to obtain some hard currency. And of course a violin is easily taken out. Musicians travelled, orchestras travelled, so people took two violins, one of which they sold. And this went

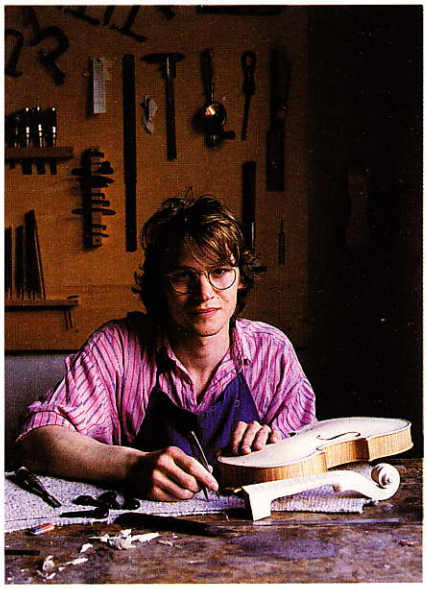
Above : the Pilaťs Below: Vladimir Pilař. Opposite: near right: Jan Špidlen, Far right: Přemysl Špidlen

on all the time.'

Once the newly won democracy and freedom of travel were again established in 1989, the situation deteriorated still further. Czechoslovakia became a prime target for theft on a grand scale - art, antiques, as well as musical instruments. Several priceless Picassos have disappeared from the Prague Castle, and medieval Madonnas are being stolen by the dozen from churches throughout the country. Security systems are hopelessly inadequate and the overworked customs officers cannot cope with the large number of visitors - and Czechs - now frequently travelling abroad. The country is simply being plundered by unscrupulous individuals, out for a quick buck. Germany and Austria are just a few hours' drive away, and opening the borders up was just what such tricksters had been waiting for.

Last autumn, for instance, the Museum of Musical Instruments in Prague's Lesser Town was burgled. Five violins - a Granchino, a Testore, a Nicolaus Amati, an Antonio and Hieronymus Amati and a Jacob Steiner - as well as a viola from the workshop of Antonio and Hieronymus Amati were stolen. It was clear that they were likely to end up in a private collection of a rich instrument-lover, and no one expected ever to see them again. But at the beginning of March this year the Steiner violin was offered for a sum of DM50,000 (about £17,000) in the Munich shop of the distinguished German luthier Zunterer. Fortunately, Herr Zuntere had already heard from Přemysl Špidlen about the theft and hence immediately recognised the violin. The remaining five stolen instruments were later found by the German police in the hotel room of the seller and his partner (both Czech nationals). The Steiner violin alone was valued at DM150,000, i.e. three times the amount they asked.

So far, a happy end: all six instruments were immediately



deposited at the Munich's Municipal Museum for safety. But there were further complications: a German citizen later contacted the police, claiming that the Nicolaus Amati violin, valued at DM200,000 (about £68,000) once belonged to his family and was confiscated in l945, after the war, by the Czech state. The Museum of Musical Instruments applied for an unconditional return of all the instruments, but as its director let it be known in the Czech press earlier this year, until he can guarantee a first class security system in Prague, the instruments will remain in Munich where they are locked up in a first-class safe, and very well looked after.

Thus there is no market in the true sense of the word in the country. 'All the really good instruments are gone, all of them,' says Přemysl Špidlen, 'what is left

There is no market , in the true sense of the word ..."all the really good instruments have gone, all of them. What is left is largely trash."

is largely trash. Some musicians from the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra and professors from the Prague Conservatoire have a second good instrument at home, naturally, but such instruments are not for sale.' Moreover, most Czech musicians simply could not afford, say, a first-class eighteenth-century violin or a cello. 'In my father's shop, before the war, we always had at least fifty instruments for sale,' continues Přemysl Špidlen. 'Italian, French, Czech. Today, conditions for business of this kind simply aren't there.'

Younger musicians in Britain, for instance, try to buy instruments a hundred or 100 or 150 years old, before they become established and can afford higher prices. How much would such an instrument cost in Czechoslovakia? 'Most such violins change hands in private sales, among professors, who may perhaps try to get one for an outstanding pupil. My colleague Pilař and I have just put together a new price list, since we simply have to make the prices comparable to those in the West, otherwise even the more recent instruments will disappear. Every weekend, hordes of German tourists arrive in Prague to see one of the most beautiful cities in Europe and most, naturally enough, want to buy something to take home. And for DM3,000 (about £1,700) they can buy a very decent nineteenth-century violin, if they want to.' Are there no customs restrictions? Are foreign tourists allowed to take such an instrument out of the country? 'Of course they're not, but they always will. So far everyone has always got everything through. No one has ever been caught,' says Přemysl Špidlen with a sigh. 'If they could get through the customs with the stolen Amatis...'

Yet for most Czechs, a hundred-year-old violin, costing between 50,000 and 100,000 Czech crowns (about £1,000 - 2,000) is beyond reach. An average monthly salary amounts only to 3,500 crowns (about £70). 'Sometimes the family of a gifted student at the Conservatoire will club together, perhaps even selling a car...I do know of people who are willing to spend 50,000-60,000

crowns, but the main problem is that the instruments simply aren't on the market.'

The other principal problem is the lack of craftsmen in the country. 'One, maybe two generations of master luthiers are missing', says Přemysl Špidlen. Did he not have an opportunity to teach? 'We were not allowed by the Communist authorities to have pupils. Members of the Society could only work on their own, and we were allowed to work only until we died out, so to speak.' A terrible tale of criminal waste of time and talent - and enough red tape to span the globe - follows. Before the war, there were some five hundred registered luthiers and keyboard makers in the country; today there are only 30. 'The Communist government didn't want to replace us once we were gone, or didn't know how.'

Several distinguished Czech luthiers managed to train their sons, but, as Jan Špidlen adds, his father, for instance, was not allowed to give him his apprenticeship certificate. 'Everyone who taught the younger generation', explains his mother Veronika, 'had to have a proper teaching as well as a Marxist background.' At the age of 16, Jan was successfully dispatched for a year to the famous Mittenwald school in Germany, 'an almost unthinkable venture at the time, to spend a year in the West', he says with mock horror. 'It took a year's running around various offices to arrange it,' laughs his mother. In 1989, Jan worked for another year at J & A Beare in London. By then, *glasnost* made things much easier. Would Přemysl Špidlen like to teach now? Many students eagerly approach him; recently, a young German luthier and a Norwegian craftsman trained at his workshop for a while. Having worked under supervision of a world-famous master luthier is a first-class recommendation. The Špidlens are thinking of employing more staff eventually, but to take on someone for several years, to complete a full apprenticeship, would naturally be a long-term commitment. Přemysl Špidlen's best pupil is obviously his gifted son, clearly the apple of his father's eye.

'We were not allowed by the Communist authorities to have pupils. Members of the Society could only work on their own, and we were allowed to work only until we died out, so to speak.'

Among the many instruments produced in the workshop is a violin made partly by Přemysl Špidlen's father Otakar, whose top plate was made by Jan. The instrument is now played by the leader of the Czech Philharmonic. Five other instruments made by Přemysl Špidlen, including a cello and a viola, are also played by the members of the orchestra. All the members of the renowned Smetana Quartet played on Špidlen instruments at the time when they rose to fame. This was intentional, 'to promote not only Czech music but also Czech instruments, a very nice gesture.' The Prague Quartet have also played his instruments. Among the best Czech soloists, Josef Suk now plays a violin by Přemysl as well as one by Jan, the latter a slightly adapted copy of a 1742 Guarneri which he has praised highly. Some twenty years ago, the Czech winner of the Prague Spring violin competition, Ivan Strauss, so impressed Přemysl Špidlen that he offered one of his instruments as a special prize. Many violins were made for German customers, as well as French and American, and a large number were exported to Japan. An amusing story is told of the French violinist Sylvie Gazeau who sold a Stradivari Melanolo and bought a violin by Přemysl Špidlen. Then, selling a Maggini viola, she bought a flat with the proceeds as well as a viola by Přemysl Špidlen. And her husband now awaits a delivery of a Špidlen cello, having sold a Gagliano.

But perhaps the most valued praise comes from Yehudi Menuhin, who thinks Přemysl Špidlen the best living master luthier, and wrote him a wonderfully spontaneous letter after playing a Špidlen violin which he had bought in Paris.

Life has not been without problems for the Špidlens. Yet talking to them, one is clearly aware of their healthy, age-old pride in their craft. 'We have plenty of good material', says Přemysl Špidlen. 'I hope we'll continue to make beautiful instruments, and that they will continue to rise in value, and be in greater demand still. The violins will survive.'

Near the Polish border, in Hradec Králové, some two hours' drive to the east of Prague, lives the other eminent father-and-son team, Vladimír and Tomáš Pilař. In a city with a population of about 100,000, well away from the country's capital, did the former régime's authorities focus on them much?

'We have a certain kind of status here', says Vladimír Pilař. 'Our work has made the city known abroad, and if one worked and otherwise left well alone, one could work in peace. Here in a small city, everyone knows everyone else. My father started his business here in 1924, and became well known, then I and my son became known...I would say the situation here was better than in Prague.'

One of the walls in the workshop is covered from top to bottom with signed photographs of the many musicians who have visited the workshop and admired the Pilars' instruments - among the violinists there are Jan Kubelík, Josef Suk and Nora Grumlíková, the cellist Miloš Sádlo, and many chamber ensembles. In the extension at the back, sun streams in through the blinds; the smell of varnish pervades the air. A brass plate on the door announces: 'A short visit will cheer'.

Three generations of luthiers have plied their craft in this workshop. The 65-year-old Vladimír Pilař is a pupil of his father Karel, both a distinguished luthier and a much sought-after restorer, who was one of the founder members of the Society of Master Luthiers in Czechoslovakia. An admirable craftsman of tremendous vitality, he was still producing first-class instruments in his eighties. In 1985, the year he died (aged 86), he completed a violin - his op. 210. His son Vladimír first studied violin playing and flute, then - after serving his apprenticeship in his father's workshop - he passed his exams as a luthier in 1945. His first instruments were greatly influenced by those made by his father, but around 1955 he began to experiment and was soon entering competitions abroad. In 1960 and 1963 he won the fourth and the third prize at Liège, and in 1962 he was awarded the first prize at the Wieniawski competition in Poznań. Today, there is great demand for his instruments, and clients on his list now have to wait for some three years. Up till today he has produced over four hundred instruments. 'A luthier who has made four hundred violins becomes immortal,' he says with a chuckle. Some 150 of these have been exported worldwide, from Argentina to Sweden, and by 1985 there were some seventy Pilař violins in Japan. One might almost say that, here in Hradec (as the city is called locally), the Pilařs were out of harm's way, yet they too were not without problems.

'I have travelled quite a lot,' says Vladimír Pilař. He has made many study trips to Italy, Sweden, Holland and Britain, as well as Japan, often as an internationally recognised jury member. Requests for these trips were, after some persuasion, always granted by the Communist authorities. 'But some years ago two of my former students who live in the US invited me to visit them and also kindly paid my return flight. I spent about two weeks in Los Angeles and in Northampton, and all I got from the Czech authorities for the trip was $30.' Hardly a sum to pay for

The house at the sign of the Three Violins - Erdlinger's descendent stands outside. Below: the sign of the house

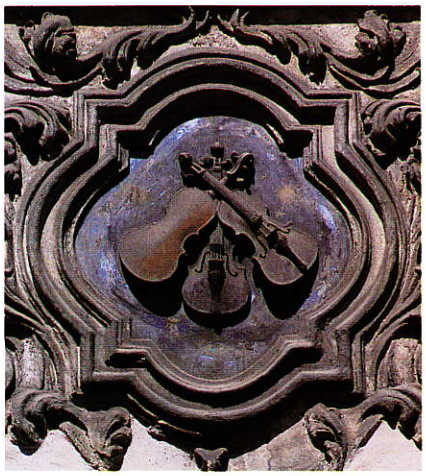
one's other expenses if one needed to - yet all the Pilař instruments that have been exported over the years have always been paid for in hard currency.

Such problematic situations can no longer arise. All the Czech luthiers can now charge in hard currency, and all are allowed to have foreign currency accounts. After the November 1989 revolution, the tax came down from 30% to 20%. There are many export agencies now in business, apart from Artia,which no longer has the monopoly, and their fees are much lower. The Pilařs could of course register as a company, but they prefer to remain with the Society and work on a freelance basis. 'We'd rather concentrate on the instruments and leave the paperwork to others.'

But in other respects, the newly established market economy holds no surprises for the Pilařs, or indeed for other Czech craftsmen. Working freelance has meant always being acutely aware of the cost of material, equipment and new techniques. 'We have nothing to learn as far as market economy is concerned,' laugh both Vladimír and the 37-year-old Tomás. 'We carry on just as before the revolution; our customers abroad want their instruments no matter what the political developments here may be.' 'We have always had clients in the West, but the Communist authorities took most of the money.'

The Society of Master Luthiers does not dictate the prices - this is now entirely a matter for the luthier and the customer to agree on - but those for commissions from abroad have been made comparable to Western prices. How much can a Czech customer expect to pay? Vladimír Pilař is convinced that he is capable of offering a new violin for 40,000 Czech crowns (about £800) on the home market, and 70,000 crowns could buy a better instrument. But, as Tomás Pilař remarks, 'even some orchestral musicians are not willing to spend that kind of money, they buy a good, expensive car and prefer to play on an instrument provided by the orchestra; many don't care very much what they play on.' This, as his father thinks, will eventually have to change, though it probably will not happen for some time. Lack of free market conditions has made many Czechs complacent yet often, in fact, more materialistic than their Western counterparts.

The Pilařs' visitors book is full of photographs and signatures from all over



the world. Many craftsmen are eager to study at the workshop, and some 13 luthiers have trained with the Pilařs for various periods of time in the past. The family are shortly expecting a relative, the great grandson of the Czech luthier Antonín Pilař (who had settled in Berlin), to begin his training here, and Vladimír Pilar's 16-year-old grandson, Jan, has recently began his apprenticeship at the workshop.

Among those playing a Pilař instrument are several leading Czech violinists such as Hudeček and Snítil. Josef Suk, played on Vladimír Pilar's op. 400 at a special concert and threatened, in jest, to return it to him only in exchange for a completed instrument which Vladimír Pilař had promised Suk some time ago - Suk later received the instrument which he has praised highly. Several chamber ensembles play on Vladimír Pilař's instruments, and a quartet in Munich has asked him for a permission to use his name - Pilař Quartet.

Clients on his son's list have to wait even longer, some six years, and Tomás Pilař is also an accomplished bow specialist and a sought-after bow restorer. His instruments, too, have been exported to many countries, including Switzerland, Germany, the US and Japan. This autumn, four musicians in Singapore will give a concert on Tomás Pilař's instruments.

All Czech luthiers have very friendly contacts with each other, and 'competition as such practically doesn't exist - we all have our hands full'. Certain difficulties inherited form the old régime still hamper a faster way forward - legislative changes concerning properties will have to be sorted out, better arrangements for apprentices to join and so on. But, as Přemysl Špidlen firmly states, 'we shall always make new instruments. This is our pride and joy, and nothing can take it away from us.'

And perhaps even the spirit of Tomáš Edlinger, the founder of the Prague violin-making school, is happily hovering around the city at this moment. As we photographed the plaque (on the cover of this issue of THE STRAD) on the house where he lived at the end of the seventeenth century, the so-called House at the Sign of the Three Violins, a middle-aged tourist walked by, stopping enquiringly for a moment. Conversation revealed that he was a German, on his first visit to Prague, and that he was no less than a direct descendant of Tomáš Edlinger's family, one of whose members left Prague again for Germany in the eighteenth century. A chance of many millions to one, you might say. Or a good omen?

Door of the Pilar's workshop