

Pavučina Corner – By Tony Kadlec

In this and next week's column, we will address the questions: what was life like for our Czech ancestors in the last few centuries before they came to America? And what role did land ownership play in the social and political power structure of these times?

CZECH SOCIETY OF THE 19TH CENTURY: SOCIAL AND PROFESSIONAL STRUCTURE PART 1 OF 2

By Ivan Dubovický

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Social changes are identifiable in every society, despite the fact that some structures survived nearly untouched for a relatively long period of time. However, there are periods when social changes affect nearly every aspect of society, from political and economic systems to the lives of individuals. Such was the case of 19th-century Bohemia and Moravia, when the seemingly immovable Czech society underwent radical and dynamic processes of transformation. It was only in the more remote areas, mainly hilly with unfertile land and un- touched by industrialization, in which traditional forms of social relations and economic life continued--until the 20th century. Yet, even in some of these areas, changes occurred, changes inexplicable without taking into account the phenomenon of emigration, as they were usually a direct result of the influence of newly opened contacts with the outside world, mediated by hundreds of migrants.

This article focuses on some aspects of 18th and 19th century Czech society, with the aim of providing descriptions of elementary forms of social life and the processes involved, as well as their impact on wider society. Since most of the population was a farming one, attention is given to the social and professional structure of the Czech countryside, and those phenomena that had a direct impact on emigration abroad are emphasized. Also, a basic description of 19th-century village and family life in Bohemia and Moravia is provided, explaining why so many people decided with such ease to leave for America. Besides the analyses of individual 19th century social categories such as *sedlák*, *dvořák*, *chalupník*, *čeledín* and others, and their mutual relations and those amongst individual family members, the article also describes some other related issues, as, for example, the threat of military service, the position of women in society, or the issue of economic opportunities at home. It concludes that emigration abroad, especially to America, was but a logical response to the unbearable situation of peasants (unbearable not only in economic terms), and it had — directly or indirectly — a deep impact both on emigrées and on Czech society in general. Most of the information used is taken from ethnographic material preserved in archives, local chronicles, and available literature.

In general, Czech society of the 19th century can be divided as follows:

1. The first level was formed by the higher nobility (*urozenstvo*) consisting of several subcategories, such as a duke (*kníže*), a count (*hrabě*), a lord (*pán* — this term was generally used by servants to cover not only all the nobility categories, but all the non-servant categories) and a knight (*rytíř*), i.e. all those who took the highest positions in the Austrian political and executive system, and were the highest administrators of individual Austrian lands (i.e. Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, Tyrolia, etc.). There were also richer and poorer landlords without any political or administrative position.

2. The second level included the nobility of cities, bourgeoisie, and other free citizens, such as official administrative city officers (mayors and executive secretaries), judges, merchants and businessmen, free

artists, miller-masters and brewers. On a lower level, there were craftsmen and artisans, apprentices, poorer artists and a large number of daily laborers.

3. Finally, the third level was formed by a highly stratified countryside population of farmers (*sedláci*), crofters, gardeners, cottagers, hinds (*podruzi*), local shepherds (sometimes called *obecní slouha*), daily servants (*čeled*, i.e. *sluha* - male form of servant, and *služka* - female form of servant) and laborers (*nádeník*). In spite of sharp differences, they all were subjugated to someone, both on an economic and personal level.



House and wagon at the open-air museum of 19th century folk buildings and artifacts in the village of Veselý Kopec, in the Czech-Moravian highlands (Vysočina), Chrudim district, Czech Republic

There is yet another perspective from which Czech society can be viewed. If we admit that the crucial role in stratifying Czech society was played by the land ownership, the Czech population could be divided — with certain simplification — into two main groups, depending on their legal relationship to the land: the so called "settled" (*usedlí*), i.e. those who owned or leased at least a small plot of land, and "unsettled" (*neusedlí*) who did not farm on their own land, but worked for others. The latter included mainly categories such as *čeled'*, *podruzi*, *pacholci*, but also all those who worked as craftsmen, artisans, and petty merchants. Originally, these unsettled peasants and city dwellers could migrate from estate to estate with greater ease, but at the end of the 15th century (1497) no migration was allowed without special permission of the landlord. The servants thus became not only administratively and judicially

subjugated to their landlords, but even their individual freedom as well as that of their families was limited to the extent comparable to slaves. Thus ended a process that can best be described as transformation from pure subjugation to serfdom.

The backbone of the economic system of feudal society lay in a system of forced labor (*roboty*) combined with payments, either in agricultural products and/or — especially later — in money. To illustrate the extent of this burden for different village categories, we can use the description of forced labor in the village of Chlumčany, Louny District. Before 1848, the *chalupník* had to work for his landlord at least one and a half days per week. Besides this, he had to be permanently available for ploughing. The settled farmers (*sedláci*) had to work for three days every week throughout the whole year for their landlords. They also had to work without a plough, horses or oxen for 1.5 days per week during the whole summer season between St. John's Day in June to St. Wenceslas' Day in September (cf. The chronicle of the village of Chlumčany — quoted in Robek 1973:134). The richest among the peasants, the *sedláci* were also supposed to pay the most in order to get rid of their forced labor obligation after 1848. Moreover, poorer categories insisted on the property of the *sedláci* being partitioned and shared amongst others in a village (cf. Horský 1914).

Some forms of forced labor survived long after 1848, in particular those for the church. For example, in the village of Doudlevice near Plzeň, all peasants were supposed to work for the priest during harvest season for one half day up to 1868. Depending on the needs of the parish, they were brought for work in groups. While poor crofters and cottagers did not oppose since the priest always gave them good amounts of food, richer farmers viewed it as a burden, and sent out their hired laborers to do the work on their behalf. In 1868, the new priest replaced the forced labor with monetary duties (Kraus 1936:59-60).

The importance of land ownership can hardly be overstated. Land was a main and for many peasants the only source of living. But the extensive type of agriculture required relatively large amounts of labor. Originally, the demand for labor was rather high, and extended families, the main social unit of the feudal system before the introduction of capitalism, had to cope with the problem on their own. Usually it was this strong need for a labor force that stimulated a larger number of children in a family. While undeveloped agricultural modes of production continued, capitalism and relative overpopulation at the beginning of the 19th century created a new reservoir of labor. There was no possibility to partition the already small tracts of land. Thus, only one of the family members could inherit the land (farm), while others had to rely upon selling their labor force on the labor market. Such a situation resulted in a surplus of categories without land, and these sufficiently supplied agricultural demands. Not surprisingly, the typical economic unit of the 19th century Czech village, i.e. a farm (*hospodářství*), consisted not only of the master farmer (*sedlák*) and his family, but also of a number of hired laborers. These could be individual daily laborers (*čeledi*) who lived on a *sedlák's* farm, frequently in barns and other farming buildings, or the so-called "*podruzi*" (sg. *podruh*), "*hofeři*" (sg. *hofer* - from German *Hof*, a yard), hinds, master subtenants, usually whole families who made a special contractual agreement with a master farmer. They all frequently formed one, relatively self-sufficient and economically rather independent unit of usually one or two households (depending on whether there were *podruzi* or not).

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