

WCAL – Thursday, April 21, 1949, 9:00 A.M. Contributions of Czech Immigrant group to 'America in the Making'; by Esther Jerabek

### III

#### ASSIMILATION AND CONTRIBUTIONS

Today I intend to go on with the story of the Czechs in the United States. Although the 1930 U.S. census, which was the last to give this information, lists 1,382,079 people of Czechoslovak stock, official figures are not too significant in this case, because of their combining of two groups of disparate background, culture, time of immigration, and place of residence in this country. It is estimated that slightly over half of this number are Czechs, the rest Slovaks. Considering the Czechs separately, we find Illinois has the largest number. This is mainly because of their concentration in Chicago, which is the second largest Czech city in the world. Cleveland and New York are the other two cities with extensive Czech populations, but in general it can be said that the Slovaks are massed in the industrial states of Pennsylvania, Ohio and New Jersey, while the Czechs predominate in the farming states of Nebraska, Texas, Wisconsin, Minnesota and Iowa.

As you may remember, of the rural settlements the first were in Wisconsin, which saw also the beginning of Czech journalism in this country. Czechs came to Iowa somewhat later, in the years 1854-56, and settled in the towns and vicinities of Iowa City, Spillville, Belle Plaine, Ely, Cedar Rapids, Protivin and dozens of other communities. Some remained briefly and moved to states farther north or west. Ohio ranks third in its number of Czechs. They started coming there before 1850 and were instrumental later in supporting missionary work among Czech Protestants in Minnesota.

Nebraska is now first in its number of Czech farmers in the United States. Many of them came from Wisconsin. Perhaps the first was Joseph Francl, who in 1854 travelled to the California gold fields across Nebraska, where he returned in 1869 to settle. He left behind him an interesting diary of his California trip. The permanent settlers began to arrive in 1856 and founded such predominantly Czech settlements as Clarkson, Crete, Milligan, Prague, Schuyler, Tabor and Wahoo. A large number settled in Omaha, which became something of a Czech cultural center.

Among the best known of all Nebraska Czechs was John Rosicky, Omaha publisher of Pokrok Zapadu, a Czech weekly newspaper, of Kvety Americke, the only Czech literary magazine issued in this country, and also the founder in 1891 of Hospodar, the farm paper which is still being published. It has today a circulation of about 31,000, exceeded only by the Chicago daily, Svornost. Rosicky was also active in organizing the Western Bohemian Fraternal Association, an insurance lodge with branches in every Czech community of the middle west. Besides magazines he published books and pamphlets and became a distributor of Czech books from abroad.

Although it will be possible for me to mention only a few outstanding individuals, one political exile of 1848, who exerted no mean influence on American Czechs must be included. He was Vojta Naprstek, who spent ten years in the United

States to escape imprisonment after taking part in the revolution. After several years of manual labor he established a bookstore in Milwaukee, planned the first Czech newspaper in this country, but left before the plan could be executed. He was active in literature and politics, worked as government agent of the Sioux Indians, visited many large American cities to study their schools, libraries, and benevolent institutions.

Upon his return to Bohemia in 1858 he tried to introduce a number of American innovations in his native land. He founded the Bohemian Industrial Museum in 1873. Ironically enough, its library now contains the most complete collection of material on the American Czechs found anywhere and impossible to duplicate in this country because many of the publications are the only copies in existence.

Several attempts were made at various times to found a Czech college in the United States. Oberlin College, which pioneered in so many fields, organized in 1885 a theological seminary in connection with its Slavic Department. Two years later the Benedictines of Chicago established St. Procopius College and Theological Seminary. This was moved to Lisle, Illinois in 1901 and is still in existence. Columbia University, Coe College and Dubuque College in Iowa have had Czech departments and the state universities of California, Wisconsin, Texas, Nebraska and Iowa have at different times offered courses in the Czech language and literature.

In 1902 a Society for the Promotion of Higher Education (Matice Vysšio Vzdělání) was established under the leadership of Professor Bohumil Šimek of Iowa State University and W.F. Severa of Cedar Rapids, a wealthy manufacturer of patent medicines. Severa's endowment made it possible for this organization to offer scholarships to young Czech-Americans who would otherwise have not been able to secure a higher education. An auxiliary of the Society was the Federation of Komenský Educational Clubs. In the early 1920's one of these clubs was likely to be found anywhere in the middle west where there was a college and students of Czech birth or extraction attending it. Its function was to acquaint its members with the Czech language and literature by means of programs and dramatic performances. These were often carried to outlying Czech communities. At the University of Minnesota the Komenský Klub while active presented the University library with several hundred books in the field of Czech literature.

Numerous high schools and parochial schools in Czech communities have also offered courses in Bohemian, but the largest percentage of Czech Americans have had to rely on their parents, their churches, or on part time Czech language schools for their knowledge. The language is a highly inflected one and has sounds practically unpronounceable for non-Slavic tongues, so its study has never been very popular with Americans of other stock. Non-Czech public school teachers have discouraged the use of Czech and intermarriage with other stocks has had its effect. By now most of the bi-lingual generation in the Czech communities has been replaced by one which knows only a few Czech words or none at all.

A few of the more outstanding American Czechs should be mentioned at this point for the sake of recognition. The men who have done the most toward collecting

and preserving the history of Czech-Americans are Dr. John Habenick, who published his chief work in 1910 and Thomas Capek of New York, the present authority in this field. It is in music that the Czechs have made their most conspicuous contribution. No large band or symphony orchestra is without them. Best known of all was Antonin Dvorak, the composer of "The New World Symphony", "Slavonic Dance", and other famous scores. He was director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York from 1892-1895 and derived some of his thematic material from his American experiences. Victor Kolar, conductor of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and Conductor George Szell of the Cleveland Symphony are of Czech parentage. Jarmila Novotna is a Czech opera singer and Rudolf Friml, a popular composer. In art Albin Polasek of the Chicago Art Institute excels in sculpture, Rudolph Ruzicka is a famous illustrator, and the late Wanda Gag, an artist who grew up in New Ulm, Minnesota, was the daughter of German speaking Bohemian parents. Frances Janauschek, the famous dramatic actress of the last century, was a Czech and so is Blanch Yurka, who was born right here in Minnesota. Ex-Governor Harold Stassen has a partially Czech ancestry.

The late Ales Hrdlicka, for many years the curator of the Division of Physical Anthropology in the U.S. National Museum was born in Bohemia. Beardsley Ruml, originator of our present pay-as-you-go tax plan, is of Czech extraction. Among university professors of some distinction are Robert J. Kerner, Matthew Spinka, Anthony, John and Charles Zeleny, Alois F. Kovarik and Bohumil Simek, several of whom have died just recently. In politics there was the late mayor of Chicago, Anton Cermak and Congressman Adolph Sabath of Illinois, who is still active.

What I at first supposed to be a series on the Czechs of Minnesota, which is the field I have explored most intensively, has turned out to cover far more. Much of what I have told so far has affected or applied to Minnesota Czechs as well, but I want to make a few observations which apply to them alone.

1854 is the unauthenticated date of arrival of Frank Pesek, the first Czech settler in Minnesota in the vicinity of Hopkins. Two other families joined him the following year. The next settlements were Owatonna in Steele County and New Prague in Scott and LeSueur Counties in 1856. McLeod County received its first Czechs in 1858. Most of these settlers came from Wisconsin, Illinois, or Iowa, where they had immigrated shortly before. Nearly all settled on farms at first. Even now Minnesota's Czech population is predominantly rural.

The 1930 census lists 29,623 Minnesotans as of Czech stock. Large numbers came in the 1870's and 1880's directly from Europe. At the turn of the century this immigration decreased sharply and the quota law of 1921 brought it practically to a standstill.

Czechs of the first generation tend to live in colonies, the largest of which is on the west side of St. Paul. In Minneapolis they are widely scattered. Rural centers are located in New Prague, Hopkins, Silver Lake, Montgomery, Owatonna, Tabor in the Red River valley, Pine City, Meadowlands, and in many more places. In religion Roman Catholics predominate, but Minnesota has several Protestant settlements and a number of free-thinking colonies.

Among St. Paul Czechs one of the best known was the musician and public school teacher, Antonin Jurka. Best loved of all Protestant leaders was the Reverend Francis Kun of Ely, Iowa, founder of ten or more evangelical churches in Iowa, Minnesota, Dakota, Wisconsin, Nebraska and Kansas in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Of Catholic leaders Father John Rynka of St. Paul was most active in promoting Czech cultural and literary interests. Several attempts were made at publishing a Czech newspaper in Minnesota, the first being the Cecho-Amerikan, issued as a supplement to the Montgomery Star in 1887 and edited by the local priest, Father F.J. Pribyl. It lasted only a few months, as did the Obzor of St. Paul and other sporadic attempts made later. The longest lived of them all was called Minnesotske Noviny, edited by F.B. Matlach of St. Paul, also under several other titles from 1904-1920. The Minnesota Historical Society has an incomplete file of this newspaper.

Since Czech immigration to the Dakotas began later than to other states, I have reserved mention of it till the end. They have settled in Yankton and Bon Homme Counties, South Dakota, arriving in 1869 and 1870 from Nebraska and other states, among them Minnesota. Tabor, Scotland, Kimball, Eagle, and Tyndall are other communities with large numbers of Czechs. In North Dakota their settlements were in Wahpeton in 1871 and later in Lidgerwood, Pisek, Weseleyville, and other centers. States not yet mentioned with fairly large Czech populations are Pennsylvania, Kansas, Michigan, and Maryland. New York has always had a large number, but it will not be possible for me to give more details about them than I have already done in mentioning some well-known personalities.

I wish to close this series with a brief summary of what I consider the chief contributions of the Czech immigrants to America. This has undoubtedly been in agriculture, which the largest proportion of Czech-Americans have embraced as their way of life and by way of industry, thrift and progressive outlook helped to raise to its present high level. American Czechs rank high in the arts, especially music, and their interest in education is noteworthy. While they have produced very few men of wealth or politicians, their numbers, in the skilled trades, small business, and professions are high. Their insistence upon freedom of worship must also be considered one of the important contributions of the Czechs to the American nation.