A Historical Look at Czech Chicagoland

By Frank S. Magallon

Like most ethnic groups that immigrated to America, the Czechs (sometimes called Bohemians) came here for a better life. America was known as the land of opportunity and prosperity, and large numbers of Czech

émigrés found both in Chicago.

During the mid-19th century, people living in the Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia were under the rule of the Habsburg Empire. This made the people subjects of a monarchy whose official religion was Roman Catholic and whose official language was German. Most Czech émigrés fled their native country in search of religious and political freedom and to achieve economic prosperity. Later, during the Cold War era, a main reason for Czech emigration was the desire to escape communism.

Chicago was the destination for many of these newly arrived immigrants. After the arrival of Chicago's earliest Czech settlers in the 1850s, many sent letters back to the old country extending *Pozdrav z Chicaga,* and boasting of available land, plentiful jobs, religious freedom, and the prospect of entrepreneurship, opportunities that did not exist in their native land.

During the 1860s, Chicago was on the fast track to becoming the premier metropolis of the Midwest.

Strategically located on the Great Lakes, Chicago served as a hub for railroads and in time became a giant in industry and commerce. There was an abundance of employment opportunities for newly arrived immigrants in the stockyards, lumber yards, and the hundreds of factories located within the Chicago area. However, life in Chicago was not easy. Like all urban areas of the time, the city was dirty, the neighborhoods were overcrowded and unsanitary, and the oppressive working conditions were unsafe for the tens of thousands of immigrants who labored long hours at low-wage jobs. Czechs were at the center of the struggle of workers to organize and form labor unions that fought for higher wages and improved working conditions in Chicago.

The immigrant neighborhoods of Chicago were very insular; their inhabitants preferred to live, worship (if they so desired), socialize, and do business with people from their same ethnic group. Chicago's Czechs settled together in areas where housing was affordable and their native language and customs could be understood by others around them. Religion also played a part in the decision of where some Czech immigrants would settle within the city.

Czechs of the Catholic faith organized St. Wenceslaus church in 1863, and had the building constructed by 1866 on Des Plaines and De Koven Streets on the city's near west side. This area, just outside of the downtown district in the vicinity of 12th and Canal Streets, was known as Praha. While the neighborhood name is no longer used in Chicago, the area itself would forever be remembered as the originating point of the Great Chicago Fire of October 1871. It was that historic conflagration which would displace many of Praha's residents to the lower west side in the vicinity of 18th Street and Blue Island Avenue, an area that would become known as Pilsen.

After the fire, Pilsen began developing overnight. Land ownership was particularly important to the Czechs, who equated it with wealth, and Bohemian real estate men sold lots to families, who built small houses of wood or brick on the rear sections of the lots. Bohemian men started building and loan organizations where savers could pool their money together. Members could then borrow money to build more substantial brick structures on the front of their lots, which could house small businesses and apartments. These enterprising homeowners were able

to use the money generated by rents to pay off their properties at an advanced rate. Many Bohemians started small businesses such as saloons, grocery and meat markets, and other retail establishments, where fellow immigrants living in close proximity to the businesses could shop for their daily needs. By the late 1870s, Pilsen was exploding with growth, and the neighborhood's main business district, 18th Street, was sprouting new businesses every day.

The Czech community in Chicago was divided by religion. Many immigrants rejected the Catholic religion once they arrived in America. Some opted for Protestant churches but many identified themselves as Freethinkers or Rationalists. One source estimated that one-third to one-half of the immigrants turned away from Catholicism; another source estimated as many as 70% of the Czechs in Chicago considered themselves non-religious, i.e., neither Catholic nor Protestant. This dichotomy resulted in parallel institutions developing among the Czechs, and the Pilsen neighborhood exemplified this division. Pilsen saw the building of churches across the religious spectrum, including Protestant churches, Catholic churches like St. Vitus and St. Procopius, which was established in 1875 on 18th and

Allport Streets, and even a Jewish synagogue. The Bohemian Freethinkers (Svobodná Obec), founded in 1870, offered secular baptisms, marriages and funerals for their followers. In 1877, they led Czech fraternal organizations in establishing the non-sectarian Bohemian National Cemetery at the corner of Crawford (now Pulaski Road) and Foster Avenues.

Czech immigrants were in the forefront in establishing fraternal and benevolent societies to help preserve their culture and serve as safety nets for families stricken by unemployment, illness, or death. These institutions, too, broke down along religious lines, Catholic and non-Catholic. One of the largest national organizations, originally founded by Freethinkers, C.S.P.S., or Česko-Slovanský Podporující Spolek (Czech Slavic Benevolent Society) had its building on 18th & May Streets. The C.S.P.S. survives to this day as CSA Fraternal Life, headquartered in the Chicago suburb of Oak Brook. Gymnastic Sokol organizations were also very popular: Plzenský Sokol was established in 1879 on 18th Street and Ashland Avenue. The slogan of the Sokol movement was “a sound spirit in a sound body.”

With businesses, churches, and organizations established, the Pilsen Bohemian colony became an

intricately woven, self-sustaining community where the people had little need to travel outside the confines of their neighborhood. This inspired the residents of Pilsen to reach out to their friends and relatives back home and encourage them to come to America. Pilsen would serve as a port of entry for newly arrived Czechs from the old country into the turn of the twentieth century.

By the dawn of the twentieth century, the Czechs had done much to establish themselves in the city of Chicago. The flow of new immigrants continued, and early Czech settlers were assimilating and becoming more and more ingrained into the fiber of America. Czech immigrants tended to be more literate than many other ethnic groups—97% of those who arrived after 1890 could read and write in their native language—and they highly valued formal education. The children of early immigrants received a quality education, and some even sought higher education in the colleges, universities, law, and medical schools of the city. Culture and art were also flourishing in the Bohemian community at this time. In Pilsen, Thalia Hall, built in 1892 at 18th and Allport Streets, served as a venue for Czech theatrical productions and other

important cultural events for the community. Česká Beseda (Bohemia Club), founded in 1899, was located at 3659 W. Douglas Boulevard in the Lawndale neighborhood by 1912. Chicago's Czech elite, as well as the visiting Czech elite of the rest of the United States and Czech lands, frequented the club. This was the place for its refined members to celebrate and enjoy literature, drama, and music by the most celebrated and talented Czech artists. By 1900, the Chicago Czech community supported six nonprofessional acting troupes and one professional company, Ludvík's Theatrical Troupe. Czech newspapers also flourished, and editors were among the most influential voices in the community. The newspapers, like other institutions, reflected the beliefs of the community: there were different newspapers for Catholics, Socialists, Freethinkers, Independents, etc. So prolific were the presses that there were even newsletters or gazettes for special interest groups, including feminists and farmers. It was said that every cause had its own Bohemian press—except for the cause of Prohibition.

With Chicago's landscape continually expanding, and the Bohemian people becoming upwardly mobile, it was natural for their community to grow. At the turn of the twentieth century, Bohemians began their westward migration to what could become known as Česká Kalifornie (Czech California) in the vicinity of 26th Street

and California Avenue. Chicago's long established Pilsen district to the east of the neighborhood was becoming too crowded for many of its Bohemian residents. There were also many first-generation Bohemian-American children of immigrants who were achieving economic success and wanted to own their own homes, which served as the ultimate symbol of owning a piece of the New World. Česká Kalifornie, or Lawndale-Crawford as the neighborhood was also known, was still largely undeveloped and had an abundance of land to build new housing. The other great advantage of Czech California was its close proximity to many manufacturing plants that provided steady, well-paying employment to willing, hard-working Bohemians.

It did not take long for the word to spread. The Bohemian people wanted to live among their countrymen, and once they heard of the advantages and prosperity of Czech California, they began migrating there in large numbers. At a time of growing anti-

immigrant bias and nativist sentiment in the United States, these new arrivals did not sit well with many of Lawndale-Crawford's original settlers, and the Bohemians were not given a warm welcome and were looked upon with distrust and prejudice. The neighborhood's first settlers felt threatened by this group who spoke a different language, had funny-sounding names, and, worst of all, drank beer. As a result, many of the neighborhood's original settlers moved away, and by World War One, the Bohemians had become the dominant ethnic group in Czech California.

The Czech California neighborhood expanded westward to include the small communities of Lawndale and Crawford in the vicinity of 26th Street and Crawford Avenue (Pulaski Road). Ethnic-themed businesses now lined 26th Street and every other commercial district in the area. "Česká Kalifornie" was now known as the center of Czech life, culture, and business in Chicago. The neighborhood was plentiful in theatres, Sokols, (Sokol Chicago and Sokol Havlíček-Tyrš), halls, churches, and schools. Czech California had several first-class public elementary and high schools, including Farragut and Harrison Technical. The neighborhood also had two Bohemian Freethinker schools: Vojta Náprstek, which was built in 1911 at 2548 S. Homan Avenue, and Jan Neruda, located at 2659 S. Karlov, built

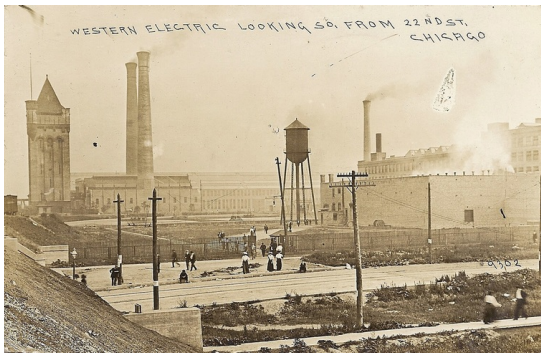
in 1912.

The greatest single wave of Czech immigration to the United States happened in the decade 1900-1910, when more than 95,000 Czechs arrived in the United States. Where earlier immigrants had come from mostly rural areas and small towns, these were predominantly urban Czechs, skilled workers who could read and write. While Czechs eagerly embraced their adopted country, they did not forget their homeland, and when World War One broke out, many Czech immigrants and first-generation Czech-American young men volunteered to fight for the independence of their homeland, either with the Czech legionnaires (draftees who deserted from the army of the Austro-Hungarian rulers of the Czech lands) or the American Army. On May 5th, 1918, Professor Tomáš G. Masaryk, who would become the first president of the newly formed Czechoslovakia after the war, came to Chicago to rally American political leaders and Chicago's Czech people to support his vision of an independent, democratic Czechoslovakia. This historic visit raised awareness of the cause of oppressed people throughout the Austro-Hungarian Empire, including the Czech and Slovak peoples. At the end of the Great War, the Czech people, after 400 years of foreign rule, finally had their own country, with the birth of Czechoslovakia.

Being a very civic-minded people, the Bohemians

readily entered the political arena at the city and state levels. Bohemians gained prominent positions within local government andcivic organizations. In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Czech districts of Chicago, which included Pilsen, Lawndale-Crawford, Merigold (Nový Tábor), and Town of Lake, were represented by Bohemian aldermen and other city officials. In 1907, Adolph Sabath was elected to represent a district of Chicago in the U.S. House of Representatives, an office he held until 1952. There were also Czechs in important positions in county government, serving as judges, police and fire officials, as well as others like John Cervenka, who was elected Treasurer of the City of Chicago in 1923, and John Toman, who was elected Sheriff of Cook County in 1934. The pinnacle of the Czechs' climb to the top of Chicago's political world was the 1931 election of Czech California resident Antonin Josef Čermák as Mayor of Chicago. Anton Cermak was a brilliant politician who was the architect of what would become the Chicago Democratic machine. Czechs and

other immigrant groups in Chicago rallied around Cermak, ensuring his victory over the incumbent mayor “Big Bill” Thompson. Anton Cermak changed the face of Chicago politics, his impact carrying forward into the 21st century. The Czech community, as well as the rest of Chicago, was stunned and devastated by his assassination in 1933. Soon after his murder, the City of Chicago paid tribute to their beloved slain mayor by renaming 22nd Street, Cermak Road; this particular street was chosen for the honor because of its path through the Czech neighborhoods of Chicagoland.



Numbering only 10,000 in 1870, the population of Czech immigrants and second-generation descendants in Chicago had grown to around 200,000 by 1920. Czech owners and managers could be found in virtually every trade and business, including building firms, restaurants, grocery stores, jewelry stores, photography studios, real estate companies, music studios, law firms, lumber yards, travel companies, and import-export firms. By 1924, 15 state and federal banks in Chicago were controlled by Czechs; they also controlled more than half of the assets of Chicago’s building and loan associations. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Czech Chicagoland community had reached its

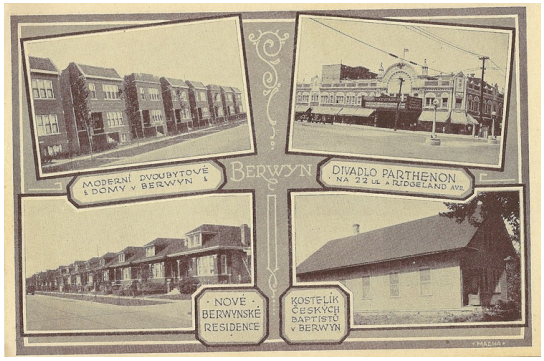
pinnacle. During this time, immigration had slowed and Czechs were moving farther west to the newer sub-divisions in the suburban areas of the

Town of Cicero and City of Berwyn. The Czechs saw this area as a new land of opportunity. There was plenty of land to build modern housing and establish businesses that would no doubt be successful with the large amounts of people moving there. In Cicero, manufacturing plants such as the Western Electric Hawthorne Works provided many jobs to the new ethnic middle class of the Chicago area. The Czechs helped build Cicero and Berwyn into world-class modern cities. The main commercial district of Cermak Road became a shopping destination for Czechs all over the Chicago area and was home to some of the most significant buildings in the Czech community, such as the Sokol Slávský building on Cermak Road and Lombard Avenue in Cicero. Berwyn and Cicero were also home to highly rated schools that educated generations of Czechs. Many of these students went on to attend institutions of higher learning and joined the professional ranks of working people in the Chicago area. These suburbs were the pride of Czech-American people, being home to tens of

thousands of multi-generational Czech families, and it was the aspiration of many to move there. It was often said, “If you were a Czech living in Berwyn, you had made it.” The Czech people were well-known for keeping immaculately maintained homes, and their frugality, especially after the Great Depression, was legendary in the Chicago area. Some Czechs moved further west to suburbs like Brookfield, while more affluent Czechs settled in Riverside and Oak Park. Like they did in their old neighborhoods, Czechs sought out and won elected offices in Cicero and Berwyn, including that of mayor. In the decades following the 1920s, Cicero saw mayors with the Czech last names of Klenha, Stedronsky, and Sandusky. For nearly half of the 20th century, Berwyn saw Czech mayors run their city with names like Janda, Novotny, Janura, Mraz, Kriz, Dolezal, and Vacin.

The Cicero and Berwyn area continued as the new center of the Czech-American community well into the 1980s, while the Czech populations in the old neighborhoods of Pilsen and Czech California began to diminish in the 1960s, and were mostly gone by the late 1970s. The story of Czechs in Chicagoland is the quintessential American immigration story of people coming to the New World for a better life and achieving their goal. In fact, Czech immigration continues in Chicago today. Young immigrants arrive here regularly

from the Czech Republic to work and attend schools in Chicago.



While there are still a number of Czechs living in Cicero and Berwyn, most have moved further west and beyond, having assimilated into the great melting pot of people and cultures of America. The descendants of Chicago's Czech immigrants are very proud of their heritage and accomplishments, and some still belong to organizations where their Czech culture, traditions, and history are celebrated and kept alive for future generations. There are annual picnics, Czech women's clubs, Czech men's lodges, dance groups, and Sokols. Old organizations like Česká Beseda, the Bohemian Lawyers Association, and the Czechoslovak Garden Club are still active; and newer organizations like the Moravian Cultural Society, the Czech and Slovak American Genealogical Society of Illinois, and Friends of Bohemian National Cemetery (a group dedicated to the restoration and preservation of the cemetery), are coming into their own.

The establishment of a Czech American Community Center in the Chicago area will provide a much-needed center where these various groups can hold their meetings and host events for the wider public. We ask

for your support and financial assistance in this historic venture. Be part of the continuing history of Czech Chicagoland.

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