

Prague in the Blackest Years of the War, and How Two Opera Singers Fared Within Its Confines

The Exciting Experiences of Mary Cavan and Otakar Marak in the Czech Capital—Utilizing a Stove to Carry Message to Allies—Meeting a German "Colleague"—A Stove as Singer's Fee

SINGING for a stove with which to cook and keep warm, for a sack of flour from which to make bread, or for live chickens counted upon to bring to their owner the treasure of treasures and the luxury of all luxuries—real eggs—is not the traditional business of opera stars.

But that was what Mary Cavan and Otakar Marak, now happily back in America as Mr. and Mrs. Marak, did during dark days in Europe when there were many necessities mere money could not buy. Looking back on their experiences, the two singers are able to appreciate the business acumen of the country editor who trades subscriptions for cordwood and swaps advertising for the loan of a pipeful of tobacco now and then.

Caught in the maelstrom of the war, the two singers were in Prague, Bohemia, from 1914 until late in 1919. Both are former members of the Chicago Opera Association and widely known. Let Mme. Cavan, who changed her name to Marak during those exciting times in Prague, tell the story:

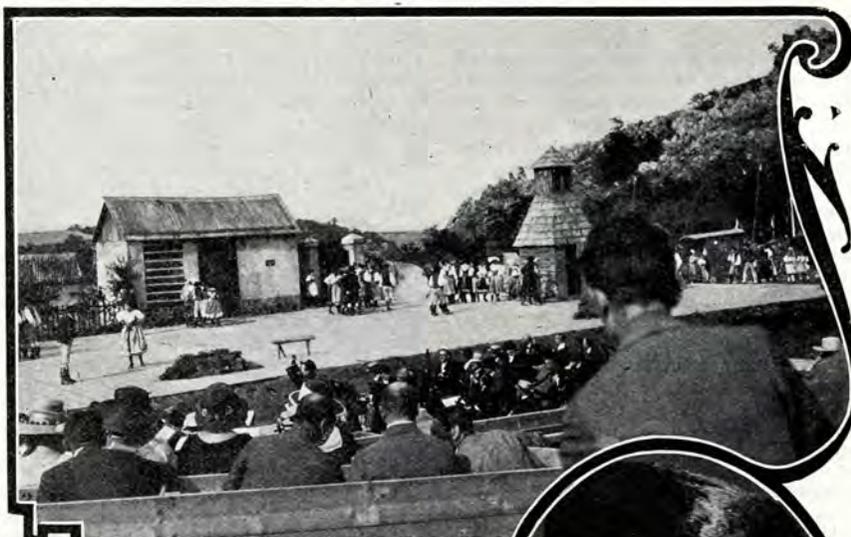
"We were both engaged at German opera houses when the war engulfed Europe in 1914. Mr. Marak, who is a Czech, hurried at once to Prague, the Bohemian capital. The Germans charged him with having broken his contract and began trying to make trouble for him. The United States, of course, was not in the war. But the Hamburg opera management informed me that because I was an American I was not wanted. This was a very cruel blow at the time, as I was depending much on this engagement.

"I decided to make my way to Prague and after many difficulties I arrived there. Mr. Marak was singing at the National Theater in Prague, where German was never sung. When I arrived I was engaged to sing there too. I could not sing in the Czech tongue. So I sang in French. The large German element in Prague hated me for this. Meanwhile the Germans were having their own opera at the German theater, where their own tongue was sung.

"The Germans began to make trouble for me. I was insulted and even violence was attempted to drive me out of the company. One night I was terribly burned about the face, neck and shoulders when I picked up some flowers that had been thrown to me from somewhere in the audience. In the bouquet had been placed a plant known over there as 'thistle,' which eats like an acid. In the excitement I had pressed the flowers to my bare shoulder.

"Presently, under orders from Vienna, I was told I could no longer sing French. So I sang Italian. The Germans objected just as bitterly, but I contended Italian was not an enemy tongue, as it was the language of portions of Austria-Hungary. This went on for a while. Then another order came from Vienna and I was told I must stop singing Italian. I next sang my native tongue, arguing that I was not singing English, but American, and America was not in the war. But I had to stop singing English, too. As I could not sing Czech, I simply had to get out.

"What did I do? I went right over to the German theater and I got an engagement there, singing my rôles in German as I had done in Germany. The Czechs began flocking to the German theater to hear me. I had triumph after triumph there, due to the Czechs, who knew my



Otakar Marak, Czech Operatic Singer, and His American Wife, Mary Cavan, the Soprano. Above: An Open-Air Operatic Performance Near Prague

heart was with them, and who made it a point to show me that they appreciated it.

"Meanwhile, the Germans, who charged Mr. Marak with breaking his contract with the opera house in Germany, were trying their best to get him into trouble, and finally achieved their purpose, as I will tell later on.

"We saw many cruelties, injustices, and agonizing suffering. Men were hung or shot on the least pretext. Women and children were in the direst want. Brave Czechs who hated Austria were sent to the front to be butchered. When one sees such things day after day, the time comes when one doesn't care much what happens. So, one day, when representatives of the Mafia, a Czech secret patriotic society, asked me if I would carry a message to Switzerland to help the Czechs, I agreed to do it. I wanted to get out of there and get back to America, and thought that if I could get to Switzerland I could get home.

Bore Message to Allies

"I had come to the point where the risk didn't bother me. I simply didn't care. The message was an appeal to the allies to recognize the Czechs as an independent state, before Austria, feeling herself tottering, should grant the Czechs autonomy in the hope of placating them and heading off the allied move. It told also of atrocities committed by the Bulgarians.

"How to carry the message was the problem. I knew, of course, that I would be searched. What I did was to mark words in my opera scores, writing in other words as substitutions for the text, as singers commonly do with their scores for the sake of getting more singable phrases. I got as far as Imps, on the Swiss frontier, where I was detained for two weeks. My scores were not rigidly examined. I had my passport as an opera singer of the German theater in Prague, and I bluffed my way through.

"Once in Berne, everybody took me for the spy of everybody else. No one would believe me. The secret service agents of all the warring nationalities shadowed me. By using ordinary letter mail, I got my message through to London and Paris. But I soon found it was hopeless for me to try to get to America. My German passport would have led to my arrest in France or Italy. So I accepted the advice of friends and went back to Prague. I was in Switzerland about two weeks.

"When I arrived in Prague I stepped into more complications. The Germans had brought such pressure on the Bohemian National Theater, which, it turned out, was a member of a German theater association, embracing opera houses in many cities, and Mr. Marak was told he could no longer sing there. He had about made up his mind to go to Germany to straighten things out. I advised against this, as I was sure he would be arrested. I decided to go in his stead. I crossed the boundary successfully and went to Hamburg. I reached an agreement with the opera house management by promising joint appearances after the war, and started back to Prague believing everything was settled.

"In the meantime Mr. Marak, who had been made a soldier at reduced pay, as was true of other opera singers, was in danger of being sent to the front, for he was no longer engaged at the opera house and therefore had no exemption.

"I was arrested as the train neared Berlin. To my protests, the reply was made that my passport had not been stamped properly.

"I bluffed my way out of this trouble, as the case against me was only that my passport had not been stamped with the time of leaving. When I was released, a policeman who had been one of my guards went with me to the station in a cab. 'By the way,' he asked, 'aren't you an opera singer?' I replied that I

was. 'Then we are colleagues,' he said, and explained that he was a horn-player in an organization corresponding to an American police band. In spite of my recent experience, I nearly choked with laughter.

"I got back to Prague safely, and resumed singing at the German theater. One day a gendarme came to my house. He was a Czech. 'I am very sorry,' he said, 'but I have a warrant here for the arrest, as a spy, of Miss Mary Cavan.' He winked, and then he said: 'By the way, weren't you married this morning?' I saw what he meant. 'Yes,' I replied. 'Then I can't arrest you, as this warrant is for Miss Mary Cavan.'

"Mr. Marak and I were engaged, and intended to be married as soon as our affairs were settled. We went right down to a registrar's office and were made man and wife. Our marriage played a part in preventing the issuance of orders sending Otto to the front. Also, we found out where a little money would do good.

"Then came the days when the German power was weakening and the Czechs were able to declare their independence of Austria. We put up the first American flag that had been seen in Prague since the entry of America into the war.

"Days followed when the Czechs had no real government. They were wonderfully well behaved. But there were almost none of the necessities or comforts of life to be had. We had purchased a home, so we had shelter. We had money, too, but there were things money could not buy. We tried vainly to get a stove for cooking and heating. No one would sell us one. Finally Mr. Marak arranged to sing in return for a stove. On another occasion he sang for a sack of flour, something he had tried vainly to buy. On another occasion the fee for the singing consisted of four live chickens from which we got fresh eggs, the first in many months.

"Then came the new Czech government. It started promisingly, but the Socialists soon began to get control. A régime of confiscation followed. The government took half your money in the bank and half of any food you bought. It confiscated homes, leaving the owners a room or two in them, and filling the houses with the relatives of officials. When I saw what was coming, I turned our home over to the Y. M. C. A.

"For a while I went on singing at the German theater, and one night it was announced that President Masaryk was to attend. Two Czechs in the orchestra came to me and told me the orchestra conductor had refused to play the Czech national hymn. When I confirmed this I fled the theater. I was done with it. They searched for me that night but could not find me.

"Subsequently my husband and I appeared in concerts together. I remember one in particular, an American program in honor of President Woodrow Wilson. I sang songs by Harriet Ware, MacDowell, Nevin, Cadman, del Riego, and old Southern melodies. The words were printed in Czech on the programs. How funny 'Dixie' looked!

"But it soon became evident Prague was no place for a singer. There were no funds to support art. The weary people seemed to care only for light music. The artist met discouragements at every step and wondered where he would eat to-morrow. We made up our minds to come to America, and obtained passports. We were only permitted to take enough money out of the country to pay for our travel part way to Holland. But luckily we were able to arrange to get more, and in November we were in the United States again, very thankful to be here. We now are considering both operatic and concert engagements. It may be necessary for us to return to Prague to settle up affairs there."

OSCAR THOMPSON.

Paderewski Reported To Be in Swiss Health Resort, Recuperating

Ignace Jan Paderewski, resigned Premier of Poland, is at a health resort in Switzerland recovering from a breakdown, according to a report from the Polish Bureau of Information, 40 West Fortieth Street, yesterday. Denial was made by Dr. George Barthel, acting Consul-General of Poland, that Mr. Paderewski's resignation was forced.

CARLO GALEFFI

BARITONE

"THE FIND OF THE SEASON"

CHICAGO OPERA ASS'N,