

HOME

SEARCH ARCHIVE

Buy Reprints from the NYT Store

INDEX

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 29, 1995

PAGE 152 OF 573

SUBJECTS

NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: EAST SIDE

Czech Center Renews Unity And a Facade

When proud immigrants built the Bohemian National Hall in 1896, no one foresaw the tumultuous century that would follow in their homeland overseas, and in the hall's internal affairs. The building became a magnet for Czech nationalists from Bohemia, a medieval kingdom that fell under Hapsburg rule. In the aftermath of World War I, the Czechs won independence, but Nazi Germany dismembered Czechoslovakia, which later fell to the Communists.

Democracy was restored in 1989, and in 1992, the nation split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The hall, at 321 E. 73d Street, outlasted all that — surviving, barely, its own misfortunes, feuds and scandals. "We almost

8 CY

THE NEW YORK TIMES

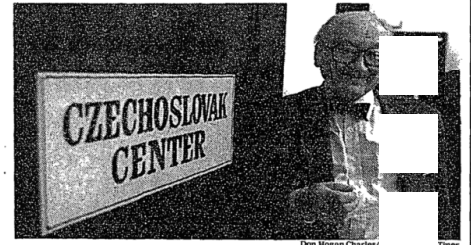
EAST SIDE

Czech Center Renews Unity And a Facade

When proud immigrants built the Bohemian National Hall in 1896, no one foresaw the tumultuous century that would follow in their homeland overseas, and in the hall's internal affairs. The building became a magnet for Czech nationalists from Bohemia, a medieval kingdom that fell under Hapsburg rule. In the aftermath of World War I, the Czechs won independence, but Nazi Germany dismembered Czechoslovakia, which later fell to the Communists. Democracy was restored in 1989, and in 1992, the nation split into the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

The hall, at 321 E. 73d Street, outlasted all that — surviving, barely, its own misfortunes, feuds and scandals. "We almost lost it," said Jan Hird Pokorny, the president of the Bohemian Benevolent and Literary Association which owns the hall.

Now the landmarked five-floor facade is being restored. Supporters have raised \$80,000 of the \$5 million needed to renovate the interior, including a 100-foot-long, two-story ballroom. They envision an ethnic restaurant, social and cultural events, a display on the great Czech composer Antonin Dvorak (who performed to raise money for the original hall) and businesses.



Jan Hird Pokorny says feuds are over at the old Bohemian hall.

"In the 80's things looked pretty bleak," said Peter Kutil, a co-chairman of the fund-raising effort. "The underlying problem was the center was for a community that was no longer there. We're trying very hard to bring back not only the building but activity in the Czechoslovak-American community, tied in overseas."

Thousands of Czechs migrated to the Lower East Side in the late 1800's, then moved to work in Yorkville's cigar factories. Their hall, expanded by an annex and an adjoining movie theater, drew sports, educational, cultural and social groups. But then the Czechs dispersed, to Astoria and the suburbs. Ethnic ties weakened with assimilation and con-

flicting views of later immigrants. The hall spiraled into decline. In the 1980's, its movie theater was sold and demolished. Some association leaders tried to sell the main hall, but others protested, prompting years of litigation. "That's all in the past," said Mr. Pokorny. Though the association has fallen to 15 member groups from 95, he says it has a new spirit of unity and optimism.

There are still critics. John Krondl, the publisher of Czechoslovak News, said it was "unforgivable" that the association took a year and a half to prepare its first fund-raising letter, mailed a few days ago. Mr. Kutil said it needed the time to perfect its appeal.

BRUCE LAMBERT

Rulings Rain On Box Tree

Twenty-three months ago, 35 workers at the small, elegant Box Tree Restaurant at 250 East 49th Street went on strike, seeking their first contract. Today, they are still walking a picket line in front of the restaurant, but their complaints have led to a series of government rulings against the Box Tree.

Health inspectors found it operating without a license and cited conditions "conducive to vermin." Building officials issued zoning and safety violations for apartments converted to a hotel illegal construction and demolition of a load-bearing fire wall. State Labor Department officials ordered reinstatement of \$22,000 in



A strike at the elegant Box Tree restaurant is almost two years old.

Pending National Labor Relations Board charges say Box Tree refused to bargain, coerced workers, obstructed the union and harassed it with a \$1 billion suit. Last week, the police arrested an employee on charges of assaulting strikers. "It's a total effort to smash me,"

nately had to rely on a series of managers to oversee things. I have to pay for all the mistakes that were made. I'm trying my very best to correct them. I cannot stand injustice."

Miguel De La Rosa, who was paid \$360 as a cook, said: "I hate the restaurant."

Times Company | Terms of Service | Privacy | Help | Feedback | TimesMachine Home