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WHO THE CZECHS ARE AND WHY THEY CAME TO AMERICA

When Dean Thompson asked me to do the talks on the Czechs in this series, my first reaction was that it would be difficult to find enough material for three broadcasts. I started a survey in order to get a background for the stories and soon found so much material that I've had to make a very careful selection in order to present a balanced picture of the Czechs and their part in the making of America. I have tried to supplement a wide reading of what others have written with my own experiences as a second generation Czech-American who was born and spent her childhood in one of the distinctively Czech communities of Minnesota.

To begin I have decided to go back several centuries, to explain to you who the Czechs are, what about their history made them the people they are, and caused so many of them to leave their homes and settle elsewhere. No doubt some of you have been confused about the names Czech and Bohemian. They are used interchangeably and refer to the same people. Czech is what they call themselves. It is derived from the name of a chieftain of their main tribe who brought them, sometime before the dawn of history, to the land which the Romans in the time of Julius Caesar called Bohemia after another tribe they found there, the Boii. The remnants of these the Czechs gradually absorbed.

The Czechs are the westernmost branch of the Slavs, ethnically and linguistically related to the Slovaks, Poles, Serbs, Croatians, Slovenes, Russians, Bulgarians and Ukrainians. Their history from the beginning of written records to the present day has been one of the everlasting struggles against the Magyars. These struggles affected the people differently in the several territories they occupied, resulted in admixtures, in settlement in parts of the lands by German and Magyar elements, and in differing cultural developments. The Czechs in particular were much mixed, but through force of circumstance rose also culturally. The Slovaks who up to 1029 formed a unit with Moravia, were then torn away by the Magyars, isolated from the west, forced away from the best soil in the warm lowlands, and repressed in every way. Yet they, so well as most of the Moravians, remained nearer to the original language of the tribes. But the rude mountain environment of the Slovaks, their isolation, and the oppression they endured, restricted their cultural advance. In direct proportion to this the Slovaks and Moravians have preserved more of their wonderful folk art and their individuality, while the Czechs have become more cosmopolitan.

Of great national figures I wish to mention only a few: Libuse, the princess who is reputed to have founded the city of Praha, or Prague; the Greek priests Cyril and Methodius, who introduced Christianity to Moravia from Constantinople in the year 863 A.D., and designed an alphabet for the Slavic dialects; Prince Vaclav, or

Wenceslaus, a Christian Martyr, who was later canonized as a saint; King Charles I of Bohemia, known also as Emperor Charles IV of the Holy Roman Empire, who founded the University of Prague in 1348. And Jan Hus, or John Huss, the great religious reformer who was burned at the stake in 1415.

The religious wars following Huss' death ended in 1620 in a complete defeat of the Hussites at the Battle of White Mountain. It was followed by the counter-reformation of Bohemia in which the Protestants, who at that time comprised more than nine-tenths of the population, were reduced by execution and exile from 4,000,000 to less than 800,000. All nobles and intellectuals were liquidated. Germans and other foreigners were given their confiscated property and homes. The Jesuits introduced from Germany proceeded to convert the remaining inhabitants to Catholicism and to destroy their culture. They searched private dwellings and burned all books they could find. Thus was destroyed most of Bohemia's early literature.

Many are the stories of the old Czechs like to tell of the ruses they used to save their precious books. Some were buried in piles of manure; others baked in loaves of bread, still others buried underground. One of my own grandmothers brought with her a cherished family possession when she immigrated to the United States sixty-three years ago, a religious book which shows unmistakable signs of having been buried in the ground during this 16<sup>th</sup> century book hunt.

Bohemia lost its independence to the Austrian crown for three centuries. A systematic attempt was made to Germanize the country by forbidding the use of Czech in the schools and in official transactions. All Protestant Preachers were driven from their churches and their parishioners compelled to embrace Catholicism or emigrate. There were a few unsuccessful peasant revolts, but the Protestants who remained true to their faith henceforth worshipped in secret.

At this point I am going to digress a bit to observe that with such a background it is not too surprising that Czechs have gained a reputation through the centuries for engaging in many religious quarrels. Those who suffered so much to preserve their Protestant heritage are sometimes intolerant of the Catholics and the free-thinkers. On the other hand, those among them who are Catholics regard the rest as heretics and cling tenaciously to their own faith. Coming from a country in which Catholicism was the state religion a rather large proportion dropped all religious affiliations when they emigrated and call themselves liberals or rationalists. The religious differences of the three factions often keep them apart in other matters which are of mutual interest and it is difficult for them to cooperate even when they are agreed on their objectives.

This characteristic has affected the Czechs' attitude even in political affairs. At the beginning of the first world war a Catholic bishop of Czech nationality in Wisconsin sided with Austria and Germany. Some Czech Catholics supported him and refused to work with the Czech National Alliance in promoting the liberation of Czechoslovakia because many of the members of the Alliance were free-thinkers. In

the end their differences were resolved and they did work together, financing the whole revolutionary movement.

A similar situation prevails during the current political ups and downs of the homeland. Although few in American view with favor the present regime, some factions call the Czechoslovak government irreligious and refuse to cooperate with those who realize that their mother country has been the victim of its geographical situation, the betrayal at Munich and abandonment by her western allies after the second world war. The Czech National Alliance is at the van of those are trying to help the children of Czechoslovakia recover from the effects of the war.

Two of the most famous Bohemian émigrés of the 17<sup>th</sup> century were Vaclav Holler, the etcher who fled to England, and the bishop of the Unity of Brethern, Jan Amos Komensky, or Comenius, as he was generally known. The later lived in exile in Holland, England, Sweden, Poland and Transylvania. His writings in the field of education have influenced the educational systems of most of western Europe as well as the united States Komensky was at one time offered the presidency of Harvard College, but he decided against coming to America.

However, it was from the persecuted exiles that the United States did receive its first Czech immigrants by way of Holland. Augustine Herrman arrived in what is now New York in 1633 as an employee of the West India Company. Three years later he was appointed by the Director and Council of New Netherlands one of the Nine Men, a body of citizens selected to assist in governing the colony. He is reported to have been a man of good education, a surveyor by profession, skilled in drawing, and an enterprising merchant, the originator of the Virginia tobacco trade.

In 1660 he moved to Bohemia Manor in Maryland. This manor, consisting of some 40,000 acres in Cecil and New Castle Counties, had been granted to him by Lord Baltimore in recognition of Herrman's services in drawing the first map of Maryland. Later Herrman named two other land grants Three Bohemia Sisters and Little Bohemia in honor of his native land. In his will he directed that a portion of Bohemia Manor should go to the colony of Maryland for the purpose of founding a Protestant school, college and hospital.

Another emigrant to reach America via Holland was Frederick Philipse, the son of a Czech nobleman. He became one of the wealthiest men in the American colonies. Manor Hall in Yonkers was one of the family's residences. A story is told that George Washington was once in love with Mary Philipse, a descendant of this family. There are records of other Bohemians in the Dutch settlements of New Amsterdam. It is probable that William Paca, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence when Maryland was of Czech extraction. Records show that other Bohemians settled in Virginia around 1650 and several Czech names have been discovered in the records of the new England states for that period.

Next week I want to go on with the story of the Moravian Brethern, some of whom immigrated to the United States in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.