

## Pavučina Corner – By Tony Kadlec

For those of us who are descended from generations of Czech peasant farmers whose lives were not noted in the pages of history books, we are forced to scour for other clues to gain insight about what their lives might have been like in the centuries before.

Occasionally a genealogy researcher/family history enthusiast strikes the jackpot; case in point, Mr. Ray Pavlish, who had the good fortune of discovering in his attic, a sealed wooden cheese box, which upon further inspection was found to contain a treasure trove of historical documents, including immigration papers/passports and letters of correspondence that describe his family's immigration story from the Czech lands to Silver Lake, McLeod County, Minnesota.



Unfortunately my family had not retained very many of such family documents, but I was able to uncover historical records in the Czech Republic that revealed an important clue that about the social and professional standing of my Kadlec family in our ancestral village of Velké Tresné.

According to these records, a succession of my grandfathers had served as village mayor. Among these men were: Jakub Kadlec, my fifth great grandfather (b. 13 Feb 1739, d. 24 Aug 1812) who served as mayor in 1797 at the age of fifty-eight. Additionally Jakub's grandson, my 3<sup>rd</sup> great grandfather František Kadlec (B. 25 Nov 1800, D. 12 August 1876) would also serve as village mayor before he and his wife Anna and five of their eight living children left the Czech lands for the USA.

**Only known photo of the man believed to be František Kadlec, mayor of Velké Tresné, Czech Republic, interred at the Bohemian National Cemetery of Silver Lake.**

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In this week's column, we continue with the final part of an article on the economic power structure of Czech society in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, including the mayor and family life.

## CZECH SOCIETY OF THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY: SOCIAL AND PROFESSIONAL STRUCTURE PART 2 OF 2

By Ivan Dubovický

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The economic position of each social category deeply coincided with their access to local political power. On the top of the village hierarchy stood the village mayor (*rychtář* or *šolc*, *šoltýz fojt* - the title varied depending on local tradition). He represented both administrative and lower judicial power. In some areas, the title and position of a mayor was hereditary, while elsewhere these mayors were elected for a limited period of years. Since the mayor himself was a servant to his landlord and his officers (*hejtman*), his election by other local farmers always had to be approved by the landlord or his officers. It was them or directly the landlord himself to whom the mayor was responsible on behalf of the entire village. As a connecting link between the landlord and the village servants, he was exposed to two opposing pressures, the one represented by steadily increasing burdens of duties and work obligations of the landlord and his representatives, while the other pressure came from the servants, who frequently viewed their mayor as an executive and obedient servant of nobility. However, in periods of social and economic oppression, especially at the end of the 17th and in the 18th centuries, some of these mayors (*rychtář*) not only firmly supported the rights of other peasants, but in many cases it was they who led their revolts.

Literally everywhere, the *rychtář* was chosen only and exclusively from among the richest farmers in the village, be it *dvořák* or *sedlák*. The *rychtář* was usually owner of the largest tracts of land. Besides, it was him whom the landlord allowed (or even ordered) to run a local pub (*rychta*). Although he had to pay an annual fee from the running of the pub, it was a relatively good source of income aside from farming, a fact that elevated him above other rich farmers. While his power in the village was unquestionable and his position highly respected, for more serious decisions he was supposed to call a council (*obecní rada*, *hromada*) formed by several richer, usually older and respected farmers (*konšelé* — from the Latin *concilium*, *council*), elected for a year or more. They decided who, when and what kind of forced labor would be required to meet the landlords' demands. They allowed lower categories (*podruh*) to build houses, they made decisions on renting the community land and pastures, and they also made legal decisions solving local disputes and smaller criminal offenses. According to some historians, this council was a remnant of a very old, pre-Christian traditional Slavic customary institution of annual or occasional meetings of the wider public, i.e. a survival of a rather democratic institution that was later replaced by a feudal system of social and political hierarchy.

The cities and villages were the main political, administrative and economic units. The most important social unit, especially in the countryside, was the family. One should bear in mind that Czech society was typically paternalistic, i.e. it was the man, the master farmer, the head of the family who ruled and ran its matters. The type of relationships among individual family members, for example between a father and his sons, or between husband and wife, were generally the same, regardless of the economic position of the family. These relations were sanctified by traditional customary norms, but, at the same time, they were strengthened by the deep economic interdependency of individual family members. Therefore, for example, the son who was completely subjugated to his father's will could denounce his obedience only if he achieved economic independence, for which he had very limited opportunities before 1848 (usually when marrying out of his family). Later, it was especially emigration or earning

money in cities that enabled some individuals to break with their families and even with subjugation to higher political authorities. For example, Czechs from America (so called Amerikáni) who visited their home country, being aware of their independence, proudly and even ostentatiously showed their disrespect to landlords, their officers and other representatives of social and political hierarchy, and sometimes changed their attitudes to their fathers as well.

When speaking about families, we have to draw a sharp distinction between families and households. Among poorer categories these two were usually identical; however, richer farmers had other household members living on their farms and joining the blood-related family members on nearly all occasions. These were mainly *čeled'*, i.e. servants and laborers who worked for the master farmer on the basis of an annual contract, and wives of married sons (the wife typically followed her husband to his father's house or they established their own household in a new house). It could also include the retired parents of the master farmer or his wife, grandparents or even orphaned children of brothers and sisters. Not surprisingly, the household sometimes consisted of more than ten or even fifteen people. All of them usually met in the evening after work for dinner in the largest room of the house, the so called *světnice* (*sednice, seknice*), i.e. the room with stoves, a large table, and benches along the walls. It was here where all the social activities of the family were performed - all the housework, the main family decisions, and entertainment on special occasions.

This type of extended, three-to-four generations' family combined with a household was the best response to social, economic and cultural pressures of the time. As the Czech historian Josef Petrář puts it, Czech society was "a society of widows and orphans" (Petrář 1990:13). For example, during the short period between 1847-1850, vast areas of Bohemia and Moravia suffered from continuous famine and epidemics of cholera and typhus, as a result of which more than 70,000 people died in two years (at that time the total population of the Czech Lands, i.e. Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia, was ca. 7 million). In other words, the ratio between the productive and non-productive parts of the population was much less favorable than today, and the only way to cope with this fact, how to feed everyone, was to include all of them, even small children, in the working process and the main cooperative unit, i.e. the family and the household.

Compared with contemporary standards, there was a very high birth rate. This, however, was not reflected in a rapid population growth since, at the same time, the mortality rate, especially that of children, was 3-4 times higher than today. If we take a closer look, we can see an even more catastrophic scenario: during the first half of the 19th century every fourth child died by the age of one year, i.e. 25 % of babies, and another 10% by the age of four. This is ten times more than the present-day average. Irrespective of these figures, the total population increased as a result of very high, practically unregulated fertility (compare the 1850s population of 7 million with the 1781 statistics of 3.99 million). All women had a very clear life perspective: immediately after marriage they were expected to give birth to a baby every second or third year, which meant that during their fertile period they were literally permanently either pregnant or nursing. It is understandable that during this time they were expected to take care of the family, the housework, and — as was the case in many areas of Bohemia and Moravia, where men used to leave for a seasonal job — also for all agricultural work.

Besides biological limits, the only factor that could have a deep impact on women's lifestyle was the death of their partner, a rather frequent occurrence at that time. For a widowed man, it was usually a necessity to find a new partner as soon as possible: he needed someone particularly to take care of his children. The fate of widows, on the contrary, was much worse: if the widow did not possess property that would attract a new groom, she and her premature children usually had to stay with the oldest male relative of the larger family (son, son-in-law, father-in-law) for whose households she and her

children had to work as servants. The other possible perspective consisted in her retirement, and in this case her well-being fully depended on the benevolence of the farmer (again, either a son or other male relative of the family).

In general, it is clear that basically all parts of the countryside population – despite large differences in their social, economic and political status — had one fact in common: they were all but servants, subject to a range of upper-level categories of the pyramid-like social hierarchy. Since Czech society of the 19th century was still much more the society of various statuses and roles than of different, self-aware individuals, it was only a matter of the quality of their mutual relationships, both on the village and family level, which determined whether they preferred to stay or leave their homeland. In other words, among the emigrants we can find both rich sedlák and much poorer chalupník. They both could have a serious reason to emigrate despite the difference in their economic status.

If you have any contributions or suggestions for topics for future columns, please contact me by email: [tkadlec@gmail.com](mailto: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](http://www.kadlecovi.com) Děkuji! Tony Kadlec