

Chris Roy Interview with John Grabowski,
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CR: Perhaps we could we begin by discussing how the issues and circumstances relating to WWII and the Cold War are emulated or represented in the Gardens.

JG: There's not really a physical manifestation. But more importantly, the gardens were used during [these times]—to symbolize a single nation made up of many parts: Literally the physical example of pluralism within the country. A using that symbolism, the Gardens were part of a program to bring the various ethnic groups in Cleveland together. Part of a national thing called the Common Council of American Unity, there was smaller group in Cleveland that played off of that, bringing groups together to address the aims of the war, the aims of the nation as a union of ethnicities if you will. So the gardens were sort of the physical representation of that.

CR: Did the Common Council of American Unity have any kind of [direct] presence or involvement with the Gardens?

JG: Not that I know of. Although I know that the one Clevelander who was very active in council matters was a fellow named Theodore Andreka, and he was the nationalities editor for the former afternoon newspaper, the Cleveland Press, and probably had the greatest stature of anyone among the Cleveland's ethnic groups. He was, as I recall, a center figure in that. He was central to pluralistic issues in Cleveland and helped put together the Cleveland Folk Festival. In the years after the war, he helped put together the first ethnic directories for greater Cleveland.

CR: You mentioned in your notes the need for ethnic independence within the groups encompassing the Soviet sphere. I suspect that that would relate more to the Cold war than to WWII.

JG: Yes; in the period after WWII the gardens manifested themselves I think in a different way. They became symbolic, not so much of internal unity or the need for it. Instead, they became a symbol of the evil of the Iron Curtain. [During that time], there would be annual "captive nations days" in Cleveland, and the mayor (particularly Ralph Perk and Tony Celebreeze) would bring representatives of the nations that had lost their autonomy to the Soviet Union together, and they would be honored . . . a sort of a "place in the media sun" for a day. So that became a very big issue in Cleveland.

A new garden—I think the Estonian Garden—was added during that period. Clearly, there aren't many Estonians in Cleveland. But it was a way to say that Estonia has an independent culture . . . that it is *not* part of the Soviet Union. The Ukraine, which had pre-existed—also took on increased importance. Ukrainian issues, of course, go back to the whole issue of the Stalinist imposed famine and then the continued domination of the Ukraine by the Soviet Union; so the Gardens in the 50s and into the 60's were very potent part of the Cold War Ideology.

A related aspect, I think, was the issue of multiculturalism: pluralism within the United States borders versus the Soviet Union's supposed consumption of all cultures into a "greater culture" of communist ideology. The Gardens played very well to that.

CR: It also seems interesting how friendships that tended to form as a result of WWII kind of became "enemyships" or vice versa during that period. For example, Italy, which was essentially the enemy at least during the first part of the second World War and evolved into a friend. And later, the reverse happened with some of the countries that came under Communist influence.

JG: The German garden was still honored during the second World War. [People mostly understood that] the second World War—unlike the first World War—was not against the Germans but against the Nazis. They essentially knew that there were good Germans and there were Nazis. The Italians, although they were the enemy at first, very quickly slipped into the friends column. By 1943-1944 Italian Americans were firmly on board with the war effort and after the fall of the Mussolini regime, even more so. By 1944-1945, I think the propensity of the United States was to look at Italy as the victim of the Nazis rather than an enemy. And by this time Mussolini becomes somewhat of an aberration

CR: Are you aware if the Gardens were the site of any kind of operation or demonstrations against the various enemies we encountered during the World War II? Would there have been, for example, demonstrations against Nazism associated with perhaps the German gardens or the Italian gardens?

JG: I don't think any of the gardens suffered. I mean, we'd have to check the record, but the gardens always remained somewhat sacrosanct, so I don't think there was any kind of violence or repercussion. It was almost the antithesis of what happened to Arab food stores after September 11th.

CR: So there wouldn't have been, for instance, vandalism towards a German garden, or against a country that fell under Communist control?

JG: Not that I know of. But I do know that the German Central Farm, which was located out in Parma, was vandalized during the second world war. There was vandalism that took place there, but a check of the records might reveal I'm incorrect.

CR: I don't recall going through the clip file at the Historical Society that there were any incidents . . . as opposed to the riots in the 1960s, where there're any number of vandalism incidents associated with the race riots.

JG: Right.

CR: One of the things that I'm particularly interested in has to do with the irony that exists in the sense that the gardens were meant to be the ultimate representation of ethnic harmony; but that the broad cultural reality is largely different. One of the best examples of this tends to be the ongoing conflict—a thousand-year conflict—that existed between the Hungarian Magyars and the Slovakian people. How would you say that played out with respect to Cleveland history?

JG: Well, that started before the gardens. There were ethnic statues erected in University Circle (Wade Park) in a very early part of the century, prior to World War I. The first statue to be erected there was of Louis Kosuth, and I think that was inaugurated in 1902. The statue was supposed to have been erected in Public Square, but the Slovaks did not want a statue of what they viewed as a Magyar oppressor given such a prominent spot in Cleveland. So they put together a Slavic alliance, which I think included Poles, Rusins and other Slavs and went to Mayor Tom Johnson and demanded that the statue be removed. They did this cleverly: not by saying that Kosuth was a bad guy, but by saying that if you put one ethnic statue in Public Square, you'd eventually have to put hundreds of ethnic statues. Their point was well taken and the Kosuth monument was moved away from Public Square. That conflict, I think, was the first example of what I would call "non-Anglo cultural statuary" to be erected in Cleveland. And certainly the fact that in the 20s and 30s (and even though the map of Europe has been redrawn to more distinctive features) you have the [remnants] of an Austro- Hungarian empire: a Rusin Garden, a Slovak garden and a Czech garden.

So these very intrinsic, very ethnic details are reflected in the Gardens, and that's the paradox of showing the unity of the city and its diversity, versus the division within the European framework. Even within particular gardens: A faction of Slovenes—progressive leftists—wanted to honor Evann Thunkor, who was a clerical writer in Slovenian culture. However, the choice of the statue rubbed the Catholic Slovenians the wrong way and the statue was "kidnapped" before it was even installed.

CR: Could we talk a bit about "the irony of a Yugoslav Garden" and the harmonious or acrimonious underpinnings that are reflected there? I think it's a good representation of how cultural affinities change over time.

JG: Well the whole issue of the kingdom of the South Slavs is a creation of the post WWII period; and those who understand the history of Yugoslavia know that it was quite a stormy time. I don't think any other garden comes so close to reflecting such internal division within a geographic entity. [For example] Czech and Slovak states were combined, but they were never merged into one garden, even though within the Czech garden there was some division as to Catholics, freethinkers and protestants, who were among the prominent Czechs in the United States. This sort of drama is probably going to be replayed now, with the discussion of a Hispanic or Latino garden and the question of what is it exactly supposed to represent: a broad Hispanic or Latino culture . . . should there not be Mexican garden or a Puerto Rican garden? It will be interesting to see how those issues are resolved.

Hispanic has become, for better, for worse, a census definition: bringing people together with some commonalities across the culture. It's the same way that we that we lump African Americans or Asians together: There should there be an Asian Garden, but we already have a Chinese Garden. And is that Chinese or Taiwanese? There a difference there. Then, if we add an Asian garden, would the Koreans want to be in the same garden as the Japanese? And would the Chinese want to be in the same Garden as the Japanese?

CR: The nation of Yugoslavia was formed after the close of WWI is that correct?

JG: That's correct.

CR: Is it fair to refer to that nation building as almost a shotgun marriage or was there a certain common desire to form a multiethnic republic?

JG: It goes both ways, There was a common desire that certainly could not have been imposed by the folks at Versailles if the opposition had been unanimous or stronger than it was. There was a sense that the South Slavs shared commonality of culture and that it could be knit together. But underneath all that, there were issues of Catholicism versus the Orthodox Church versus Muslim minorities within the country. So on the surface, [unity] would look like a good idea, but it was fracturing already in the 1920s. And certainly during the WW, with the partisans and the collaborators. The fact of a separate Croatia, its just like Slovakia, the Czechoslovak state: Father Tiso created a separate Slovak state with the blessing of the Germans, and father Tiso to this day has been characterized as Nazi collaborator. The mayor of Cleveland, Ralph Perk, got in trouble when he honored Slovak independence day and hung the Slovak flag up, and he was then reminded that Tiso was a creation of Adolph Hitler. For Yugoslavia, there was enough cement there to put it together, but not strong enough cement to overcome to internal fraction.

CR: I heard that the only reason that the country didn't fracture earlier that it did was the very heavy handedness of Tito.

JG: Yeah. Tito supposedly kept it together and balanced all things and gave favors here and there He ran Yugoslavia his way and did it heavy handedly enough to keep it together.

CR: Going back to beginning of the 20th century, isn't it somewhat ironic to think of a Yugoslav country at all, when its actually represents so many ideals and ethnicities?

JG: Yeah I think so, I personally do.

CR: So how did it happen that a Yugoslav garden came to be at all?

JG: I would suspect that all the South Slavs had common cause in looking for autonomy under the Austro-Hungarian empire. They were all, in a sense, equally pressed or equally robbed of independence by the empire, so by bringing themselves together and talking about themselves as the South Slavs, they were able to use better a series of small states working together for a common cause. This is my speculation: that each state trying to say "we want Slovenia, we want Bosnia, we want Herzegovina.

CR: Another controversy that has come to the fore involves the more recent formation of the Chinese cultural gardens. Can you familiarize us with that?

JG: I'm not terribly familiar with that; but one of the issues about the Chinese Cultural Garden is that it is located so far from the main cultural gardens. My presumption is that that was done for security: Put it in a more visible spot, closer to University Circle. And that, of course, speaks to the perception of the Gardens being a dangerous place. I don't know of anything else, except that

the Garden was planned by Taiwanese. I don't know how much of the planning went into the hands of older Chinese who did not represent the newer population.

CR: In Cleveland Chinese culture, is there a greater representation of mainland Chinese versus Taiwanese?

JG: That has changed frequently. The early Chinese—mostly from south China near Canton—came from the west coast, and they are the ones that managed to get in before the Chinese exclusion in 1882. Subsequent to that, after the reopening of immigration, some Chinese were brought over as refugees following the fall of Mainland China to the Communists in 1949. The bulk of Chinese in Cleveland today came later: post 1965 immigration.

CR: To wind up, could we talk a little about the subject of vandalism? Has there been what you might call an evolution to the aggression/vandalism with respect to the Gardens. Do you see any historical patterns?

JG: Yes, I believe that there is a pattern. The Gardens have suffered from two things. First, they initially were created by the “enthusiastic promeneri” of each of the ethnic groups: Judges, business people, etc., who had accomplished great things, and they became the leaders of the Gardens. They maintained and took great pride in the Gardens. But as that generation passed from the scene, there was significantly less backing coming from the proceeding generation. That since has been recreated to some degree, with subsequent generations taking a greater role—pitching back in. But as this was happening, the second generation was moving away from the city, largely because the ethnic makeup around the Gardens was changing (primarily to African American).

In addition, the Gardens were not at that time—nor are they currently—inclusive in terms of race. The only black person memorialized in the Gardens was Booker T. Washington in the American Garden. Thus the Gardens became somewhat of a metaphor for the prejudice and acrimony that existed between the African American community and various ethnic groups. In effect, the Gardens were the centerpiece of a deteriorating neighborhood that could not relate to them nor was concerned about caring for them. In turn, the poverty in the surrounding neighborhood contributed to the theft of statues and copper and bronze rain gutters that then were resold. These activities exacerbated the divide between white and black even further. I would argue that vandalism was far more a crime of opportunity and monetary gain than it was destruction for destruction's sake. Oftentimes, however the white community chose not to see it this way—preferring to think of the acts simply as malicious.

CR: A good way to wrap this up might be to swing back to the very beginning. Do you feel that there is an innate irony to the fact that such a beautiful and broad swathe of parkland was developed to symbolize a level of ethnic harmony/compatibility that doesn't truly exist in the real world?

JG: I don't think that's the case. I think that in a sense, the Gardens may be overt in their demonstration of ethnic harmony. But one can argue that, while people are shooting each other in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union is falling apart, etc., that same sort of violence has not

occurred in Cleveland. And the violence that *has* occurred here has been racial rather than ethnic. What I'm saying is that, although the Gardens may be a bit too saccharine in their message, they do reflect a reality that does exist in Cleveland. To some degree that has been because there generally is enough pie for everyone to eat . . . when the pie gets too small, that's when certain groups go after other ones.

CR: That speaks well for the melting pot concept.

JG: It speaks well for the *pluralism* concept. The Gardens are all about pluralism; they're not about melting pots. That's the issue. We're all Clevelanders but we're all different. We share this parkland but each of us has different heritages and symbols. And that's what's remarkable about the Gardens.