

CT 24

Portrétoval jsem
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královnu**



SCRIPT

Czech Television presents the documentary

I Sculpted the Queen of England

Commentary in Czech:

The best-known woman in the world. The longest-reigning monarch in British history.

Only one Czech spent long hours with the royal family during the Cold War. Franta Bělský, born in Brno:

Time Code: 0037 Franta Bělský, sculptor

I made portraits of four generations of the royal family. I sort of become a link between the mortal world and people that have to play a superhuman role. Living at Olympian heights. Often in a fairy-tale environment.

As a Czech war veteran, he became the royal record-holder. He made busts of the Queen Mother, Prince Philip, Prince Andrew, Prince William and Elizabeth II.

0118 Lawrence Hendra, head of the Philip Mould Gallery in London

There is no greater honour for any artist that works in Britain than having a sitting with the queen.

He created a statue of Churchill reviewing the Czechoslovak army in England for the US. He was helped by a Hollywood actor:

0137 Steve Stinson, son of a co-founder of the Churchill Museum in the USA

It was only to the invention of the famous actor Douglas Fairbanks Jr. that Belsky was put to the fore. Fairbanks knew the royal family and knew of Bělský. He sent a letter to dad.

German invasion, March 1939

0200 sculptor Franta Bělský speaking

My father had a warrant for his arrest issued and he just made the escape in the nick of time. My mother, father and I reached London in the summer of 1939. When war broke out, I ran the Czech embassy to enlist. I impatiently waited for the first transport so that I could get to France, where there Czech division operated.

My military career in France did not last very long, because France packed it in June. We were saved by an order from Winston Churchill, who sent a few boats that were sailing in the Mediterranean to collect us. I was on the *Northmore*, which was half full of coal. With another approximately 1,700 soldiers. There was accommodation for 11-member crew.

0249 Cholmondeley, camp of the Czechoslovak Exile Army in 1940

sculptor Franta Bělský speaking

Our first camp was in Cholmondeley. After some time, it occurred to somebody that we should leave some sort of monument and that I could chisel something out.

This document is made available after 80 years. It shows that even President Beneš got involved in Bělský's fate. The minister of defence was against Bělský starting to study at the Royal College of Art in London. He was worried that others would then want to make use of a grant and it would weaken the exile army, which had three and a half thousand men. Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk got involved in the dispute:

0349 Letter from Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk to Czechoslovak President in exile Beneš, 1940

He comes from a Jewish family whose Czech tradition and national loyalty is exemplary. Both his brothers are also volunteers in our army. Would the grant go to those who avoided voluntary military service and would it be denied, even next time, to those that behaved as Czechoslovaks at critical times?

President Beneš' office stated that it agreed with Masaryk's opinion.

Partly thanks to this, in the '90s the Marquess of Cholmondeley, who serves as a representative of the queen in the House of Lords, could unveil a memorial plaque to Czechoslovak soldiers and airmen in Westminster Abbey – the very symbol of the British nation. It was created by Franta Bělský.

0448 sculptor Franta Bělský speaking

We left for Normandy in 1944. We went all across Europe.

March 1945

German garrison in Dunkirk had an unpleasant shock. When soldiers with the Czech brigade discovered a store of German-produced rockets and started to bombard the enemy with his own weapons.

In England, Bělský was in the same military camp as the paratroopers Jozef Gabčík and Jan Kubiš. They took this famous photograph in front of the chateau in Cholmondeley. Then the Anthropoid operation awaited them. The assassination of Reinhard Heydrich – architect of the holocaust.

sculptor Franta Bělský speaking

I got my first commission because a monument was to be built to the paratroopers who killed Heydrich and the person that was to do it was to be someone who participated in the resistance. Although I was a student, I got the order.

I brought an Englishwoman – my wife – to Prague, where we lived very, very happily.

25 February 1948

Factory militia units are going through Prague. These men were ready to defend nationalised industry plants.

0640 Franta Bělský, sculptor

The year 1948 arrived, and the situation obviously worsened after February. It was clear that we would meet a fairly unpleasant fate if we didn't leave again.

The death of Foreign Minister Jan Masaryk affected him. After emigrating a second time, he created his death mask and exhibited it in London.

0715 Bohumil Vostal, presenter

Bělský and his wife also experienced Communist censorship. They were not allowed to publish the book *Svět za kanálem* (*The World Beyond the Channel*), in which they wanted to describe the oddities of an Englishman's nature. The manuscript is being shown in public for the first time now, after more than 70 years.

The Czechoslovak Communist Party would have let it be published after February only if he put propaganda against England in it. He refused. The same as his wife Margaret refused an offer to become a party cartoonist.

After leaving Prague, she became the first female cartoonist on Fleet Street, where the largest British dailies were based.

cartoon by Margaret Belsky, 1969

Fantastic how these Czechs keep on shouting 'Russians, go home' as if they did not realize by now that we ARE at home.

Belsky's signature meant broad-mindedness. This is shown by her cartoons of Churchill or a striking queen in the post-war years, when the British Empire started to collapse.

Coronation of Elizabeth II, June 1953

It was the first coronation that was shown on television. Britain entered the era of Elizabeth II. She became the head of the Church of England, the armed forces and a number of other countries at the age of 25. Nobody then could have expected that the length of her reign would exceed that of her model, Elizabeth I, as well as Queen Victoria.

However, it was the Queen Mother who became Bělský's first artistic commission for the Royal portrait in the '60s.

0855 Franta Bělský, sculptor

It was to be in such a way that the Queen Mother was in a box at an opera gala. So, in the Order of the Garter, with jewels, her tiara. First I went to see her at her palace and I could even choose the jewels that I regarded as suitable.

She let him photograph her like that. Bělský was then the only Czech who got the chance to create a commemorative coin bearing the Queen Mother's image, which he made to mark her 80th birthday. The royal mint issued it in a limited edition for the island of Guernsey.

0936 Lawrence Hendra, head of the Philip Mould Gallery in London

All monarchs, going back to Henry VIII, knew and understood the power of portraiture. Their faces were on the coinage in this country since the 15th century.

Franta Bělský, sculptor

The queen came to me, the situation in London was that strange that she could come to me by car without an escort.

He smoked Gauloise cigarettes and the last queen of India danced barefoot to Edith Piaf with his wife the cartoonist in the kitchen. This is one of a number of messages from the Queen Mother, saying she would like to meet a dozen of Bělský's friends at a party.

1105 Martin Jennings, British sculptor

I remember him remembering having the Queen Mother sit for him and tears appeared in his eyes. I made a portrait of her when she was 99 years old. She could almost be said to be coquettish and with Franta that would have worked well because I think they were closer in age. She did remember him.

Bělský represented the legacy of the Czech resistance. He was a victim of the Munich Agreement. But also a witness to how the Queen Mother gave Britons courage in the war. Hitler called her the most dangerous woman in Europe, because she remained by King George IV's side in London during the Blitz. Their daughter became a mechanic for military vehicles.

1151 Elizabeth II, British monarch, 1996, Prague Castle

I understand and sympathize with the feelings in this country over the Munich Agreement. The Second World War however saw the strong foundations for the relationship laid. Czech soldiers and airmen then played a distinguished role then, not least in the Battle of Britain.

sculptor Franta Bělský speaking

One day Winston Churchill came. He stopped in front of every soldier and looked him deep in the eye. It seemed like ages he spent looking at me and me looking at him. I thought one day perhaps in the future I will make the statue of this man.

He did actually create a statue of Churchill with Czechoslovak soldiers. Meaning he immortalised the most important figure in British history in the 20th century.

His larger-than-life Churchill was transported to America by plane in 1971. To the Churchill Museum in Missouri, where he first used the term "iron curtain" in a speech in 1946.

1319 Winston Churchill, former British prime minister, 1946, Fulton

From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic, an iron curtain has descended across the Continent. I do not believe that Soviet Russia desires war. I am convinced that there is nothing they admire so much as strength. There is nothing for which they have less respect than for weakness, especially military.

Half a century ago, Bělský was personally present during the transport of Churchill's statue to America. It's was the experience of a lifetime for him:

Franta Bělský speaking

It was possibly the nicest flight I ever had. This enormous VC10 had nothing but this crate in its entirely empty fuselage, at the back they were a few seats, where I and my wife sat with several other people.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev made a speech by Bělský's statue of Churchill. This was a symbolic win for Bělský:

1430 Štěpán Drexler, son of the sculptor Irena Sedlecká, Bělský's second wife

He loved England, he loved Churchill. It was terribly important to him, he hated the time the communists were here. I always thought that he would return one day.

He made his return in grand style. Immediately after the Velvet Revolution he created a bust of Churchill for Prague.

1455 Nicholas Soames, Churchill's grandson, 1997

It's a lovely statue, isn't it? Very good. It's great to see this statue here.

1508

Triga by Franta Bělský in London

Not every model or statue by Bělský ended up on a pedestal in Britain. Some were destroyed by their owners, others were lost, sometimes they could be saved:

1524 BBC's Antiques Roadshow, 2017

Lisa Lloyd, director of Roseberys auction house

So, you've brought me this rather intriguing figure of Churchill.

1532 contestant on Antiques Roadshow

It was actually in a lake, and the level of the water had gone down, and just his head was poking above the water. So it was a question of going in, not far, and retrieving it.

1546 Lisa Lloyd, director of Roseberys auction house

Well, it's signed F. Belsky, who was the artist Franta Bělský born in Czechoslovakia in 1921. He fled to Britain when the Germans invaded Czechoslovakia. He had quite a sad life. Most of his family died in the holocaust.

Rohovládova Bělá is the village in Pardubice District from which his family got its name. Bělský's granny died during the transport of Jewish citizens from Pardubice to Terezín. Another 20 cousins, aunts and uncles were murdered by the Nazis in concentration camps.

1628 Štěpán Drexler, son of the sculptor Irena Sedlecká, Bělský's second wife

It was as though he closed it off, he didn't want to talk about it.

1635 Trafalgar Square, 10th anniversary of the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia, 1978

He fought the Nazis in the trenches. He protested against the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia as a sculptor.

In London – a year after Charter 77 – he created a monument to Jan Palach. At a time when the communist authorities prohibited remembrances of Palach, who burned himself to death in protest against the censorship renewed by Moscow.

1717 Marian Werner, present when Palach's memorial was unveiled in London

In 1978, I was present at the unveiling of this wonderful statue by Franta Bělský, which is touching of itself, it was an incredible moment, we were all moved.

Franta Bělský speaking

Somebody from the Czech community occasionally asked me to do something. For example, the memorial for Palach. It's on the Velehrad house. In the old times, demonstrations gathered there and there were then marches from there to the Czech embassy.

1751 Karel Bartošík, attendee at demonstration in London

Franta Bělský was courageous because he created the memorial. This meant that at that moment the authorities in Czechoslovakia were against him.

The communist regime punished Bělský's step-brothers immediately after February. The lawyer Zdeněk Bělský was forced to move out of his Prague apartment and go to Lovosice, and lost his rank of colonel. Hero of the western front Otakar was interrogated by the StB and the Communist Party designated him a village man of wealth.

Bohumil Vostal, presenter

In the '60s Bělský became the first foreign artist ever that created a statue for Trafalgar Square. The bust of Admiral Cunningham was unveiled by the queen's husband. Over the next 30 years the Czech sculptor filled his diary several times.

Franta Bělský speaking

The National Portrait Gallery wanted the first three-dimensional artwork showing the Duke of Edinburgh, but I unfortunately had to make it in their palace. It's not so pleasant, it's a different environment, the light is different, so it's a struggle.

Lawrence Hendra, head of the Philip Mould Gallery in London

The fact that Prince Philip even invited the artist for lunch means that we know the meeting went well.

The correspondence with Prince Philip shows that Bělský spoke to him about Czech war veterans and the duke praised their representation in military ceremonies.

Before lunch with the monarch Bělský obtained the seating plan.

The corgis, which are well known for biting ankles, were there as well:

1940 Štěpán Drexler, son of the sculptor Irena Sedlecká, Bělský's second wife

At one lunch he had with the queen he kicked a corgi by mistake, she had this little dog, he kicked one and didn't know what to do.

The queen noticed and calmed Bělský by saying he was privileged. She showed him her bitten hand and said: Look what they do to me.

2005 sculptor Franta Bělský speaking

But obviously, when she is the head of the British Commonwealth of Nations and the head of the church then – as she says herself – she has to put on her national anthem face.

Bohumil Vostal, presenter

The dream of probably every artist is that Queen Elizabeth II sits for him. Bělský achieved this. Everything took place at Buckingham Palace.

sculptor Franta Bělský speaking

I always think that the ones that make the most fun of this are my friends. It's simply hard going for me.

These photographs seem to show Bělský in the windows of the yellow drawing room. During one of six sittings with Elizabeth II.

sculptor Franta Bělský speaking

I had screens put up there so that I didn't see the Rococo mirror, so that I wasn't disturbed by all the posh decorations. I took my things from the studio there, for example the turntable. It's a sort of funny story. Because in English sculpting terminology it's called a "throne" – "trůn" in Czech. So I had to be careful so as not to say the wrong thing and not to ask the queen to hop on the throne again. But she wouldn't have been bothered, because she has an impish sense of humour. It's really always good fun with her.

2129 Peter Cannon-Brooks, curator of Franta Belsky Estate

He was the heir to the rigor of the Czech classic tradition. Both the queen and Prince Philip signed the clay. That is as far as I know unique.

Bělský got to know the royal family in the '60s, when the people first swapped admiration of the monarchy for pop, fashion and film stars.

When he made a bust of Prince Philip in the '70s, Britain was facing terrorist attacks from the IRA and economically became the sick man of Europe.

Bělský's greatest success was in the '80s, when the monarchy was experiencing a revival in popularity.

The queen's son – Prince Andrew – who was then active as a pilot in the Falklands war had himself photographed by Bělský.

2304 Lawrence Hendra, head of the Philip Mould Gallery in London

Bělský had sittings with the queen in 1981. This was rather time when princ Charles was about to marry Diana. Of course as we know it ended in a great tragedy.

Bohumil Vostal, presenter

Kensington Palace has been Prince William's home since his birth. Bělský made a bust of him here, as the second in line to the throne and the king to be, in the '80s.

sculptor Franta Bělský speaking

I had to do it in the children's room. First, so that they got used to me, so that they familiarised themselves with me, so that I would not be too strange. So I went to see him for a snack, the princess was there. The first thing he asked me was whether I came in a helicopter. That was the usual method of travelling for him.

The signature on the bust is a W – according to Bělský the little prince was afraid he would break his finger while doing it.

sculptor Franta Bělský speaking

He's playing, I have to crawl on the floor after him and try to capture his expression, the proportions. Then you have to play with him and, for example, he realises he wants to play races on the corridor. At another time he trod a piece of plasticine into the carpet. I shouted at him: Jesus Christ, what are you doing? He looked at me with complete seriousness and said: I'm making a print of my shoe.

Horse Guards Parade is the place where royal military reviews are held.

Bělský transformed it in the '80s.

Every British prime minister since the time of the Iron Lady Margaret Thatcher has gone past his statue on the way to 10 Downing Street.

ITV, 2 November 1983

The largest number of VIPs since Prince Charles's wedding met in Whitehall for the unveiling of Lord Mountbatten's statue.

Channel 4, 2 November 1983

The queen unveiled the statue in front of the foreign office this morning. The statue, by the Czech sculptor Franta Bělský, was commissioned by the government.

Mountbatten was the commander of allied forces in Southeast Asia. He was killed in a bombing by IRA terrorists in Ireland.

These shots are the only ones that show Bělský with the royal family. He was wearing military medals from the Second World War, including Czech ones. This could not be spoken of in Czechoslovakia, then undergoing normalisation.

Czechoslovak State Television, 3 November 1983

Good evening and welcome to Television News. First let's look at the most important information. There was a ceremonial gathering of the workers to mark the 66th Anniversary of the October Revolution in Prague and Bratislava.

At the end of his life – now in a free country – Bělský created a memorial to fallen Czechoslovak RAF airmen. When Prince Philip visited the Czech Republic in the '90s, he came to see the monument. He knew more about its creator than a lot of Czechs did:

sculptor Franta Bělský speaking

I took as the model an airplane called the Mosquito, which Czechoslovaks also flew.

I always put a message in a bottle in my statues in public. They call it a time capsule today.

They opened Churchill in America after half a century. The message in a bottle read:

I'm Franta Bělský, sculptor, a Czech by birth, adopted by Britain and aspiring to become a citizen of the world.

His gravestone, however, belongs to the land of his birth. It was created by Martin Jennings. The creator of the famous statue of the writer George Orwell in front of the BBC's headquarters in London. Bělský rests next to Orwell in the cemetery.

2757 Martin Jennings, British sculptor

I was commissioned to make his gravestone by his widow, the great sculptor Irena Sedlecká. She specified and it may have been his specification before he died that that it should have the Czech lion on the back. It was an honor to make it.

Peter Cannon-Brooks, curator of Franta Belsky Estate

Franta Bělský was the most important Czech born artist working in the United Kingdom since Wenceslas 121412Hollar in the middle of the 17th century.

sculptor Franta Bělský speaking

I always regard it as evident that I'm open about my Czech origin. This is something that I can be genuinely proud of. We have an excellent reputation here. In athletics, in culture. Our influence on lots of events is certainly disproportionate to our number.

Credits

Director, script, presenter
Bohumil Vostal

Camera and editing
Martin Rusek

Production
Monika Veletová

Project leader
Michal Kubal

Sound
Martin Všečetka

Footage and photos

Sochař Jejího Veličenstva, Čs. armádní film (1992)
Fond Jan Lang, Národní archiv

Hledání ztraceného času:
U Benešů na zahradě (1999)
V Británii za vlast (1996)
Východ - západ (2006)
Volá Londýn (1997)

Za národní osvobození – za novou republiku (1984)
Československý filmový týdeník 1948/12
Aktualita Prag-Praha, NFA
Winston Churchill návštěvou u ČSL armády, NFA

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Ludmila Stáně, Velehrad
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