

A Genealogist's View of Czech Family Names-Part 2

By Miroslav Koudelka

For this column, I am pleased to present the next part of an article written by Mr. Miroslav Koudelka, Czech Republic Regional Representative of Czechoslovak Genealogical Society International (CGSI).

“Geographical Phenomena

Another big group of surnames are those referring to geographical phenomena. First of all they referred to the person's place of origin. A man who had moved into a town from a village of Lhota started to be called Lhoták, a man from Prague was called Pražák, a man from Makov became Makovský, a man from Palačov was known as Palacký. In these cases, a city/town/village name became the source for the surname. And similarly, it could have been the country, province or region the person was coming from as well: Němec was a person coming from Germany (in Czech, Německo), Polák from Poland, Bavor from Bavaria, Moravec from Moravia, Hanák from the lowlands named Haná. In some other cases, the reference to a country may have had another connotation – for example, a person named Tureček (little Turk) may have been a child of a Turkish soldier who had taken part in one of the invasions and assaults of Central Europe rather than a “civil” man of shorter stature having come from Turkey. To be fair, we should add that it may have been a person somehow looking like a Turk, too...

One more section of surnames has a geographical aspect – those referring to the person's location in a community. Kopecký (kopec = hill) was a man living on/under a hill, Zápotocký (za = across, potok = creek) was someone living on the other side of a stream running down the village, Dolejší (dole = down) in the lower section of the town. A special subset are nouns derived from house signs. Located usually just above the front door or in the gable, house signs were the way to mark houses before the 1771 introduction of house numbers. So the name of a Mr. Anděl may have originated from the place he was living at, generally known as the house “at the angel” (or he may have been a man very nice to others– like an angel).

Personal Characteristics

Many surnames were derived from personal characteristics. The most striking feature of a person was if a man or a whole family moved in from another place, if they were new to local people. That is why Novák has been for a long time the most frequent family name in our country and its variation, Novotný belongs among the top three too. Names with similar meaning are frequent in other languages as well – compare the names Newman and Neumann in English or German respectively. The reasons for this name in our country were multiplied by the disaster of the 1618-1648 Thirty Year's War when plenty of farms were found abandoned and had to be re-settled by newcomers from other areas.

A big number of surnames were created by the shape of the person's body or a distinguishing feature. They most often have the form of adjective with the masculine/feminine endings -ý/-á: Malý (short), Dlouhý (tall), Černý (black-haired), Hlavatý (big-headed), Holý (bare/bald), Hrbatý (humpbacked), Tlustý (fat/big), and so on. Or it could have been the person's nature, temperament, way of behavior that became the base for his surname: Šťastný (happy), Pokorný (humble), Veselý (merry), Tichý (silent), Hrubý (rude), Moudrý (wise), Neruda (surly), Hlas (voice), Doležal (having a nap: lazy), Otčenášek (paternoster: pious), and many other.

Names from Nature

Another group of surnames refers to natural world. Most of them originally had a metaphorical

meaning. Some of them were derived from animals, birds, insects, etc: Křeček (hamster: a person furious like a hamster? or a furrier?), Srnec (roebeek: shapely?), Liška (fox: cunning?), Vrabec (sparrow: short and lively?), Bejček (bull: strong? or a farmer raising cattle?), Motejl (butterfly: handsome?), and the like. Trees, plants or their parts gave birth to surnames as well, for example: Dub (oak: magnificent stature?), Lípa (linden tree), Růžička (rose: handsome? or pink-cheeked?), Fiala (violet), Petržela (parsley: a gardener?), Jahoda (strawberry: small and rounded?), Ječmínek (barley: a farmer?) Kořínek (root: thin?), Větvička (branchlet). Inanimate objects and phenomena became sources for surnames too: Skála (rock: high-principled? or ruthless?), Hora (mountain: big?), Křemen (flint), Potůček (creek), Mráz (frost: heartless? or sturdy?), Větr (wind: fast moving?), Mráček (cloud: glum?), Voda (water), and the like.

Names from Verbs or Entire Sentences

An interesting category of Czech surnames are those that actually represent verbs or even whole sentences. Most of them end with – “l” which indicates a verb in past tense. They occur in Bohemia but more frequent they are especially in Moravia: Pospíšil (he hurried), Navrátil (he returned), Sméal (he dragged), Musil (he had to), Chladil (he cooled), Běhal (he ran), and also, Drahokoupil (he paid a high price), Přecechtěl (he still wanted), Potměšil (he sewed in the dark), Skočdopole (Jump into a field!), and many more.

Names derived from Foreign Languages

A special group of surnames in every country are those adopted from foreign languages. Most of them in the Czech society come from German because contacts between the Czech Lands on one side and the neighboring German and Austrian Lands on the other side have always been very close and because a considerable number of German speaking people lived right in the territory of this country for centuries. Some of these surnames have preserved their original (foreign) spelling, others have been more or less Czechicized. And we can say that their sources are the same or very similar to those of Czech origin – given names, professions, geographical or natural phenomena, personal characteristics, and the like: Franzel/Francl (Frankie), Hansel/Hanzl (one of diminutive forms of given name Johannes), Müller/Miler (miller), Schmidt/Šmíd (smith), Schuster/ Šustr (shoemaker), Bayer/Pajer (Bavarian), Böhlm/ Bém (Bohemian), Treutnar/Trajtner (from the city of Trautenau/Trutnov, North Bohemia), Vieweg/Fibich (grazing ground), Hübel/Hýbl (hillock), Strauss/Štraus (ostrich), Knoblauch/Knobloch (garlic), Schwarz/Švarc (black), Zehrmann/Cerman (spending much for food and drinks), Lustig (merry), Habenicht (I don't have), and thousands of other names.

Jewish Surnames

A special sort of surnames were those belonging to Jewish people. There was a Jewish minority in our country and they had just one name each for quite a long time. A common way to make the name more specific was bounding it to the father's name: David, son of Samuel. Another edict issued by Emperor Joseph II in July 1787 ordered Jews to adopt permanent surnames. They had a selection of around 1,500 names (about 10% of them were highlighted as especially suitable), and because German was the official language in the then Empire, they had a German form. Even a couple of those that had been of Czech origin got German spelling (Benesch, Libusch). That way the names of a majority of Jewish society in our country were Germanized. We have mentioned a selection, but of course, it very much depended on the willfulness of the recording clerk. If he was in good mood (and/or a richer man was able to bribe him), he assigned the applicant a fragrant name such as Rosenfeld (rose field), while on the other hand, if the clerk was disgusted, the poor Jewish man could have got, for example, the name Kanalgeruch (sewage odor).

But of course, German was not the only foreign language surnames have been adopted from. The neighborhood of Slovakia resulted in a number of Slovak names to our country (Kováč – smith, Kramár – merchant, Trnavský – from the city of Trnava), and because Slovakia belonged to Hungary in the past, a number of Hungarian names too (Farkaš – wolf, Nagy/Nad’ – big, Fazekáš – potter). Italians were known as excellent craftsmen and artists who were frequently coming to Central Europe namely in the sixteenth thru eighteenth centuries and bringing names of Italian origin (Sorbi, Chittussi, Gambetta). The expansion of the Turkish Empire to the Balkan in the late Middle Ages pushed many Slavic people from there (namely Croatian but also Serbian and Slovenian) to Central Europe in the sixteenth century. Some of them ended up in Southern Moravia and brought their surnames to the Czech neighborhood as well. Most of these surnames have a suffix -ič: Drobilič, Malinkovič, Lukačovič, Ožanič (or its Czechicized form, Ošanec), and the like. There are surnames of French (Le Breux, Davignon), Spanish (Dekastello) or Scandinavian (Jensen) origins occurring in our country too. Most of them originally belonged to noblemen who got properties and settled here especially after the 1620 Battle of the White Mountain, their courtiers and servants, or soldiers of foreign armies who stayed behind here because of some reasons (love, injury). Things in this field have been changing faster particularly in recent period as one of the results of globalization. A growing Vietnamese minority in our country, workers from the Ukraine or Mongolia, students from African countries, businessmen from Russia and other ethnic groups enrich Czech society with their surnames too. That is why the present statistics of the Ministry of Interior listing all the surnames occurring in the Czech Republic (including foreigners living in this country) already contains more than 60,000 entries – see:

<http://www.mvcr.cz/clanek/cetnost-jmen-a-prijmeni.aspx?q=Y2hudW09Mg%3d%3d>

(scroll down the left side and find the “příjmení ČR + cizinci”).

On the other hand, mobility was not a typical aspect of life in the past. Virtually up until the 1848 abolition of mandatory labor and other remainders of the feudal system, farmers were subject to their feudal lords, bound to the ground and the dominion to perform their feudal duties there and therefore they could not freely move. Thanks to that, **some surnames were typical** more or less just **for a certain area** or even **a certain town**, namely those that were rather rare.

One of my friends from Nebraska is Gary Zabokrtsky and his family came from Slemeno, Eastern Bohemia. The concentration of that surname had been so high in that little town that I found records where a man named Žabokrtský married a young lady named Žabokrtská in the presence of two witnesses named Žabokrtský, the priest marrying them was Žabokrtský, and when they gave birth to a child, the midwife’s name was, of course, Žabokrtská. Anyway, in the whole Czech society it does not belong among very frequent family names, the ministerial statistics lists 53 men presently bearing it. During the years we have been working on Gary’s genealogy we have not talked to all of them, however, the ancestors of those we managed to contact had come from that same little town and the preserved documents indicate that they all are most likely descended from one man living there in the 1590’s, Jan Pavlík of Zabokrký. Another example is the name Orság (and its spelling variations Orsák, Ország, Országgh). When a community presently named Nový Hrozenkov, Eastern Moravia was founded in 1649, it was then created by six colonists one of which was named Orság. He must have had a number of male descendants because in the 19th century the name was as frequent in Nový Hrozenkov as Žabokrtský in Slemeno.

Similar cases are the name Dušák, occurring especially in the area around the town of Třeboň, South Bohemia, or the names ending with -le (Heckele, Bieberle, Pimperle...) referring us to the island of

German speaking population (descended from medieval colonists coming from Swabia, South Germany) on the Bohemian/ Moravian frontier between the towns of Svitavy and Moravská Třebová.

Knowledge of this “surname geography” can be helpful if someone is unsure about the place his or her ancestors came from. Certainly, only if we are so lucky that the researched family name is not a Novák or Svoboda, so it does not occur in every other village or town like Smith in English. Anyway, if all the documents referring to your ancestors you found on your side of the Big Pond only say Bohemia/Moravia or even Austria as their place of origin, in other words – if you have no idea where in the Czech Lands your ancestors came from, it does not hurt to consult some tools that are available. You can start with the current telephone directory (see <http://en.zlatestranky.cz> or hard copies of telephone directories at the CGSI library) to see where the family name appears today. And in the next stage you can take it from the opposite side – to research the above mentioned general index to the 1654 Berní rula (available at the CGSI library as well) – there you can learn where in Bohemia particular surnames occurred around the middle of the seventeenth century (i.e. which towns/villages and dominions). It may be a useful hint as for where to start your search.”

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