
Vítáme Vás (Welcome)! The idea for trying my hand at an experimental column in the *Silver Lake Leader* came to mind this past May, when the Czechoslovak Genealogical Society International (CGSI) held one of their quarterly meetings at the McLeod County Historical Museum in Hutchinson. It was a very well attended meeting that provided a great opportunity for both CGSI members and non-members to gather and to learn a bit more about the resources that are available for those who are interested in their Czech heritage and with tracking down genealogy information.

Although I have spent a considerable amount of time and effort researching and documenting the story of my Czech (and non-Czech) ancestors, I am by no means an expert on the subject, nor am I proficient in the Czech language. But I have learned enough to become dangerous and have come to realize that the *Silver Lake Leader* could serve as the platform for helping like-minded local historians (young and old) and Silver Lake/McLeod County genealogists to network and get their research ‘to the next level’, whatever that level may be.

The French philosopher Voltaire (who likely was not a genealogist) once said, ‘Do well and you will have no need for ancestors’. Fortunately the converse of this statement is not true, as there is much to be gained by reflecting on questions and looking for answers with regard to the lives of our ancestors.

What can you say about the past generations of your family? What were the circumstances of their lives and their motivation to immigrate to America? Who were the first members of your family to arrive on the American shores? And who were the loved ones they left behind in the ‘old country’? What was their journey like coming to a new world and what challenges did they face when they transplanted your family roots into the community of Silver Lake, Minnesota? These and other questions revolved in my mind as I undertook the challenge of researching my ancestors.

To my mind, the immigrants and their families who settled in and around the village of Silver Lake were a remarkable group of people who experienced a unique historical passage in time that will never be duplicated again. Silver Lake native and historian Esther Jerabek (1897-1979) wrote the following account of these early days:

“Many of the Czechs selected the towns of Racine or Caledonia on Lake Michigan as their first destination upon their arrival in the United States. For several years they led a hand-to-mouth existence. The report of free land farther west lured them on. On April 1, 1858, a little more than a month before Minnesota became a state, Václav Kašpar, Josef Maly, and Antonín Navratil left Racine with their families for McLeod County, Minnesota. On the journey ox teams were used to convey the children and the most necessary household goods. The few roads were so poor that the caravan preferred to use the prairie beside them. Not until July 6 did the settlers reach their destination, and then only after experiencing many dangers and hardships.

The homesteads that the Czech immigrants chose were in a thickly wooded area situated about five miles east of Hutchinson and ten miles north of Glencoe. Their first task was to clear enough land for gardens in order to raise their food supply. The rest

of the land was cleared gradually. Jan Kašpar, a fourteen-year-old boy at the time that his father's family arrived in McLeod County, tells of their bitter poverty during the first years. Several times the elder Kašpar walked the fifty-five miles to Minneapolis to seek employment and earn enough money to supply the most urgent needs of his family. Meanwhile the others toiled early and late, clearing the land and planting and harvesting what crops there were."

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

Possibilities for this Column

The above account is just one piece of information that I found while researching the immigrant history of Silver Lake and the greater McLeod County area. I know that some of you reading this newspaper personally knew Esther Jerabek and perhaps even her cousin Milan Jerabek and might have historical memories that you would like to share. Or perhaps one of the historical accounts of 25-, 50- and 75 years ago triggers a memory for you and the life you remember as a child or the legendary story that was told to you by an older relative that you never confirmed? Perhaps you have a box of letters or photos that are captioned in the Czech language that you would like to translate but never got around to learning Czech and are not sure where to start? Or perhaps you would like to figure out the location of your ancestral home village to set up a possible visit?

In any case, please send in your letters or suggestions or questions to the Leader office or if you are online, email to tkadlec@gmail.com and we'll see what we can get going here. Thanks! Tony Kadlec

Mluvíte Český? Do You Speak Czech?

Prosím - Please / You're welcome

Děkuji – Thank you (formal)

Díky - Thanks (informal)

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

Czech language resource:

Czech language lessons are offered regularly at the St. Paul Sokol hall and are starting up this January. For more information call (651) 290-0542 or see their website: www.sokolmn.org