

The New York Times

Thursday, September 7, 2006 - Home & Garden

A Playful Tenant and Her Enablers

By RAUL A. BARRENECHE

Kvasejovice, Czech Republic

WHEN William B. Russell Jr., an art historian, and his partner, Robert McQuilkin, a book editor, bought a former schoolhouse here in 1998, it seemed like an ideal country place, just an hour's drive south of Prague, where Mr. Russell had been living since the year before and Mr. McQuilkin had just come to join him.

But when the couple moved back to New York in 2000, having turned the house into their fantasy of a Biedermeier era hunting lodge, they could not bring themselves to let it go, which is why they still treat the single-story, stucco-covered brick building as their country getaway, making the trip to this tiny farming town in the hills of the "Czech Tuscany" three times a year.

What makes this arrangement possible is the involvement of a third American, Karen Feldman, who has lived in Prague since 1994 and who became a weekend tenant in 2000. Since then, Ms. Feldman, 37, the founder and proprietor of a glass company based in Prague called Artel, has put her stylistic stamp on the house — she is there much more often than the owners — and transformed it again, adding eclecticism and kitschy Communist era toys and dolls to the Biedermeier furniture and the Art Nouveau graphics.

Mr. McQuilkin, 37, first saw the house in the window of a real estate agency in Prague. He had left a job at Doubleday in New York to move there, and found himself with too much time on his hands, "champing at the bit to have a project," he said. "I fell in love with the idea of fixing up a ruined house in the country."

The men were drawn to the picture of what looked like an Empire-style villa — it turned out to be a school built in 1900, part of a building spree by Emperor Franz Josef — and made an appointment to see it. They drove to Kvasejovice, a charming but slightly grubby hamlet, and quickly learned that there were complications with the property.

In a legal tangle typical of the Czech real estate market in the 1990's, the house was claimed or coveted by several parties, including the former Young Pioneers, a Communist youth movement that had used it as a clubhouse, and a Czech-born Australian couple who bought it from the municipality.

But in a market where properties are seldom put up for sale (Czechs do not move often, in part because of low property taxes and extremely low rents), the house seemed worth a struggle. With the help of a prominent property lawyer, Mr. Russell and Mr. McQuilkin were able to buy it from the Australians at the end of 1998 for \$85,000. "It was expensive at the time, because the Czech crown was much stronger then," Mr. McQuilkin said. "We overpaid because the house was available."

The couple hired a Prague architect and spent another \$40,000 transforming the schoolhouse into a stately villa. They added a fireplace and had the building rewired. They installed new windows and French doors leading from the kitchen to a new stone patio. The kitchen was fitted out mostly with cabinets from Ikea, though with custom countertops made of stone from a local quarry.

In May 1999 the men moved in, but just over a year later they were preparing to return to New York, where Mr. Russell, now 41, became the head of the sculpture department at Christie's in New York, and Mr. McQuilkin started a literary agency, now called Lippincott Massie McQuilkin. It was then that mutual friends put them in touch with Ms. Feldman, who was looking for a weekend house in the country. They invited her to visit, and "in five minutes, we clicked," Mr. McQuilkin said. They agreed to rent the house to Ms. Feldman for \$500 a month.

At first she felt like an interloper. "Then she painted her bedroom bright pink," Mr. McQuilkin recalled, a move that delighted the men. "Soon it became an artistic and decorative collaboration."

Mr. Russell said, "She wanted us to be happy with the changes."

Over time, the three became friends, not just landlords and tenant. One year Ms. Feldman gave Mr. McQuilkin an orange Lada, a Russian-built car, for his birthday. She eventually stopped paying rent, instead investing in furnishing the house and maintaining the property in the men's absence.

Her offbeat and irreverent taste was different from Mr. Russell and Mr. McQuilkin's, which tends to the traditional.

Ms. Feldman collects toys, including Communist era inflatable animals, Japanese anime figures and broucci, the traditional Czech figures of fairylike insect people. "Karen really shook us up," Mr. Russell said. "We were interested in classical furniture. Now the house is a bit of a freak show."

Beyond the playful, Ms. Feldman bought Czech Modernist furniture, which was inexpensive. She found a 1920's sofa in Prague for \$100; a pair of 1930's armchairs cost \$25.

"Most Czechs want new things," Ms. Feldman said. "They want Ikea, not antiques. They don't find these things interesting because they were stuck living with them for 60 years. They can't wait to get rid of them." (An exception among Czechs is Cubist furniture, a high-value collectible.)

Ms. Feldman hired Vera Korandova, an interior designer in Prague who trained as a textile designer, to make 10-foot-tall curtains from olive green velvet used for military uniforms during the Communist regime. Another artisan, one who makes Czech flags, embroidered appliqué patterns on the curtains.

"One of the things I love about living in this country is that I can afford to do extravagant projects because they cost little money," Ms. Feldman said. "Things are not free here, but they are not outrageous."

The collaboration among the three friends and housemates continues. "We go shopping for furniture whenever they're in town," she said. "It's a little bit of a guilty pleasure and a little bit of a project."

Mr. Russell said: "Karen has injected a weird and playful sensibility in the house, and added a bit of femininity. It's a wonderful collaboration, because we come at it from such different angles."

