

# Czechoslovakian Collectors Association



Fall Newsletter  
November 2011

## Czechoslovak Christmas Traditions

by  
John H. Marvin

The highlight of the Christmas season in old Czechoslovakia was Christmas Eve when presents were opened, typically after a dinner of carp and potato salad.

There was no Santa Claus. Instead, Baby Jesus was supposed to put presents under the tree. Christmas was truly a religious holiday. The word “*vánoce*” retained its original spiritual meaning: “Holy Night.”

Even today, Czechs and Slovaks enjoy keeping up old Christmas traditions. Many varieties of cookies are baked well in advance of the holiday, not only to eat, but to be used as decorations for the Christmas tree. The serving of carp on Christmas Eve is still observed, because, as on Friday in old



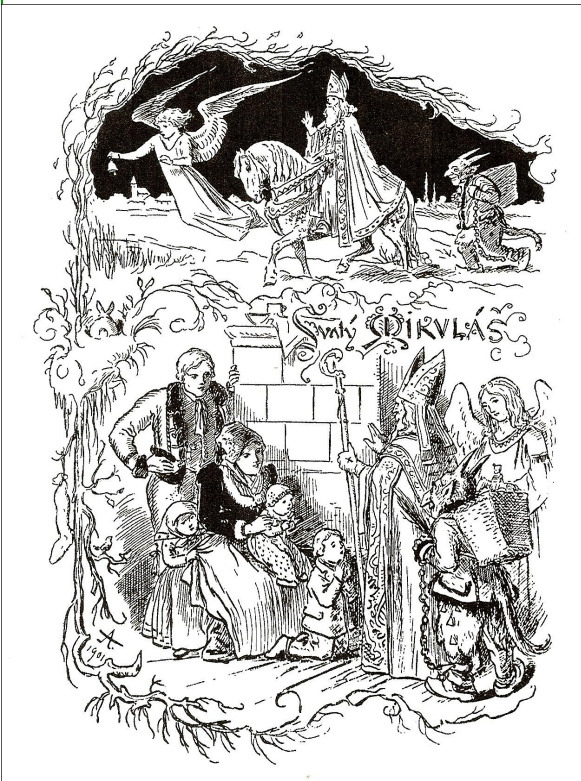
Christian practice, meat was not eaten on that day. Bohemia raises much carp, so this fish was a natural for Christmas dinner.

There are a few superstitions and tales that go along with eating Christmas carp. As the days grow fewer before Christmas Eve, fish farmers set up their tubs filled with live carp. Czechs like to buy the carp live, take it home, and let it swim in the bathtub until the day it is to be eaten. When asked why, one woman said, “*I think it is for the children to play with. But really I think it is done in hopes that the fish will shed its muddy taste with many changes of water.*”

There is a famous story about the Nanes brothers (2 Czech artists) who grew attached to the carp living in their tub. When Christmas Eve came, they could not bear to kill what they felt was now their pet. The brothers carried the carp to the river and set it free. In this spirit, some families still carry a carp to the Vltava River and set it free; however, so as not to go hungry, they usually buy two fish and eat the second.



In more modern times, it is St. Nicholas who brings presents to the children of the Czech and Slovak Republics. But there is always some question as to whether his visit will mean reward or punishment ... at least in theory. For accompanying St.



Nicholas (who descends from heaven on a golden cord) are an angel dressed in white and a devil (known as čert) dressed in black. Čert carries a whip and rattles a chain. So as this group makes its customary rounds, the rattle of the chain can be heard. This is a signal for the good little boys and girls to say their prayers and, if they know them well, the good angel will leave an appropriate gift. If, on the contrary, the prayers don't go well, Old Čert will be ready with his whip, or simply leave an old potato.

The Christmas season is typical everywhere. There is caroling in the streets and in the homes, and dancing and eating follow the fasting which ends on Christmas Eve. Friends, neighbors, and relatives constantly visit, and it is customary for all those who have quarreled during the year to forgive each other publicly.



Veselé  
Vánoce a Šťastný  
Nový Rok !!

## *How to Decorate a Christmas Tree In the Old World Tradition*

The Christmas tree represents a symbolic ladder to the heavens. As a result of this, ornaments are hung on the tree depending on what their symbolic position is in life. As an example, vegetables and fruits are closest to the earth; therefore, they are hung on the lower third of the tree. Houses, churches, people and animals should be placed in the middle region of the tree. Birds and angels should hang from the middle of the tree to the top to symbolize their closeness to the heavens.

### *Poppy Seed Cake from Makova Buchta*

#### THE NIGHT BEFORE:

Combine 1/3 cup poppyseed and 1 cup buttermilk and let it sit overnight.

#### INGREDIENTS:

1 cup butter or margarine	2 1/2 cups sifted flour
1 1/2 cups sugar	2 teaspoons baking powder
4 large eggs	1 teaspoon baking soda
1 orange rind, grated	
1/2 teaspoon vanilla	2 Tablespoons sugar and
1/2 teaspoon salt	2 teaspoons cinnamon, blended

Cream butter or margarine and sugar until smooth and fluffy. Beat in eggs, one at a time. Stir in vanilla, salt, and orange peel. Sift flour, baking powder and baking soda together and add alternately with soaked poppyseed and buttermilk. Mix to a smooth batter.

Pour half of the batter into either a 10" angel food or bundt pan that has been greased and lightly floured. Sprinkle cinnamon/sugar mix on batter. Then add the rest of the batter.

Bake at 350 degrees Fahrenheit for 35-40 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted into the middle comes out clean. Cool on a wire rack

#### GLAZE:

1 Tablespoon melted butter or margarine	2 cups powdered sugar
1/2 teaspoon vanilla	

Just enough milk to make mixture the consistency of very thick cream.

Using a teaspoon, dribble glaze over cake, leaving part of the cake showing through.

# President's Message

from  
David Phelps

Greetings All! I started writing this message to the members while on the porch at the lake in Minnesota – escaping the heat of Iowa. Without the distractions of the TV and Internet, I thought about the great time I had at Convention and the question posed to me by a couple of members: “What is your vision of the CCA?” I've thought about this for the past month. Now that the worst of the heat is past, it is time to put my thought to paper. Before I do that, however, I need to make a few acknowledgements.

First I would like to thank Debbie for all her work over the past two years especially in guiding the club through some difficult issues. The club is emerging stronger as a result. Not only have our tax and reorganization issues been substantially resolved, but she had to fill in as secretary and do the Newsletters this past year in the absence of a secretary. Even after her term was over she has agreed to continue to publish the Newsletters. All club members owe her a big thank you!

I would also like to take the opportunity to recognize the new Board members. First, Publicity is now handled by Rosie Bodien. You will recognize her name from articles written in past Newsletters. Bob Collier of Georgia has graciously agreed to be Secretary. For those at convention this year, Bob talked about buying engraved glass and being confident in your ability to see quality. I look forward to working with them along with current Board members David Fein (Membership) and Aggie Elwell (Treasurer).

Since I may be new to some members, a little about me. Those who have attended the past conventions will know me from listening to me talk on and on about Red Dime Mark birds and Mrazek pottery. I've been collecting for nearly 20 years, not long compared to some of you. I have a few other minor collections, mostly chosen for the color, even accumulating about 30 pieces of glass. Hopefully this won't lead to another collection – I have no room! I belong to a couple other non-Czech clubs and attend as many flea markets and antique shows as I can, looking for that special find. I attended my first convention before I joined CCA. I came because I was a collector but joined because of the wonderful people I met there and the opportunity to learn. One of the other organizations I belong to is solely for the purpose of learning. This is important for reasons I will mention later.

Back to my “vision”: This means different things to different people. If the question is what direction do I want to take the club, my answer is where it is now: No major changes in focus or emphasis. We have a great organization, but can do more.

Are there changes I would like to make? Yes, that's easy.

- I believe one of the primary goals should be to increase membership. We have lost members over the past few years, due in part no doubt to the economy. Hopefully this is turning around. New members bring new ideas, more knowledge and

participation; keys to a successful club.

- I would also like to see more member participation, those of diversified collecting areas who are willing to share their knowledge of their specialty or interest, not to mention holding Board positions.
- We also need to make sure the club is in strong financial shape. While we are in pretty good shape, any club needs to be able to withstand the economic hardships like those we have experienced in the past few years. If every member could bring just one new member into the club, we would see an enormous return to our existing members.
- To do this I feel we need to add benefits. We need to expand what we can offer to compete with other clubs. We have been updating the website with existing information such as newsletters and articles, but we need more! Another area to explore is adding a bulletin board or a Q and A section to exchange information.

This is easy to say, and the Board will work to achieve these goals, but that alone is not enough. We need you! Without your input and participation, we can't get there. Feel free to contact me any time with ideas. And of course, articles are always welcome on **ANY** topic. Any of the links on the website will get to me or directly at [dave@czechpottery.com](mailto:dave@czechpottery.com).

I can't close without mentioning the Convention. Even with attendance down some, I feel it was one of our best yet.

- Thursday is always exciting, seeing old friends again and getting an early crack at the dealers' wares.
- This year though, we had a special treat by being invited to Patti and Vinnie's house for some exceptional food and a tour of Vinnie's collection. Thanks again for their hospitality!
- Friday was a trip to the Corning Museum of Glass, about which I can't say enough. The few hours we spent there were not enough.
- Even though we were disappointed Saturday when Bob Mrazek was hospitalized and unable to attend, members stepped up and presented informative and interesting talks on a variety of topics.

You can get a sample of this on the website with all the pictures of convention.

As you may know, we are tentatively planning on holding the convention in Houston,

CCA CONVENTION 2012 — **SAVE THE DATE !**

JUNE 7-10, 2012

HOUSTON, TEXAS

Details to follow, but look at the website:

[www.czechcenter.org](http://www.czechcenter.org)



# Buying in an Economic Downturn

by  
David Fein



The best and safest way to buy the things we love in an economic downturn is to visit your local antique shows, antique shops, auctions, and antique malls. These are the places you can do what is necessary to ensure the perfect purchase:

- Handle the piece.
- Inspect the piece up close for damage.
- View the markings, impressions and subtle inscriptions to verify the validity of your purchase.
- Make personal contact with the dealer/seller.

Buying on the internet in an economic downturn can become a greater risk than in normal times. People are more desperate for money so this draws the inexperienced seller and the scammer.

The biggest problems with an inexperienced seller is:

- improper descriptions
- no knowledge of what they are selling
- poor photography
- unacceptable packing for shipping—(my favorite)

In end you are left with no piece and no refund of the total or the return shipping costs.

The scammer preys on those looking for a quick deal to make money, or find that desired item. Here the problems are:

- intentional misinformation
- photography to hide imperfections
- bait and switch

Most scammers will either disappear or make you claim insurance instead of refunding your money.

Internet selling sites (such as Ebay) are businesses. Their primary goal is to make money. Often they sound as though they a 100% guaranteed, but more often than not, you end up with only a partial refund and have nothing to show for your lost money.

If you must shop online, here are some very important rules to follow:

- Only buy from someone you have dealt with positively in the past.
- If you must buy from someone new on a site like Ebay, make sure the seller

has many hundreds of positive feedback points.

- **Above all: If it looks too good to be true, it probably is.**

In conclusion I implore you to travel the safer route. Visit your antique shows, auctions, antique shops, and antique malls.

Check the CCA website for a list of your member/dealer locations.

Best Wishes for Happy and Secure Buying!!!

*David*

## WHAT IS IT?

In the last Newsletter issue, we posed the question of what the orange item in the photo was used for.



John Marvin replied that this is a "domed cabinet." These cabinets were kept in well-to-do homes. It was customary to greet a special visitor with a shot of the special vintage homemade wine or Becherovka from the Jan Becker distillery in Karlovy Vary. Accompanying the shot was a piece of rye bread covered with salt (which at that time was very precious.)

Our next WHAT IS IT? item is shown in the photo to the right. If you have any information, send it to Deborah Truitt, [ccatruitt@sbcglobal.net](mailto:ccatruitt@sbcglobal.net) for publication in the next Newsletter.



Treasurer's Report  
as of 8/31/11  
by  
Aggie Elwell

As of August 31, 2011, the balance in the CCA checking account was \$17,929.75.

As of August 31, 2011, income stood at 76% of what was budgeted. Total budgeted income was \$10,235 with actual of \$7,789.

Total budgeted expenses were \$10,235 with actual expenses of \$5,233.92. This represents 51% of the budget.

Membership Director's Report

The membership drive for 2011-12 season is well underway.  
At present we have 107 members - below the budgeted projections for the year.

I thought I had searched everywhere for new potential members until I received a recent request for prices and information about Czech pottery from Iceland.

This was a wake up call, the potential members are out there, one need only make the information about our organization available.

It's our members that are our best asset. The word of mouth to your friends and colleges is the best advertisement we have.

I would ask that you take membership pamphlets with you when you visit Antique Shops, Malls, Auctions, or other like minded organizations.  
Dealers please place membership pamphlets in your showcase, or booth in the malls or at shows.

Since we have committed to Houston for our 2012 convention we have received renewals from former members who reside in the area, extremely excited we are coming to town.

You can print membership pamphlets on your printer or some can be sent to you on request.

Thank you for all your efforts and time.  
David Fein  
Membership Director



In October, CCA Member Rosie Bodien and hubby Dan Bodien were in the Czech Republic to visit Rosie's Moravian relatives in Hroznova Lhota . They were there on Oct 16th to see a special festival where the village people wore their native kroj (folk costumes ) to church, then danced in the streets, and sang beautiful folk songs. Of course they then enjoyed the cultural food and drinks. They then visited a special two week show of the Moravian artist Joža Uprka's [pronounced yo-zha ooo-per-ka] paintings that was in the city hall.



While in Prague, Rosie and Dan took advantage of an opportunity to tour another recently-installed exhibit of paintings by Joža Uprka. The exhibit was held in the Wallenstein Riding School to celebrate Uprka's 150th birthday. It contained sketches, large paintings, and watercolors.

After the tour of the exhibit, all the participants were treated to Moravian singing and dancing, in which all who could participated.



## TRIP TO THE CZECH REPUBLIC

During the second half of May 2012, Debbie Truitt and Elizabeth Meek are leading a trip in the Czech Republic. 2012 is the 300th year of continuous production by the Glassworks of the Counts Harrach. The Uměleckoprůmyslové Muzeum in Prague, Novosad & Syn (the Harrachov Glassworks), and the chateaus of the Counts Harrach will be having special displays.

The tour will be 10-12 days, start in Prague, and have guided tours in many glassworks and museums. Plans are still in development, but if you are interested in learning more, contact Debbie or Elizabeth. [ccatruitt@sbcglobal.net](mailto:ccatruitt@sbcglobal.net)

## Hand Made By Machine, part 2

by  
Rolf Achilles

[As readers of this Newsletter may recall, I wrote about Czechoslovakian mass produced ceramics last year (Spring Newsletter, May 2010, p1-3). This article continues that discussion.]

During the 1920s and 1930s, Czechoslovakia was a ceramics powerhouse. Though we know the names and locations of many companies, many more producers of fine ceramics and porcelain are known only by blind stamp numbers (i.e., a colorless impression) or ink stamp “Made in Czechoslovakia” and have yet to be specifically identified. Almost all of the several thousands of people employed in this industry remain unknown.



Collecting pieces of history is not just about the country that produced it or the piece itself, it is about the culture that produced it, the industry it nurtured, the economy it generated with its creativity.

Firms such as BIHL became giants of the industry, pillars of the economy. Yet today, a mere long generation later, we know almost nothing of its enormous production and even less about the people who produced it, sold it, bought it and did whatever with it. There seem to be countless forms and patterns. There is an online catalog of inventory but it is by no means complete and shows mostly floral patterns for a company that also produced some of the most innovative airbrush designs of the age.

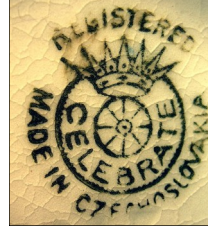


Until World War I, Bohemia (sometimes Austria) was the common name of the area famed for its ceramic production. Then with the armistice came not only economic but linguistic confusion. At first the new country was to be Czecho-Slovakia but quickly became Czechoslovakia. Both spellings were employed throughout the 1920s. The United States seemed to prefer the hyphen well into the 1930s.

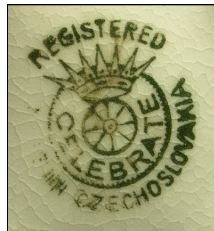


This vase is by BIHL and carries the blind stamp 2118. Based on other forms with the same very complicated stenciled composition, it may be pattern 1497. Forms with this yellow pattern (it also came in blue) were sold in Europe as well as the US, and possibly Australia. The black ink mark simply indicates that this vase was made in Czechoslovakia.

This blue air-brushed vase was manufactured by BIHL. It is blind stamped 2102 and came in 9 sizes. The size most commonly found in the US is 12 cm high. The US importer for this pattern was Celebrate.



The same statistics hold true for the brown vase: it is also form 2102 by BIHL and was imported by Celebrate. The pattern is two shades of brown applied over a fishnet pattern. Fishnet patterns appear in German and Czechoslovakian magazine ads in the early 1930s and continue to the late 1930s. The fishnet appears not to have been considered degenerate art, while the angled pattern was.



Except for Ditmar Urbach and BIHL, most Bohemian manufacturers of ceramics rarely sold directly under their own name to the US.

Importers (such as ERPHILA, CELEBRATE, and CORONET) had the widest distribution and became known for specific forms (blanks/shapes) and patterns (decorations). Here more confusion can arise, because some importers, with the help of manufacturers, developed their own, exclusive **forms**, which in turn were produced by the Czech manufacturer and never sold under the manufacturer's name but always under the importer's brand. Some importers (again with the help of a manufacturer) applied **patterns** that were country-specific. For example, there is a brown angled pattern (see the first photo) associated in the US with CELEBRATE that was never exported to any other country.



We know that some German firms blind stamped production dates into their blanks. This is a key to identifying the date the blank was produced, but may not be informative to date the pattern applied to that blank. Other firms use blind stamp number sequences, giving batches of years certain numbers. There is also numbering used to identify the applied patterns. In short, recording only the ink stamp may help identify the importer, but not the manufacturer.

Sometimes the manufacturer used his stamp to mark pieces, omitting the importer. Pieces sold within Bohemia or even the Austro-Hungarian Empire need not have been marked with country of origin or the manufacturer's mark. Other pieces are totally unmarked or have only a blind stamp number. Pieces exported to Belgium, the Netherlands, Brazil, Australia, the USA, and other countries were required to have the country of origin, but not the manufacturer stamped on the piece. As a result we see

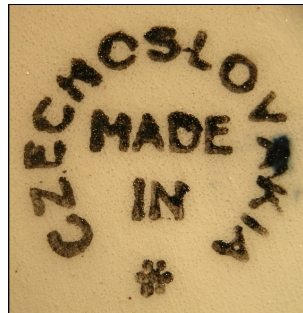


“Made in Czechoslovakia” without knowing the manufacturer, when it was produced, or to which country it was exported. We assume that because the label is in English, the piece was for the US market, but already in the 1920s, English was the universal language of ceramics commerce, except in France and Belgium.

How do we learn more about our specific pieces?

One key element hardly ever mentioned in US publications on Czechoslovakian ceramics is the blind stamp, a common feature to many ceramics. Because each manufacturer had its own inventory system, the blind stamp can be a very important clue. The blind stamp also indicates the shape and size of the piece, but not the pattern. So a vase with a floral pattern stamped “CELEBRATE Czechoslovakia” may have the same blind stamp as one with a geometric pattern marked “Made in Czechoslovakia.” Through other research and various web-based inventories we may know that the blind stamp is a BIHL number.

There are several Czechoslovakian ink stamps that have not been attributed to a manufacturer. Below are a couple of unattributed ink stamps illustrated with the piece each is on.



### CELEBRATING 11 YEARS OF DEMOCRACY

*November 17, 1989—students in Czechoslovak universities celebrated International Students’ Day with a peaceful demonstration. After several hours of marching, they met a police cordon and were beaten while being disbursed.*

*That started the Velvet Revolution—a bloodless demonstration where students and theater artists in Prague, Bratislava and other cities offered flowers to heavily armed militia. From 15,000, the crowd in Prague grew to half a million on November 27*

*when they held a paralyzing strike.*



*On December 29, Vaclav Havel was elected President. The Communist Party had been overthrown. The people had joined together as a nation to obtain their freedom!*



## STORY BEHIND THE PLATE

By  
John Marvin

Ten years ago, a friend and I were doing a weekly TV show on antiques, in particular Czech. A certified dealer, he had an antique shop in a nearby town that I had never visited.

After much urging, I finally made the trip. I spent much time browsing the high end front of his shop, finding nothing. And then I went to the bargain section. Sitting on the bottom shelf of a cluttered book shelf, I spotted the small plate with the emblems of Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia, and Silesia.



Turning it over, there was Josef Mrazek's signature.

Since there was no price on the plate, I asked for a price, covering the signature with my fingers. My friend said: "*Five dollars.*"

To which I gasped and said in amazement: "*What?*"

He answered: "*OK. As a friend, you can have it for \$3.50.*"

With a bad case of the shakes, I told him not to wrap it. I'd carry it to the car.

Speeding home, I immediately looked up Harold Mrazek's address and wrote a letter to him with pictures of both the front and back of the plate. Three days later I got his confirmation letter along with his father's stationery from Letovice.

To this day I've never told my friend about his "junk" plate, and the find of my lifetime.



*Now some information about your piece of pottery. It is significant piece but not "One of a kind". I have one myself.*

*The plate was made in 1918 and distributed to every member of the "Evening Of the Czechoslovak Arts Club" in honor of the first president of Czechoslovakia, Thomas Garigue Masaryk, held in Waldorf Astoria in New York, on November 18, 1918.*

*and attended by the then reigning 28 Czechoslovak artists living in United States at the time. In Exile, of course, since they were "wanted" by the then government over the Czech lands. These were first caliber artists such as Alfonse Mucha, Frantisek Kupka a tak dale. My father created this plate for that occasion and gave it to each member. There were probably about fifty plates made and sorry to say not many remain. Fifty isnt too many but it is more than one of a kind.*

*Sorry to give you this disappointing news.*

*Enjoy the plate anyway and keep it safe.*

*One of the few treasures associated with our first president, and of course, my father. If you didnt hear my lecture in Indiana, here is a piece of information on the Black Bird trademark, which eventually was incorporated in the Mrazek pottery.*

*Before Joseph opened his own factory to produce the ceramic dishes, he needed plates*

to paint and sell. The Macy's store in N.Y. ran an add that would sell to the public dishes, teach them how to paint and bake their results in Macy's kilns. Of course they sold you the kit with paints and dishes and the instructions how to do it. That is how my father got started sometime in 1916. He took the plates home, set an alarm clock for 15 minutes and started to paint. He felt if he can paint the plate in 15 minutes, he can sell it for one dollar and make a living. And that is how Czecho Peasant Art got started. And the black Bird? It was his trademark started by necessity. Most of his original white dishes that he bought downtown N.Y. were very inexpensive and of course, "Made In Japan". The black bird covered the origin of the pottery.

I am sure that now you know more than you wanted about our pottery, but that is the price you pay when you ask.

Vas

A.R. Mrazek



oops

## Czechoslovak Christmas Ornaments

Down through the centuries, the glass blowers of Bohemia became famous throughout the world for their blown glass Christmas ornaments.

**Walnut**—this is the traditional “fruit” of the Christmas season in central Europe.

**Corn**—symbolizes prosperity, fertility.

**Pickle**—hidden on a tree. Whoever finds it first opens the first present. Often a family tradition.

**Houses, Churches**—symbols of village life. Collectors try to assemble a whole village with different houses and churches.

**Farm Animals**—traditional symbols of everyday village life.

**Birds**—symbols of joy and cheerfulness.

**Swan**—symbol of gracefulness.

**Fruits**—in Central Europe in the old days, fruit at Christmas time was unobtainable. That is how the tradition of hanging fruit ornaments on a Christmas tree was born. Even today, fruit is a symbolic gift of St. Nicholas Day (December 5th).

**Pineapple**—symbol of friendship, hospitality.

**Owl**—symbol of wisdom.

**Clowns, Carousels, & Circus Animals**—in the old days, the circus was the main entertainment for the people. Much joy and excitement came from watching exotic animals and clowns. The spirit of the circus, because of its joyful nature, has carried over into the Christmas ornament tradition. The artisans wanted to replicate the same spirit by designing ornaments representing circus life. Today, many people are collectors of clowns or animals typical to the circus (elephants, monkeys, bears, dogs and others).

**Mushroom**—the mushroom is indigenous to Central Europe and typically matures in the late fall. It is very beautiful and looks very much like the ornament, but is very poisonous. This type of mushroom is a traditional Christmas ornament.

**Musical Instruments**—symbolize the joy that music and singing brings during the Holiday Season.

**Stars, Moons & Angels**—the closest you can get to Heaven.

Ornaments made in Czech Republic for European Trading Co., Milwaukee WI, 2011.

