

THE CZECHS IN WISCONSIN HISTORY

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OF ALL of the national and ethnic groups who came to Wisconsin during its first half-century of statehood, probably none was as consequential for the subsequent development of their group's "national life" in America than were the Czechs. Czech-speaking immigrants from Bohemia and Moravia, most of whom settled in Wisconsin between 1848 and 1880, were both pioneers of Wisconsin farmland and primary instruments in shaping the contours of the Czech-American institutional life which flourished from the 1880's through the 1920's.

Bohemians of the mid-nineteenth century, first accorded the right to migrate by the Habsburg authorities in 1848, found much in the well disseminated image—and future potential—of the new state to attract them. Low taxes, liberal residence requirements, inexpensive land, a climate of political and religious freedom, and similarities in soil and physiography attracted both the unobtrusive peasants and village artisans of southern Bohemia and the vociferous, visionary refugees of the Prague uprising of 1848.¹ Attracted by the assiduous

distribution of American propaganda in the Habsburg lands and directed by Wisconsin's active immigration commissioner in New York, Gysbert Van Steenwyk of La Crosse, the state became the first center of Czech-American rural life.² Within a generation, however, the once pre-eminent attraction of Wisconsin was eclipsed by the prairie lands to the west and southwest.

Czech settlement in Wisconsin (and elsewhere in America) was the earliest of any of the Slavic-language peoples, roughly contemporary with the main body of German rather than Slavic immigration. It consisted largely of farmers and skilled tradesmen, as well as a considerable number of refugee intellectuals, and in terms of skills represented an abler group than the more numerous Czech immigrants who arrived later and settled in other states. It was, however, a geographically representative movement, consisting primarily of persons from southern Bohemia, the most Slavic, least Germanized portion of the old kingdom. If the numerous reminiscences of old settlers in the Czech-American press and the almanac *Amerikan* may be regarded as approximately definitive, the regions of Plzen (Pilsen) and Ceske Budejovice (Budweis) contributed the bulk of the immigrants.³

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Because of the impossibility of procuring a font containing Czech diacritics, many words and names in both the text and in the footnotes are rendered as English characters.

¹ Thomas Capek, *The Czechs (Bohemians) in America* (Boston and New York, 1920), 37.

² *Ibid.*, 36-39.

³ *Amerikan; Narodni Kalendar* (American; National Calendar) was a yearbook published from 1878 to 1957 by the Chicago *Svornost* (Concord). The reminiscences in *Amerikan* constitute a major body of primary material concerning Czech immigrants in the United States.



Society's Iconographic Collections

Gysbert van Steenwyk, Wisconsin's immigration commissioner stationed in New York.

Like German settlement in Wisconsin, the location of early Czech settlements was quite disparate and widely diffused throughout the southern half of the state. Though there were valid historical reasons to avoid the association, most of the Czech settlements were associated with, or contiguous to, German settlements. In reality, a rationale for the sites chosen is difficult to discern, except perhaps in terms of the proximity to water transportation or of soil-terrain similarities with areas of southern Bohemia.

As a generality, Bohemian immigrants located in two widely separated parts of Wisconsin—the eastern lakeshore area, especially in the counties of Racine, Milwaukee, Manitowoc, and Kewaunee, and in the bluff and coulee country of the west-central and southwest parts of the state, in the counties of La Crosse, Vernon, Grant, and Crawford. All of the major settlements were established by 1857, although toward the end of the nineteenth century new groups, often after previous residence in Chicago, sought land in the cutover from Antigo to Ashland.

With the possible exceptions of Milwaukee and La Crosse, the Czech communities were

founded specifically for agricultural purposes, and Czech farmers in Wisconsin were the earliest of their ethnic derivation in the United States. While the earliest Czech arrivals came to Milwaukee in 1848, the first of the farming communities was the township of Caledonia, which lay along the lakeshore just north of the town of Racine, a little settlement which early Czechs in the area knew as the *Ceska Betlemska* (Bohemian Bethlehem).⁴ The original settlers came to Caledonia in 1850, and family groups followed in 1851 and 1854, though no permanent homes were erected until 1855. Later the Caledonia area inherited the name "Tabor," so called after the famous south Bohemian fortress of the Hussite Wars.⁵

Caledonia-Racine proved economically viable from its inception, and it provided something of a developmental model for later settlements in the lakeshore area. Farms were deliberately established in heavily wooded country and settlers cut hardwood to secure the cash necessary for taxes and flour. The Chicago and North Western Railway provided something of a guaranteed market, but the sharp drop in wood prices in 1857 occasioned considerable hardship. For the most part the wood-selling device worked well, however, and by the time the railroad converted to coal (1870) the forest was gone.⁶

Most Czech settlers in Caledonia purchased heavily mortgaged plots of forty to sixty acres at prices ranging from \$5 to \$10 per acre. Business establishments appeared in 1854, and by the 1860's the Czech farmers were amply supplied with saloons. The Civil War provided a major stimulant for the little settlement, assuring profitable markets for lumber, potatoes, and corn, and allowing the settlers for the first time to look outward.⁷ Racine, with a few Czech families, provided its "urban" focus, and

⁴J. W. Mikulesky, "Notes on Early Days in the Bohemian Settlement, Caledonia Township," unpublished manuscript (1940) in the Archives-Manuscripts Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Capek, *The Czechs (Bohemians) in America*, 39-40; Jan Mikulecky, "Zc Zivota Jana Mikuleckého v Caledonii, Wis." (From the Life of John Mikulecky in Caledonia, Wis.), in *Amerikan*, IX:181 (1886); Nan Mashek, "Bohemian Farmers of Wisconsin," in *The Charities*, XIII:212 (December 3, 1904).

⁷Mashek, "Bohemian Farmers of Wisconsin," 212.

in 1860 a Czech newspaper was established there, followed in 1861 by a library and lyceum.⁸ Taking a strong stand against the *rebelové* (rebels) of the Confederacy, the Czechs of Caledonia, only recently freed from serfdom themselves, loyally supported the Union cause and commenced their rapid Americanization. During the war a Czech-language school was established in Racine as well as *Nova Skola* (The New School), founded to teach English language and composition, with the assistance of a Czech-English dictionary prepared in Racine for that purpose.⁹

SIMULTANEOUSLY, Bohemians began to filter into Milwaukee, creating one of the two oldest Czech urban quarters in America. Many soon moved on to rural Manitowoc County. The best known of the early Milwaukeeans was Vojta Naprstek, refugee of 1848, who edited and published a German-language paper, the *Flug-Blätter* (Leaflets) between 1852 and 1854.¹⁰ Evidently the paper was so radical in tone that some members of the state legislature endeavored to keep it out of the hands of their colleagues. Naprstek returned to Prague in 1857, and later established there the Naprstek American Museum, but Milwaukee became a Czech community of some size and an important publishing center.¹¹

More diffuse and numerous were the Czech settlements in Manitowoc County, to which the first settlers came in 1851. The environs of the small hamlets of Kellnersville and Greenstreet were first occupied, but by 1855 Czech farmers had settled, and in some instances created, the villages of Kossuth, Cooperstown, Francis Creek, Melnik, Tisch Mills, and Two Creeks, founding farms, churches, and social institutions in the original effort.¹² More than 2,000

Czechs, three-quarters of the number who would ever come, were settled in the county by 1870. Median date of settlement was 1863,¹³ and the subsequent history of Czech life in the villages of the county was quite uneven. In some communities, notably Two Creeks, residence was often short-lived, owing to the failure of local enterprises.¹⁴ Tisch Mills, on the other hand, became a solidly Czech community of 170 families, supporting a small brewery, brick factory, cheese factory, and most of the basic trades.¹⁵ Kossuth demonstrated its faith in the future by sponsoring in 1856 the first Czech-American political rally — in honor of John C. Frémont—and staged the first amateur theatre production in the same year.¹⁶ In general, Czech life in Manitowoc County was self-contained, with marked cleavages along religious lines dividing the small communities and forcing an exaggerated degree of parochialism.

The same features characterized the town and county of Kewaunee, although Czechs in Kewaunee were from the beginning the largest ethnic group in the county, comprising slightly less than half of the population. Settlement in Kewaunee began in 1854, with a small exodus of settlers from Milwaukee constituting the original Czech population. The village of Kewaunee and the hamlets of Stangelville, Krok, Pilsen, and Slovan in the middle and southern portions of the county represented the areas of principal concentration.¹⁷ Like the Caledonia and Manitowoc settlements, the first foundations of Kewaunee were in heavily forested country, and wood secured by clearing potential farmland was sold to various lake steamer companies. The economic downturn of 1857 drove some of the early residents out of the settlement, and one of them recalled in later life that as he made his way circuitously toward

⁸ Copy of library and lyceum application under date March 3, 1861, in the Charles Jonaš Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

⁹ (Racine) *Slavie*, January 12, 1865.

¹⁰ Jan Habenicht, *Dejiny Cechuv Amerických* (History of American Czechs) (St. Louis, 1910), 462-463.

¹¹ Capek, *The Cechs (Bohemians) in America*, 126-127.

¹² Habenicht, *Dejiny Cechuv Amerických*, 467, 469-474, 475-477, 478; Louis Falge (ed.), *History of Manitowoc County, Wisconsin* (2 vols., Chicago, 1912), I: 321, 326, 336.

¹³ Glen L. Taggart, "Czechs of Wisconsin as a Culture Type," (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1948), 17.

¹⁴ J. F. Wojta, "Town of Two Creeks, From Forest to Dairy Farms," in the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, XXVII: 421 (June 1944).

¹⁵ Habenicht, *Dejiny Cechuv Amerických*, 480.

¹⁶ Ernest Zizka, *Czech Cultural Contributions* (Chicago, 1942), 105.

¹⁷ V. F. Mashek, "Bohemian Settlements in Kewaunee County," (unpublished manuscript, 1889), p. 2, in the John Roeseler Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

St. Paul he learned his first effective word of English, "work."¹⁸ Kewaunee became home for some of the most notable members of the early Czech-American community—Vojta Masek, a prominent merchant; John Karel, influential in banking and active in Wisconsin politics until his appointment as United States Consul in Prague; and Vaclav Pohl, one of the organizational luminaries of early Czech-American fraternalism.¹⁹ By the 1880's some 5,000 Czechs of the first and second generation in America resided in Kewaunee County.²⁰

Less numerous and more widely separated were the settlements of the 1850's in western Wisconsin in Grant, Richland, La Crosse, and Crawford counties. The earliest of these settlements was at Muscoda in Grant County, to which the first Czech settlers came in 1853. Muscoda was a small colony, dividing very early along Catholic—evangelical Protestant lines, an uncommon fragmentation for a Wisconsin Czech community.²¹ A larger settlement was commenced a few years later at Castle Rock. Much of the prime land in both areas had already been acquired by German and Scandinavian farmers, and the Bohemian settlers were forced to occupy the ridges and rougher lands sold by speculators.²² Nevertheless, both settlements prospered sufficiently, and by the early 1870's Czech names were prominent among the town officers of Muscoda and Castle Rock.²³ In the late 1880's farmers of Czech extraction comprised about 60 per cent of the Castle Rock area and 40 per cent of Muscoda.²⁴

The largest of the western Wisconsin establishments was commenced in 1855 in the town

of La Crosse, a settlement which later took cohesive shape around the society and church of St. Vaclav. In the late 1870's a major influx of immigrants from the region of Ceske Budejovice increased the number of Bohemian-born in the city to nearly 500. By the end of the century Czech life was well developed, and the community possessed a weekly newspaper, *Vlastenec* (Patriot), a Catholic church and school, lodges and social clubs, dramatic facilities, eight stores retailing "mixed goods" (groceries), ten taverns, a butcher, baker, saddler, barber, furrier, tinsmith, plow maker, cigar maker, tailor, several coopers, and artisans specializing in grave markers and billiard tables.²⁵

Contemporary with the La Crosse foundations, Czech families from the Plzen (Pilsen) region began to occupy the isolated ridge and valley country of northern Richland and southern Vernon counties, establishing themselves around the village of Yuba in Richland County. Their principal settlement, Champion Valley, attracted other immigrants and by 1861 nineteen Czech family names were represented in the valley. As an isolated outpost, household manufacture was employed for most purposes, and the men of the community made an annual journey to Lone Rock to mill the year's wheat and to convert surplus corn, maple sugar, and some butter into tools, coffee, and cloth. Dairy products posed a major disposal problem for the community, and until the Yuba cheese factory commenced operations in 1892 the products of the butter churn often served as a lubricant for machinery. Yet the colony flourished, and by 1900 some 233 families of the first and second generations farmed the ridges, bluffs, and valleys of the Yuba area.²⁶

The last of the sizable Czech settlements in western Wisconsin was founded in Crawford County, especially in the village of Prairie du

¹⁸ *Kewaunské Listy*, January 27, 1892.

¹⁹ Habenicht, *Dejiny Cechuv Americkych*, 481, 484; Josef Martinek, *Stoleti Jednoty CSA* (One Hundred Years of the C.S.A.) (Cicero, Illinois, 1955), 8, 20-21.

²⁰ Louis Bruemmer to Rueben Gold Thwaites, March 20, 1889, in the Roeseler Papers.

²¹ Habenicht, *Dejiny Cechuv Americkych*, 495; Vilém Siller et al., *Pamatnik Ceskych Evanjelickych Cirkvi v Spoj. Statech* (Memorial of the Czech Evangelical Churches in the United States) (Chicago, 1900), 30-42.

²² Joseph Schafer, *The Wisconsin Lead Region* (Madison, 1932), 220, 230.

²³ Castello N. Holford, *History of Grant County, Wisconsin* (Lancaster, Wisconsin, 1900), 689-692, 778.

²⁴ J. A. Thomas to John Roeseler, December 20, 1889, in the Roeseler Papers. Thomas was county clerk of Grant County.

²⁵ Habenicht, *Dejiny Cechuv Americkych*, 508, 510, 516-518; see also A. H. Sanford and Louis Hirschheimer, *A History of La Crosse, Wisconsin, 1841-1900* (La Crosse, 1951), 208.

²⁶ Julia Janecek Britts, "A History of the Bohemians of Champion Valley" (1948), in the Archives-Manuscripts Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin; Habenicht, *Dejiny Cechuv Americkych*, 497.

Chien and the townships of Eastman, Bridgeport, Mariella, and Wauzeka. Except for isolated cases, the earliest of the main bodies of immigrants arrived in 1857, settling on federal land, and coming principally after a brief residence in Chicago. Crawford County Czechs acquired a reputation for exclusiveness and parochialism, even in the broader Czech-American community. These attitudes were later reflected in secessionist tendencies from Catholic fraternal bodies. Nonetheless, the colonies experienced considerable growth, and by 1890 about 1,400 immigrants and their children lived in the vicinity of Prairie du Chien.²⁷

In summary, all of the major Czech settlements in Wisconsin were founded in the 1850's, and by 1880 the bulk of Czech immigrants who would come to Wisconsin had already arrived. Increased demands on the immigrant lines operating from Hamburg and Bremen permitted a drastic drop in fares, and by the 1870's an immigrant could come on a single ticket from Prague to Racine, Milwaukee, or Kewaunee for fifty dollars or less.²⁸ Other Czech immigrants, after unsatisfactory experiences in the mushrooming Chicago Czech community, filtered after 1876 into the newly cutover areas to establish farms. Small settlements were made near Phillips in Price County, and many of the early arrivals reflected the success of unscrupulous Chicago land promoters. A larger number located, with greater advance knowledge, near Antigo in Langlade County.²⁹

YET THE DOMINANCE of Wisconsin as the principal attraction of immigrants from Bohemia and Moravia was at an end by the 1870's. Though little is known of the internal mobility of immigrants in the United States, it is a certainty that even in the 1860's out-movement was commonplace among Wisconsin Czechs. Grant County, owing to the relatively unfavorable conditions of initial settlement,

was perhaps most affected, but Manitowoc County also experienced some losses.³⁰ The Nebraska prairie became the magnet for Wisconsin Bohemians intent on using the new Homestead Act.

Saline County, Nebraska, especially the villages of Crete and Wilber, received the first of the exodus of Wisconsin Czechs just as the area of the county had received its first settler, a Czech from Watertown, Wisconsin, a decade earlier. Large-scale settlement, however, dates from 1867 when Wisconsin Czechs laid the agricultural foundations for Saunders, Butler, Colfax, Douglas, and Knox counties.³¹

The federal censuses demonstrate with clarity the inability of Wisconsin to remain a major attraction for newly arrived Bohemian immigrants. According to the Ninth Census (1870), 10,570 Bohemian-born persons lived in Wisconsin, with 2,360 in Manitowoc County, 2,011 in Kewaunee County, 1,524 in Milwaukee County, 703 in Racine County, 547 in Grant County, 489 in La Crosse County, 402 in Crawford County, and 281 in Vernon County.³² In 1880, the Tenth Census listed 13,848 Bohemian-born in the state, with 2,408 in Manitowoc, 2,660 in Kewaunee, 1,611 in Milwaukee, 800 in Racine, 637 in Grant, 783 in La Crosse, 557 in Crawford, and 446 in Vernon.³³ And the Eleventh Census (1890) listed only 11,999 Bohemian-born, with 1,958 in Manitowoc, 2,200 in Kewaunee, 1,517 in Milwaukee, 800 in Racine, 463 in Grant, 506 in La Crosse, 567 in Crawford, and 414 in Vernon.³⁴ Thus, while Bohemian immigration to the United States exceeded 75,000 between 1870 and 1890, Wisconsin experienced a net decrease from death and departure. Inclusion of the second generation—designated by the census as “persons with both parents natives of Bohemia”—alters

²⁷ Ferdinand F. Doubrava, “Experiences of a Bohemian Immigrant Family,” in the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, VIII: 404 (June, 1925).

²⁸ Rose Rosicky (comp.), *A History of Czechs (Bohemians) in Nebraska* (Omaha, 1929), 70-97, 97-115, 195-205, 137-168, 175-182, 182-195, 47-63; Capek, *The Czechs (Bohemians) in America*, 47.

²⁹ *Ninth Census of the United States, 1870, Vol. I, Population* (Washington, 1872), 336, 376-377.

³⁰ *Tenth Census of the United States, 1880, Vol. I, Population* (Washington, 1883), 468, 534-535.

³¹ *Eleventh Census of the United States, 1890, Pt. I, Population* (Washington, 1895), 608, 668.

²⁷ Habenicht, *Dejiny Cechuv Americkych*, 504-506; Emily C. Balch, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens* (New York, 1910), 222-223; Frank Brady to John Roeseler, undated (probably 1890); C. E. Alder to Roeseler, February 6, 1890, both in the Roeseler Papers.

²⁸ (Racine) *Slavie*, February 5, 1879.

²⁹ Taggart, “Czechs of Wisconsin as a Culture Type,” 7, 14; Habenicht, *Dejiny Cechuv Americkych*, 498-499.

the picture significantly, and provides, in 1900, for 31,074 Wisconsin Czechs of the first and second generations.³⁵ By 1900 Wisconsinites of Bohemian birth or antecedents lived in some 187 communities and in all but three counties of the state.³⁶

More consequential than the numerical or productive contribution to the growth of the state, however, were the contributions of the Wisconsin Czechs to the distinctive "national life" of the Czech immigrant community in America, especially in the realms of journalism, religion, and fraternalism. Czech-American journalism, which experienced a prodigious growth in the half century between 1860 and 1910, had its birth in Milwaukee and Racine, beginning in 1852 with Vojta Naprstek's radical little weekly, *Flug-Blätter*. Owing to the scarcity of potential Czech subscribers and the inability to acquire a Czech-alphabet press, the paper appeared in German throughout its brief history.³⁷ Publication in the Czech language itself commenced in January, 1860, with the appearance in Racine of *Slowan Amerikansky* (American Slav), a paper turned out by one Frantisek Korizek, an immigrant from Moravia, on an old German hand press purchased from a Milwaukee priest for \$40 and a mortgage on his cottage. Korizek went on to more significant editorial work elsewhere, and by October of 1861 *Slowan Amerikansky* gave way to the *Racine Slavie* (1861-1918), the dean of American Czech-language papers.³⁸

Slavie, a weekly of (usually) eight pages, served a list of national subscribers which never exceeded 4,000. From its inception the paper was a national rather than a Racine or Wisconsin-oriented organ, and its original patrons were located in Wisconsin, Iowa, Chicago, Cleveland, New York, and St. Louis. Its advertising was national in coverage, and its news content was national and largely international, with news sections devoted to all major European nations. The number of subscribers to *Slavie* grew from 750 in mid-1863 to 1,200 in



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Frank (Frantisek) Korizek, founder of the first Bohemian press in America, pictured on the cover of a Czech-language magazine published in Racine in 1885.

mid-1864, and the distribution of the paper was revealing of the areas of early Czech concentration: Wisconsin 500, Iowa 180, Illinois 150, Missouri 80, Ohio 80, Michigan 75, New York 75, and Minnesota 45. Only one Kewaunee Czech of mature years failed to subscribe because, as the editor observed scornfully, "He is illiterate," and another in Manitowoc was singled out as similarly disadvantaged.³⁹

By the end of 1861 *Slavie* had established local news contacts in Manitowoc, Kewaunee, Francis Creek, Two Creeks, Muscoda, Yuba, La Crosse, Prairie du Chien, and a few smaller settlements. Its format was quite formalized by 1861, and much space was devoted to serialized fiction, especially novels on a Hussite theme. *Slavie* rendered more than literary service, however, for it operated a message service, its

³⁵ Cited in Balch, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens*, 261.

³⁶ Habenicht, *Dejiny Ceckuv Americkych*, 520-521.

³⁷ Capek, *The Czechs (Bohemians) in America*, 125.

³⁸ Thomas Capek, *Padesat let ceského tisku v Americe (Fifty Years of Czech Letters in America)* (New York, 1911), 1-33.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 94; see also list of early patrons of *Slavie* in the Jonaš Papers.



Society's Iconographic Collections

Charles (Karel) Jonas, from a faded portrait by an unknown artist.

Mala Posta (Little Post Office), and it endeavored inconsistently to acquaint its readers with American federal and state politics.⁴⁰ In addition, the paper carried detailed comparative price information for staple foods and firewood for the cities in which its readers resided.⁴¹ Occasionally *Slavie* also provided substantial analyses of specific American states. An 1871 report on Wisconsin was especially noteworthy, for, in addition to a detailed examination of the state's population and resources, information was provided about library facilities, especially the 45,500-volume holdings of the State Historical Society.⁴²

For nearly thirty years *Slavie* was edited by Charles Jonas, a young refugee intellectual who assumed control of the paper in 1863. Jonas, the "first [i.e., leading] Czech in America," entered actively into Wisconsin Democratic politics, weaned a sizable proportion of his readers from their original Republican sympathies, and was elected lieutenant-governor in the Democratic upsurge of 1890. Among Amer-

ican Czechs Jonas' position was pre-eminent, and he was called upon to arbitrate many of the disputes which racked the immigrant community until his departure in 1894 for consular service in St. Petersburg, Prague, and Krefeld, Germany.⁴³

Jonas was largely responsible for the determination of norms and techniques in Czech-American journalism. His other ventures — *Pozor Americky* (American Attention) in 1865 and *Amerikan* in 1872—were intended for religious liberals and took a pronounced anti-church position. These organs, among the first in the freethought movement, were intended to provide outlets for these views without disturbing the readership of *Slavie*, which he held to scrupulous neutrality.⁴⁴

A second fruitful source of Czech periodical publications and newspapers was the well-diversified firm of Antonin Novak, who arrived in 1866 and settled in Milwaukee. Some of the longest-lived Czech-language papers came from his offices, notably *Domacnost* (Household), published semi-weekly from 1879 to 1930, and *Rovnost* (Equality), which appeared daily in 1892 and weekly from 1896 to 1919. His other efforts—*Cech* (1876), *Besidka Detska* (Children's Arbor, 1884), *Hospodyne* (Housewife, 1889), and *Vlastimil* (Homeland, 1896–1897)—had much briefer histories.⁴⁵ Novak's ventures reflected curious tastes, emphasizing domesticity on one hand and religious liberalism on the other. Finally, Novak laid the groundwork for a distinctive Czech contribution to American immigrant life, the foreign-language farm press, by undertaking in 1879 the publication of the short-lived *Hospodar Americky* (American Husbandman), edited from Cooperstown in Manitowoc County by a former priest, Thomas Juranek.⁴⁶

Besides Racine and Milwaukee only Kewaunee and La Crosse sustained Czech-language papers. Kewaunee was served by *Kewaunsee*

⁴⁰ (Racine) *Slavie*, December 11, 1861; December 18, 1861.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, June 22, 1870.

⁴² *Ibid.*, January 25, 1871.

⁴³ Thomas Capek, *American Czechs in Public Office* (Omaha, 1940), unpagged.

⁴⁴ Capek, *The Czechs (Bohemians) in America*, 170, 180, 183–184.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 166, 193; Capek, *Padesat let ceskeho tisku v Americe*, 259–268.

⁴⁶ Habenicht, *Dejiny Cechuv Americkyh*, 464; Capek, *The Czechs (Bohemians) in America*, 130.

Listy (Kewaunee Paper) from 1892 to 1917, a paper edited with considerable skill until 1904 by Jaroslav Lunak, who had worked on the staff of *Dennice Novoveku* (Morning Star of the New Age) in Cleveland, a paper unequalled in its literary taste among Czech-American publications. *Listy* was supplemented briefly in 1902 by *Kewaunsky Obzor* (Kewaunee Horizon). La Crosse was home for *Vlastenec* (Patriot), published from 1898 to 1909 and again briefly in 1927, and *Svata Rodina* (Holy Family), which appeared briefly in 1904.⁴⁷

WITH THE EXCEPTION of agricultural and family-oriented publications, Wisconsin Czech journalism was involved on one side or another of the growing cleavage of the Bohemian immigrant community along religious lines. This religious dichotomy became the predominant element in Czech-American life, and by the 1870's the small immigrant community was split into two hostile and exclusive camps, the Roman Catholics and the partisans of *Svobodomyslne* (Freethought).⁴⁸ Freethought was a sort of intellectual posture, a set of attitudes sustained by a philosophy which represented the working out, in a free and unstructured social climate, of certain facets of the Czech historical character determined by the Hussite tradition and the unfortunate relationship of the recatholicized Bohemians with the control mechanism emanating from the alliance of the Habsburgs and the Church. The Habsburgs and their clerical allies produced a bitter fruit, not in Bohemia but in America. In freeing themselves from Vienna, Czech immigrants were not hesitant to free themselves from Rome as well. Ultimately a major proportion of Czech immigrants—estimates varied from 50 to 70 per cent—defected from the Church and found meaning in organized fraternalism and a highly ritualized agnosticism.⁴⁹

The intellectual origins of Freethought are irrelevant here, but the leaders of Czech life in Wisconsin, political and religious radicals of

1848 and the 1860's, provided the arena, the ideas, and much of the initial leadership for the struggle which polarized American Czech life. In Bohemia itself, anti-Catholicism and anti-Austrianism were synonymous by 1850. Both were employed as agents of national rebirth, especially by a young and enormously influential Prague journalist, Karel Havlicek, writing in his *Narodni Noviny* (National News). Havlicek's writings turned up in Vojta Naprstek's *Flug-Blätter* of the 1850's, and the connection of Bohemian and American radicals was early established.⁵⁰

In America Freethought had dual if not multivarious origins. The *Flug-Blätter* opposed the Catholic Church as an institution, but as a formally organized movement Freethought dates from the arrival in 1869 of Ladimir Klacel, a former Augustinian monk, an inveterate dreamer and prolific writer, who edited in Iowa City *Slovan Amerikansky* (1869) and later, in 1872, undertook the publication of *Hlas Jednoty Svobodomyslnych* (Voice of the Freethinkers' Union).⁵¹ Klacel subsequently resided in several Wisconsin communities, and in 1873 and 1874 dire poverty drove him to perform priestly functions in rural Manitowoc County.⁵² The groundwork for Freethought had been well laid, however. All of the leading Wisconsin Czechs—Jonas, Korizek, Naprstek, Novak, Pohl—were of Freethought disposition and unhesitatingly entered religious combat. All of them contributed to the specific and complete departure of many Czech immigrants from their old world faith, a phenomenon which has had no parallel among other immigrant groups.⁵³

Freethought in Wisconsin was also propagated in journals established for that particular purpose. *Bodlak* (The Thorn) commenced in 1876 in Milwaukee, and *Ruch* (Stir), which followed in 1893, graphically expressed the views of the religious liberals.⁵⁴ In spite of its frequent degeneration into tasteless materialism, however, Freethought evinced a spirit, a

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 486, 513-514, 755; Capek, *Padesat let ceského tisku v Americe*, 263, 267, 268.

⁴⁸ Tomáš Capek, *Naše Amerika* (Our America) (Prague, 1926), 370-373.

⁴⁹ Capek, *Padesat let ceského tisku v Americe*, 33-42; Capek, *The Cechs (Bohemians) in America*, 119.

⁵⁰ Capek, *Naše Amerika*, 364-366.

⁵¹ Capek, *Padesat let ceského tisku v Americe*, 33-43.

⁵² Capek, *The Cechs (Bohemians) in America*, 192.

⁵³ Zizka, *Czech Cultural Contributions*, 70.

⁵⁴ Capek, *Padesat let ceského tisku v Americe*, 259, 267.

sincerity, a concern for social well-being and a ritualization which marked the movement as decidedly religious.⁵⁵ Since Freethought became the dominant feature of Czech-American life by 1880 it is difficult to accept as commonplace such simplistic explanations of the phenomenon as that offered by Vaclav Pohl of Kewaunee, one of its early leaders, who indicated that irreligion came easily to him, for as a boy in a Bohemian village school the catechism was one book too many to manage on the long walk home.⁵⁶

In Wisconsin the task of freethinkers seeking to decatholicize their expatriated countrymen was made easier by clerical shortages, problems, ineptitude, and hesitancy within the Catholic community. Wisconsin Czechs, owing perhaps to their ruralness, were probably the most heavily Catholic group of Czech immigrants in America. But they were tardy in organization and lost the initiative to the liberals, and they produced numerous converts to Freethought by an unhappy parish history. In part, the Catholic problem was the commonplace one of ownership of physical facilities, a problem which split many immigrant communities in America. Since many church facilities were constructed by devout laymen before the coming of the clergy, there was considerable reluctance—and often absolute refusal—to surrender property to church authorities. Perhaps of equal consequence, however, was the alienation wrought by the behavior of immigrant priests, especially the inability of many of them to perceive the religious realities of a nation in which the authority of the church was not buttressed by the strong arm of the state.⁵⁷

The first organized Czech parish in Wisconsin was established in 1859 in Greenstreet, Manitowoc County, and other chapels were built shortly afterward in Cooperstown, Tisch Mills, and Kewaunee. Parishes in most Wisconsin Czech communities were founded in the 1860's.⁵⁸ Father Josef Maly, who arrived in 1855, served as the first clergyman and worked in some twenty localities in the first half of a

fifty-year Wisconsin career.⁵⁹ Many parishes were wracked by dissension in the early years, and in La Crosse, to cite one example, one of the early pastors was forced out by the parishioners.⁶⁰ In some localities the refusal of clergymen to permit burial of freethinkers in parish cemeteries reacted against the church. For this reason, it was alleged, "By 1877 Catholicism died in Caledonia."⁶¹

The fracturing of the Czech immigrant community along religious lines was principally responsible for the profusion of fraternal societies and the flowering of lodge life in Czech America. Wisconsin Czechs were instrumental in this process, particularly in the establishment of the *Slovanska Lipa* (Slavic Linden Tree) chain of societies. *Slovanska Lipa*, a social organization named after a revolutionary society established in 1848 in Prague, was brought to Racine in 1861.⁶² It was the prime mover in the creation of *Slavie*, and later the various lodges became part of the *Sokol* movement.⁶³ The society opted for religious liberalism at the outset, and it set in motion a movement to institutionalize immigrant life, creating language schools in Racine and Milwaukee, burial societies in smaller settlements, and amateur theatrical groups.⁶⁴ The idea of non-religious brotherhood was given a major impetus by *Slovanska Lipa*. Stangelville, a mere hamlet, sustained five societies,⁶⁵ and by 1884 Caledonia boasted four associations of note—*Slovanska Lipa*, *Osveta* (Culture), a burial society, and an organization called simply *Cesko-Moravsti Bratri* (Bohemian-Moravian Brotherhood).⁶⁶

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 9-12.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁷ Mikulesky, "Notes on Early Days in the Bohemian Settlement, Caledonia Township."

⁵⁸ Thomas Capek, *The First Czech Society in America* (Chicago, 1950), 13.

⁵⁹ *Sokol* (Falcon) was a gymnastic-physical culture movement with patriotic and liberal religious overtones. It was the equivalent of the German *Turnverein*. The movement was founded in Bohemia and introduced among American Czechs in the 1860's.

⁶⁰ Mikulesky, "Notes on Early Days in the Bohemian Settlement, Caledonia Township"; Capek, *The Czechs (Bohemians) in America*, 241.

⁶¹ Habenicht, *Dejiny Cechuv Americkych*, 493.

⁶² Jan Novak, "Ze Zivota Jana Novaka v Tabore, Wis." (From the Life of John Novak in Tabor, Wisconsin), in *Amerikan*, IX: 170 (1886).

⁵⁵ Balch, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens*, 391.

⁵⁶ *Kewaunské Listy*, June 29, 1892.

⁵⁷ Joseph Cada, *Czech-American Catholics, 1850-1920* (Lisle, Illinois, 1964), 24-25 et passim.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 9, 11-12, 30-31.

By the 1880's *Slovanska Lipa* became imbedded in the *Sokol* movement, and fraternal and benefit functions largely devolved upon *Cesko-Slovansky Podporujici Spolek* (Czech-Slavic Benevolent Society), a fraternal body which originated in St. Louis and ultimately became the major Czech society in the United States. C.S.P.S. expanded slowly from St. Louis and its first Wisconsin lodge was established in Milwaukee in 1877. A state lodge was founded in 1878, followed by local branches in La Crosse (1879), Prairie du Chien (1879), Kewaunee (1881), Francis Creek (1883), Racine (1884), Antigo (1885), Manitowoc (1886), and Caledonia (1892).⁶⁷ Toward the end of the century the Western Bohemian Fraternal Union, an Omaha-Cedar Rapids based body representing a secession from C.S.P.S., became prominent in Kewaunee County.⁶⁸ The fraternal bodies, *Sokol*, and supporting women's and children's societies were well represented by 1900, and all of the organizations were tinged or dominated by freethinkers.

Wisconsin's Czech Catholics were slow to evolve parish-oriented fraternalism to compete with the freethinkers. Milwaukee Catholics had no organization until 1871; Racine Catholics remained unorganized until 1896.⁶⁹ Parish societies in La Crosse, Watertown, and Milwaukee, however, were among the nine founders in 1877 of *Ceska Rimsko-Katolicka Prvni Ustredni Jednota ve Sp. St. Americkych* (First Bohemian Catholic Central Union in the United States), the principal Catholic benefit society.⁷⁰ In 1891, Czechs in Prairie du Chien inspired a "secession" from the Catholic Central Union, leading ultimately to the separation of twenty-one Wisconsin parish lodges and the creation of a rump body, the Czech Roman Catholic Union in the State of Wisconsin, which claimed all of 900 members.⁷¹

This kind of exclusiveness was not untypical of Wisconsin Czechs, and it was this separatist

⁶⁷ Martinek, *Stoleti Jednoty CSA*, 83, 93, 87, 105, 109, 110, 130. C.S.P.S. was the major constituent of the post-World War I fusion which produced Czechoslovak Society of America.

⁶⁸ Habenicht, *Dejiny Cechuv Americkych*, 486.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 454, 465.

⁷⁰ Joseph Cada, *The Catholic Central Union* (Chicago, 1952), 10, 86.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 23-24; Capek, *The Cechs (Bohemians) in America*, 263.



Society's Iconographic Collections

Jonas' grave in Prague, photographed in 1906.

tendency which renders the designation "Wisconsin Czech" meaningful and useful. Moreover, just as Wisconsin became the first major center of Czech-American life, its Czech residents were also the first to succumb to the immutable processes of assimilation. Undoubtedly their exclusiveness and separatism, as well as the decline of the state as a major attraction for newly arrived immigrants, were major contributing factors in the assimilation process. There were, of course, new additions to the immigrant stock after 1890,⁷² and the years of World War II even witnessed a revival of Czech-language journalism in the state. But the creative role of the Wisconsin Czechs in Czech-American life was fulfilled by 1890.

⁷² See Konrad Bercovici, *On New Shores* (New York, 1925), 44-50 and Joseph Auslander and Audrey Wurdeman, *My Uncle Jan* (New York, 1948).