

RE-DISCOVERING THE PATH BACK TO YOUR ANCESTRAL VILLAGE

Tracing your family roots to find the way back to your ancestral village, up the path to the old home and through very doorway that your family once passed more than one or two hundred years prior—is a very powerful experience that will you will never forget.

As I started researching my father's Czech roots, I found wasn't too difficult to get started—my great grandfather Albin Theodore Kadlec (born 1881) and his father Josef (born 1838) and his father František (born 1800) were all interred in the nearby Bohemian National Cemetery, which was co-founded by Josef Kadlec in 1873 just over the hill from the Kadlec farm where I was raised.

“Forming a pathway of recollection, we know ourselves by inventorying our family's deaths. However deeply we bury the dead below the monuments of stones and words, they rise back up.” (Jacob's Well, p. 128, by Minnesota-based historian, Joe Amato)

Like many genealogists, I found myself drawn to cemeteries of all shapes, sizes and locales—walking and searching headstones for familiar names or clues to find relatives whose stories were either untold or at the very least, just waiting to be found by me, perhaps even sleeping in the pages of some book or journal on some shelf in a building that I have driven past at least a thousand times, in my car.

Through my genealogy research efforts, I have come to relearn a universal lesson; there is so much to be learned, if you only take the time to learn how and where to look. The answers can be right under your nose.

Perhaps the most important milestone in my family history research occurred in August of 2004, when my family attended a Czech cultural festival held at the Komensky school house, located between Hutchinson and Silver Lake, Minnesota about two miles west of the Kadlec farm.

This was the first time I had the opportunity to walk through this school house where my grandma Rose Kadlec had taught for six years before she was married in 1936. To my surprise, high up on the wall was a photo of my proud looking great-great grandfather, Josef Kadlec—and documentation of his involvement in the Czech community of Komensky and co-founding of the nearby Bohemian National Cemetery (in 1873) and Bohemian Reading and Educational Society (in 1876).

The digital photo of Josef that I had taken in the Komensky school house that afternoon happened to include a caption in the Czech language, which I ignored, and which sat silently in my computer for nearly *two years* before I had realized it held the clue to help me solve this mystery.

Yes, I had driven by this school several hundreds of times and the clue was right under my nose!

With an online Czech to English translation tool and Google.com I was finally able to identify and locate the home village of the Kadlec family, Velké Tresné! With great excitement, I typed and sent an email message in English language to the village of Velké Tresné website, not being sure what to expect.

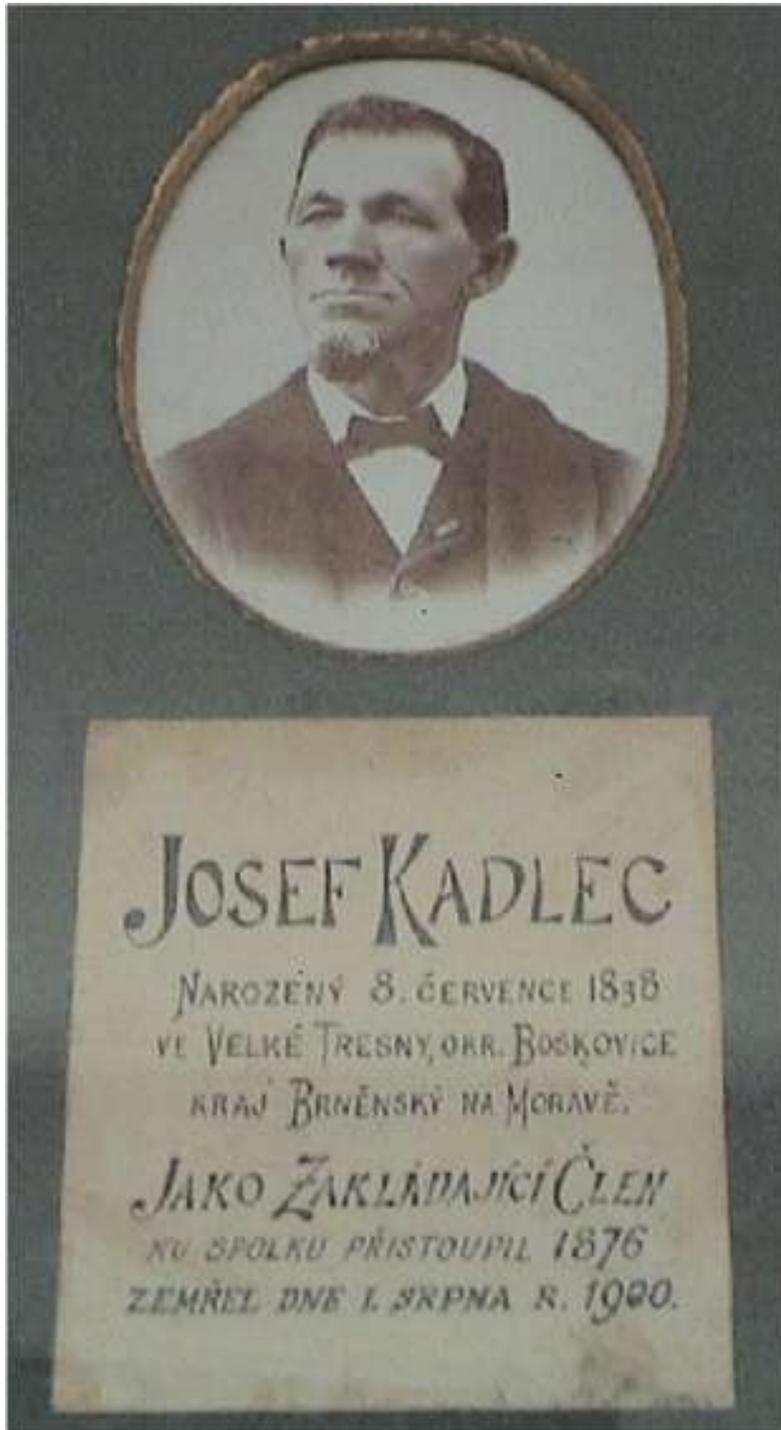


Photo of Josef Kadlec taken in Komensky school house, August 2004.

Meanwhile, on the wintry Sunday afternoon of January 29, 2006, a good natured Czech man by the name of Jiří Petr cross country skied along the steep hillsides facing his village of Velké Tresné, in the Czech Moravian highlands known as the Vysočina. Nestled into a small and deep valley, the first historical reference to the village of Velké Tresné dates back to 1351 and it is still home to nearly one hundred citizens. This is one of those peaceful, out of the way places on Earth that you will never have the pleasure of finding, unless you have a strong, compelling reason to look for it.

Mr. Jiří Petr is mayor of the Velké Tresné and on this day his cell phone compelled him to glide to a stop on the main hillside which overlooked the snow-topped roofs in his village below. Why would he have received an email from 'tkadlec', his student Tomáš Kadlec on the weekend?

However this email was written in English and was from an altogether different "tkadlec", yours truly, a Czech-American descendant from villagers of Velké Tresné who had left their homeland in 1856. With great interest on behalf of both parties, a friendly email relationship ensued, developing into a strong friendship between two men who would eventually come to realize that they shared the same DNA

from their common third great grandfather, František Kadlec (Jiří's great great grandmother Anna (Petrová) and my great great grandfather Josef were siblings).

It only got better from here. Jiří Petr, who through his own kindness, enthusiasm and the help of his next door neighbor Erika Cacková (for English translation help) and local historian Vladimír Kovář (for his research work) were able to help me fully document eight additional generations of my Kadlec family who were previously unknown! This information included not just the vital (birth, marriage, death) records of my direct ancestors back to 1655, but also that of their siblings and siblings' children, real estate purchase records, and digital photos of the homes where these people, my family once lived.

The key to learning the port of entry for my family was learned at a Czechoslovak Genealogical Society International (CGSI) quarterly meeting where I learned about the Castle Garden website, www.castlegarden.org (for the immigration port of New York City, before Ellis Island came into existence). If you are not sure of the port of entry of your family, I encourage you to try this website and be sure to use the wildcard (*) in your search to handle variations in how your ancestors' names were spelled. Of course it could be the case that your family came through a different port, such as Baltimore, Boston, Galveston, New Orleans, or even Quebec, Canada.

Which members of my family made this fateful journey across the Atlantic? The František Kadlec family, which included parents František (age 56) and Anna (53), and five (Franziska (29), Josepha (21), Josef (19), Antonia (13), and Vincenzia (9)) of their eight living children, left the port of Hamburg Germany on October 15th and thirty-four days later, first arrived on the American shores of the Castle Garden immigrant processing center in New York City on 18 November 1856. Upon arrival in America, the Kadlec family name was first recorded as "Kadletz", which is how it was spelled in the Germanic language Austrian Empire.

The three Kadlec children who remained in the Czech lands were: Anna Petrová (she was married Josef Petr); František Jr. Kadlec (who inherited the farmland), and Jan Kadlec, who was age 15 when his family left the village and no death records can be found for him in the Czech archives—perhaps he arrived on a different ship or settled elsewhere?

Lest you think your ancestors only made a one-way trip to America and never went back, the elder brother, František Jr., who initially stayed behind in Velké Tresné with his wife and small children, would make the journey to America and was enumerated in the 1860 federal census of Caledonia, Racine County, Wisconsin, but would go back home to his family a year or two later and spend the rest of his days there.

One hundred and fifty years later, it would be time for my branch of the Kadlec family to visit our home village once again. My wife Marata and I traveled to the Czech Republic in November 2007 to meet my cousin Jiří Petr, who with his lovely wife Věra, hosted us in their home and arranged a meeting in the town hall with the villagers. That trip set the stage for a follow-up trip to Velké Tresné in August 2008 with my parents, brother, uncle, and two cousins.

On this second follow-up trip, after days of looking up at it with wonder, my brother Andrew and I decided that we had to climb up the steepest hill overlooking the village, to walk the very same field that was owned and farmed by generations of my Kadlec ancestors for hundreds of years.

We found the beauty of the highlands to be breathtaking, both figuratively and literally as we climbed this hill. Certainly the flat and fertile farmlands of Minnesota were a welcome relief from working the steep, infertile fields of the Vysočina.

Upon reaching the upper hillside where my people once labored, my brother and I stopped and took our pictures of the village below. Jiří came up the hill a few minutes later, to meet my brother and I where we had chosen to stop for this peak experience. My brother and I were amazed at the perfect acoustics of the valley below that enabled us to have a conversation with my parents who sat on a bench down in the village some 500 meters away (we yelled down in Czech to ‘bring more beer’!).

At this moment, Jiří turned to me, smiled, and said, “Tony do you remember when you sent me your first email to contact the village? This is exactly the place where I was skiing when I got your message!”

Over the course of the last 150 years, these two branches of the Kadlec family tree had grown apart, to survive and thrive on opposite sides of the Earth, each without knowledge of the other and now they have been rejoined. I’d like to think that it was fate or some kind of synchronicity at work, which compelled this reunion between family and life in the Kadlec ancestral village with the man who was my closest relative there, a man summoned to answer the call just at the very instant he was crossing the land of our mutual ancestors. And I imagine that our ancestors were smiling down from above.

©2012 Anthony J. Kadlec. If you have any contributions or suggestions for topics for future columns, please contact me by email: tkadlec@gmail.com or call me: (651) 271-0422 or send your letters to my attention: 1408 Fairmount Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55105. See this article online at: www.kadlecovi.com
Děkuji! Tony Kadlec