

Homage to Helsinki

One Czech's passion for the spirit of '75

From a garage ceiling in Prague's Lhotka district, a massive woodcut immortalizing the Helsinki Final Act is firmly supported by a grid of bolts and rope, shielded from the public eye. Its creator, 80-year-old retired engineer Otakar Becvar, has been looking after it for the past 15 years as faithfully as he tends the family garden, making sure it keeps its natural lustre. However, this was not the way he had envisaged the fate of his grand design. In a letter to the *OSCE Magazine*, the committed European sounded an emotional appeal for help in finding a permanent spot from which his medium could finally spread its noble message.



Otakar Becvar's work is temporarily placed in a garden setting before it is taken indoors.

BY FLORENCE LE CLEZIO

Some eight years had passed after the signing of the Helsinki Final Act when Otakar Becvar chanced upon excerpts in a local weekly newspaper. Intrigued, he made up for lost time by ordering a 1983 reprint of the document's Czech version from the Foreign Ministry of Czechoslovakia.

"As a European, I have always been concerned with developments in the continent," he says. He was 14 when Hitler invaded Poland, 35 when the Warsaw Pact military alliance was formed, 43 during the Communist invasion of Czechoslovakia, and 52 when Czech dissidents drew up the Charter 77 human rights document and distributed it secretly throughout the country.

"Once the Helsinki Final Act arrived, I read it from cover to cover," he says. "It dawned on me that I had in my hands a major life-changing document. I felt I had to create something lasting to honour it."

The following year, for inspiration, he walked through Alvar Aalto's Finlandia Hall in the heart of Helsinki to be one in spirit with the Agreement's 35 original signatories. To those who knew Otakar

Becvar well, this came as no surprise. At 58, although his profession as an engineering consultant was taking him to far-flung world capitals, he preferred exploring European cities that had either been affected by war or had figured prominently in bringing about peace.

"The Helsinki Final Act gave Europe a much-needed impulse," he says. "Finally, things were going to change. Its signing represented one of the most significant political milestones of our time. Without the document, our 'velvet revolution' and the fall of the Berlin Wall would have happened much later."

On his return to Prague from his two-day stay in the Finnish capital, he sat at the drawing board to develop a concept. "I taught myself woodcarving as a young man and had crafted occasional pieces, so I knew I would go down this path," he says.

The idea of peace in Europe is omnipresent in his work, including his poetry. He dedicated a poem, "European Bridges", to Vaclav Havel. Last year, he carved the names of every country in the European Union on a totem pole. He recently completed a similar piece with the names of all 55 participating States.

"I'm not really an artist and so it was a challenge to translate some of the highlights of the Helsinki Final Act into pictograms," Mr. Becvar says, who is an economist as well as an engineer. Using some 50 different carving tools and especially prepared boards of limewood, he whittled away at his creation during his leisure time for more than two years, either in his garage in Prague or at his weekend home.

"It was enjoyable, a change from sit-

As the CSCE negotiations were winding down in Geneva, a Prague intellectual wrote to a friend in the West: "Everyone here has his own reaction to this: We, the people from the ghetto, feel a cautious hope; the secret police feel an increased nervousness." Once the post-summit celebrations were over, the Communist regimes tried to protect their status-

quo framing of Helsinki by limiting public awareness of the actual content of the Final Act ... In Czechoslovakia, thousands of copies of the Helsinki Final Act were published, but never distributed.

— from *The Helsinki Effect*, by Daniel C. Thomas, Princeton University Press, 2001



Committed European:
Otakar Becvar

ting all day long in an office. My son offered to help, but I wanted to do it my way.”

Adopting a “tactile sculpture” approach to enable the blind to decipher his message, Mr. Becvar carved a relief of Europe, surrounded by seven circles, each of which

features universal logos illustrating some of the main areas of co-operation set out in the Helsinki Final Act. He dedicated one circle to the Finlandia Hall.

A pictogram of a man, a woman and a child holding hands surrounded by nature depicts the reunification of families, an issue that takes up almost a page in the Final Act. A factory chimney represents industrial co-operation, another commitment signed up to by Heads of State.

Mr. Becvar chose a stylized sun (purity) and a pair of birds (freedom) as unifying symbols. Along the edge he carved the flags of the 35 Helsinki Final Act countries, with the names of the signatories.

For ease of transport and assembly, he designed the plaque so that it could be dismantled into separate segments, which are held together from the back by sliding bolts and screws.

In an unintended but fitting finale, Otakar Becvar’s imposing *oeuvre* was ready

in 1989 — the year of the velvet revolution. It measured more than 3 metres (10 feet) in diameter and weighed 270 kg (595 pounds). “It was, and is, I believe, the biggest commemorative emblem of its kind,” he says.

Still, much to his disappointment, his feat did not make it into the *Guinness Book of Records*.

“We certainly do not underestimate what might be considered to be a significant record,” the global authority in record-breaking achievements said in May 1989, in response to Mr. Becvar’s submission, “but we think that this item is a little too specialized for a book of competitive records as general as ours.”

Contacts with several diplomats and more than a dozen organizations within and outside the Czech Republic to find an exhibit area were to no avail, many citing the lack of sufficient indoor space for a gigantic piece made of limewood, which is soft and malleable and thus not suitable as an outdoor installation.

Mr. Becvar refuses to give up. Late last year, as the 30th anniversary of the signing of the Final Act drew nearer, he sent a letter to the editor of the *OSCE Magazine*, enclosing a picture of his homage to Helsinki.

“I am nearly 80 years old and I am afraid that after my death, this work will be destroyed,” he said, enclosing a picture of his plaque. “I am very worried about what to do with it. Should I burn it? I am disappointed that it has not drawn anyone’s interest. Everybody I have approached has been polite with me, but the plaque is still in my garage. You are my last chance for the preservation of this work for the future.”

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Human dimension commitments now available in expanded compilation

On the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act, the OSCE’s Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) has published a new two-volume edition of its guide to the OSCE’s commitments relating to the human dimension.

The first volume presents the commitments according to themes, and the second volume takes a chronological approach.

The Helsinki Final Act succeeded in placing human rights on the East-West agenda, making it a legitimate subject of international dialogue.

Following the historic changes in Europe in 1989, the OSCE’s participating States developed the basic outline of the 1975 Helsinki Final Act into a comprehensive set of norms and standards, especially in the area of human rights.

These principles, together with those dealing with democratization and the rule of law, are the building blocks of what the OSCE refers to as the “human dimension” of security.

The first compilation, published in 2001, has served as an invaluable reference tool for individuals and institutions engaged in promoting human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

www.osce.org/odihhr