
Pavučina Corner – By Tony Kadlec

Over the next several columns, I would like to present the work of Silver Lake native and historian Esther Jerabek (1897-1979), who in 1934 wrote the following historical account of Czech immigrants who settled into the Silver Lake area.

THE TRANSITION OF A NEW-WORLD BOHEMIA – PART 3

A paper read at the afternoon session of the eighty-fifth annual meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society, held in the Historical Building, St. Paul, on January 8, 1934.

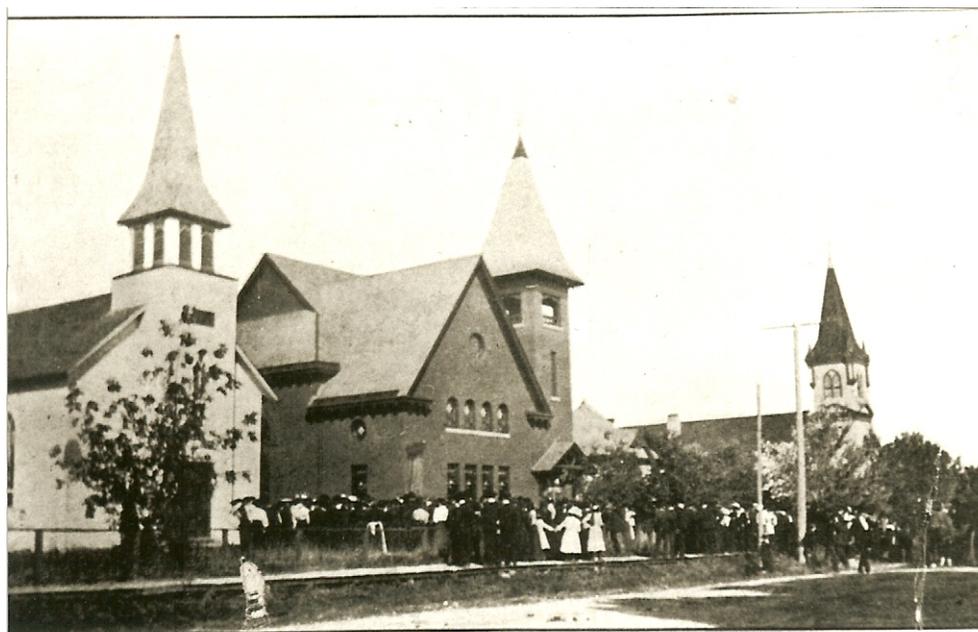
There was at that time (1871) a dearth of Protestant Czech ministers. Because of continued persecution of Protestants in Bohemia, ministers of that faith had almost entirely disappeared there, and the few Protestant parishes that existed after the Act of Tolerance of 1781 were compelled to seek their religious leaders in Hungary. As the Czechs had fought for religious freedom in central Europe for centuries, the Hungarian Protestants had a kindly feeling toward them and for many years furnished them with ministers from their own ranks. Kún was a descendant of Hungarian pastors living in Moravia, where he was born in 1825. After obtaining a good classical and theological education, he was ordained into the ministry in 1849. He completed six years of service as vicar at Miroslava, and then emigrated in 1856 to the United States, where he settled on a farm in Tama County, Iowa. For three and a half years he cultivated the soil, enduring the hardships of the pioneer in a sparsely settled region. The first time Kún conducted religious services in the Iowa community, he faced a congregation of Czech, German, and American neighbors in the shade of a clump of trees. After 1859 he was frequently invited to preach. He spoke in Czech, German, or English, as the occasion demanded; sometimes he preached in the open air; at times he walked as many as sixty miles to reach his congregation. In 1860, at the earnest behest of six Protestant Czech families living at Western, near Ely, Kún settled among them and became their minister at a salary of sixty dollars a year. To support his family, he farmed during the day, spending his evenings in the preparation of his sermons. In 1867, when the number of Czech families in the community had increased considerably, they built their own church. In addition to his pastoral duties, Kún served for two years as professor of classical languages and literature at Western College. In 1874, with the help of a Methodist minister, P. H. Fairall, he began the publication of a periodical, *Hlas Pravdy*. A little later he published *Věstník*, "a periodical devoted to the Evangelical people of Czech language in the United States of North America." Both publications were soon suspended because of financial difficulties. Their purpose was to counteract the influence of older Czech-American periodicals of atheistic tendencies. (Source: Šiller, Průcha, and De Castello, *Památník českých evangelických církví*, 20, 116; Josef F. Kún, *Věrný služebník: životopis a některá kázání zesnulého Důst. P Františka Kúna, faráře Ev. Ref. Cirkve u Western, Iowa, U. S. A.*, 5-12 (Cedar Rapids, 1895). A copy of the latter book is owned by the Reverend Francis Pokorný of Cedar Rapids, Iowa.)

By 1874 Protestant Czechs living in widely scattered communities in Iowa, Minnesota, Dakota, Nebraska, and Kansas were calling upon Kún for his services. He visited each community annually, administering the sacraments; performing the rites of baptism, marriage, and confirmation; urging the people to build churches; and preparing the way for congregations with ministers of their own. Ten churches in these states were eventually dedicated by him. (Source: Kún, *Věrný služebník*, 10.)

Kún visited the Silver Lake community in January, 1876, and, at the home of Totušek, preached to the assembled Protestants for the first time in Bohemian. He baptized many children, administered the rites of confirmation to several adults, and consecrated the cemetery, which had been in use since 1873. Through his influence, on February 20 of the same year, the Czech Evangelical Reformed Church was organized. The members decided to hold Sunday services at the homes of Totušek and Josef Hlaviš in

alternate months. In the following July, fourteen acres of land were purchased from Josef Kaštánek for \$425 in what is now the village of Silver Lake. Several years were required to pay off the debt, for there was dissension among the members of the congregation and many of them were facing economic difficulties as a result of the grasshopper invasion of 1877. In the meantime a Sunday school was organized and carried on under the leadership of Totušek and later of Jeřábek. (Source: Šiller, Průcha, and De Castello, *Památník českých evangelických církví*. 120-122.)

A church building was begun in 1881. It was dedicated on June 19 by Kún, then making one of his annual visits to Silver Lake. During the rest of the year the church work was divided and carried on regularly by the members of the congregation. The need for a regular pastor became more and more urgent and in 1884 an unsuccessful attempt was made to obtain one from a missionary institute in Switzerland, where several Czech students were being prepared for the ministry. In 1887 the Reverend Henry A. Schauffler of Cleveland, Ohio, at the church's request, sent Jan Průcha, a student in the Slavic division of the theological seminary at Oberlin College, to Silver Lake. He conducted services from August 12 to October 14, after which he took charge of the Czech Congregational parish in St. Paul and visited Silver Lake every fourth Sunday. In 1889 he left Minnesota and for a time thereafter the Silver Lake church was served by various visiting pastors and theological students. (Source: Šiller, Průcha, and De Castello, *Památník českých evangelických církví*. 123.)



PRESBYTERIAN AND ST. ADELBERT CHURCHES, SILVER LAKE, MINN.

Dissension arose among members over the choice of a minister. A minority favored the calling of Průcha, but he was rejected at a meeting held on June 16, 1891, and a short time later the Reverend František Pokorný, who was just completing his studies at Union Theological Seminary in New York, was elected. He accepted the call and was installed in the autumn. This was the occasion for the last visit to Silver Lake of the beloved Pastor Kún, who died two years later. A manse was built in 1892 and the church prospered.

Those who favored the calling of Průcha decided to separate and organize their own church. In the spring of 1891 they met at the home of Josef Dvořák for a Sunday morning service. Twelve hundred dollars was pledged, Dvořák donated a lot, and a committee was elected to consider the problem of

building a church. A congregation was organized as the Free Reformed Church with fifty-seven members. In the fall, a church was built; and Průcha was called as its pastor and ordained. Since he had not completed his seminary work, he asked leave to return to Oberlin for that purpose. The Reverend Filip Reitingger, who was elected to substitute for Průcha, became the permanent pastor when the latter accepted a position in Cleveland.

In 1892 František Kořista donated land for a cemetery and the church bought a site for a parsonage, which was erected for \$1,100. Of this amount \$250 was raised by the members of the church, and a like amount was borrowed from the Congregational Building Society. The Congregational Home Missionary Society was asked for help in paying the pastor's salary. By 1899 the debts had been paid and the church had a hundred members. Until 1898 it had no official connection with any denomination, but in that year it sent a delegate to the Congregational conference and asked for entrance. The request was granted. During eight months of the year the pastor conducted a school each Saturday morning for training children in religion and teaching them the Czech language. There was Bible study weekly for the adults. In 1900 the church raised \$1,107, of which \$530 was for its own work and \$577 for missions. Both Protestant congregations have erected new church buildings — the Evangelical Reformed Church, whose minister is affiliated with the Presbyterian Synod, In 1905; and the Congregational Church, in 1909. (Source: Šiller, Průcha, and De Castello, *Památník českých evanjelických církví*. 214-216) These churches have played an important part in the life of the Silver Lake community. At one time they furnished practically the only social contacts for many farmers and their families, giving them an opportunity to visit with one another after church services and other meetings.

Esther Jerabek, 1934, The Transition of a New-World Bohemia, P. 27 , 1934, St. Paul, Minnesota, Minnesota Historical Society Press.

Mluvíte Český? Do You Speak Czech?

Dobrá rada nad zlato (Good advice is better than gold)

As a rule, you should always stress the first syllable of a Czech word!

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. Thanks! Tony Kadlec