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PASSPORT TO EUROPE

BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY

fourth-generation czech violin maker JAN ŠPIDLEN is on a quest

Passing through the amber-lit anteroom to answer the door bell, Jan Špidlen greets me with a generous smile—the 34-year-old violin maker carries with him generations of knowledge, and has the confidence and poise of someone beyond his years. Nearly 100 years after his forefathers began making violins, Špidlen returns to sit at a low wooden bench in the mid-morning light and finish a violin for this year's Violin Society of America competition. Přemsyl Špidlen, Jan's father and mentor, bustles about the shop in a long white workcoat as another employee fixes pegs into a new instrument. Inside the shop, the warm smell of wood mixes with the astringent, sweet scent of varnish. File cabinets, books, family photos, and shelves stacked with bottles of varnish and polish, wood samples, tools, and instruments surround three large wooden workbenches.The shop is clean and nearly quiet, except for the fluttering wings and happy chirping of a parakeet in a nearby cage.

Tucked within an enclave of stores, Špidlen's shop lies on one of Prague's busier streets in the Nové Město, or New Town district. Within the shop's interior, the outside world falls away and the past seems to come alive—and it's no wonder. Špidlen violin-making tradition is interwoven

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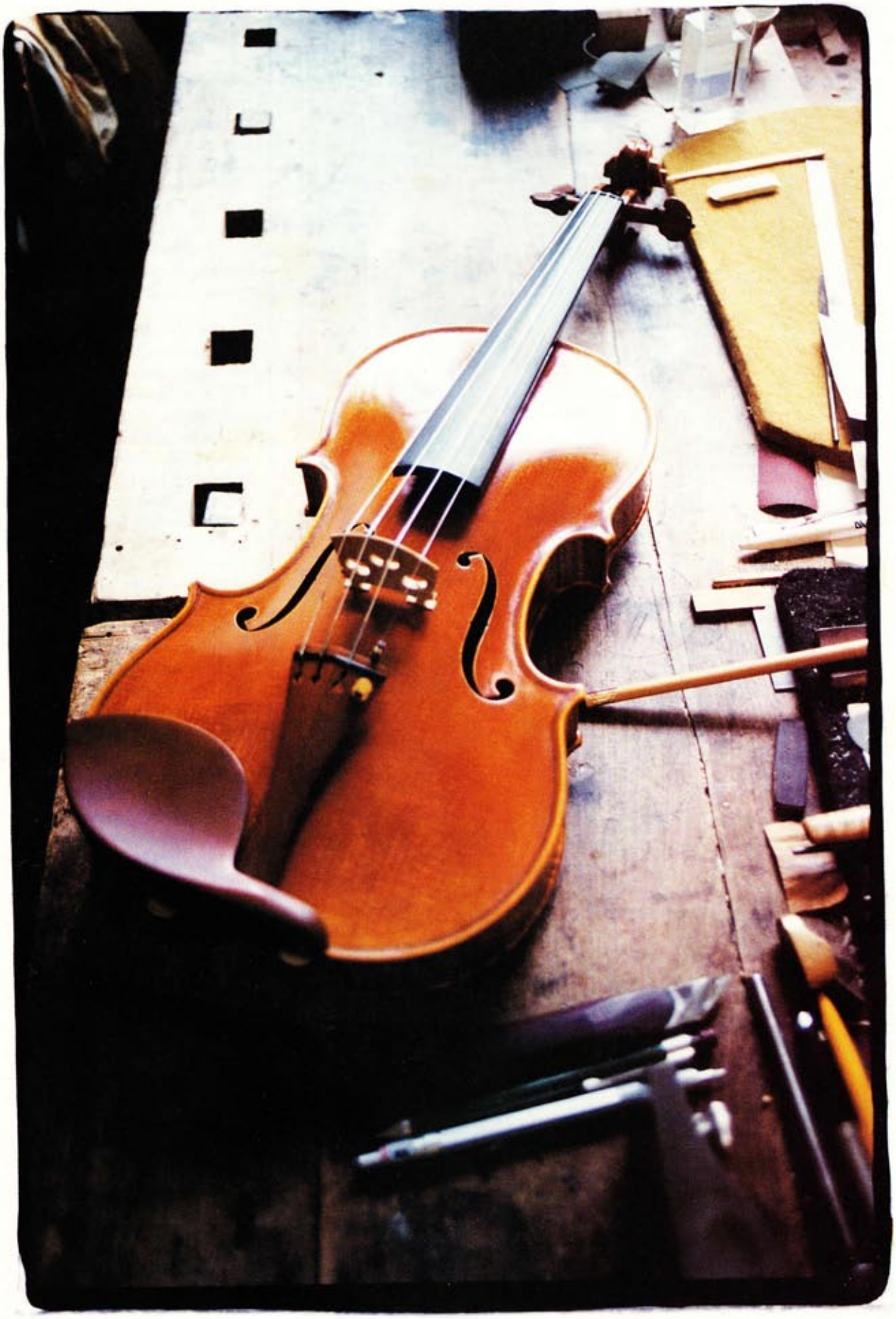

bohemian rhapsody

within the centuries-old history of Prague itself. The family has ridden the rise and fall of this beautiful, albeit tumultuous, city's history, from Prague's Golden Age (following the Czech National Revival movement) to the horror of the 1968 Soviet invasion to the devastating floods of this past August. Throughout it all, the family has continued to make violins and contribute to the international music community.

SUCCESS AND SURVIVAL

The Špidlen violin-making tradition began in 1867 with the birth of František Špidlen in the small village of Sklenařice in the Krkonose mountains of Bohemia. The son of a farmer, František grew up learning the craft of making violins in his brother-in-law's workshop. He quickly mastered the art and accepted an invitation to move to Kiev and manage a musical instruments department at a prominent store. Garnering the title of Russia's top violin maker, František won a position at the esteemed Imperial Academy in Moscow, and consequently moved his family to the capital. But, like many from the Krkonose region, František struggled with bronchitis brought on by the sub-Alpine climate. At the urging of his doctors, he returned to Bohemia, and in 1909, opened a small shop in Prague.

In 1896, František and his wife Anna welcomed son Otakar into the world. The eldest of four children, Otakar took over his father's violin-making business in 1916 upon his father's death. Otakar worked hard and earned the reputation of a skilled craftsman. Also a gifted dealer, Otakar ran one of the biggest shops in Prague, catering to many famous musicians.

The family's current patriarch, Přemsyl (born in 1920), grew up playing in the sawdust of the luthier's bench. Přemsyl learned violin making from both his father and Karl Josef Dvořak (a Prague maker known for his fine workmanship, wood, and varnish). By 1947, Přemsyl had won the leading position for all Czech violin makers at the prestigious Hague Competitions, and went on to win several other competitions (Liege, Poznan). Today Přemsyl's work is known worldwide, in part because members of the fabled Smetana Quartet performed with his instruments.

But nearly 50 years ago, political events in Prague put Přemsyl's flourishing career and his father Otakar's established business in peril. In 1948, the Communist party took over the leadership of Czechoslovakia—just three years after German occupation—and once

again, times changed. Just ten years later, on the morning of August 21, 1968, Prague would awake to learn on radio Praha that Russian tanks had invaded the city, rumbling down Wenceslas Square and firing at the National Museum. With the Soviets reasserting the power of the communist police state, the Špidlen success story became a dangerous insubordination. "The change did not happen suddenly," relates Jan. "But [nonetheless] we were unwanted and persecuted."

Consequently, Přemsyl and his family were designated as "enemies of the working class." Přemsyl struggled to keep his home and shop, but the government soon intervened. "The state took the whole house and the family was allowed to keep only an apartment on the first floor and a small room on the ground floor," Jan explains. When it was not possible to run the shop anymore, Přemsyl secluded himself in the back room, taking advantage of the time and quiet to develop his masterwork.

"Paradoxically," Jan says, "the end of the family shop turned into a good thing [for Přemsyl's violin making]."

FAMILY AFFAIR: Přemsyl and Jan Špidlen both receive high marks for their craftsmanship.

Since the communists forbade free trade, all violin makers were forced to work for state companies or factories. "My grandfather, his colleagues, and many famous musicians [discovered] a good trick," Jan recounts with a hint of mischief. "They [learned] that if violin making was accepted as *artistic* work, it could be organized under the Cultural Ministry with painters, sculptors, and musicians." As artists, luthiers could then be self-employed. However, Otakar died in 1958 before the resulting Violin Makers' Artist's Circle came into being. So Přemsyl fulfilled his father's dream despite losing the shop, and became the organization's founding member.

After the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989, the Circle's members considered disbanding. "We decided it would be a shame for it to dissolve," says Jan, explaining that the Circle has become a trade group that carefully screens

the workmanship of its members. "It already had a long tradition and a good name. Also in [today's market] there are many violin makers or dealers of poor quality—it's hard for customers to know this until they've had a bad experience. Today, the Circle's purpose is to guarantee the good quality of its members' work."

CLASSIC LINES: Jan Špidlen's copy of the 1679 Stradivari "Hellier" violin.

BRAVE NEW WORLD

Between November 17 and December 29, 1989, the residents of Prague celebrated the "Velvet Revolution," a bloodless overthrow of the Soviet-backed Czechoslovak communist regime. It was a time of rebirth and rejuvenation—and, for the Špidlen family, a time of reevaluation. "When communism fell in 1989, we tried to decide—and still are—if we should open a violin shop again," says Jan. "We have the perfect location and a very famous and good name here and abroad. But, on the other hand, my father and I like building new instruments much more than dealing them."

At Jan's mention of violin making and to illustrate the quality of the Špidlen instruments, Přemsyl rises from the stained-wooden chair in the corner of the shop and walks slowly across the room to the shop's instrument safe. He retrieves two striking violins, a prized fiddle from his own collection of work, and a copy of Stradivari's "Hellier" violin crafted by Jan.

These days, both father and son receive high praise for their craftsmanship. Přemsyl's instruments have been lauded in V. Pilar and F. Sramek's authoritative book *The Art of Violin-Making* (Panton Intl., Prague, 1986), which notes that "Přemsyl . . . is one of the most celebrated figures in the entire violin-making history of our country."

Jan is celebrating great success as well.

Born in the fall of 1967—just one year before the Soviet invasion—Jan expressed an early and eager interest in violin making. "When I was six, I started to play violin," he recalls. "At 15, they sent me to learn woodcarving in an artistic school, and [two years

later] they sent me to the International Violin-Making School in Mittenwald. But I was not forced. Doing something with my hands—drawing, carving, and painting—was fun and I remember I was not bad at such activities. Later, when I was old enough to decide my future, I was already on the way to becoming a violin maker. Why choose something else? I had all I needed: workshop, tools, father-teacher, customers, and a very good name."

The possibility of following in the family's famous lineage influenced Jan's choice to become a maker. "Because it is beautiful work! And my father's instruments were asked for in the Western countries," he says. "And my father was—and still is—a famous person in my country [and abroad] and we meet many interesting people. And we live and work in such attractive surroundings. These were the many reasons [for me] to became a violin maker and not to stay an ordinary man."

Although Přemsyl still makes instruments, Jan now runs the family business and is the primary maker. Now, Jan watches his own young son and daughter play with the workshop's wood scraps. But as a fourth generation maker, there is pressure to maintain a high standard.

"As a Špidlen, it is expected that all of my instruments will be the best," he explains. "It is hard to win a good name but very easy to lose it—I *must* make perfect violins. If I lost just a little of our high standard, people would say, 'This is not what it used to be,' and I would ruin what my ancestors built. There are many good violin makers around the world, and the competition is big."

Jan adds that making a living as a luthier in a competitive market is much more difficult today. Yet the demand for his instruments—with vibrant, rich, and unique colorations—indicates that Jan is on the right course. Jan modestly points out that it takes about two to three months to complete work on a violin or a viola. He confides that there is a two-year waiting list on commissions and that he enjoys a bustling business.

And what is in store for the future of this long-standing family of makers? "I want to solve the secret of Stradivari, of course!" Jan says. "I still use secrets set by my ancestors, and music remains important for me. I am busy with my work and it looks like it will stay like this in future. I [continue to be influenced] by the old Italian masters—I think most of us are still looking for that charismatic look and tone of the old instruments.

"The violin is such an interesting subject," he muses, "and the more you know about it the more there is to find out." □