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Photographs / Images: fig 1: Jan Hus as portrayed on the proscenium curtain in the Kollár Hall, DuBois; fig 2: the Bílá Hora Hall, Verdigré; fig 3: Bohemian and Moravian emigration districts of rural Nebraska Czechs (1891-1894 *Hospodář* census); fig 4: Jungmann ZČBJ Hall, rural Valley County; fig 5: wardrobe made by Stanislav Drdla after immigration to Omaha; fig 6: Moravian village depicted on a backdrop from the Crete Sokol Hall; fig 7: interior view of the Crete Sokol Hall; fig 8: memorial plate for the Liberty Bazaar in Omaha, September 1-8, 1918; fig 9: Jan Rosický, Omaha, Czech-American publisher; fig 10: location of rural Czech settlements in Nebraska (1891-1894 *Hospodář* census); fig 11: Kateřina and Václav Pavlík farm in Knox County; fig 12: straw-decorated box brought to Colfax County before 1869; fig 13: District 76 School, Box Butte County, about 1915; fig 14: St. Wenceslaus Catholic Parish, Howard County

# CZECH-AMERICANS: *THE LOVE OF LIBERTY*<sup>1</sup>

By Joseph G. Svoboda

Karel Zulek became the first permanent Czech settler in Nebraska when he set foot in the little town of Arago in Richardson County on the Missouri River. The date was August 27, 1856.<sup>2</sup> During the next six decades, some fifty thousand Czechs settled permanently in Nebraska. This was a large percentage of the total Czech immigration into the United States. By 1910 the number of first and second generation Czechs in Nebraska was nearly 51,000 or approximately ten percent of the state's population of foreign birth and foreign parentage, and almost five percent of the total population of the state. It has been estimated that in 1910, one-eighth of all Czechs in the United States resided in Nebraska.<sup>3</sup>

Who were the Czechs, or Bohemians as they were then more often called? Why did they leave their homeland? Why did they come to the United States, and why did they settle in such numbers on the Nebraska prairies? These and related questions must first be answered to better understand the way of life of Czech settlers in Nebraska, their struggles in this new environment, their Americanization, their generational differences, and their heritage.<sup>4</sup>

The highlights of the historical development of the Kingdom of Bohemia provide a clue to the formation of the characteristics of the Czech people. Two historical factors shaped the philosophical outlook of the Slavs of central Europe. The first is evident in the dawn of Czech history when Cyril and Methodius, on invitation of the Czech Prince Rostislav, came in 863 A.D. from Byzantium to Great Moravia to

introduce Christianity to the Czechs in the old Slavonic language. The two Greek missionaries with their indefatigable zeal prevailed in their work despite the pressure of German bishops who were there to Christianize the western Slavs under the auspices of German princes and in their interests. This early conflict heralded a long

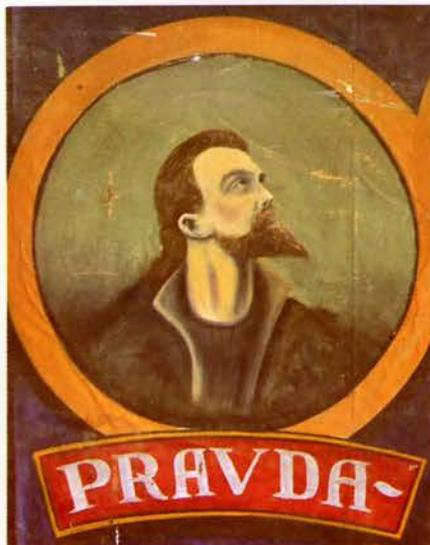


Fig.1. Jan Hus as portrayed on the proscenium curtain in the Kollár Hall near DuBois, Nebraska. (P. Michael Whye, NSHS C998.1-492)

history of Czech struggle for survival as a nation against the predominant German influence which was at times subtle, but often brutal.

Although these struggles could not be wholly successful within the framework of a medieval Holy Roman Empire dominated by the Germans, who continued their penetration into Bohemia and Moravia, the Czechs essentially did preserve their cultural and political identity. The fourteenth century brought a new element into the Czech struggle for survival. Toward the end of that century the corrupt

practices of the Catholic church came under attack by Jan Hus, a priest and the rector of the recently established Charles University at Prague (fig. 1). Hus, influenced in his teaching by the early English reformer Wycliffe, was called to defend his criticisms to the currently sitting church council in Constance, and on refusing to recant he was burned at the stake as a heretic in 1415.

The ensuing revolt of the Czechs, who successfully defeated the crusading armies sent against them by the popes, is one of the most crucial periods of Czech history. Inevitably, the struggle for religious freedom against the power of the Catholic church became a part of a more general conflict for Czech independence against the German threat.

Although lacking ideological cohesion, the Czech Hussites, led by able generals, defeated waves of invading armies from Catholic Europe. Finally, divided among themselves, moderate Hussites defeated radicals in a fratricidal battle at Lipany in 1434. This disastrous event demonstrated for the first time the difficulty of achieving a modus vivendi and unity among the stubborn and variously motivated free Czechs. Still, the moderate Hussite party gained a limited victory that lasted for almost two hundred years, in spite of the ascension of the German Habsburgs to the throne of Bohemia in 1526. By then, Protestant reformation movements had arisen in various parts of Europe, and the Czech evangelical Bohemian Brethren, the spiritual heirs of the earlier Hussites, flourished in the Czech lands.

Gradual encroachment on Czech rights to political and religious liberty by the Habsburg monarchs led to the last stand the Czechs made for their

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national liberties. Their tragic defeat at White Mountain (*Bílá Hora*) in 1620 left the Czech nation spiritually and materially broken, and at the mercy of the absolute power of the German Habsburgs bent on revenge (fig. 2). Their leaders either executed or exiled, their lands confiscated, and their writings burned, the Czechs for more than two centuries lived in an age of darkness.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the oppressed peasants, with the support of a few patriotic priests, kept the Czech language and the Czech freedom spiritually alive. The towns and cities were fast becoming Germanized. Even the Patent of Toleration granted by the enlightened Emperor Joseph II in 1781, allowing religious freedom to recognized Protestant denominations, did not stem the tide of national lethargy. Germanizing tendencies increased.

The ideas of the French Revolution carried throughout Europe by the armies of Napoleon ushered in a new era of hope, particularly to subjugated national groups. Although pessimism still prevailed to a large extent under Metternich's absolutism following the defeat of Napoleon, the impact of



Fig.2. Most lodges of the ČSPS and ZČBJ were named for important national heroes, events, or places; the *Bílá Hora* Hall at Verdigré, Nebraska, commemorates the Battle of White Mountain, where Czechs lost their political independence in 1620. (D. Murphy)

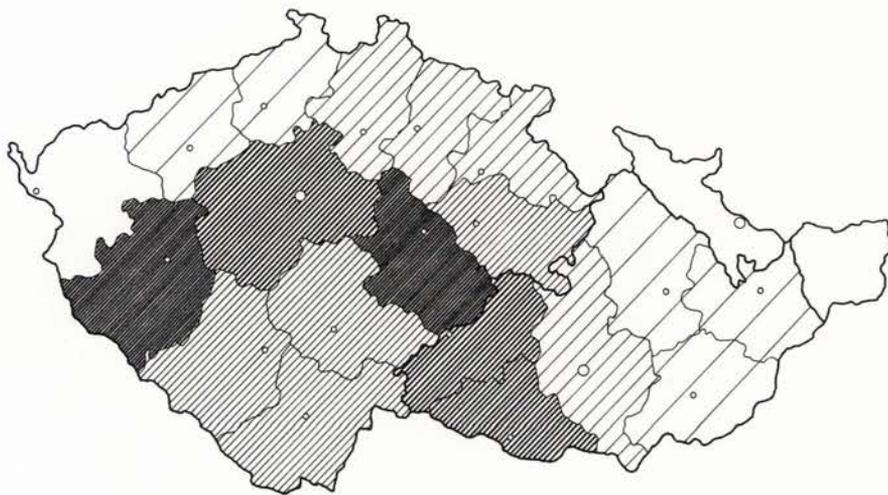


Fig.3. Bohemian and Moravian emigration districts of rural Nebraska Czechs, 1891-94 *Hospodář* census; shaded areas indicate percentages of total, from 4-7, 8-13, 14-19, to 20 or greater. (D. Murphy, NSHS)

liberalizing ideas was generally felt among the Czech intelligentsia. With the restoration of intellectual leadership, an awakening among the Czechs began. Known as the *Národní obrození* or National Revival, this awakening brought a new flowering of Czech culture, the results of which were transplanted wherever Czechs settled in America.

The revolutions which swept across Europe in 1848 undermined authoritarian regimes, and the Austrian Empire was no exception. Metternich's despotic regime came to an end, and with it the last vestige of feudalism. Although Habsburg repression reasserted itself and the Czechs grew more and more dissatisfied with their inferior political



Fig.4. Rural isolation was traumatic. Community buildings like the Jungmann ZČBJ Hall in rural Valley County, Nebraska, provided a place for a rich social life, such as Czechs had enjoyed in the Old Country village. (NSHS C998-192)

and economic position in the Austrian Empire, the *Národní obrození* at this time turned toward political objectives. Liberal journalists (foremost among them Karel Havlíček), writers, politicians, and scholars, writing first in German and later in Czech, began reaching and teaching more and more of their countrymen (fig. 26). A better understanding and appreciation of Czech history, particularly the glorious era of the Hussite Reformation with its deeper meaning of freedom, humanism, democracy, and justice, as well as the endless struggle against German might, made the Czechs proud and self-reliant.

Because the Czechs immigrated to America in the decades between 1848 and the founding of an independent Czechoslovakia in 1918, the struggle against the Catholic-Habsburg alliance is important for understanding the religious and political views of Czechs in the United States. This helped persuade many Czech immigrants to embrace freethought and a few to join Protestant denominations, while resistance to authoritarian and Germanizing Habsburg policies produced a liberal and nationalistic ideology, which



Fig.5. Cabinetmaking was one of many crafts brought to the New World. Trained in Bohemia, Stanislav Drdla made this wardrobe about 1900 after immigration to Omaha. It appears here as it was refinished in the 1950s, including removal of its broken-pediment top. (NSHS Museum 10029-1, C998.1-668)

Czechs carried to America.

Although a few residents of Bohemia and Moravia entered England's American colonies in the seventeenth century as a result of the persecution of the Moravian Brethren after the White Mountain disaster, Czech immigration to the United States did not begin in earnest until the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the Czechs' awareness of past oppression and of existing uncertainty, neither political nor religious reasons primarily accounted for Czech immigration to the United States. The foremost causes were worsening economic conditions and overpopulation in rural Bohemia and Moravia, situations exacerbated in South Bohemia by enclosure of the land on large estates.<sup>6</sup> Nationalistic Czech leaders discouraged people from leaving Bohemia or Moravia for whatever reasons, arguing, in one instance, that "love of fatherland, if nothing else, should deter Czechs from emigrating."<sup>7</sup> But the urge for greater economic security was too strong. Stories of the discovery of gold in California in 1849, sensationally magnified in newspapers, lured some Czechs across the Atlantic. Thirteen years later, the 1862 Homestead Act provided a real inducement to peasants who had to eke out an existence on inadequate land holdings. The wars in which the wobbly Austro-Hungarian Empire was continuously engulfed, and which provided many more defeats than victories for the armies of the emperor, encouraged Czech lads to avoid military service by quietly slipping to the promised land across the ocean.<sup>8</sup>

Some Czechs also came to the United States as political refugees, but their number was insignificant in contrast to several hundred thousand immigrant farmers and artisans.<sup>9</sup> As more Czech immigrants settled in America, they wrote to families and friends back home describing American living



Fig. 6. A Moravian village depicted on a backdrop from the Crete (Nebraska) Sokol Hall. The diminutive fields of peasant farmers are visible on the distant hill. (P. Michael Whye, NSHS C998.1-469)

conditions, political freedom, and economic opportunities, and thus induced thousands of other Czechs to emigrate (fig. 12). Some midwestern states, anxious to increase their population, encouraged immigration from European countries, including Bohemia, by publishing pamphlets and newspaper advertisements about the wonderland on the American prairies.

The majority of early immigrants were peasants who had owned very little land, usually not more than twenty-five acres, or were the younger sons of small land holders who could not be optimistic about obtaining land on which to farm (fig. 6). These cottagers, as they were called, represented the rural lower middle class, who had very little opportunity to improve their lot in a strictly stratified society. They could, however, sell their land and thereby afford transportation for themselves and their families to America, and still have enough money left to pay for land registration fees and immediate necessities. The peasants with larger land holdings managed quite well and did not have the urge to leave. Landless day laborers simply did not have the funds to emigrate.

Other Czech immigrants came from various trades—shoemakers, tailors, cabinetmakers, harness makers, and blacksmiths—while some immigrants had no particular trade or occupation at all and worked temporarily in manufacturing plants as unskilled laborers (fig. 5).

Educationally, Czech immigrants rated high due to the compulsory, state-supported elementary education provided since 1869 in Bohemia, Moravia, and most other Austrian crownlands.<sup>10</sup> This universal education consisted for the most part of five grades of elementary school. Relatively few Czechs had attained a high school education, and fewer still were able to attend a university.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, a sprinkling of Czech immigrants had received a higher education, sometimes in Roman Catholic seminaries.

The attitude of Czech immigrants toward religion is most perplexing to American observers. Unlike the immigrants of other nationalities, who generally retained their native religion, the Czechs in large numbers abandoned their allegiance to the Catholic church, to which they customarily belonged in Bohemia. While over ninety percent of the population in Bohemia was consid-

ered Catholic according to official Austrian statistics, less than half the Czech immigrants retained their membership in that church in the United States. In some communities the percentage of secularists or freethinkers was even larger.<sup>12</sup> One writer, Rose Rosicky, defined the term “freethinkers” as “all the groups ranging from atheists (or more properly speaking Pantheists, for Czech atheists believe in nature as the guiding force) to those who believed in a Creator but did not attend church.”<sup>13</sup>

The reason for many Czechs’ rejection of organized religion lay in their experience with the Catholic church in Bohemia, where it represented an arm used by the Habsburgs to keep the Czechs in political subjugation and economic dependence. In the United States, they simply expressed their freedom by not joining any church or by formulating spiritual alternatives. These “unchurched” were far more numerous among the freethinkers than were the doctrinaire atheists. The latter, however, organized themselves first in the Unity of Freethinkers and later in the Association of Freethought Societies. By their press they propa-

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gated rationalism and atheism with the missionary zeal of early Christians. Their vitriolic attacks against Christianity in general, but more particularly at the Catholic church, made cooperation among various Czech-American groups difficult.

For the purpose of self-help the Czechs organized themselves into fraternal benevolent associations, which paid a benefit to members in case of illness or death (fig. 23). The benevolent low-premium insurance associations, the best known of which were the Czecho-Slavonic Benevolent Society (*Česko-Slovanský Podporující Spolek / ČSPS*) and its offshoot, the Western Bohemian Fraternal Association (*Západní Česko-Bratrská Jednota / ZČBJ*), had hundreds of lodges across the United States and proved to be of immeasurable assistance to many Czech immigrants who could not otherwise afford life and health insurance.

Next to benevolent associations, the Czechs formed social interest groups such as reading societies, dramatic clubs, singing circles, and gymnastic associations (most prominent among them Sokol). Since the orientation of most of these groups was “liberal” — for example the ČSPS had an anti-Catholic bias—the Catholics often organized themselves into separate groups such as the *Katolický Dělník* (Catholic Workman), usually centered around the local church (see fig. 81).

František Sokol-Tůma, a Czech writer who arrived in the United States in 1904 and spent some five months visiting Czech communities, made an interesting observation: “The Czechs in America are brought together only for mutual protection necessitated by lack of American social legislation. Above that, they are interested only in social gatherings, concerts, stage plays, but all their activity is not motivated for the



Fig.8. Memorial plate for the Liberty Bazaar in Omaha (*Český národní bazar svobody*), September 1-8, 1918. The bazaar was the largest single fundraising event in the United States in support of Czechoslovak independence. (NSHS Museum 8757-133, C998.1-622)

national (i.e. Czech) good but it is dependent upon other, often personal reasons and circumstances.”<sup>14</sup> While this, as well as observations of other Czech visitors about the life of Czech-Americans, is superficial and lacks understanding of American conditions, it also strikes a true note about the Czech immigrants: they were aware of their need for security even though they loved social life, group, and national activities as well.

The Czechs did not leave their native land to establish a utopian society in America. They came to make a better life for themselves and their children. It is true that many of them were exposed to the various social and labor ideals which, with increasing industrialization, Czechs discussed and wrote about in Bohemia and Moravia. Those who opted to settle in large American cities often experienced extreme difficulties. Poor labor conditions and substandard housing coupled with the tendency of employers to take advantage of non-English-speaking immigrants, provided good grounds for establishing Czech labor organizations.



Fig.7. Interior view of the Crete (Nebraska) Sokol Hall, showing gymnastic equipment and the stage with proscenium curtain. (P. Michael Whye, NSHS C998.1-465)

The first such Czech workers' club was founded in Chicago as early as 1866. It was followed by similar groups in Cleveland and New York, where in 1870 the first Czech trade union was organized. The new Czech labor movement had established as its spokesman as early as 1870 the weekly newspaper, *Národní noviny* (National News), published in Chicago. It is interesting to note that this newspaper antedated by two years the first Czech socialist newspaper in Prague.

Newspapers were the most important medium keeping American Czechs aware both of happenings in the many Czech settlements in the United States and of developments in their native land. Between January 1860 and the spring of 1911, 326 Czech newspapers and journals (predominantly weeklies) were published (fig. 9).<sup>15</sup> Most were short lived, lasting less than a year. Their publishers and editors were for the most part self-educated men dedicated to helping and advising the new immigrants. Their leadership was not always appreciated. Readers often failed to pay subscriptions, causing the financial failure of many sincere and useful journalistic efforts. One editor, in announcing the demise of his weekly, wrote bitterly in 1874: "It is hard to make a living in America with a pick and shovel, yet it is even harder for a journalist. I am throwing away the pen which made three prime years of my life so miserable . . . I will not even say whose fault it is. I mention only that I could not publish the farewell issue of the paper because I lacked money to buy newsprint, even though the Czechs owed me \$800."<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, religious, political, and ideological animosities among some competing newspapers ran high and, in many instances, contributed to bitter relationships among their readers.

Czechs settled in Nebraska for the same reason they settled in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Kansas, and the

Dakotas. They migrated for the most part from the villages of Bohemia and Moravia, and they hungered for land they could till and own, recognizing that American land was available in abundance (fig. 3). Three acts passed by the U. S. Congress, or made effective in Nebraska between 1854 and



Fig.9. Jan Rosický, Omaha, the most important Czech-American publisher west of Chicago. (Courtesy ZČBJ 101, DuBois, Nebraska; NSHS C998.1-628)

1873, enabled a prospective settler to take possession of up to 480 acres of land within a few years.<sup>17</sup> The early Czech newspapers directed the newcomers interested in farming to the most favorable, unsettled parts of the Midwest and the Great Plains. Many Czechs who settled first in Wisconsin and Iowa moved farther west on learning of excellent conditions for farming and readily available land.

The first Czech newspaper in Nebraska, *Pokrok západu* (Progress of the West), founded in Omaha in 1871 by an enterprising Czech Jew, Edward Rosewater, served in its early stages as a land advertising sheet. The railway companies, especially the Burlington and Missouri River and the Union Pacific, were very active in their efforts to bring more settlers to Nebraska (fig.

24). Frank Sadflek, an early Czech settler from Wilber, claimed that "up to 1880, fully three-fourths of the entire number of Czech immigrants came to our state."<sup>18</sup>

Like immigrants of other nationalities, the Czechs suffered much in their new homes. Along with economic hardships and the rigors of pioneering, settlers faced extreme isolation and loneliness (fig. 11). Although the minds of Czechs were for centuries exposed to westernizing influences, their inner makeup remained Slavic, inscrutably complex and sentimental. Their love of music, dance, and beer occasioned joyful celebration, and the release from monotony of day-to-day existence (fig. 4). Here, on the prairies of Nebraska, they were in the early years of their settlement denied this kind of escape.

Willa Cather in her poignant story of a Czech immigrant family in Nebraska writes: "I knew it was homesickness that had killed Mr. Shimerda, and I wondered whether his released spirit would not eventually find its way to his own country."<sup>19</sup> To others, the suicides of fictional Shimerda and other Czech immigrants are attributable to their lack of religion and their fatalistic outlook on life. "It appears that when a crisis comes, there is no sustaining force to guide the individual to a more settled mind."<sup>20</sup> It was the combination of both, the ever present Slavic fatalism as an underlying recognition of man's helplessness and the more immediate loneliness in the often beautiful but seemingly cruel natural setting of their new prairie home that accounts for the high suicide rate of the Czech settlers.

This mental conflict between a desire for the greatest possible personal freedom and economic security on the one hand, and a sentimental longing for the homeland on the other, did not prevent the Czech pioneers from staying. The initial psychological and economic difficulties were slowly

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overcome by a dogged determination and a willingness to adjust and to make the best of it. Their isolation became bearable by occasional visits to their Czech neighbors and to the growing number of predominantly Czech villages (fig. 4).

The village settlements growing since the late 1860s in eastern Nebraska, particularly in Saline, Fillmore, Saunders, Butler, Colfax, and Knox counties, and in the city of Omaha, provided the means for social life the Czechs desired (fig. 10). There they recreated an image of a Bohemian setting as they remembered it: houses adorned by flower beds, the vegetable gardens in the back, the benches lining the main street where older citizens could sit and talk, halls to stage the plays, to dance polkas, to drink beer, and to argue, and churches for worship.

This Czech-American setting gave Czechs security and social satisfaction. They viewed it gratefully and were proud of it. Czech customs prevailed. People spoke Czech, danced to Czech

music, cooked Czech dishes, and read Czech newspapers. Even at death a person could expect to be buried in the Czech cemetery following a eulogy or prayers in the Czech language spoken to the soft sounds of Czech music (fig. 35). Božena Němcová, an outstanding Czech writer who suffered a great deal

in Bohemia for her convictions, wrote to her friend who left for America regarding this need for the cultural unity of Czechs: "Live happily in that new country and never regret that you had to leave. . . . The fatherland is everywhere where there are people of one language, morals, and endeavors."<sup>21</sup>

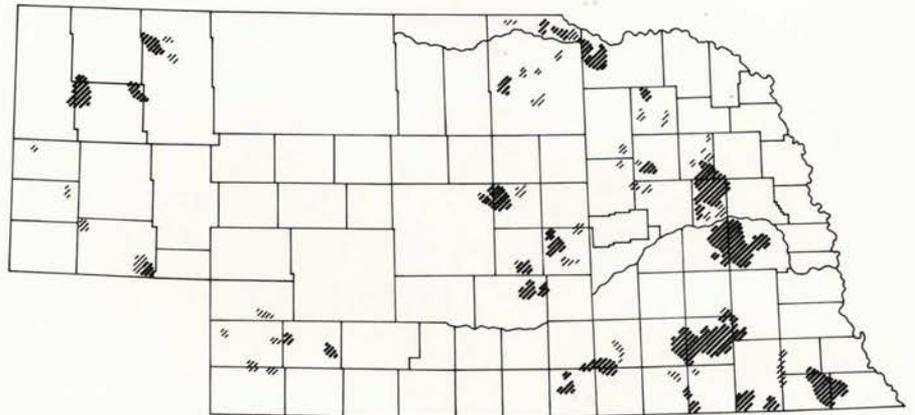


Fig.10. The location of rural Czech settlements in Nebraska, 1891-94 *Hospodář census*. The urban enclaves of Omaha and Plattsmouth are not shown. (D. Murphy, NSHS)



Fig.11. The isolated Czech-American farm. View of the Kateřina and Václav Pavlík farm in Knox County, Nebraska. (Courtesy Verdigre (Nebraska) Heritage Museum, NSHS C998.1-632)

Like Czechs in other parts of the United States, the settlers in Nebraska had organizations which served their needs. Every Nebraska Czech settlement had its fraternal benevolent lodge, which was concerned not only with providing insurance but with numerous social activities as well. In an 1897 convention in Omaha, the Western Bohemian Fraternal Association (ZČBJ) was established as an off-shoot of the ČSPS. Originally, only persons

of Czech ancestry were permitted to become members. The Czech language was used exclusively. Various social functions, performances, dances—all distinctly reflecting the composition of the Czech membership—were organized by local lodges.

Sokol, the Czech patriotic gymnastic association founded in Bohemia in 1862 with the professed ideal that there must be a vigorous mind in a healthy body, spread rapidly among the Ne-

braska Czech-American communities. It was extremely well organized and its programs were well attended, particularly by young Czech-Americans of both sexes. Sokol chapters were active not only in gymnastics, but also sponsored educational and cultural programs including Czech-language classes, festivals, dances, lectures and picnics (fig. 7).

Religiously, the Czechs in Nebraska were divided about equally into free-



Fig.12. Not all family members were able or willing to emigrate. Separation was difficult. This straw-decorated box, brought to Colfax County, Nebraska, before 1869, proclaims veneration for the parents left behind: "My parents; Let live." (Courtesy Clarkson (Nebraska) Historical Society; R. Bruhn, NSHS C998.1-663)

thinkers and Catholics, with a relatively small number of evangelical Protestants. Saline and Fillmore counties in particular were strongly secularist, while in Butler, Saunders, and Colfax counties Catholics predominated. Though occasional friction arose among them, Czechs in Nebraska did not allow their religious convictions to prevent harmony in business and social life. While the unchurched were generally active in the fraternal lodges and Sokol organization, the Catholics participated in group activities which usually centered around the church and were organized by the priest. Both the Catholics and the freethinkers, each in their own way, pursued the goal of retaining the traditional Czech culture and transmitting it to the next generation. The Czech language was to be the primary vehicle used in attaining this goal. The schools were to play a significant part in that effort.

Although even the most outspoken Czech traditionalists favored the American public school system with English as the language of instruction, they advocated some supplementary education for their children in Czech.<sup>22</sup> The children of immigrants, after all, learned the native language in the home before going to public schools (fig. 13). They had the background and the feel for the Czech language, and they saw no reason why they should not continue to use it. It was part of their ethnic identity. Eventual dissipation of that culture was inevitable, however, and perhaps even desirable. But would not its retention enrich at least the second generation of ethnic Americans? And would not that implantation of different ideas help to promote better understanding among all Americans as well?

The protagonists of supplementary instruction in Czech saw it as a means to instill into the children's minds a better understanding of their parent culture. During the nineteenth and the first two decades of the present cen-



Fig. 13. District 76 School in the Box Butte County, Nebraska, Czech community, about 1915. (NSHS B789.3-7)

ture, hundreds of Czech "free schools," operating mainly during the evenings, weekends, and summers, were found across the United States wherever Czechs were settled. The classes met in Czech lodge halls, Sokol halls, or public schools. In most cases there was little continuity, and the shortage of competent teachers created problems.

According to a partial survey, in 1910 Nebraska had five supplementary schools (all conducted by freethinkers) located in Omaha, South Omaha, Humboldt, Schuyler, and Bruno with a combined enrollment of about 300 pupils.<sup>23</sup> Free schools were sponsored sporadically in Czech communities through the 1940s. A recent effort to revive interest in the Czech language belongs to Dr. Vladimír Kučera, who with great dedication taught hundreds of Americans of Czech descent the language in Omaha, Milligan, Dwight, Schuyler, Clarkson, Wilber, Abie, North Bend, and Table Rock in the 1960s and 1970s.

Czech life in Nebraska, which showed vitality for several decades, had by the 1920s begun to show signs of weakening, in part due to prejudicial pressures of "Americanization" groups. The changes were slow and often imperceptible to contemporaries. As the second generation began to outnumber the first, the Czech language slowly began to disappear. World War I and the anti-foreign feelings which resulted led to the enactment of strict language laws in Nebraska, which further discouraged the younger generation from improving their basic knowledge of the language and culture of their parents.<sup>24</sup> This waning of separate identity happened first in the smaller communities. Listen to the sentimental narrative of a member of the Czech community at Warsaw, Nebraska, in the late 1920s (fig. 14):

The Czech language is seldom heard in the Warsaw Catholic Church. No longer do the beautiful Czech songs of a by-gone era echo over the Warsaw plain. . . . The time is not distant when

the dear Czech language will vanish and only the Czech inscriptions and the names on the monuments in Warsaw cemetery will remind the passer-by of the fact that there lie loyal Czech pioneers, who struggled for a livelihood and a better future for their descendants.<sup>25</sup>

The main source for the survival of the Czech language was the steady flow of new Czech immigrants. This flow to Nebraska was relatively strong until the outbreak of World War I. Following the war, it declined rapidly. The immigration laws of the 1920s establishing nationality quotas prevented the influx of new blood to replace the older Czechs.<sup>26</sup> A marked decline in the number of first generation Czechs in Nebraska began in the 1940s.

The establishment of an independent Republic of Czechoslovakia at the end of World War I was another, perhaps more psychological, reason for declining interest in the retention of Czech culture in the United States. For many older Czechs it was the climax of their sentimental involvement with their native country, dominated at the time of their departure by the Germans (fig. 8). With the Habsburgs gone and the country free, Czech-Americans felt their role in the Czech struggle for freedom had come to an end. They had proved their devotion to the country of their birth by providing material, political, and moral support to the leaders of Czechoslovak resistance abroad, and by volunteering by the thousands to join the American Expeditionary Force during the war. Now with Masaryk, who epitomized the noblest ideas of the Czech historical struggle, at the helm of a democratic Czechoslovakia, Czech-Americans experienced a sense of relief and deep gratitude to their adopted land for the opportunity to participate in this struggle and its successful outcome (fig. 30).

Finally, intermarriage between Czechs and non-Czechs proved a very effective means for assimilation and



Fig. 14. *St. Wenceslaus Catholic Parish in the Slovania settlement of Howard County, Nebraska; the post office was known as Warsaw. (NSHS S969-27)*

acculturation. Generally, the only solution for both the parents and the children in such marriages was to accept American attitudes from the outset to prevent conflicts.

The effect of the Czech assimilation pattern becomes progressively more evident as the history of Czech life in America lengthens. Nebraska is no exception. The decline in use of the Czech language has already been mentioned. It resulted in the gradual phasing out of Czech-language books, newspapers, and periodicals. Another example may be seen in the disappearance of Czech plays, formerly presented by amateur dramatic clubs in many Nebraska communities.<sup>27</sup>

Declining usage of the Czech language as the common means of communication among Nebraska Czechs has contributed to the demise of other cultural forms. It helped to change the ideological and spiritual contents of institutions that, for reasons of their

own, either survived or on occasion were revived by efforts of a few dedicated individuals.

Only a few Nebraska Sokol chapters are active today. The object of the present-day Sokol is "physical, mental, and moral development of young men and women in accordance with the civic and progressive patriotic principles toward attaining the highest standards of American citizenship regardless of their ancestry."<sup>28</sup> Even the modern-day Sokol, open to everyone, is apparently not able to prevent loss of membership. There is simply not enough appeal in its traditional program, and the competition from other sports-related organizations is strong.

A similar argument applies to almost all other traditional activities brought into existence by and for the social and economic benefit of first-generation Czechs. Nevertheless, Czech heritage remains alive in present-day Nebraska. Americanization has not meant a total obliteration of the ethnic cultural pattern of which Nebraska Czechs are a part, and it has not prevented a continuation of activities aiming at the retention of that identity. The second, third, and fourth generations have, by continual adjustment to the needs of the prevailing society, developed new sensitivities regarding their cultural heritage.

In the early 1960s, descendants of Nebraska Czech pioneers and immigrants led a revival of cultural identity fostered in part by a new interest in folklore and genealogy. This revival, marked by festivals, culture clubs, and museums, is now in its fourth decade. Whatever the future may bring, Nebraska Czechs, like all Czech-Americans, will be remembered for their "love of liberty," their American patriotism, and their efforts to retain some of their Old World heritage.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> This article is a revision of one by the same author originally published as "Czechs: The Love of Liberty," in Paul A. Olson, ed., *Broken Hoops and Plains People* (Lincoln: Nebraska Curriculum Development Center, 1976), 153-91. It is published here in revised form with the permission of the editor and publisher.

<sup>2</sup> Vladimír Kučera and Alfred Nováček, eds., *Czechs and Nebraska* (Ord, NE: Quiz Graphic Arts, Inc., 1967), 51. Actually the first Czech to enter Nebraska was Joseph Franc, who crossed Nebraska in 1854. *Ibid.*, 48. Šárka Hrbková writes in *Bohemians in Nebraska* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1919), 143, that Libor Alois Šlesinger was the first Czech who came to Nebraska on Apr. 15, 1857.

<sup>3</sup> Problems in estimating the number of Czech immigrants to the United States have never been satisfactorily resolved. See particularly Kenneth D. Miller, *The Czech-Slovaks in America* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1922), 47-48; Tomáš Čapek, *The Čechs (Bohemians) in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1920), 56-68; Hrbková, *Bohemians in Nebraska*, 143; Jar. E. Salaba-Vojan, *Česko-Americké epistolky* (Czech-American Epistles) (Chicago: n.p., 1911).

<sup>4</sup> Students of Nebraska Czech settlement are indebted to Mrs. Margie Sobotka for her translation and publication of an unofficial, extensive, and incomplete census of Czech settlers in Nebraska and Kansas made by J. Mareš for the magazine *Hospodář* (Husbandman) in the early 1890s. See Margie Sobotka, *Nebraska, Kansas Czech Settlers, 1891-1895* (Evansville, Ind.: Unigraphic, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> See Tomáš Čapek, *Památky českých emigrantů v Americe* (Memories of Czech Immigrants in America) (Omaha: Národní tiskárna, 1907), 17-61, particularly the story of August Heřman, who was already in the area of present-day Philadelphia in 1633.

<sup>6</sup> One early Czech immigrant wrote that Bohemia experienced good times after the Napoleonic Wars, with plenty of opportunity for employment and low prices. In the 1840s potato crops failed, resulting in hardships which led the people to consider emigrating. See Tomáš Čapek, *Padesát let českého tisku v Americe* (Fifty Years of the Czech Press in America) (New York: Bank of Europe, 1911), 4

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Čapek, *Čechs in America*, 32.

<sup>8</sup> Austria lost Lombardy in two bloody battles at Solferino and Magenta in 1859.

In 1866 she suffered military defeat by the Prussians at Sadowa.

<sup>9</sup> In the mass escape in 1847, thirty-nine Czechs of the Thirty-fifth Pilsen Regiment escaped to America from the Mainz fortress. Another political refugee and early Nebraska settler was Libor Alois Šlesinger, participant in the 1848 Revolution in Prague.

<sup>10</sup> According to the survey regarding illiteracy among immigrants fourteen years of age and older for the year ending June 30, 1900, the percentage of illiterate Bohemian and Moravian immigrants was only three percent. Only Finns, Scots, English, and Scandinavians were more literate. See Emily Green Balch, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens* (New York: Charities Publication Committee, 1910), 479.

<sup>11</sup> Before the 1860s higher education, outside of seminaries, was available to Czechs in Bohemia and Moravia only in German. Czech-language instruction began at the new Prague Technical Institute in the early 1870s and at the university in Prague after its division into autonomous Czech and German universities in 1882.

On literacy and on elementary, secondary, and higher education in the Czech crownlands during the later nineteenth century, see Bruce Garver, *The Young Czech Party, 1874-1901, and the Emergence of a Multi-Party System* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 10-11, 84, 112-13.

<sup>12</sup> In Chicago, which had the largest bloc of Czechs, it is estimated that as many as seventy percent of all Czechs avoided not only the Catholic, but also the Protestant faiths. See Vlasta Vraz, ed., *Panorama: A Historical Review of Czechs and Slovaks in the United States of America* (Cicero, Ill.: Czechoslovak National Council of America, 1970), 31. In Milligan, a Nebraska village comprised almost entirely of Czechs, three-fourths of the Czech people did not belong to any church. See Robert I. Kutak, *The Story of a Bohemian-American Village: A Study of Social Persistence and Change* (Louisville, Ky.: The Standard Printing Co., 1933), 148.

<sup>13</sup> Rose Rosicky, *A History of the Czechs (Bohemians) in Nebraska* (Omaha: Czech Historical Society of Nebraska, 1929), 279.

<sup>14</sup> František Sokol-Tůma, *Z Cest po Americe* (Travels in America), vol. I (Moravská Ostrava: F. Tůma, 1910), 144.

<sup>15</sup> Čapek, *Padesát let českého tisku v Americe*, 185.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>17</sup> The Preemption Act of 1841, the Homestead Act of 1862, and the Timber Culture

Act of 1873 each allowed claims of up to 160 acres, provided certain conditions were met. See Addison E. Sheldon, *Land Systems and Land Policies in Nebraska* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1936), 25, 75, 97.

<sup>18</sup> Rosicky, *A History of the Czechs in Nebraska*, 30.

<sup>19</sup> Willa Cather, *My Antonia* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1954), 101.

<sup>20</sup> Alfred R. Jensen, "European Background Influences on Education in the Milligan School" (Master's thesis, University of Nebraska, 1952), 25-26.

<sup>21</sup> Božena Němcová to Joseph L. Lešikar, Aug. 12, 1856. Quoted in Kučera, *Czechs and Nebraska*, 14.

<sup>22</sup> Salaba-Vojan, *Česko-Americké epistolky*, 153.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>24</sup> *Laws of Nebraska, 1919-21*, 244-45.

<sup>25</sup> Rosicky, *A History of the Czechs in Nebraska*, 327.

<sup>26</sup> According to the immigration laws passed by Congress on May 26, 1924, the Czech annual quota was 3,073. See U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1975* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1976).

<sup>27</sup> Two topics mentioned in this and adjacent paragraphs are addressed at greater length in a Nebraska context in this issue of *Nebraska History* by Míla Šašková-Pierce in "Czech-Language Maintenance in Nebraska," and in David Murphy's article on "Dramatic Expressions: Czech Theatre Curtains in Nebraska."

<sup>28</sup> Joseph A. Kučera, "Sokols in America," *Sokolský slet* (Sokol Congress) (Crete, Nebr.: Western District of American Sokols, 1964).