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Orinda City Hall houses rare and beautiful artwork

By Sora O'Doherty



Portrait of cellist Zdenka Cerny Vasak by Czech artist Alfons Mucha, donated to the Orinda/Tabor Sister City Foundation by Otto Vasak, son of Zdenka. Photo provided

With 2017 being the Year of the Czechs in Orinda, it is a good time to recall that Orinda City Hall houses a beautiful portrait of cellist Zdenka Cerny Vasak by the renowned Czech art nouveau artist Alfons Mucha. The portrait was a gift to the Orinda/Tabor Sister City Foundation when Bobbi Landers was mayor of Orinda. Landers could think of no better place for the artwork than in City Hall, where any of the Czech residents of Orinda could easily see it.

The portrait was donated by Otto Vasak. He had inherited it from his mother, the famous cellist Zdenka Cerny Vasak, who had trained in her father's conservatory as a girl. In 1913 Mucha, a family friend, painted the portrait of Zdenka with her cello for a concert poster for an upcoming world tour. The tour, scheduled for just when World War I erupted in Europe, was canceled. The portrait hung in the artist's studio.

The history of this artwork was discussed 45 years ago in the Chicago History Magazine, Spring 1972, by Katherine Wagner Seineke in an essay entitled, "Mucha's Chicago Poster." Visitors to City Hall may obtain a copy of the article upon request. Seineke explains how the portrait came to be, and how it came to return to the United States:

"The star pupil of Cerny conservatory was Cerny's own eldest daughter, Milada, who, a prodigy at the piano, has already made a successful concert tour of Europe in 1903 at the age of 10. ... But it was Milada's little sister Zdenka, who would be the subject of a Mucha portrait in his best medium, the color lithograph poster.

"During his early stay with the Cernys young Zdenka became a favorite of Mucha. He was very much a member of the family and often played simple piano parts in family trios on relaxed musical evenings. ...

"On a visit to the Cernys in March, 1913, ... he renewed an old promise to Zdenka to do her portrait. She was now sixteen, an accomplished cellist, and of a rare swan-like beauty.

"The poster was intended for Zdenka's European tour, but the declaration of war by Austria-Hungary on Serbia caused Zdenka to cancel and hurry back to Chicago. The posters were used for her American concert tours, but her career was short. By the end of the war she was married and had given up the concert stage. Papa Cerny took a trip to Prague later in the twenties when he learned from Neubert that Mucha still had the drawing at his Zbirah Castle in the country. Mucha told Cerny ... that of all the posters he had designed, Zdenka's was his favorite. When he learned that Zdenka has asked her father to look at the drawing if it still existed, Mucha took it from the wall and removed it from its silver frame. Rolling it up he gave it to Cerny, saying, 'Take it to Zdenka in Chicago with my love.'"

For further information on Mucha, see <http://praguedayschicago.com/MuchaBooklet.pdf>

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