

Iowa floods hit Czech/Slovak museum

Thousands of heritage artifacts salvaged, many others beyond repair

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Traditional dolls, medieval weaponry and a Bohemian crystal chandelier. Before a colossal flood immersed the U.S. town of Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in more than 10 feet (3 meters) of water earlier this month, all these artifacts were housed in the city's National Czech and Slovak Museum and Library — the country's only museum dedicated exclusively to Czech and Slovak culture.

On June 13, a series of rainstorms resulted in what experts are calling a “500-year flood” of Iowa's Cedar River, forcing the evacuation of more than 25,000 Cedar Rapids residents. Aside from destroying thousands of homes, the deluge inundated the local museum and destroyed an untold amount of inventory.

Days after the waters receded, museum staff and volunteers waded through the muck, attempting to rescue hundreds of historic items from the cesspools.

“This is the first day we've been allowed back to start removing things. You just can't imagine the sludge and smell,” said museum President Gail Naughton. “All I can say is that this flood is beyond any imaginings.”

A hub for Czech and Slovak immigrants during the 19th century, the Cedar Rapids area is still home to approximately 13,000 of their descendants. Concerned about losing touch with their origins through the generations, these residents launched a heritage foundation in the 1970s and eventually went on to found a national Czech and Slovak museum. With more than 30,000 artifacts, the museum received international renown: Its 1995 inauguration was attended by U.S. President Bill Clinton and his Czech and Slovak counterparts, Václav Havel and Michal Kováč.

Thirteen years after these former heads of state dedicated the building before an enraptured audience of 7,000, the flood did not go unnoticed here by Prime Minister Mirek Topolánek, who expressed “great concern” for the museum's collection and the people of Cedar Rapids in a June 20 statement.

“I was alarmed by the news that the collections, which have contributed so much to the maintenance of the Czech and Slovak heritage in the United States, are in danger,” he wrote.

Such displays of sympathy are appreciated by Naughton, who is working to allocate funds for flood-related damages not covered by insurance and other resources.

“People have been calling and e-mailing from around the world,” she said, adding that the organization was accepting donations on its Web site.

Assessing the damage

With the floodwaters slowly receding, volunteers and museum staff now face the tedious task of salvaging thousands of books, textiles, glass and other muddied items from the decimated building. While employees managed to move two truckloads of artifacts to higher ground before the flood hit, some larger items — including a Steinway grand piano in the museum’s concert hall — are beyond saving. “The piano is a total disaster,” Naughton said. “I don’t think it can be restored.”

Other items, including traditional folk costumes and delicate textiles, are being cleaned and sorted under the supervision of the Chicago Conservation Center.

“Wash tubs, drying racks and clotheslines were parked in the museum lot, and mud-soaked linens were coming out surprisingly clean,” said museum spokeswoman Leah Wilson.

Aside from rescuing heaps of books, textiles and historic documents, staff have focused on cleaning up debris from the building’s interior to prepare it for sanitation. With shattered windows and dissolving walls, all of the building’s innards will have to be replaced, Naughton said.

“Structurally, the building will be OK,” she said. “We have to remove all the wallboard and woodwork, gut the inside and disinfect it. Then, we’ll seal it up for the time being, step back and decide what’s next.”

Despite the innumerable damages, Naughton remained optimistic. She pointed out that some keystone items, including a 400-pound chandelier in the main hall, managed to survive the calamity. “It is made out of the famous Bohemian crystal, and has 600 pieces in total. The fact that it survived gives us hope.”

As they waded through upended furniture, volunteers and staff also found much of the glassware and porcelain intact, Wilson said. “In the museum store, a painted ostrich egg was found sitting in the middle of muddy debris, completely unharmed,” she added. Before the floods hit, Naughton said she had plans to expand the museum to three times its current size. While such plans are on hold for the time being, the deluge does not signal an end to the museum. “We want to assure Czechs and Slovaks that this museum will survive,” Naughton said. “Czechs have survived a lot of trials throughout their history, and this is just another challenge.”

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