

German-Bohemian Immigration to North America

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There were three periods of immigration to North America from the German speaking parts of what is now the Czech Republic: post World War II, pre World War II, and mid 19th-century.

After the expulsion of the German people from Eastern Europe in 1945, some of them immigrated to the United States. These people were sponsored by German societies and German churches in this country. Groups of German-Bohemians settled in the major cities of the United States; primarily, in New York, Chicago and San Francisco. These groups of people maintained contact with their fellow countrymen in Europe and also tried to preserve their culture in this country. They formed Sudeten-German societies where they could dance their traditional folk dances in their colorful folk costumes, sing the old songs and prepare the traditional foods. They did this so that they could preserve their unique culture.

Prior to World War II, during 1938 and 1939, between the annexation of the Sudetenland by the Nazis and beginning of the war with the invasion of Poland, several thousand German-Bohemian Social Democrats, socialists and intellectuals who opposed the Nazis tried to plead Czechoslovakia. These people would have been killed by the Nazis, if they had not been protected by their Czech neighbors. Most traveled to Prague where they were harbored in pseudo-arts groups. They were spirited out of the country via an underground railroad through Poland to England, where they remained for several years. The German-Bohemians who were not fortunate enough to be able to flee the country were arrested by the Nazis and imported to the Dachau concentration camp, where they were summarily executed. In England, the Sudeten Germans were given work in war-related industries and their children were sent to special schools. Later in the maintaining the Sudeten Germans became a hardship for the British. The Canadian National Railroad offered tax forfeiture land for them in Western Canada, primarily in Saskatchewan and British Columbia. The Sudeten Germans were transported to this part of Canada and housed in box cars and abandoned farms that were tax forfeited from the 1930s. These German socialists were primarily educated city folk not suited to the rugged living on the Canadian prairies. The stories of their many trials are now being published by their Canadian survivors. After some years, many of the Sudeten Germans moved to the major cities of Toronto, Winnipeg and other eastern cities to find work. Nevertheless, Dawson Creek, British Columbia still boasts a small community of Sudeten Germans who during World War II built the Alcan Highway linking Canada with Alaska.

There was some pre-19th-century immigration to North America from the western rim of Bohemia. Along with the eastern migration to peoples after the 30 years war and defeated the Turks in the fall of the Ottoman Empire, German people moved to the East. Emigration was promoted by Catherine the Great of Russia and Maria Theresia of Austria to repopulate areas of their Empires. Germans from Bohemia, primarily from just south of Taus (Domazlice) migrated to an area called Bukovina which is in Southern Hungary. There were also German Bohemians from the same area who went to Galicia (now part of Ukraine and Poland) to find work in the oil fields. Prior to World War I, many of these transplanted German-Bohemians,

along with the Germans from Russia and the Donauschwaben, fled to the United States, primarily to the Dakotas and central Canada. There is a very active Bukovina Society in Ellis, Kansas.

The primary emigration came in the mid 19th-century. The earliest documented immigration of German Bohemians to the United States was in the early 1850s, shortly after the failed 1848 revolution. I am certain that there were individuals and small groups who immigrated earlier but these people tended to assimilate into the existing German communities in this country. I am also certain that there were small numbers of German Bohemians in the eastern port cities of New York and Baltimore, but these, too, are difficult to identify, and for the same reason.

There were two groups along the western migration routes, however, that can be identified. Along the northern migration route that extended to the Great Lakes, there was a sizable German Bohemian community in Buffalo, New York, clustered around the industrial area of the city. Many of these German Bohemians worked in Buffalo's breweries, near the waterfront.

Along the Southern route there was another group of German Bohemian settlers in and around Pittsburgh and Allentown working in the steel mills and glass factories. Interestingly, the cottage glass industry was highly developed in the forested areas of the western Bohemia from where these immigrants originated.

By far the largest concentration of German Bohemians is to be found in the upper Midwest. It is true that there are small groups of German Bohemians in California, Washington, Nebraska, Kansas, and North Dakota, but these were very small communities compared to those found in Wisconsin and Minnesota.

Even though there were a large number of Czechs who went to Wisconsin from Bohemia, there was another group of Bohemian immigrants who came at the same time and for the same reasons. They too loved to drink "pivo" but they called it "Bier". They loved to eat sauerkraut, pork and knedliks but they called the dumplings Kneidl. They made a coffee cake with cottage cheese, prunes and apples or almonds. They did not eat kolaches but schmierkuchen. They loved to dance the polka and enjoyed a good time. They had their homes in the same area of Bohemia where in many cases they were neighbors in the same villages. Some of them even had Czech sounding names. The main difference was in their language. They spoke a dialect of German called Böhmisches. They were the German-Bohemians, the Deutschböhme. They came to Wisconsin from the Böhmerwald (Sumava), the South Egerland (Cesky Les), and from Falkenau (Sokolov). These areas later came to be known as the Sudetenland, a term that was unknown to these 19th century immigrants.

A group of these "Border People" coming from the villages of the Sumava and from the villages stretching from south of (Taus) Domazlice to Neuern (Nyrsko) settled in the small towns near Green Bay, Wisconsin and later along the Wisconsin Central railroad in towns stretching from the Wisconsin to the Chippewa Rivers, from Stevens Point to Chippewa Falls. These were the lumberman farmers, descendants of the Free Farmers who were given land and special privileges by the Dukes of Bohemia to protect the border areas. These border settlers, along with

their Czech cousins, became known as the Choden (Chodsko). They joined with their Czech neighbors in a rebellion led by the fabled Kosina against the hated repression of landlord Lamigen.

These were lumberman farmers, skilled in working in the fields and the forests of Bohemia. It is only natural that they would be attracted to the same type of surroundings in America. They found work in the forests and sawmills of northeastern Wisconsin. They cleared and farmed cutover land left behind by the lumber industry and the railroads. They worked in the sawmills and wood products industries of Oshkosh, where they produced doors, windows and other millwork. They worked in the huge lumber mills of Appleton, Marinette and Menominee, Michigan. In these larger communities they tended to associate with their fellow German speakers. They joined the German Catholic Church and the German cultural societies in the smaller communities; however, they were content to join with their Czech neighbors in worship and social activities. They lived together in harmony as they had in the old country. In many of the small towns one can find Czech and Germans buried side-by-side in local cemeteries

Another group of "Border People" emigrated from the border area between Bohemia and Moravia, from the Landskron (Landskroun) district. This district consisted of the town of Landskron and the forty-two surrounding bordering villagers. This district included the Czech town of Chermna. Three fourths of these villagers were German, and both ethnic groups were Roman Catholic. Increased population and frequent wars were the main factors prompting the Landskroners to consider emigration. During the Austro-Prussian war of 1866, 120,000 Austrian troops were quartered in this area. The battle of Konigraetz (Sudowa) was fought just 40 miles from Landskron.

Already in 1852 German Catholic day laborers were applying for passports for immigration to Wisconsin. The primary destination of these German Catholic immigrants was Watertown, already one of the largest German cities in Wisconsin, an area of abundant rolling farmland midway between Madison and Milwaukee. The Watertown German Bohemian community extended westward to Sun Prairie and Waterloo and southward to Janesville. A significant number of Landskroners, both Czech and German, settled in Pierce County near La Crosse, on the Mississippi River. The community is still referred to as Chermna.

Beginning in the 1850s a sizable immigration occurred from the Falkenau (Sokolov) district located on the Eger (Cheb) river midway between Eger (Cheb) and Karlsbad (Karlovy Vary) to Wisconsin to the city of Milwaukee. By 1855 already 23 percent of the names from the Falkenau district appear also in Milwaukee city directories. From the early days of immigration the German Bohemians tended to settle near the central business district near the present-day downtown and "East town". There were a large number of rooming houses in this area providing temporary housing near the businesses and factories. They were also a few known German-Bohemian shopkeepers located in the business center of this area.

As the German Bohemians of Milwaukee became better established, they expanded northwest into the Ninth Ward on the west side of the river. Their occupations in Milwaukee city directories mirror those practiced in the homeland: the occupations associated with the brewing

industries such as those of coopers, teamsters, malters, brewers and millers, as well as other professions such as those of shoemakers, butchers, carpenters, bakers, tailors, blacksmiths, glove makers, cap makers, masons, coppersmiths and tin smiths, basket makers, cabinetmakers, and, of course, saloon keepers. Little of the old neighborhoods exist today; the freeway and the public housing and revitalization projects of the 1960s and 1970s leveled those portions of the north and west side of the city where the German Bohemians had settled. It is ironic that the same can be said of many of the places that the German-Bohemian immigrants had left behind over a century earlier.

Beginning with the mid 1850s there was also a significant immigration of German settlers from Bohemia to neighboring Minnesota. There was a sizable group of German Bohemians who settled in St. Paul, the capital of Minnesota, a city made up of a patchwork of ethnic neighborhoods. The first German Bohemians came to St. Paul in the early 1870s and settled in the German ethnic neighborhoods that ring the downtown area of the city and joined the downtown German Catholic parish of the Assumption. As time went on, each of the German neighborhoods established its own Catholic Church. The largest concentration of German Bohemians in St. Paul was in the "Frogtown" neighborhood just north of the downtown business district. These German Bohemians immigrated from small villages in the forested areas of Southwest Bohemia, the Böhmerwald (Sumava). There were many from the small village of Glockenberg (Zad Zavonka). The neighborhood was called "Frogtown" or "Froshbberg" by the German-speaking immigrants who populated the neighborhood, because of the large number of frogs that inhabited this marshy area of the city. This immigrant neighborhood was centered on the beautiful church of St. Agnes where German-language sermons, Hymns and confessions lingered well into the 1950s. Social events often centered around churches, card clubs, men's clubs, women's clubs, sewing circles, sauerkraut suppers and booyas. Old-nine dancing was the rule at the local tavern and at all wedding receptions. The German language was universal. The local business establishments, taverns, grocery stores, bakeries, butcher shops, hardware stores, tailor shops, barber shops, pharmacies and mortuaries displayed the German names of their German proprietors on their marquees.

My wife, Dorothy, who was born in Frogtown, recently recollected that she had many fond memories of listening to her father speaking broken German with the neighbors over the back fence. Houses were built very close together and were surrounded by neatly fenced-in yards. The air was always filled with the fragrances of cooking. The bells of the St. Agnes church would chime each hour and every half-hour. My wife recalls that the church was a strong presence in the neighborhood and the ringing of the bells brought order to people's lives.

The largest concentration of Minnesota German-Bohemian immigrants, however, centered in the town of New Ulm, located on the Minnesota River about 100 miles south and west of St. Paul. This unique group has been able to retain much of their cultural heritage and has been the subject of my research and study for the past twenty-five years.

The German Bohemians almost became a lost people. It is extremely difficult to track their life in America. Few archives recognize the existence of the German-Bohemians as a distinct cultural group. Usually they are lumped together with other nationalities. Some census-

takers listed them as Austrian, since their homeland was under the rule of the Austrian Empire when they immigrated. Some were labeled as German because of the language they spoke. Still others were called Bohemians, a term which hardly distinguished them from their Czech neighbors. In fact, in the 1905 Minnesota census, Brown County, the home of the most German Bohemians in Minnesota, was noted to have the second-largest Czech population in the state, when in fact there were only two Czech speaking families in the County. Not until the 1920s census were the Böhkish listed as German speakers from Bohemia.

The German Bohemian communities in Minnesota were centered on the town of New Ulm in the surrounding counties of Brown and Nicollet. The immigrants that settled these areas came from the Western rim of Bohemia, from the counties of Bischofteinitz (Horsovsky tyn) Mies (Stribro) and Tachau (Tachov). The largest numbers came from villages in or adjacent to the Radbusa River Valley, centered in the parishes of Muttersdorf (Mutenin), Waier (Rybnik) and Berg (Hora Svateho Vaclava).

The destination of the very earliest German-Bohemian immigrants was not Minnesota at all but seems to have been the area of northeastern Iowa. Obituaries of several of the early settlers indicated that they had short stays in New Vienna or Dyersville, Iowa. It was also stated that they traveled overland from Iowa to New Ulm. In 1843 Bishop Loras, the bishop of Dubuque had established the church of St. Boniface in New Vienna for a growing number of German Catholic immigrants. In 1847 a group of Bavarian immigrants from the area of the Oberpfalz near the town of Waldmÿnchen came to St. Louis and learned of the new German Catholic settlement of New Vienna and proceeded there to put down their roots. Many other families from the general area were soon to follow. It was just a matter of time until word of the opportunities in the New World spread across the border into Bohemia, to the villages in the Radbusa River Valley. The first German-Bohemian settlers began arriving in the early 1850s but began looking for other areas to settle almost immediately because, by then, the best and cheapest land in this part of Iowa and already been claimed.

A group of German Bohemian families left New Vienna in the spring of 1855 and traveled on foot with ox-drawn wagons following the so-called Dubuque Trail out of Iowa to their homesites in Sections 4, 5, and 6 of the Cottonwood Township on the bluffs overlooking the Cottonwood River in south-central Minnesota. This is but two miles south of the New Ulm settlement on the Minnesota River, which had been established only a year earlier by the Chicago Land Company, populated by natives of Germany from Wurtemberg. These first homesites in Cottonwood Township became the nucleus of the German-Bohemian community that would spread southwest through the rest of Brown County into the neighboring counties of Redwood, Renville, Sibley and Nicollet counties.

By 1860 there were 94 German-Bohemian families listed in the federal census for Brown County, only two of which were in the city of New Ulm itself.

During the 1862 Dakota conflict many German Bohemians were active in the defense of New Ulm and subsequently served in the Union Army, either in the Indian wars or on the Western frontiers. Many of these men were veterans of the Austrian army who had served in the

35th Regiment in the Austro-Prussian War. The 1870 Federal Census for Brown County lists 549 German-Bohemian names, nearly ten percent of the total. What was more significant were the numbers in New Ulm itself, in an area on the Minnesota River known as Goosetown. Goosetown was made up of what might have been called very small subsistence farms, much like those in the old country. These small farms could be of a size from a half acre to an acre at most. They would consist of a house, a large vegetable garden, a small barn for the few livestock, a chicken coop, a smokehouse, a bake oven, and, many times, a tiny house for the grandparents. The settlers of Goosetown, because most of them were quite poor, built very small houses, even though they usually had many children. Eight to ten children in a family was quite common. They would have a cow, maybe two pigs, a flock of chickens, possibly a horse and, of course, a gaggle of geese. Goosetown was also the industrial section of town. The railroads and a flour mill, the nearby breweries and the stone quarry provided employment for the Goosetowners. In addition, there were well-developed cottage industries, notably lace making, called klöppeling, and cigar making. Money earned was set aside for the purchase of farmland, the dreamed-of 160-acre homestead. The Goosetowners rarely traveled uptown to do business. They were largely self-sufficient in their own little community. They might go "up the hill" to barter some eggs or milk for coffee, or other food that they could not produce themselves, but mostly they kept to themselves.

Goosetown was in reality a small old-world village with its own language and custom, situated within the city of New Ulm. The name Goosetown conveyed both the bright and dark side of life. The German Bohemians knew the pride of being able to fend for themselves, but they also weathered the disdain of people who looked down on the goose-dwellers with work-callused hands who were more interested in enjoyable community life than in upward mobility.

Nestled next to the boat landing, Goosetown was only the first step for many of the early settlers who stayed only long enough to earn the money they needed to buy land. Those who arrived after 1880, however, discovered that most of the farmland was taken. These late comers settled into laboring jobs, perhaps aspiring to move up the Hill. In later generations many New Ulm business people and professionals were German-Bohemian, including teachers, blacksmiths, artists, saloon keepers, lawyers, doctors, retailers and civic leaders.

The name "Trinity" still identifies another German-Bohemian settlement, the neighborhood near Holy Trinity Church, now the Cathedral, settled later by German-Bohemian elders who retired from their farms to spend their final years close to each other and close to the church that kept their culture coherent.

These German Bohemians did not come to America to join the melting pot. They abandoned their homeland for economic necessity but they came to the New World to recreate the same way of life they had known in Europe. They clustered close together in solid locations, separated from outside influences, and, for a generation or two, intermarried with the same families that they had intermarried with in the old world. This enabled them to maintain their German-Bohemian cultural heritage. The Böhkish dialect survives in many rural homes up to this day. The settlers live close to the land and cling piously to their church and their homeland traditions.

Part of this rich cultural heritage that all Bohemians, Czech and German alike, have in common, is their love of music; the international language. It is this love of music that has brought my friend Joel Blahnik, a Czech Bohemian and I, a German Bohemian, together. German-Bohemian music is a true synthesis of the music of both cultures. It is almost as if that Czech music has given warmth and heart to its German counterpart. This shared love of music has provided me with some of the most moving moments in my life.