

A Genealogist's View of Czech Family Names-Part 4

By Miroslav Koudelka

For this column, I am pleased to present the fourth and final part of an article written by Mr. Miroslav Koudelka, Czech Republic Regional Representative of Czechoslovak Genealogical Society International (CGSI). At the end of this column is a sampling of Czech surnames that have been prevalent in the Silver Lake, McLeod County area over the years.

“Official Name Changes

Marriage and converting to the name after a cottage have not been the only cases when someone's surname got changed. In the “modern” period it has become possible for an individual to have their name changed on request. Most often these changes were performed if the person had been bearing a name he felt as inconvenient or even offensive – such as the one meaning “sewage odor”, mentioned above, or a name referring, for example, to a less decent part of human body. No wonder that they have almost completely disappeared from the present repertory of Czech family names.

Ethnic Relation Name Changes

Another kind of change in family names refers to ethnic relations in the history of our country. In the late 18th century, when the Czech Lands belonged to the Austrian Empire, the ruling circles wanted to enforce the unification of the whole empire by language. Czech actually disappeared from official documents, they all were conducted in German, and because there are differences between the spelling in Czech and German (we have diacritical marks, in German they do not exist) many a Czech surname was fairly crooked: Ošťádal was recorded as Oschtiald, Hlaváček as Hlawatzek, Coufal as Zaufall, and the like.

And of course, there was an opposite trend from the Czech side too – some Czech patriots Czechicized their German-looking names. Many readers of this quarterly are familiar with the Sokol gymnastics organization, founded in 1862. But not everyone knows that its founder was baptized as Friedrich Emanuel Tirsch, but later on, to demonstrate his Czech patriotism, he turned to Miroslav Tyrš. Another wave of Czechicizing family names took place after World War II. Some Czech people no longer wanted to have their names look German and they transformed the spelling (Šmíd instead of Schmidt, Macek instead of Matzek) or in some case they even “translated” the name – from Schmidt to Kovář, from Schwarz to Černý, and so on.

Variations in Name Spellings

The spelling of names often varied, it many times depended on the particular person writing down a record, his education, mother tongue, age, and the like. Many common persons were practically illiterate, could not check what the priest had recorded, and if he was new to that place and did not know his parishioners very well yet, he simply wrote down what he heard. Besides, we have to realize that grammar principles both of Czech and German as modern languages were still developing at that time. That was why we can find the name Jílek spelled as Gjlek, Václavek as Wacslawek and Bouček as Bauczek. In addition, there were a number of surname forms influenced by local dialects in the past and some of them have been preserved: Mlynář, Mynář, Minář, Mlnář. Or an example from my own family. The maternal root of mine leads to Eastern Bohemia and they were named Treutnar there. One of my ancestors moved to the Moravian city of Prostějov and the name got changed to Truetner and then Treitner. And when my great-grandfather married into the Czech speaking village of Přemyslovice, the spelling of the family name was Czechicized to Trajtner. From Treutnar to Trajtner, and yet the same family.

Americanization of Surnames

Researchers from the United States have to take into account one more kind of surname change that might have taken place in their families – “Americanization” upon arrival to the New World. Omission of diacritical marks was a matter of course in the English speaking (and writing) country but some of the names were rather butchered by immigration officers or other clerks – usually simplified or made look more “American”. Besides, some more changes were performed by (or upon request of) the immigrants themselves. Most of them tried to continue with the written form of their family name (and put up with its crooked pronunciation, different from what they had been used to in the old country), but if they wanted to preserve the name’s original sound, they had to conform its spelling to the rules of pronunciation in English. This way the family name Šandera became Shandera, Krejča turned to Kracha, and the like.

Ending Changes by Declension

I have already indicated that Czech as an inflective language has prepared another trap to foreigners dealing with our family names – their endings used in declension. They are very useful, they express the function of a noun or adjective in a sentence. Compared to four possible forms of nouns in English (nominative and possessive, both in singular and plural), in Czech we have seven declension cases both in singular and plural, and as for names, if we add their possessives and multiply it by two because of feminine forms, we are facing dozens of possible forms. It does not mean that each of our names has dozens of ending – some of them repeat, used for more than just one case. But it makes the whole matter even more complicated to a foreigner. Let me give you a couple of examples of family names in various cases a researcher may find in main documents for genealogy (birth/marriage/death records, land registers and census sheets). (Father/mother:) Havel/Havlová; (widowed after) Havlovi/Havlové; (son of) Havla/Havlové; (with) Havlem/Havlovou; Havlův/Havlova/Havlovo/Havlové (=Havel’s/Havlová’s, e.g. cottage, garden, field); (to Mr. and Mrs.) Havlovým; (to stay at the house of Mr. and Mrs.) Havlových, etc.

And we could go on, showing names of different declension with different endings (son of Svobody, Němce, Černého...), or those recorded in German with the feminine suffix -in/-yn (Sedlaržin, Zatopkyn, Svobodin...).

Already this brief survey shows that a foreigner not speaking Czech (and German) who comes across one or two of these forms of the name may have a hard time to determine what the basic form should actually be.

And to present one’s Czech grandfather’s family name as Havlové would be rather odd, wouldn’t it? It is definitely better to turn to someone mastering Czech and possibly even acquainted with genealogy.

To conclude our excursion to the world of Czech family names, let me add a curiosity. You may know that we have given-name days in our calendar. For example, Josef is celebrated on March 19, Anna on July 26, Václav on September 28, as Miroslav I celebrate on March 6. And recently someone came up with an idea of family-name days. They published a calendar where the most common Czech family names are attached to particular dates. The authors tried to add explanations, if possible, why just that day is determined for a certain name. For example, they suggest that Kostka (cube) is celebrated on January 23 – the date when sugar cube was patented in 1843, Láška (love) on February 14 – Valentine’s Day, Boháč (rich man) on April 4 when Bill Gates established Microsoft in 1975, Holub (pigeon) on October 9 – International Postal Day, or Černý (black) on October 24 – the anniversary of the 1929

“Black Friday”. It is a matter of course that 365 days of year are not enough for the whole range of family names occurring in our society. So, by that special calendar, all of those who do not find their family name attached to a particular date can celebrate on April 30. There always is a reason to party...”

About the Author:

Miroslav “Mirek” Koudelka (*bearing the 218th most frequent Czech family name*) from Olomouc, Moravia is a professional Czech genealogy researcher and personal tour guide, the CGSI Regional Representative for the Czech Republic. He is a frequent speaker at our genealogy conferences and the author or translator of a number of publications. More at <http://www.czechfamily.com>.

A Sample of Czech Surnames from the Silver Lake Area:

Bednář: a craftsman who makes or repairs wooden barrels or tubs; **Čap (Chap)**: Stork; **Čermák**: nickname meaning ‘redstart’, the name of a common European songbird (robin). The Czech word was also used as a euphemism for the devil, and this no doubt affected its use as a nickname; **Chalupsky** from ‘Chalupník’, meaning peasant or cottager; **Dostál**: nickname for a reliable, trustworthy person, from Czech *dostát(slovu)*; **Doležal**: having a nap: lazy; **Dvořák**: free owner of a larger farm, or a man working at a bigger estate or even at a noble’s court; **Hořejší**: adjective meaning upper or upstairs; **Jeřábek**: nickname for a tall, gangling person, from a pet form of *jeřáb* ‘crane’; **Kadlec**: occupational name for a weaver, *tkadlec*; **Koktan**: a stutterer, from Czech verb *Koktat*, ‘to stutter’; **Kopecký**: topographic name for someone living by a hill, from *kopec* ‘hill’; **Kouba**: from a pet form of the personal name *Jakub*; **Kovář** (blacksmith); **Krejčí** (tailor); **Kučera**: curly; **Lhotka**: habitational name from any of various places called Lhotka, Lhota, or Lhotek; **Makovský**: habitational name for someone from a place called Makov, named with *mak* ‘poppy’; **Mareš** - Americanized form of Czech and Slovak name Mareš; **Mička**: from a pet form of the personal names Mikuláš (see Nicholas) or Michal; **Miska**: Czech word for bowl; **Mráz**: Czech word for ‘frost’: heartless? or sturdy? **Mužik**: affectionate nickname for a man of short stature, from a derivative from *muž* ‘man’; **Mrkvička**: derived from the Czech word ‘Mrkev’ for carrot; **Němec**: a person coming from Germany; **Navrátil**: ‘he returned’; **Nunvař**: castrator of animals, especially horses; **Ondráček**: from a pet form of the personal name *Ondrej (Andrew)*; **Pekař**: occupational name from *pekař* ‘baker’; **Pěšina**: Czech word for path; **Picha**: nickname for a haughty person, from Czech *pýcha* ‘pride’ & from a pet form of the personal name *Petr*; **Pokorný**: humble, meek; **Procházka**: one who walks or strolls; **Pulkrábek**: dissimilated derivative of the medieval status name *purkrabí* ‘burgrave’ or nobleman; **Růžička**: rose, handsome? or pink-cheeked? **Svoboda** (free man, i.e. not a serf); **Telecky**: derived from the Czech word for ‘calf’; **VIček**: nickname from a diminutive of *Vlk*, i.e. ‘little wolf’; **Vorliček**: ‘little eagle’; **Wanous**: German spelling of Czech *Vanous*, a derivative of the personal name *Václav*, Old Czech *Věceslav*; **Zajiček**: from a diminutive of *zajíc*, the Czech word for hare (wild rabbit); **Zelený**: green.

©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