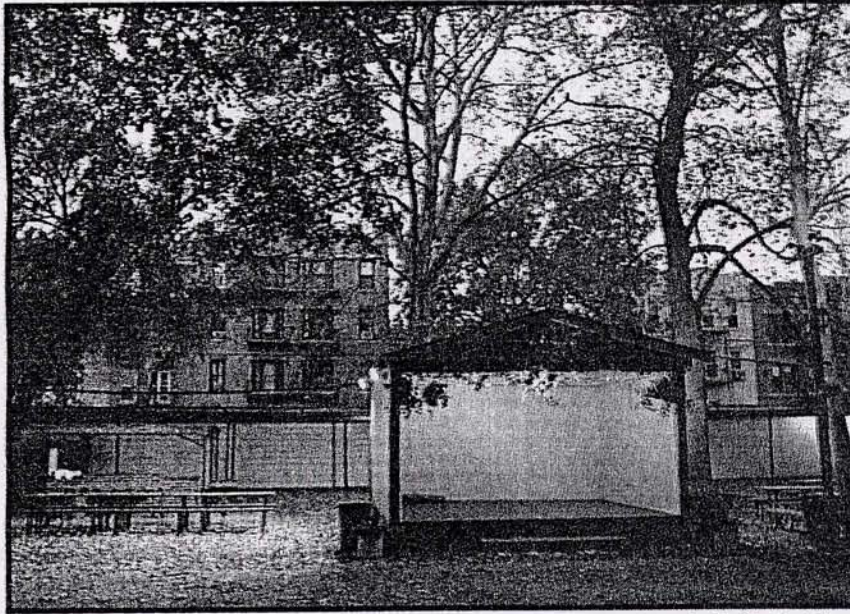


The New York Times

A Beer Garden in Astoria Shelters a Lost Era

By ANNE RAVER



Rebecca Cooney for The New York Times

A LITTLE PATCH OF BOHEMIA The last beer garden in New York City.

THE beer garden at Bohemian Hall and Park in Astoria isn't a garden in the usual sense of the word. It's a grove of about 20 old trees — maples, sycamores and lindens — enclosed by a high wall. It has the sheltering feel of an ancient European village, where the townspeople gather for beer and gossip.

It was built by Czechs, but plenty of others drift in off the neighboring streets — Swiss, Asian, Indian, Greek — to play chess, or watch the moon rise in the darkening sky.

This is the last beer garden in New York City. It's a vestige of the hundreds of old German and Czech-style picnic parks that thrived all over the outer boroughs in the 1800's, when crowded tenements were hot and there was no place to stroll, except for the cemetery. And Frederick Law Olmsted's fine new Central Park banned beer drinking and bathing, for goodness' sake.

It's a country, in a spiritual sense, for people longing for the motherland. And last October, when the Czechs gathered for their annual beer fest, and the air was fragrant with pork and dumplings and sauerkraut, the stories flowed as freely as the Pilsener:

¶How Leonard Jindra came to New Jersey in 1938, the year before Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia. Not because, at 16, he knew what was coming. "My aunt used to send me American magazines and Buffalo Bill comics," Mr. Jindra said. "I wanted to be a cowboy." His picture hangs in the bar — a soldier in the 29th Infantry Division, which invaded Normandy on D-Day.

¶How Joseph Voves and his brother were helping people escape across the borders in 1949, after the Communist takeover, when "they caught my brother," Mr. Voves said, "and I went running over a roof and hid at a farmer's house. I had to leave my wife and son."

¶How others, like Vazlan Jelinek, slipped out in 1968, when Soviet tanks

Continued on Page 9



1929 Czech festival at the beer garden. The girl at right is Debbie Van Cura's mother.

A Beer Garden in Astoria

Continued From Page 1, This Section

rolled into the capital to crush the liberal reforms of the Prague Spring.

For 90 years, since the Bohemian Citizens Benevolent Society built its humble hall on the corner of 24th Avenue and 31st Street, adding the half-acre courtyard in 1930, this corner has been home to Czech immigrants and their descendants — from the first refugees from the Austro-Hungarian Empire to Vaclav Havel, the president of the Czech Republic, who planted a linden, his country's national tree, here recently.

"I invited him here when he came to the U.N. conference," said Peter Bisek, the president of the society and editor of the Czech-American newspaper *Americke Listy*. "So they said, 'O.K., half an hour that's it.' He liked it so much, he ordered some goulash and beer and stayed for an hour and a half. We have a picture of him shoveling dirt on the tree."

President Havel was just responding to "the magic of the garden," said Debbie Van Cura, the former president of the Greater Astoria Historical Society, whose grandfather was a bartender at the garden.

"I saw how relaxed he was when he came in here," said Ms. Van Cura, whose grandmother used to take her to the garden to see Czech plays, translating them for her under the trees. "It doesn't matter here who you are, what clothes you wear. Everybody

wants to sit outside and have a beer."

The Germans brought the first beer garden to the Lower East Side, introducing the first lager beer — Schaefer — which was served cold, not warm, like English ale.

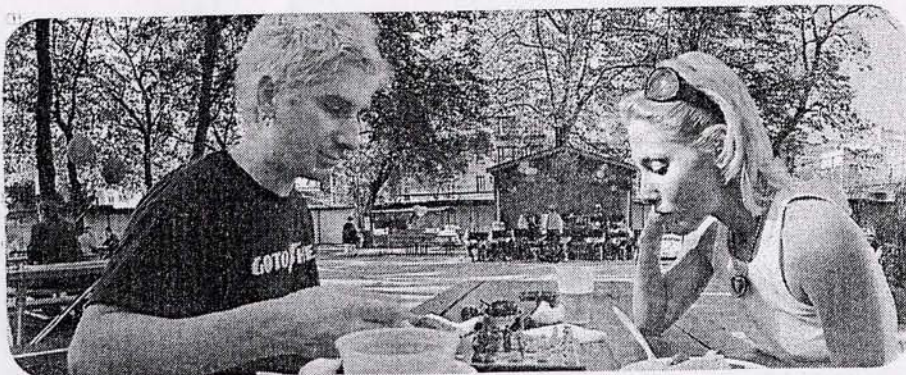
Niblo's Pleasure Gardens, on Broadway and Prince Street, "catered more to the upper-class people," Ms. Van Cura said. "They served ice cream, and it was the first place in America where the polka was danced — which is a Czech dance, not a Polish one." Beer, by the way, was invented in 10,000 B.C. or earlier.

But with the world wars, anything German was shunned. Street names were changed. Wieners were called hot dogs. Beer gardens declined. And Prohibition was the death knell. Somehow, at Bohemian Hall, where beer is as necessary to body and soul as gym class, it never quite stopped.

But the beer garden almost went on the auction block seven years ago, when the society, down to 34 members and \$150,000 in debt, was told to pay its back taxes or sell. It was a dying organization. Old members had failed to reach out to new Czech immigrants, whom they viewed with suspicion for growing up under Communism.

Only with the Velvet Revolution did those groups join to save the one little piece of Czech land they still had in New York.

"After the revolution, there was all this pride," said Pavel Vancura, who left Prague in 1965. "We could say, 'Look at Havel, he's a playwright, an intellectual, someone who



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can really talk.' If not for that, this place might have been sold."

Through some rather Herculean efforts — Mr. Voves, for example, talked his second wife into putting up \$70,000 as collateral on a new mortgage — Bohemian Hall and its garden were saved.

And now it has been nominated for the National Register of Historic Places in collaboration with a New York preservation group, Place Matters, which is devoted to

saving places that might not have striking architecture but that hold the spirit of a people, or some turning point in their history. Like the Audubon Ballroom, in Washington Heights, where Malcolm X was assassinated, or the oldest general store in Chinatown, Quong Yuen Shing & Company, at 32 Mott Street, where since 1899, medicinal herbs have been sold with brocade and soap.

"Bohemian Hall is an authentic community building, a hall for hire, where ordinary New Yorkers come together to make their own history," said Laura Hansen, a co-director of Place Matters who has extensively researched the site and its people.

And the walled garden is key to the rituals of cultural celebrations. "Every ethnic community has a need to celebrate with itself," said Steve Zeitlin, the director of City Lore, a sponsor of Place Matters.

For an Italian festival, the garden has hidden salamis, cheeses and cash in its trees. Members of the Hungarian Reform Church have danced the csardas under the lindens, which are gloriously fragrant in spring. There's something primeval about performing ancestral rituals in an enclosed grove of trees open to the sky.

And now the hipsters from Manhattan have discovered it.

"The goulash is awesome," said Melissa Logan, 28, playing chess with a friend, Ron Colinear, 40, from Chelsea. Icy mugs of Pilsener and plates of dumplings were wordless tribute to their contentment.

"We thought there would be flowers, but this feels like a backyard barbecue," said Greg Rice, 26, from Chelsea.

It has finally dawned on the society that its Old World atmosphere is its gold mine.

"I spent \$800 on a band for the hall one night, and everyone was out here drinking beer," Mr. Bisek said. Then, worriedly, he continued: "What do you think of the bar? Many of us think it's just 2-by-4's painted green." (It is, but so nice.) "To me, it's dirty, ugly," he added. "But the young people, they like it."

At a red picnic table, Marie Miller, 86, tapped her arthritic fingers in time to a polka. "When the band starts to play, even with my stupid legs, I still feel I could march around," said Mrs. Miller, who taught traditional dances at a Czech school in Queens for 50 years. If her legs couldn't carry her, her spirit was dancing in the garden.



Rebecca Cooney for The New York Times

SECRET GARDEN Robert Chermak, above, the Czech bartender at Bohemian Hall. Bottom left, Ron Colinear and Melissa Logan, visitors from Chelsea; bottom right, Olga Simuk and Marie Miller, speaking Czech under the linden trees.