

Irena Sedlecka, a Personal Tribute by Peter Cannon-Brookes

Situated close to the border between Bohemia and Moravia, Velké Meziříčí is unfortunately best known as the site of a notorious Nazi massacre in May 1945, but the monument to it is one of the finest sculptured groups surviving *in situ* from the Communist era. After a search we located it in the New Cemetery of the town: unveiled on 7th May 1960, it is the creation of Irena Sedlecka and her first husband, Ludwig Kodym, *see back cover*. Irena once said to me that he was the ideas man and she turned them into reality. Both had been students in the Sculpture School of the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague immediately after the end of the Second World War and in 1952 they together won the national competition for the sculpture commissioned to ornament the newly-founded Lenin Museum in Prague.

Open competitions and generous state patronage were then readily available, and Irena and Ludwig were married in the same year. Klement Gottwald, the Czechoslovak Communist leader, died in 1953 and they again won the open competition to execute the sculpture for the grandiose mausoleum planned for him. However, in the wake of the death of Stalin and Khrushchev's denunciation of his personality cult, combined with the drying up of state funds for such projects, nothing was executed. Irena said of Kodym that he was excellent as a business partner but useless as a husband, and relations grew so strained that she erected a curtain across their shared studio to separate their workspaces. In 1958, divorced from Kodym, Irena was married again, to the paediatrician Stefan Drexler who had served with Czech units in the British Army during the Second World War.

The *Monument to the Victims of the Nazi Regime* was a major state commission and the full-scale plaster was executed by Irena in Prague before being translated into stone by the highly skilled stone cutters trained in Hořice. This was standard practice and Hořice-trained stone carvers had been in great demand during the second half of the 19th century, not least working for Rodin in Paris. The massive group of three figures, swathed in heavy winter clothes, defiantly face their executioners, transcending the normal conventions of soviet-inspired social realism.

The optimistic idealism embodied in Irena's sculpture of the 1950s dissolved into a deep pessimism as she came to recognise the true nature

of the Communist regime. The contrast between the Velké Meziříčí figures and the Czechoslovak reality in 1965 when she won the national sculptural competition with *God is Dead*, could hardly be greater. The Communist authorities read the wiry figures of the group as referring to Nietzsche's critique of religion when for Irena it was the new religion, materialism, which was dead. Cast in resin bronze, she managed to have the sculpture smuggled out of Czechoslovakia together with her fur coat, and with Stefan Drexler they planned their escape to Britain with the three children the following year. For those seeking purely factual information about Irena's life and work the formal obituaries published by *The Times* (14th August 2020) and *The Daily Telegraph* (9th October 2020) are readily accessible, but any deep understanding of her artistic personality has to be based on her training under Karel Pokorný and the art historian V.V. Štech in the Academy in Prague, 1945-49, and her early career in Czechoslovakia.

Such studies are easier said than done because the Czech government has discouraged research on the Communist period and consigned much key material into the deepest recesses of the archives and museum stores. Irena Sedlecká does not feature in the massive 992-page compendium, *Art in the Czech Lands 800-2000*, published by the Institute of Art History at the Czech Academy of Sciences, in 2017. Furthermore, much monumental sculpture of the period has been destroyed after the Velvet Revolution, including Irena's nine-foot high bronze figure of Julius Fučík made for Plzeň/Pilsen which, with other no longer politically acceptable bronze sculptures, was cut up and melted down to provide the bronze needed for the Lidice monument. Mercifully, as it now turns out, the Velké Meziříčí group was executed in stone rather than bronze and thus had no scrap value. On the other hand, due to the current general antipathy for Communist period monumental sculpture, it is virtually ignored, even in the Velké Meziříčí website Irena is only noted in passing and then as the architect [*sic*] of the monument!

Nonetheless, after her arrival in Britain in September 1966, speaking no English and with only *God is Dead* to hand to demonstrate her talent, she had to cherish her memories of her earlier works left behind in a hostile Czechoslovakia. Franta Bělský, who had been a fellow student in the Academy from 1945, helped her, not least by introducing her to The Society of Portrait Sculptors. The figure of Franz Kafka she exhibited

with them in 1967 picks up from *God is Dead*, but the combination of losing the support of Drexler and the immediate needs of bringing up three children and paying for the mortgage led her, in her own words, to "The Wasted Years" of 1967-1974.

From 1974 Irena exhibited regularly with the Society of Portrait Sculptors in which company her rigorous training in the Academy in Prague, with its emphasis on the structural integrity of each head, overlaid by the flesh which could be subjected to subtle distortions to express the personality of the sitter, thereby rising above any rigid delineation of the individual's facial features, presented Central European alternatives to the classic British traditions. As a creative artist, she was never seduced by the contemporary preference for abstract art and its enthusiastic support by the Arts Council of Great Britain and other official bodies, and impressionistic approaches to portraiture, even when the Society of Portrait Sculptors went into hibernation (1984-1996). The *Talking Heads* project introduced Irena to a highly distinguished clientèle of sitters who recognised her special talent for portraiture, and it was not surprising that the eccentric publisher, Felix Dennis, turned to her for additions to his personal Valhalla - *Heroes and Villains* - populated by over-life-size bronze figures



which he assembled on his Warwickshire estate.

After the death of Franta Bělský's first wife, Margaret, in 1989, Irena became increasingly close to him, not least in the re-establishment of the Society of Portrait Sculptors in 1996, with him as President. He became her third husband in the same year which also saw the installation of her famous over-life-size bronze figure of Freddie Mercury in Montreux. This union reinforced Irena's Czech heritage and after his unexpected death in 2000 I was privileged to be able to support her in her work for Felix Dennis. The highly imaginative rendering of the seated figure of Conan Doyle, with the phantasmagoric figure of Sherlock Holmes rising up behind him, which was unveiled in December 2001, as well as her earlier figure of Baudelaire with the figure of Mephistopheles whispering in his ear (1987) demonstrate her highly personal reworking of ideas developed earlier by the Czech Symbolist sculptor, František Bílek (1872-1941), whom she revered.

The second commission from Felix Dennis was for the over-life-size bronze figure of the 19th century American poetess Emily Dickinson, to join his growing company of *Heroes and Villains*. Of decidedly variable quality, the invitation presented difficult problems for her. Irena was at first very reluctant to accept the commission, not least because all the known photographs of Emily Dickinson are full-face and Irena would have to construct much of the head largely by guesswork. In this process she tried out ideas on me over many weeks and I did my best to support her with constructive criticism. In addition, she was hesitant about Emily Dickinson's clothes and in the end settled on a composition which echoed the statue in Prague of Božena Němcová by Karel Pokorný. He had been Irena's professor in the Academy and she told me how Pokorný had modelled the hands of Božena Němcová for the statue from her hands and that he had given her one of the maquettes for the sculpture as a token of his gratitude.

Irena Sedlecka, notwithstanding her long years living in Britain, remained at heart a Czech, and during her last months in a care home outside London she refused to speak anything but Czech. The monument at Velké Meziříčí continues to reveal with tragic clarity that Czechoslovakia lost in 1967 its most imaginative young sculptor. On the other hand, British portrait sculpture of the late 20th century owes an enormous debt to this indomitable Czech who came to live and work amongst us.

Above, Sedlecka working on the statue of Emily Dickinson.
Right, 'God is Dead' (1965)



The Monument to the Victims of the Nazi Regime

Velké Meziříčí, Moravia (1960)

by Irena Sedlecka and Ludwig Kodym

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