

Pavučina Corner – By Tony Kadlec

THE FREETHINKERS MOVEMENT

If you have Czech ancestors in the McLeod County area who were members of the Bohemian Reading and Educational Society (established 1876) who were buried in the Bohemian National Cemetery of Silver Lake (established 1873), then there is a good chance that your ancestors may have once been involved with the Freethinker's Movement. What does it mean to be a "Freethinker" and what is the philosophy of "Freethought"?

Freethought is a philosophical viewpoint that holds that opinions should be formed on the basis of science, logic, and reason, and should not be influenced by authority, tradition, or any dogma. The cognitive application of freethought is known as *freethinking*, and practitioners of freethought are known as *freethinkers*.

Freethought holds that individuals should neither accept nor reject ideas proposed as truth without recourse to knowledge and reason. Thus, freethinkers strive to build their opinions on the basis of facts, scientific inquiry, and logical principles, independent of any logical fallacies or the intellectually-limiting effects of authority, cognitive bias, conventional wisdom, popular culture, prejudice, sectarianism, tradition, urban legend, and all other dogmatic or otherwise fallacious principles. Applied to religion, freethinkers have generally held that there is insufficient evidence to support the existence of supernatural phenomena (source: wikipedia.org)

The following article highlights the role of Czech immigrants within the larger Freethinker's Movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

THE FREETHINKERS MOVEMENT, By Judith Patterson (source: www.oxfordjctgenealogy.com)

The Freethinkers Movement was basically Czechs who split from the Catholic Church but it grew to be much more. Its creed (below) reveals that its followers believed in mankind, in nature, and in the universe. Their religion was without the structure of a church denomination, building or services. They believed in love, justice, science, and art. *Pokrok*, a weekly publication for Freethinkers, established in 1867, claimed itself to be for "religious independents". *Slovan Amerikansky* was a Freethinkers newspaper in Wisconsin as early as 1860. Chicago had *Svornost*. These newspapers and others were said to be edited by freethinking intellectuals who stressed Slavonic culture and Czech language.



Logo of the monthly publication, *Svojan* ("Myself") of the Freethinkers Community of Chicago, IL., published 1894-1920, 1922-1924, which was read by members of the Bohemian Reading and Educational Society of Komensky, Minnesota.

Czechs had been oppressed by the Austria-Hungary Empire. Catholicism was forced on them by the ruling Hapsburgs. The same control, greed, and corruption that motivated Jan Hus in the 15th Century and Martin Luther in the 16th Century to rebel against the Catholic Church were still present in the 19th century. The movement started in ca. 1848, the time that serfdom was abolished, Hapsburg power was weakening, and emigration out of Czech lands began.

Some Czech immigrants in America remained Catholic due to force of habit and/or truly believing in the doctrines of the church. But many were finished with the authoritarian Catholic Church when their feet touched American soil and they realized true freedom. The Freethinkers Movement or Society of Free-Thinkers (*Česká Svobodná obec* in Czech) grew out of resentment toward the Catholic Church. Oxford Township Czechs remembered that the church owned many properties in their villages, that the local Priest answered only to the Vatican and the land-owning noble, and that the Priest abused his power over the villagers who had to pay the Priest for services like Baptism, weddings, etc. From the book [A Pictorial History of Immigration](#), by Oscar Handlin: "The priest in his church and the noble in his hall ruled the spiritual life of the parish and the material life of the district."

Non-Czechs joined the movement, too. Some Freethinkers were Protestant, a few were atheists, but most were agnostics who believed in God but not in the organized church of various denominations. They held meetings although their frequency and agenda are unknown to me. The movement had members in Oxford Township (near Oxford Junction, Iowa). Vaclav Jilek, there since 1855, was described in *Amerikan Narodni Kalendar* in 1896: "In all these years of his residence here, Jilek has supported the Free Thinking philosophy. In that he has remained steadfast." Anton Simerda was a Freethinker per his biography in *Amerikan Narodni Kalendar*. Joseph Pavlista renounced Catholicism when he arrived in Oxford in 1866 at age 15. Other Freethinkers can be found in obituaries and biographies.

An International Congress of Freethinkers was held in Prague in ca. 1910. One can assume that there were European members of the movement founded in the U.S. There was a Bohemian Federation of Freethinkers in Chicago in ca. 1910. In 1937 there were 23 "free thought" schools in Chicago, providing good education. The movement was still alive in 1957, and it exists in 2004 though I have no details on its nature today.

From *The Czechs in America 1633-1977*, compiled and edited by Vera Laska: "Czechs started arriving in larger numbers after the 1848 revolution. By the 1880s the group was well established. The awakening nationalism in the mother country was mirrored in the Czech communities in the United States. As the Catholic Church had been a tool of the oppressive Austrian state, the resentment against both manifested itself the moment the Czechs reached the free shores of America: at least half of them left the church. This helps explain the large number of freethinkers among them. A radical faction were atheists, but the majority of freethinkers were agnostics, and their ideologies corresponded to those of Franklin and Jefferson as well as to those of Tom Paine." Laska refers to Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson. Thomas Paine was a political philosopher and author. Abraham Lincoln was also a Freethinker in that they were secularists. They believed in secular (non-religious) government and religious liberty.

Maratha E. Griffith explained in *Iowa's Journal of History and Politics* "the religious situation among the Czechs has been unique, for among no other immigrants who have come to the United States have so many people professed religious liberalism. The origin of this liberalism may be traced back to 15th century Bohemia where the followers of Jan Hus sought to correct the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church and to offset Austrian autocracy with Czech democracy. For two centuries following Jan Hus,

Protestantism was the dominant religion of Bohemia; then came the defeat of the Czechs in the battle of the White Mountain and the subsequent supremacy of Austria and the Roman Catholic Church. Many of the Protestants fled to other countries or remained in Bohemia to worship in secret... In the 19th century a liberal trend reappeared in Bohemia and some of the liberal-minded Czechs who fled from Bohemia during the Revolution of 1848 renounced a religion which to them was associated with the Austrian autocracy. They gladly welcomed the American idea of the separation of church and state.”

Jan Habench wrote of Freethinkers in his History of Czechs in America. He was obviously Catholic but fairly described the movement.

Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism by Susan Jacoby is a modern publication, available on the internet and certain libraries.

THE CREED OF THE FREETHINKERS

Source: *Hlas Jednoty Svobodomyslných* (Voice of the Free Thinkers Union), Iowa City, Iowa, June 3, 1872.

“1. We see, believe and comprehend that everything that exists, grows and lives is directed by certain laws or intelligence.

2. We see, believe and comprehend that in all diversity things are mutually related through natural law.

3. We see, believe and comprehend that this mutuality is graduated, as lower organisms combine and create higher ones.

4. We see, believe and comprehend that the most complex and hence most perfect culmination of this development is the human being.

5. We see, believe and comprehend that man’s higher emanation is his spirit, that is his mind and will, which is called “I”.

6. We see, believe and comprehend that man by himself is powerless and incomplete, and individuals are called upon to combine their minds and their wills into higher entities, first into small communities, then into larger ones, and ultimately into a unity of all mankind; we call this self-conscious entity Great Mankind, whom all should serve as the only Lord on earth.

7. We see, believe and comprehend that the earth is but one member of a higher unit, the solar system.

8. We surmise, that this solar system is also but a member of a still higher unit, and that any other possible units form one body, which we call the universe.

9. We believe that every creature has a purpose as a member of the universe, and this purpose is called universality.

10. We believe and comprehend that everything has an awareness of this universality, and we term this religion.

11. We believe and comprehend that unconscious creatures fulfill their purpose by existing, growth and life and we term this natural religion.

12. We feel, believe and comprehend that conscious creatures are liberated through their consciousness, hence they should voluntarily fulfill their purpose, and that is conscious or free religion.

13. We call the greatness of the universe harmony, the laws of the universe as the objects of cognizance truth

14. The devotion of one member of the universe to another is love, its conscious exercise is justice; the process of learning about the laws of the universe is science, and the imitation of universal harmony is art.”

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. Děkuji! Tony Kadlec