

...BRIDGES... Number 12, 2007: "DELIGHTS"

by Joyce Michael for the ECCB's American Working Group & PC(USA)'s Czech Mission Network

When I began to write about our congregation's week-long biennial on behalf of the Diaconal Center in Stodůlky, I hoped to describe that entire experience on a single page. However, I had already alluded to the impossibility of that plan when I returned home from an especially fine program and enthusiastically said, "I will have a whole year's worth of BRIDGES in my mind by the end of this week!" Yet, after devoting BRIDGES 7 to this theme, so many significant events occurred that I did not expect to return to the biennial despite a number of untold stories. However, a mid-Advent adventure convinced me that picking up this theme may be a good way to invite each of you to embrace the New Year with a sense of delight.

While John's sister was visiting Prague in mid-December, we happened upon the large white tent that is annually set up on the edge of Vítězné náměstí (Victory Square). Although we live fairly close to that square, we had never explored the tent where seasonal entertainment is offered to children each year. However, being an adventurous soul, John's sister said, "Let's go in," and being curious folks, we did exactly that. A Sunday afternoon puppet show began just moments later, and I soon felt like a kid myself as I laughed at the woodsman who asked three different sheep their names, and each time received the answer "BAA!" I was amazed at the skill of the puppeteers who entranced children as young as three and grandmothers as old as eighty with their ability to bring a diverse array of characters to life in a way that commanded attention and invited response. Yet, I was especially impressed by the theme of the hour-long pohádka (story) that we experienced.

You see, it was not just any tale that was coming to life in a magical way – it was the story of Jesus' birth, replete with angels, shepherds, wise men, Mary, Joseph, and some uniquely Czechoslovak characters. The dialog and the action were lively, and no one left the crowded tent. Thus, I again concluded that there really is a place for Christianity's distinctive message of hope here in this secular society. In planning its programming, the municipal district of Prague 6 had not omitted the story of Christ's birth. Thus, the wonder of Bethlehem had captivated children and adults alike on an Advent afternoon.

As we left the tent, I recalled another puppet show that I had seen at our church in Prague 6 during the May biennial for the Diaconia, and I

wondered if that performance had been based on a traditional Czech tale or a religious theme? I could remember the lecture in which Professor Milan Balabán related the tangible delights described in the Song of Solomon to Jesus' life. When asked about the propriety of analyses that move backward in time, that scholar astutely observed that rich poetic texts invite, and even require, multiple interpretations. I could recall the enchanting performance of a recorder choir composed of young people from our congregation, and I could almost hear the complex polyphonies produced by an ensemble of accomplished vocalists who specialize in baroque music. I cherished being able to see another, more playful, side of a respected church leader, doctor, and author who joined another writer in reading some of his witty reflections on traveling and such. And I was especially charmed to remember a soloist who sang some of Dvořák's compositions with her whole soul, and a cellist who played a Bach work with such deep passion that his instrument slipped from his grip for a second.

I remember a lot about the May biennial on behalf of the Diaconia, but I cannot recall the theme of the puppet show because my mind's eye is solely focused on an enchanting scene following the performance when tiny children who had been captivated by the puppets rushed up to the little stage to meet their new friends. I can't help but wonder how many children similarly crowded around the stage after the play in Prague 6, eager to smile upon the baby Jesus. And I wonder how many of us will let ourselves be delighted by the promise of hope that the Christmas story invariably offers. May you be delighted by the warmth of Christ's presence throughout the coming year.