

Czech Peasantry: An Historical Overview, Part I

How many times have you heard or said the cliché: *“kids today, just don’t have same work ethic that I was taught”*? Many of us probably have the sense that we learn our work ethic from our parents or grandparents and that may be true. As a genealogist, I cannot help but wonder about the earlier generations of my family (one or two hundred years back) and the relentless amount of work they faced, in their existential struggle to survive another season, another year, another generation. How would our 21st century work ethic compare to that of our early ancestors?

For the vast majority of us who have family trees that are rooted in the European continent, we are the product of dozens upon dozens of generations of peasants, who labored in servitude, subject to the laws of the state and the demands of their landowners. Our immigrant ancestors (i.e. the ones who left there to come here to North America) must have been strain-hardened, motivated, and ready to face the challenge of making it in the new world of America, where new opportunities came with a whole new set of responsibilities.

In his paper, ‘Whatever Happened to the Work Ethic?’, Steven Malanga wrote:

“Nowhere did the fusing of capitalism and the virtues that made up the work ethic find a fuller expression than in America, where Puritan pioneers founded settlements animated by a Calvinist dedication to work. One result was a remarkable society in which, as French political thinker and historian Alexis de Tocqueville (in his book [Democracy in America](#)) would observe, all “honest callings are honorable” and in which “the notion of labor is therefore presented to the mind on every side as the necessary, natural, and honest condition of human existence.” Unlike in Europe, where aristocrats and gentry often scorned labor, in the United States, “a wealthy man thinks that he owes it to public opinion to devote his leisure to some kind of industrial or commercial pursuit, or to public business. He would think himself in bad repute if he employed his life solely in living.”

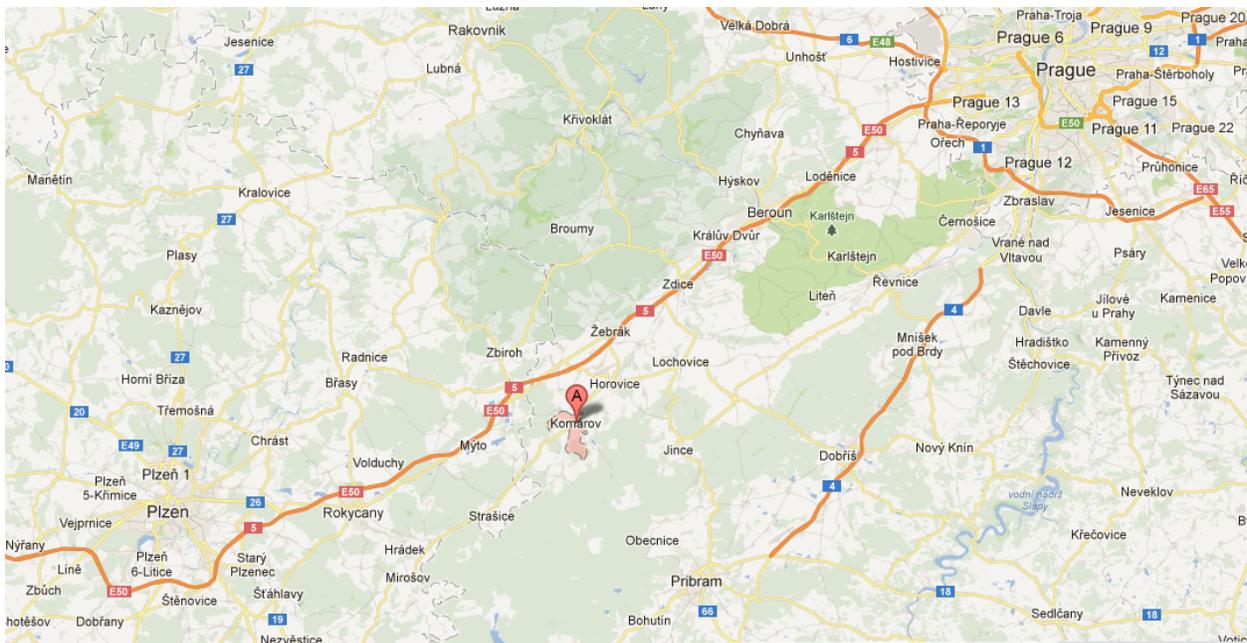
This thick and complex work ethic, so essential to the success of the early, struggling American settlements, became part of the country’s civic fabric. It found its most succinct expression in the writings of Benjamin Franklin, whose well-known maxims, now considered quaintly old-fashioned, recommended to citizens of the new country a worldview that promoted work and the pursuit of wealth. “Time is money” and “Never keep borrowed money an hour beyond the time you promised” and “Early to bed, early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise” voiced virtues that Franklin and his contemporaries viewed not chiefly as religious but as utilitarian.

After the Civil War, this secularized version of the Protestant ethic served as a lodestar for millions of poor immigrants, many from countries with little experience of free markets and democracy. Their assimilation into a culture that they recognized not as Protestant but as American reinvigorated the country, helping to set late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America on a distinctly different path from much of Europe.”

Although the identity of the peasant generations of our early European ancestors are lost to time, there is a fascinating book that sheds light on the history and plight of Czech peasantry, who lived in village of Komárov, Bohemia:

“Until recent times, the life of a small rural community in much of Europe was one of relative isolation from the measured busyness of the regional market town and of complete separation from the pomp and circumstance of the capital. And yet the fundamental aspects village life were determined in great part by the political fortunes of the larger world, which the peasant sustained with his labors but over which he had little or no control.

The small village of Komárov was no exception, engulfed as it was by the eventful history of the Bohemian Kingdom. Studying such a village the anthropologist cannot avoid becoming a culture historian as he strives to see the particular group, however small its size, in the larger context of time and space. And so the study of Komárov, a minute detail on the tapestry of Central Europe, should properly begin with a glance at the tapestry as a whole—an historical overview of the Czech peasantry and its changing socioeconomic status over the past thousand-odd years.



Map of the village of Komárov, located in Bohemia, between Prague and Plzen, Czech Republic.

There is general agreement among archeologists and historians that the first waves of Slavs must have entered the territory that came to be referred to as the historic Czech Lands no later than the fifth century of the Christian era. Like the populations that had preceded them, the incoming Slavs practiced animal husbandry. Employing in all likelihood the two-field system of crop rotation, they raised hemp, flax, and all of the common cereals, and tilled their fields with both wooden and iron plowshares. They used rotary mills for grinding grain and manufactured a modest variety of ceramic ware for domestic use. Although initially members of each settlement group probably held both cattle and cultivated land in common, archeological evidence suggests that the institution of the extended family, characteristic of other Slavs, rapidly yielded in this new home to an arrangement of clustered dwellings, each housing a nuclear family. It thus appears that a very early shift had occurred from collectivities based on descent to settlement groups bound together by ties of common territorial and economic interest—a process that was completed by the beginning of historical times.

During the next several centuries a slow but steady change marked the social and economic conditions of these western Slavs. Finds from the ninth century attest to the employment of an asymmetrical plowshare in light and fertile soil and it is conceivable that the three-field system was at least in partial use. Still more significant was the noticeable tendency toward social and economic differentiation among these Slavs. Tribal and regional chieftains, making use of their growing political power, acquired control of substantial tracts of productive land and began to exact from the peasants within their domain contributions in kind in return for protection and goodwill. By the time the Great Moravian Empire fell to the invading Magyars around 900, the foundations of a feudal system had been laid.

By the end of the twelfth century, feudalism had been fully established throughout the western portion of what had been the Great Moravian Empire and was about to become the hereditary Bohemian Kingdom. Except for a relatively small number of peasants who managed to retain full rights to their holdings, most had been forced into tenancy on the land. The territorial princes initially gave the land itself in temporary fief to the most deserving members of their retinues, and later in patrimony to the growing number of nobles. In return for the right of occupancy, the peasants were obligated to pay tribute to their lords. They made their payments customarily in grain, eggs, meat, and cheese as well as in compulsory labor service (*robot*) whenever their manpower was needed. Beginning in the twelfth century, payments were made sporadically in cash. Sizable portions of the land also came to be owned by the Church, especially by the monasteries, which the ruling princes richly endowed in order to strengthen their own political power.

The thirteenth century was characterized by rapid growth of the Bohemian Kingdom. With the three-field system in general use, crop yields improved, and the new practice of cultivating fodder plants helped increase cattle holdings. More and more soil was being reclaimed at the expense of a large supply of forestland. These developments in turn were closely associated with the rapid growth of specialized crafts, the chartering of numerous cities by the crown, and the rise of busy markets. Once or twice a week the peasants brought whatever they could spare to the nearest marketplace, where it was exchanged for products manufactured by the craft specialists.

When the drive to expand the land under cultivation met with a shortage of local manpower, large numbers of colonists from the surrounding German-speaking territories were brought in at the invitation of the king, the Church, or the nobles. In order to promote this large-scale undertaking, the newcomers were granted significant reliefs. The feudal lord and landowner contracted with an entrepreneur (the locator) for the division of a designated area into fields, and arranged for dwellings to be built for the use of the German colonists. The rights and obligations of the new settlers were set down by the lord of the domain in a written document. It was customary to exempt the new settlers from all taxes for a period of several years (commonly eight to twelve), after which their regular payments in cash were due twice a year as initially stipulated. Moreover, under the so-called emphyteutic, or German, law applied to these new settlements, the colonists were given hereditary rights to their property, subject, of course, to their continued cultivation and proper management. Emphyteusis was a distinct improvement over the domestic right, under which the land of a peasant was subject to escheat, that is, reversion to the lord upon the death of the original grantee. After the middle of the fourteenth century, payments made by the peasant tenants were generally in the form of money rent, and the right to inherit cultivated land, though not to dispose of it, was extended to the majority of the domestic peasantry as well.

Whether or not the transition to payments in cash provided relief for the peasants is subject to some disagreement among historians. However, it seems doubtful that the conditions of the peasantry could have improved appreciably even during the "golden age" of the reign of Charles IV, the Bohemian king who became the Holy Roman Emperor (died 1378). The Church increased and consolidated its holdings with the result that more than one third of all agricultural land was owned by parish priests, monasteries, prelates, or the archbishop. In addition to their regular payments, the peasants continued to be subject to some labor obligation or, in lieu of it, to extraordinary payments, some of which were collected for the royal treasury. Still another obligation was the parish tithe, collected from the peasants as well as from their feudal lords. It was commonly paid not only from crops (*decima grani*) but also from livestock (*decima animaliam*). Those who were landless paid with labor.

With the appearance of markets and a money economy, the socioeconomic differences among the peasants significantly widened. Not infrequently, children of small peasants were forced by circumstances to enter the service of those with larger holdings yielded greater surpluses and sizable sums of money. Any advantages that the peasants gained during the first half of the fifteenth century, when they actively contributed to the victories of the Hussite armies (mobilized as part of the Bohemian religious and nationalistic movement originating with the reformer Jan Hus) over mercenaries recruited from lands as distant as Spain and Sweden, were offset by the ravages of war wrought upon the land. By the end of that century, the economic burden felt by the peasant serfs and the restrictions placed on their personal freedom became severe enough to spark the first series of regional rebellions, all of which were brutally suppressed.

Economic developments during the sixteenth century were marked by the concentration of agricultural lands in fewer hands and the increasing tendency of the nobles to add land to their domains and to cultivate grain crops for income. Thus, in 1600, eleven of the foremost noble families owned one half of the agricultural land in Bohemia. In these circumstances the treatment of the serfs further deteriorated: on many an estate, not only were the serfs subject to both rent and the labor obligation, but they were not allowed to marry, seek employment outside, or send their children to study without the permission of the lord. Once again, the peasants rose in revolt in several localities, only to be effectively put down.

With the loss of Czech independence in 1620, following the battle of White Mountain, conditions further worsened, both during the Thirty Years' War and after. As a result of an extended period of wartime conditions, the wholesale flight from the country of the persecuted non-Catholic nobility and bourgeoisie, and epidemics of plague and other diseases, the population of Bohemia was reduced by about one half, and that of Moravia by about one fourth. Despite a number of peasant uprisings during the Thirty Years' War., the labor obligation, which in the past had amounted on most estates to several days per year, had been increased by some of the landlords to several days per week. In Czech historiography, the ensuing period is referred to as the "second serfdom." Exploitation reached such an extent that in 1654 the provincial diet saw it to issue an ordinance whose aim was to restrain the landowning nobility and their officials from the excessive insistence that the peasants render labor obligation on Sundays and holidays. Such demands by the landowners were viewed as encroachments on the Church's requirements concerning days of obligation. Special permissions for serfs' sons to learn a trade or to study were granted only upon payment of a high fee, and thus were accessible only to the richest of the peasants. Taxing took all of the three possible forms: exacted labor, payments in cash, and payments in kind. Moreover, grinding of grain was permitted only in designated mills under the landlord's control, and beer and other products had to be purchased from sources owned by the lords themselves—a practice established earlier. And as if all this were not enough, the peasants had become

subject to a state tax on the land they cultivated, while the lands of the nobles were exempt.”(Source: *Komárov: A Czech farming village (Case studies in cultural anthropology)*, 1974.)

Next Column: the Czech peasantry revolts.

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