Article Title: Czech-Language Maintenance in Nebraska

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Article Summary: The author explains why efforts to perpetuate use of the Czech language have been central to the experience of Czech immigrants and their descendants. The Habsburgs had replaced Czech with German in 1627. The nineteenth-century Czech National Revival reintroduced Czech as a means of sophisticated communication.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Vladimír Kučera, Joseph Svoboda

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Photographs / Images: fig 85: University of Nebraska chapter of the Komenský Club, 1911; fig 86: Jan Amos Komenský portrayed on the Kollár Hall prosenium curtain, DuBois; fig 87: young women members of Sokolice South Omaha in the 1890s; fig 88: Dr Vladimír Kučera at a festival in Wilber; fig 89: Joseph G Svoboda; fig 90: artwork by August Petrtyl for a 1916 cover of the *Hospodár* agricultural journal; fig 91: Dwight Czech dancers performing in 1991; fig 92: immigrants’ trunk owned by Ignác and Marie Šebesta; fig 93: Irma and Lumir Ourecky of Wilber, shown in costume
The first Czech emigration started during the Thirty Years War (1618-48) after the Catholic Habsburgs defeated the army of the predominantly Protestant Czech Estates in 1620 at the battle of the White Mountain (fig. 2). The Habsburgs’ execution of the rebellion’s leaders and their confiscation of the property of Protestant nobles prompted a Protestant exodus from the Czech lands to the Netherlands, England, Scandinavia, several Protestant German states, and later to the English colonies in North America.

The victorious Catholic Counter-Reformation, supported by the Habsburgs, largely identified the Czech language with what Catholics considered to be a heretical religious literature written in Czech by Hussites and Protestants (fig. 34). By suppressing Czech as a language of political administration and Protestant religious expression during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’ “period of darkness” (Doba temna), the Habsburgs laid the foundation for the Czechs’ subsequent persecution complex and protective relationship toward their language. Throughout this “darkness” and the subsequent period of National Revival (Národní obrození) (1780-1848), Czechs identified preservation of their national consciousness with maintenance of the Czech language.

Nebraska’s first Czechs began to arrive in the 1860s, with the majority arriving during the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Czechs came to Nebraska because there was cheap land available, which allowed them to improve their economic status and support families. The first Nebraska Czech villages and towns were settled by people who learned of the settlements and available land through friends and relatives—or from newspaper advertisements or American railway land agents (figs. 24, 92).2

Czech immigrants were highly literate, in the upper ninetieth percentile.3 Very quickly they turned to self help and founded Czech-language periodicals through which they disseminated information about the new country and its many opportunities, including—very necessary for settlement in Nebraska—dryland farming, with which Czechs were not familiar (fig. 90).4 As soon as Czech farmers experienced a rising level of economic well-being and believed that their immediate dream of economic prosperity was in sight, they turned their eyes to the cultural realm.

Czechs brought to the United States political opinions as well as cultural interests from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in which an authoritarian imperial government proved increasingly unable to maintain its great power status or to moderate domestic nationality and class conflicts. American Czechs, like the Czechs in Austria-Hungary, perceived the maintenance of the Czech language to be a guarantee that the Czech nation would survive as a distinct entity. Knowledge of Czech language and culture became the best indicator of membership in a national Czech community. A person was deemed to belong to the Czech nation because of the following criteria: she or he was born in the Czech lands to parents of Czech origin who spoke Czech and who could read and write in Czech. But, in the multi-national Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, identification of nationality according to territory of residence was not always possible because many Czechs resided outside of the Czech crowlands; and conversely, in the same lands lived other nationalities, notably a German minority in northern Bohemia and Moravia. Consequently, use of the Czech language became for all Czechs the strongest symbol of their national identity.5

Even in the Czech lands, where Czechs constituted more than two-thirds of the population, the Czech language had an inferior position to German in governmental administration. Higher educational opportunities were mostly in German as well. Under these conditions of cultural inequality, Czech intellectuals perceived the cultivation of the Czech language through educational, fraternal, and civic organizations to be a fundamental condition for the survival of their nation.6

Czech immigrants adapted to their new American situation some of the strategies they had used in their struggle for national autonomy against the politically dominant German and Hungarian nationalities in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The settlers established many Czech-language organizations and periodicals. It is estimated that in 1900 about 150,000 Czechs subscribed to one Czech newspaper or another. According to the 1900 census, there were 156,891 Czechs in the United States.7 However, this census much underestimated the number of Czechs because it classified many of them as Austrians in accordance with a policy of identifying immigrants by country of origin.8 Yet
even these numbers indicate that the readership of Czech periodicals must have been considerable.

Everyday use of the Czech language played several functions in the lives of the first generation of settlers in the United States. It facilitated the transmission of knowledge among Czechs about new American conditions, since few understood English well (fig. 22). Czech-American newspapers disseminated information concerning the new milieu, farming practices, health, and much other important information that newly-arrived settlers needed to become successful citizens. Of course these periodicals were also read for entertainment. The Czech language further provided Czech immigrants with a sense of cultural continuity and fostered the preservation of their Old World heritage. Knowledge of the language gave these immigrants intragroup identification and greater opportunities for mutual support.⁹

The Czech immigrants who settled in the Great Plains states constituted a functioning society. There were few significant social disparities among these settlers, and their sharing of the difficulties in making a new home in America enhanced their social contacts and sense of solidarity. As a group, they were committed to carrying on a meaningful Czech life, that is, cultivating their heritage and identifying with the Czech nation while working to integrate themselves successfully into the economy and politics of the United States. They consciously became producers and consumers of Czech culture and considered themselves an overseas part of a Czech cultural world centered in Bohemia and Moravia. Their need to adapt to their new American environment, while maintaining Czech culture as an enjoyable part of their lives, conditioned their development of private Czech schools and organizations as well as their interpretation of their American experiences through writing Czech-language literature and history. Their efforts to build a Czech scholarly community also took an interesting path, which will be treated elsewhere. Their publication of hundreds of Czech-language newspapers and periodicals also testifies to their desire to communicate with one another over great distances within Nebraska and across the United States.¹⁰

Czech-Americans in Nebraska organized their social life either around churches or within numerous fraternal benevolent associations, which offered life insurance and space in their meeting halls for stage productions, language classes, and other amusements or educational activities.¹¹ There were forty-two Western Fraternal Association lodges in Nebraska.¹² The Sokol

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Fig. 85. University of Nebraska chapter of the Komenský Club, 1911; Club co-founder Sárka Hrbková is front row, second from right. (Courtesy Czech Heritage Collection, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Archives & Special Collections; NSHS C998.1-567)

Fig. 86. Jan Amos Komenský (Comenius), portrayed on the Kollár Hall proscenium curtain, DuBois, Nebraska. (P. Michael Whye, NSHS C998.1-494)
gymnastic associations also built halls with stages for theatrical productions and other cultural activities perceived as necessary to the cultural health of Czech communities (fig. 7).

Education ranked high on the agenda of Czech settlers both for self-improvement and the preparation of their children for success in an English-speaking world. As a result of free and universal primary and secondary English-language education, the second Czech-American generation became bilingual, and more comfortable with English as a language of higher culture. Some members of this generation used English exclusively, although many others, unwilling to lose their uniqueness and cease to belong to Czech culture, maintained or created opportunities to improve their knowledge and use of the Czech language. At the same time, they felt that they must look to the future welfare of their children by helping them integrate into American society.

Czech-Americans addressed these educational concerns and objectives by founding in 1907 at the University of Nebraska the first Komensky Club, which was named after Jan Amos Komensky, the world-renowned seventeenth-century Czech philosopher and educator (figs. 85, 86). Before 1918 twenty-nine additional Komensky Clubs were founded in Nebraska and other states, which adopted programs similar to those of the club at the university.

The function of the Association of Educational Komensky Clubs was to help clubs in their educational work towards (cultural) elevation and cultivation as well as unification of American Czechs; to help cultivate the Czech language and Czech music; perfecting of knowledge of Czech history and literature; to promote higher education for Czech youth; the general improvement and upgrading of social conditions among Czech people in the moral as well as in the spiritual aspects; to inform Americans about the achievements of Czechs; and in general to do everything which can lead to a greater honor of the Czech people.

Articles published in Komensky, the periodical of this association of Komensky clubs, expressed such goals as (1) disseminate news concerning the intellectual achievements of Czech-Americans, (2) spread culture to the wider masses of Czech-Americans, including the farming communities of the Midwest, (3) collect money for financial support of needy Czech youngsters who exhibited the potential to study at universities or higher schools, and (4) keep the ties between the Czech lands and the Czech communities in the United States alive and intellectually fertile through intellectual and literary works produced on both continents, introduction of contemporary literature published in the Czech lands and its translation into English, and organization of public performances of arts by Czech authors.

The publication also offered American articles published in Komensky to advertise the achievements of their ethnic community were mainly responses to those English-speaking Americans who had long looked with misgivings or open hostility and prejudice on that community’s efforts to preserve its language and Old World culture.

Other Czech organizations also strove to promote the unity and cultural life of Czech-Americans. The teaching of the Czech language and other subjects in Czech constituted an important part of their activities. For example the Sokol gymnastic organizations offered instruction in the Czech language for children, and so did some rural schools and churches (fig. 87).

During the twentieth century, Czech-Americans’ knowledge of the Czech language decreased with each passing generation. In 1977 the University of Nebraska-Lincoln decided, for lack of funds, to offer its Czech classes only
every second year, thus spurring public
protest and renewed interest in Czech
language instruction. The university in
1980 reinstated annual Czech classes,
in part as a result of lobbying by Ne­
braska Czech organizations and their
umbrella association, Nebraska Czechs
Incorporated. Participation at the
university in Komenský Club cultural
activities also increased, thanks to more
imaginative and varied programs, to
growing student enrollments in Czech,
and to the attractive personalities of the
Czech instructors, Věra Stromšíková
and Bruce Kochis. However, during
the next ten years, enrollments once
again declined and the activities of the
Komenský Club ceased temporarily
after the departure of the two instruc­
tors. In 1990 the club was revived and
has continued to function ever since.18

It has been estimated that only about
500 Czechs came to Nebraska out of
the third and fourth Czech emigrations
from Czechoslovakia—following,
respectively, the Communist coup
Several among these emigrants, how­
ever, have played a catalytic role in the
maintenance of Czech language and
culture in Nebraska, primarily because
teachers of Czech were recruited from
among them. Dr. Vladimír Kučera,
who came after 1948, and Věra
Stromšíková, who came in 1977, repre­
sent two examples of how much indi­
viduals can accomplish. Dr. Kučera
taught the Czech language through the
extension division of the University of
Nebraska, edited and published a series
of booklets on Nebraska Czech life,
and helped to organize Czech festivals
(fig. 88). Another emigrant from 1948
is Joseph Svoboda, former archivist of
the University of Nebraska-Lincoln,
who in 1968 founded the Czech Heri­
tage Collection of the university ar­
chives. This collection, which contains
extensive publications and manuscripts
on the culture and history of Czechs in
North America, is one of the five larg­
est of its kind in the United States and
Canada (fig. 89).19

In 1992 residents of Czech commu­
nities in Nebraska exhibited various
levels of knowledge of Czech. In
Hastings, for example, there are at least
two native speakers of Czech, both
born in Czechoslovakia and married to
Czech-American soldiers who had
helped liberate Czechoslovakia in
1945. They know of no one in town
with whom they can converse freely in
Czech. As a rule, they use English for
communication. In Clarkson, Seward,
and Wilber, one can still hear Czech
spoken daily in local inns and stores
(sometimes with discomfort) by people
in their sixties or older. In all commu­
nities identified as Czech settlements,
the youngest generation (three to
of this generation who are fluent speakers, most can neither read nor write the language.

The fourth and fifth generations of American Czechs, with minor exceptions, do not know any Czech. They have grown up in front of English-language television, often for more than forty hours a week. They choose Czech ancestry. In Wilber, "the Czech capital of Nebraska," there have been no classes in Czech since Mrs. Irma Ourecky retired more than a decade ago (fig. 93).

Four Nebraska post-secondary educational institutions have recently taught the Czech language to adults: the University of Nebraska at Omaha, Metro Technical Community College in Omaha, Southeast Community College in Lincoln, and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. But only UNL has ever offered Czech regularly as an integral part of the undergraduate curriculum. The other three institutions have employed part-time instructors, either through continuing education programs or with grants from federal agencies; consequently at none of them can students be sure from year to year whether or not Czech will be offered.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln has provided Czech-language instruction continuously since 1907, with the exception of the years 1919-23. However, the university board of regents, upon the recommendation of the chancellor, decided in June 1993 to eliminate funding for the Czech-language program and offer Czech in the future only as an extension course.

When the program was terminated, the university had the largest Czech-language enrollment of any college or university in the United States. Typically, fifteen students enrolled in the first semester of Czech and ten in the second semester; usually the third semester had five to eight students. Each fifth-semester course typically had four or five students who planned to study or travel in the Czech Republic. These statistics fairly accurately reflect the average enrollment in Czech-language courses at the university over the past twenty years. All other college and university Czech programs in the United States outside of Nebraska typically have five to fifteen students in their undergraduate...
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One reason for peasant emigration was social and economic opportunity. The fruits of this opportunity are shown in the artwork by August Petrtyl for a cover of the Hospodář agricultural journal. The journal provided valuable advice to immigrant farmers. (NSHS Museum 638P-11, C998.1-608)

Czech-language classes offered privately under the sponsorship of Nebraska Czech organizations like Sokol South Omaha or the Omaha Czech Cultural Club nicely complement but are not intended as substitutes for the more intensive and demanding courses taught for college or university credit. This private instruction caters well to beginning students and those who wish to brush up on Czech learned at home or abroad. In any given year, all private classes together enroll approximately thirty-five students in Omaha alone. Those few beginners who decided to learn Czech thoroughly often later did so at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln or another institution of higher learning.

A questionnaire distributed by the author in 1991-93 to thirty-six students enrolled in the Czech-language program at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln reveals a composite portrait of the average student. He or she belonged to the fourth, fifth, or sixth generation (the immigrant generation being the first). Only two students during the past five years were of the second generation. Eleven percent of the students were not of Czech origin at all and studied Czech as a second language.

In the students’ extended families, only the third generation with one exception (the fourth or fifth) could still speak any Czech. Only the first and second generations were or are able to read Czech. Thirty percent of extended family members who could speak Czech preferred to use it less than daily, sometimes only when attending Czech festivals. Every family member who spoke Czech occasionally used it when talking to relatives or friends of their own generation but never when speaking to their grandchildren. Even when grandchildren were able to learn Czech at college, their grandparents often would not
speak to them in Czech. The grandparents felt that the variety of Czech they knew was “incorrect.” This attitude remains an obstacle to the intergenerational transmission of the knowledge of Czech as a native language. It recognizes the considerable differences between the literary Czech taught in American universities and the somewhat Anglicized Czech informally passed along from one Czech-American generation to another. Ninety-two percent of all students interviewed thought that very few high school students would take Czech in the unlikely event any high school would offer it.

The reasons why University of Nebraska-Lincoln students enrolled in Czech-language classes were the following, in order of importance: (1) to study or work in the Czech Republic (eighty-three percent); (2) to talk to relatives (forty-five percent); and (3) to fulfill language requirements (fifty-five percent). Some students gave more than one reason. The establishment and cultivation of an inexpensive exchange program was mentioned as the best way to maintain or stimulate Czech-language enrollment.

Just as the citizens of ethnically Czech towns in Nebraska still identify themselves as Czech, the author found from her survey that university students of Czech origin consider themselves to be Czech. From this evidence and the numbers cited above, one may conclude that knowledge of Czech has ceased to be the main indicator of membership in the Czech-American ethnic group. Ancestry is now the determining factor, as Nebraska Czechs continue to organize and patronize ethnic festivals and belong to ethnic associations. In their eyes, an inability to speak and read Czech does not disqualify anyone of Czech ancestry from participating in these associations.
Czech as a native tongue (i.e., learned from parents) is disappearing in Nebraska. The youngest Czech-Americans of the third generation are in their sixties. Twenty years from now, there will be very few native speakers of Czech in the state, although there will surely be people who will know it by having learned it as a second language.

Nebraskans of Czech origin seem likely to continue to consider themselves to be Czech-Americans, even in the absence of their having any knowledge of the Czech language. The low enrollment of college and university students of Czech during the last ten years proves that there is no widespread desire to study Czech, and that ancestry alone is perceived as sufficient to qualify one for membership in the Czech ethnic group or in any Czech-American organization.

Czech ethnicity, however, is alive and well in Nebraska. With the restoration of political democracy and a market economy to the Czech Republic, many Nebraskans of Czech ancestry are now eager to reestablish or reaffirm connections with their ancestral homeland.

Notes
1. The author thanks Professors Jana Bischofova and Bruce Garver and former UNL Archivist Joseph Svoboda for their comments on the substance and style of earlier drafts of this article.
2. Studies of Czech immigrants in Nebraska include Vladimír Kučera and Alfred Novák, eds., *Czechs and Nebraska* (Ord, Nebraska: Quiz Graphic Arts Inc., 1967); and Růžena Rosická, *Dějiny Čechů v Nebrasce* (The History of Czechs in Nebraska) (Omaha: Czech Historical Club of Nebraska, 1928).


3 There were thirty-four Czech newspapers or periodicals published in Nebraska at one time or another. Both the Nebraska State Historical Society and the Czech Heritage Collection at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Archives hold extensive files of these publications. Finding aids are available in both repositories.

4 Some of these halls are still standing. The use of drama in Czech-language maintenance and in cultivating popular understanding of Czech history and culture is discussed by David Murphy in his article, “Dramatic Expressions: Czech Theatre Curtains in Nebraska,” in this issue of *Nebraska History*.


7 Ibid., 6 (1913): 18.

8 In 1994, the University of Nebraska at Omaha, thanks to a series of visiting Fulbright professors from the Czech Republic (for five months in 1993), was able to offer a Czech-language course through a period of eleven years. Metro Technical Community College occasionally hired some of the same instructors to teach Czech on a part-time basis. No visiting Fulbright professor has been sent to UNO to replace Dr. Jana Bischofová, who returned to Prague in July 1993. UNO will not offer Czech in 1993-94.

9 It is interesting to compare these students’ experiences with those of others discussed in broad studies such as J. S. Phinney and M. J. Rotheram, *Children’s Ethnic Socialization* (Newbury Park-Beverly Hills-London-New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1987).