

## **Slovak Immigrants to Wisconsin**

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President Franklin Roosevelt, speaking to the Daughters of the American Revolution, addressed them as “Fellow Immigrants” and thereby restated a fact known to all of us. For the most part, our United States was settled by waves of immigrants who wanted to escape various negative conditions in “the old country,” and the Slovaks were no exception.

Individual Slovaks began coming to the United States shortly after the settlement of the Thirteen Colonies. Groups of Slovaks started arriving in the United States in the early 1870s and such groups continued to come through the World War I era. In general, the Slovak immigrants came primarily because of poor economic conditions and political oppression in their homeland and because of the dream of a living in a land of opportunity and freedom. To be sure, quite a number also came to escape being drafted into the Austrian Emperor’s army.

I am pleased to share with you some general information about Slovak immigration, and, more specifically, Slovak immigration to Wisconsin, and to speak about the lives of those immigrants, and a bit about the efforts of our 800-member Wisconsin Slovak Historical Society to preserve the history, and the customs and traditions of the Slovak immigrants.

As most of you know, Slovakia, as a nation in the modern world, was not officially acknowledged until after World War I, when it joined the Czechs, Moravians and the Ruthenians in forming the new state of Czechoslovakia. Up to that time, the Slovaks had lived for almost a thousand years under foreign rule, first under the Hungarians and then under the Habsburgs and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Slovak people lived under Hungarian hegemony and the area in which they lived was generally designated as northern Hungary. That contributed to some confusion in United States census records, since the Slovak immigrant’s birthplace prior to World War I, was officially Hungary, though their language and culture were Slovak.

Even after the European efforts to free the serfs in the late 1840s, the official policy of the Hungarian government was to try to eradicate the Slovak identity by prohibiting the Slovak language from being spoken in schools and to any governmental activity. Not only were the civil rights of Slovaks restricted, but also ownership of land and educational opportunities were severely restricted. Despite these adverse conditions, however, the language and culture of the Slovak people continued and at various times and in various places even flourished.

The Slovak immigration pattern -- similar to other immigrant groups -- was for males, both single and married, to come to America, with the thought that, as soon as they had earned sufficient money, they either would send for, or to return to “old country” to bring, their wives, families, or new brides to America. There were often complications, though, such as wars and the potential danger the male immigrants faced of being drafted for the Emperor’s Army, upon their return to their native land.

Figures on immigration from 1899 to 1910 reveal that, though only 355,527 Slovaks were among the more than nine million immigrants who came to the United States during that period,

the percentage of Slovaks who emigrated from the "old country" was the highest of any European group. Some 18 out of every 1000 Slovaks emigrated during those twelve years, primarily to the United States and Canada.

It is estimated that Wisconsin attracted some 50,000 Slovak immigrants. The only states with more Slovak immigrants were Pennsylvania, with some 500,000; Ohio, with some 300,000; New York with some 120,000; Illinois and New Jersey with some 100,000 each; and Michigan with some 60,000. Most of the Slovaks in the more populous states such as Pennsylvania and Ohio came from the more eastern area of present-day Slovakia, whereas most of the Wisconsin Slovaks came from the western area of Slovakia, from a broad area along the Moravian border, stretching from Bratislava, located about 35 miles north of Vienna, northward to cities such as Trencin, and Zilina. This broad area included cities such as Topolcany, Nitra, Trnava, Piestany, and Sv. Martin, among many other villages and towns.

Typically, Slovaks who settled in Wisconsin left their homeland around the turn of the century by walking or traveling by wagon to a railway station, from which they took trains to seaports like Hamburg and Antwerp and, particularly, to Bremen. Bremen was the port of debarkation for the majority of Slovaks because the Hungarian government had granted a monopoly to the Cunard Line there. Among the main U.S. ports of entry was Ellis Island in NY harbor, and the ports of Baltimore, Boston, and Philadelphia. Commercial recruiters or relatives who had preceded them usually dictated the immigrants' final destination, ordinarily reached by railroad. Large numbers of Slovaks who immigrated to Wisconsin settled in Milwaukee and smaller places such as Ashland, Boyceville, Carrollville, Cudahy, Kenosha, Phillips, Racine and Superior.

About all that most immigrants prior to World War I could afford was the "steerage section" of a steamship. This usually meant a lack of privacy, poor sanitation and poor food.

No comprehensive written history of the Slovaks who settled in Wisconsin is presently available, but considerable information can be found in periodicals such as the *Wisconsin Slovak*, published quarterly for the members of the Wisconsin Slovak Historical Society; the *Ethnic Voice* published quarterly by the Moquah Heritage Society in the Ashland area; the Phillips Czechoslovak community volumes; old organizational event programs and books, including autobiographies. Surprisingly, there was also a weekly Slovak language newspaper started up in Milwaukee as late as 1936, which lasted until its editor left for military service in World War II.

We continue to publish articles in the *Wisconsin Slovak* which tell about the experiences of immigrants and their descendants. Indeed, many of us who are first- and second-generation Americans can relate something of the immigrant experience as we saw it as small children in the 1920s and 1930s. We can describe not only the celebration of holidays with Slovak customs and traditions but everyday, mundane experiences, such as eating kolatche, klobasy, and kapusta; and by characterizing the mixture of Slovak and English we heard spoken by the immigrants, who coined hybrid words such as *shoe-zeh* for "shoes"; *cydwook* for "sidewalk", and numerous other terms which were a type of Anglicized Slovak,

On a personal level, I can state that I was born in a village in Wisconsin which was heavily populated by Slovak and other immigrants. My mother and father were born in Slovakia and as children we were bilingual — speaking Slovak as in the early years and then learning English from older siblings who were by then going to school. My Slovak mother had a good friend, a neighbor who was Czech and a subscriber to the *Ceska Zena*, a Czech monthly literary periodical. After reading the magazine, this Czech lady would pass it on to my mother. Living on a farm, my sisters and brother and I would listen to our mother read stories from the *Ceska Zena* in the early evening by the light of a kerosene lamp and a natural fireplace. I first learned about Robinson Crusoe, chapter by chapter, as it appeared in the *Ceska Zena*. And, you may not know what suspense is unless you have had to wait for the next issue of the *Ceska Zena*.

No child raised in an immigrant Slovak family escaped the lessons contained in the Slovak proverbs, the *prislovia*. Some examples, with rough translations: *Komu sa nelenyi, tomu sa zelenje* "If you don't submit to laziness, you will prosper"; *Stary strom nemozes presadit* "You can't transplant an old tree."; *Dva razy meraj, raz strihaj*: "Measure twice, cut once. There were literally hundreds of such meaningful statements which conveyed little lessons for living. Some of the sayings were embroidered on dish towels and various table of furniture coverings.

Another characteristic of the Slovak immigrant was to use the phrase, *Jezis, Maria, a Jozef*, or sometimes just *Jezis, Maria*. The phrase was used respectfully to indicate surprise, frustration, and other emotional reactions. And long before the advent of *Do videnia* for a farewell, it was always, *S Bohom* ((Go) with God.)

The Slovak immigrants also learned quickly about American politics. Both the Democrats and the Republicans encouraged the new immigrants to file declarations stating an intention to become U.S. citizens. That encouragement was not entirely altruistic. Once the immigrant had filed the declaration, he could begin voting. And, those of you who are genealogists know the value of some of the information on those declarations.

In Wisconsin, as elsewhere, industrial work attracted many of the Slovak immigrants, although there was a good representation of farmers, tradesmen and businessmen, as well. As you look over United States census records for 1920 and 1930 in cities and towns in Wisconsin, you find clusters of single Slovak men living in the rooming houses, which were often a grand substitution for a country club, the corner tavern, where a common language could be spoken, leads on jobs could be obtained, checks could be cashed and a small loan might be obtained.

For example, in looking over the census records for Cudahy, where a good number of Slovak immigrants worked at the Cudahy Packing Company – known among the older Slovak immigrants as the "Schlacta," the men typically lived in rooming houses. They walked to work, ate their meals at the rooming house, attended church services on Sundays, and spent time at the taverns when not working – often having a five-cent beer and sandwich.

As was typical among many immigrant groups, the Slovaks quickly established churches and formed mutual aid societies, gymnastic Sokols, theater groups, musical groups, and athletic teams, mainly soccer, later bowling and softball. In some cases the familiarity of Slovaks with

Moravians and Czechs living in common settlements and groups caused the three groups to share these ventures. This certainly was the case with the establishment of churches but it also applied to social and fraternal associations. Two notable groups of this type in Wisconsin were the Zapadoческа Bratrska Jednota and the Prva Slovenska Katholicka Jednota.

According to the best information available, the first Slovak immigrant to come to Wisconsin was Henry Kusick, a wire artisan, from the Trencin area of Slovakia. He arrived in Milwaukee, by way of Chicago, in 1881. In the succeeding decades some 25,000 Slovaks emigrated to the Milwaukee area. Within a generation, the Slovak colony, as an early writer referred to them, already had their own priests and ministers, physicians, midwives, dentists, grocers, funeral directors, and tavern and restaurant operators. Slovak student groups at institutions such as Marquette University flourished for some decades prior to World War II. The Sokol gymnastic and athletic groups also flourished during that time. Many of the immigrants in the Milwaukee area worked in largely unskilled jobs in industry, and employment at a place like the Schlitz Brewery was seen as a prize.

Some Slovak immigrants were attracted to northern Wisconsin to develop farms on cut-over timber lands. Realtors advertised such land—in glowing terms in Czech and Slovak periodicals. In the Moquah and Phillips areas many immigrants bought 40 acres of this land and began removing stumps and improving the land while working as section hands on railroads in the area. As the years went by, they expanded their 40 acres to 80 and 160 and in some cases more. They went from simple farming to raising registered cattle, and even today the Bayfield County Fair in northwestern Wisconsin has a beef sale as one of its highlights. During the early 1930s, which were days of harsh economic conditions, some Slovaks from the Chicago area migrated to the farmland of northern Wisconsin.

One may imagine the enthusiasm of these early immigrant – coming from an impoverished area of Europe, where opportunities were almost non-existent, to the United States where hard work – even during the Great Depression – produced more than a subsistence living. Here they became free citizens and helped build churches, schools, and whole communities. They could also preserve their cultural traditions even as they became increasingly Americanized.

The Wisconsin Slovak Historical Society was founded in 1980 by a small group concerned that the descendants of the Slovak immigrants were being assimilated so successfully that they risked losing all knowledge of their Slovak culture and traditions. Currently, we have about 800 members, some scattered throughout the United States but most concentrated in southeastern Wisconsin -- with most of the members residing in Milwaukee and its suburbs and in smaller cities such as Cudahy, Racine and Kenosha, south of Milwaukee. We are proud to be affiliated with the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

We have many senior members in their 70s, 80s, and 90s. Quite naturally, we lose some members each year. However, we are buoyed up by the steady flow of people seeking to know more about their Slovak heritage. Many of them get involved in genealogy, which evokes in them an even greater interest in their heritage. Others get interested from reading our quarterly magazine. During the past decade we have maintained a membership in excess of 800.

In achieving its goals, the Society has a home which has been remodeled to serve as a heritage center/museum. We have published a series of articles in our quarterly magazine related to the churches organized by Slovaks in Wisconsin, another series covering Slovak contributions to communities such as Milwaukee, Cudahy, Moquah, Kenosha, Phillips, Racine, and Superior. We have also featured series of articles on clergy, tavern and restaurant owners, other businessmen, and professionals. We continue to publish family histories and articles tracing families back to ancestral villages in Slovakia.

Though we are certainly a small minority in Wisconsin, we have counted among our membership Slovak descendants who are municipal and circuit court judges, and a Federal Judge, college and school administrators, teachers and professors; nurses, physicians and surgeons; ministers and priests, including Bishop Sklba of the Milwaukee Archdiocese; numerous professional and semi-professional athletes, including "Mr, Cub" of the 1940s, Andy Pafko; many elected officials, farmers, law enforcement officials, lawyers, pharmacists, industrialists and business men. And a lot of really fine families.

The Wisconsin Slovak Historical Society holds four dinner meetings each year; publishes the quarterly 20 plus-page *Wisconsin Slovak*, cooperates in sponsoring a Slovak Day Picnic (this year the 74th annual Slovak Day), holds a Harvest Festival, helps to support the Tatra Slovak Dancers and the Phillips Czech-Slovak Community Festival, and has sponsored Slovak language and Slovak singing classes.

And, so it is, that we have set out to remember our immigrant ancestors and to preserve their history and that of their descendants.

We are proud of our Slovak ancestors whose dreams and courage led them to emigrate to this land of opportunity and freedom.

Guided by their dedication to God and their new country, through work and personal sacrifice, they established families and built homes, churches and schools.

Here they toiled, lived and loved, prayed and sang, celebrated and sacrificed, grieved and died – and they left a proud legacy of Slovak culture and traditions for us to appreciate and perpetuate.

In loving memory, we ask God's Blessing upon them and may they rest in peace in this adopted land which they appreciated and loved.