

BEDŘICH SMETANA
(1824–1884)

The Brandenburgers in Bohemia
An opera in three acts from 1863

After the death of King Přemysl Otakar II, the Kingdom of Bohemia was placed under the protection of Otto I, Margrave of Brandenburg, for five years. Despite being the nephew of the former king, Otto imprisoned the young Crown Prince Václav at Bezděz and, along with German colonists, pillaged the country. The years between 1278 and 1281 are regarded as one of the most challenging times in Czech history.

Act One

The knight Oldřich Rokycanský, along with other noblemen, approach Volfram Olbramovič, the mayor of Prague, at his country estate near the city. They call for an attack against the Brandenburg invaders. However, the prudent Volfram prefers to seek a peaceful resolution. Meanwhile, Junoš, a young burgher of Prague, arrives with news that a rebellion has broken out in the city. He reports that Brandenburg troops have invaded it, abducting the Queen and Crown Prince Václav. Everyone rises for battle with the slogan “slavná Praha!” (“Glorious Prague!”).

Only Volfram’s three daughters, Ludiše, Děčana, and Vlčenka, stay on the estate. Tausendmark, a young German from Prague, secretly takes advantage of Ludiše’s solitude. He does not care about the situation in Prague, the Bohemians, or the Brandenburgers. He is attracted to the beautiful Ludiše, promised to him by her father, but she rejects him vehemently. As Tausendmark cannot win her by fair means, he makes a deal with Captain Varneman. Together, they gather the Brandenburg troops and abduct all three girls.

The Brandenburg troops plunder the city. The Prague paupers rebel against the townspeople who allied themselves with the Brandenburgers and elect the runaway serf Jíra as king. The Prague rabble pillages the abundant supplies of the townspeople while shouting: „Nejsme více chudina! Přišla naše hodina! Žebráků už v Praze není, jsme si rovni, chlap i pán!” (“No more in poverty’s plight! Now, we triumph in our fight! In Prague’s streets, beggars are nowhere to be found. Between peasants and lords, equality does abound!”). Then, a clash breaks out between the townspeople and the Brandenburg troops, who are dragging away Volfram’s daughters.

Ludiše comes running, asking for protection from the Brandenburgers and Tausendmark. Jíra disarms Tausendmark, but the troops capture the girl again. Mayor Volfram arrives with his squires and faces the crowd of Prague citizens. Tausendmark accuses Jíra of abducting the girls. Volfram places more trust in Tausendmark, a prominent ally of the Brandenburgers, than in Jíra, who is a fugitive supported by the Prague citizens. So Volfram has Jíra arrested.

Act Two

The villagers are fleeing, taking what little they have and abandoning their homes. An elderly man offers them comfort, and they all pray. Captain Varneman and his soldiers hinder their attempt to flee. The message from Otto of Brandenburg, stating that his troops must leave the country within three days, brings a new sense of hope. The captain indicates that Bohemia is still under Brandenburg's rule for these three days. He then sends the elderly man to Prague to collect the ransom from the mayor for his daughters.

The nobles, led by Volfram, judge Jíra, with Tausendmark as the prosecutor. Jíra accuses Tausendmark, suggesting that his wealth and position might grant him special privileges. Following this accusation, which criticises both the nobles and the burghers, Jíra is sentenced to death.

Thereupon, Junoš intervenes, saving Jíra's life. He announces the arrival of the elderly man who brings news regarding Volfram's daughters. The mayor entrusts Tausendmark with investigating the matter. Meanwhile, Junoš bravely gets past the Brandenburg guards and comforts Ludiše.

Act Three

Tausendmark offers Varneman a ransom of three hundred groschen in exchange for the three girls. He hopes that he might leave the country with the Brandenburgers. However, Varneman despises the traitor and refuses to accompany him and the captive girls. Tausendmark attempts to flee.

The armed citizens of Prague, led by Junoš and the freed Jíra, are drawing near. Despite the darkness, Jíra captures Tausendmark and brings him to face justice. Volfram acknowledges Jíra's innocence, thanks him for saving his daughters, and offers him a place to live on his farm. However, Jíra declines, confused by Volfram's change of heart. The people rejoice and celebrate the victory of truth, justice, and the protector of their homeland.