

Czechs and Slovaks in Florida

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According to the 1990 census, there were 36,000 people of Czech descent, 70,000 of Slovak descent and 15,000 described as Czechoslovak descent living in Florida. While it is true that few Czechs and Slovaks came to Florida directly from Europe, the migration of people from the northeast and mid-west to Florida included a significant number of both nationalities, as we shall see during this presentation. To illustrate this point I shall review two communities started in Florida during the early part of the twentieth century, describe an important historical event and historical site, and briefly review some of the organizations that were formed after World War II.

Slavia

In 1911 several members of the congregation of the Holy Trinity Slovak Lutheran Church in Cleveland, Ohio, incorporated themselves as the Slavia Colony Company. They purchased about 1200 acres of land northeast of Orlando, Florida. This was the beginning of the little community of Slavia. Many of the early settlers were from rural areas in Central Europe and had found it difficult to adapt to urban life in Cleveland. Most likely they were attracted to Florida because of the state's campaign to attract settlers to its warm climate and good soil for farming.

For the first decade of its existence, the settlers of Slavia struggled to make a living. At first some families were engaged in lumbering and turpentine collection. All had gardens from which came potatoes, beans, squash, radishes, turnips, cabbage, cucumbers and celery. By the mid-1920s, farming had become the most important occupation, with celery being the leading cash crop.

Religion was one of the cornerstones that held the community together. In 1912 eight men organized themselves into the congregation of St. Luke the Evangelizer. It wasn't until 1935, however, that the congregation finally obtained a full time pastor.

Today you will not find a commercial district in Slavia. The heart of the community is the lovely St. Luke the Evangelizer Evangelical Lutheran Church.

Andrew Duda

Andrew Duda was one of the first four settlers of Slavia. He had come in 1909 from Europe to Cleveland, where he had friends and relatives. In the summer of 1912, Andrew's wife, Katarina, and her four children, left Velčice in Austria-Hungary (present day Slovakia) and arrived in Slavia to join Andrew.

The Duda family lived in a shack previously used by black turpentine and sawmill workers. There were cracks in the walls and cracks in the floors. When the mosquitoes were out in force, the family slept under mosquito netting. Andrew worked in the swamps among the alligators, cutting cypress logs and dragging them out with oxen and mules. For a while he also

worked at a nearby citrus packing plant. Life for the Duda family as well as for the other Slavia settlers was difficult indeed. After struggling financially for four years, the Duda family returned to Cleveland in 1916. Ten years later they returned to Slavia and harvested their first cash crop of celery from their 40-acre farm.

It is quite marvelous to think that the present-day company known as A. Duda & Sons, Inc. started from such humble beginnings. This diversified, international company now has a domestic land base of 100,000 acres. Privately owned by the Duda family, management includes third- and fourth-generation family members. With fields primarily in Florida, Texas and California, DUDA is the largest fresh vegetable grower in the United States. Major vegetable products include celery, radishes, onions, lettuce, sweet corn, carrots, cabbage and peppers. The company also grows, packs and ships fresh and processed citrus fruit. In addition, it markets sugar cane, sod and cattle. Lastly, the company has undertaken land development projects such as the establishment of Viera (which means “faith” in Slovak), a new town located in east central Florida.

Masaryktown

In 1924 Joseph Josčák, editor of the *New Yorksky Denník*, a daily Slovak newspaper in New York City, began writing a series of articles about the wonderful State of Florida, where it was reported that it was possible to grow as many as three crops annually, due to the warm climate. These articles appealed to many Slovaks working in the coal mines, steel mills and other industries in the North.

In September 1924, 60 Slovaks and one Czech formed the Hernando Plantation Company. Its purpose was to buy land in Florida. They bought 10,000 acres in Hernando County in Central Florida north of Tampa. Later, another 14,000 acres were added in adjoining Pasco County. Three months later about 135 shareholders left Ohio, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York (the greatest number) for what they called “Joscak’s Paradise.” Thus was the start of Masaryktown, named in honor of Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia. The settlers named streets running north and south after American presidents and named east to west streets after Czechoslovak poets, writers, patriots and national heroes. The original plan for earning money was to raise oranges, and thus many orange groves were planted. However, two consecutive winters with hard frosts occurred and wiped out all the orange trees. Many settlers had to abandon their farms. Some borrowed money from relatives in the North, while some husbands moved back to the North to find work and sent money back to their families left behind. Those who stayed in Masaryktown started to grow onions, sweet potatoes and cucumbers. The problem, though, was that a steady market could not be found for these vegetables, and this type of farming failed. Nevertheless, small poultry farmers formed an egg producers’ cooperative. The eggs were successfully sold in the Tampa and St. Petersburg markets. This cooperative was at one time the largest such cooperative in the Southeast and made Masaryktown the egg capital of Florida. Today Masryktown is a sleepy little village without much evidence of its rich Slovak heritage. However, there is still a library containing books in Czech and Slovak, and a small museum is housed in the community center.

Death of Mayor Čermák

One of the most mysterious political assassinations in history took place on February 15, 1933, when the Czech-born mayor of Chicago, Anton Čermák, was mortally wounded. The traditional story is that Čermák was shot by an anarchist, Giuseppe Zangara, who opened fire on a crowd of people in Bayfront Park in Miami, in an attempt to kill the then President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt. Roosevelt accompanied the mayor as he was rushed to the nearest hospital. "I'm glad it was me, instead of you" Čermák reportedly gasped to Roosevelt.

On March 4th Roosevelt was inaugurated. He called Čermák on the telephone immediately after the ceremony. Doctors thought the mayor would recover, but he developed pneumonia and died two days later. Five hundred thousand people gathered to watch the mayor's funeral procession in Chicago. He was buried in the Bohemian National Cemetery. Another version of the story, though, is that the Al Capone mob orchestrated the plot to assassinate Čermák because he was trying to destroy the Capone gang. Zangara deliberately fired wildly over FDR's head to distract security guards while another hit man got in close and fatally wounded the mayor. The bullets that struck Čermák came from a .45-caliber weapon, whereas the gun taken from Zangara was a 38-caliber pistol. Zangara was executed in Florida's electric chair five weeks after the shooting.

Zangara had allowed himself to be used as a decoy in Čermák's murder because he was dying of cancer and wanted to provide for his family after his death. The Capone gang made a deal with him, saying that if Zangara would take the rap, the mob would take care of his family after his death. Nevertheless, Zangara insisted to the end that he wasn't shooting at Čermák.

Albin Polášek

Albin Polášek was born in Moravia in 1879 and came to the United States in 1901. In 1906 he studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and won scholarships in 1907, 1908, and 1909. He was a Fellow at the American Academy in Rome from 1910-1913, after which he started his own studio in New York City. In 1916 he went to Chicago, where he became head of the Department of Sculpture at the Art Institute, a post that he held until 1943. During World War II he designed his retirement home and studio on the shore of Lake Osceola in Winter Park, in the Orlando area. In 1961 the Albin Polasek Foundation was established and a gallery was built to house his works. Polášek died in 1965 at age 86.

Today the Albin Polášek Museum and Sculpture Gardens hold more than 200 sculptures and paintings. In 2000 it was added to the National Register of Historic Places. I have been to the Albin Polášek Museum and Sculpture Gardens on several occasions and can heartily recommend a visit there. It is open to the public from September through June.

Czech and Slovak Organizations

The Slovak Garden, A Home for Slovak Americans, Inc. is probably the largest of the Czech and Slovak organizations in Florida. The seed was sown for the Slovak Garden back in 1939 when Mr. and Mrs. John Jerga of Detroit, Michigan, gave \$10,000 to the Zivena Beneficial Society for the purpose of establishing a Slovak retirement community. The money was held in escrow until 1949 when a 40 acre farm with a two-bedroom house was bought near Winter Park, Florida. It wasn't until 1952 that the Slovak Garden came into existence, due primarily to the efforts of Karol Belohlavek. Today the Slovak Garden has more than thirty apartments for rent, a large building that houses a library and museum, a smaller hall, a swimming pool and a shuffleboard court.

The annual Slovensky Den is held on the first Sunday of March and is regularly attended by several hundred people. It begins with a Mass in Slovak, followed by a traditional Slovak dinner, entertainment, and dancing. The American Czechoslovak Social Club (now known as the American Czech-Slovak Cultural Club) was founded in 1949. It has a clubhouse situated on three and a half acres adjacent to Arch Creek in North Miami. The restaurant serves traditional ethnic meals every Sunday. The bar is open on weekends and serves a variety of Czech and Slovak beers. There are over 100 dues paying members.

Sokol Miami was organized in 1969 in North Miami. Retired Sokol members who came to South Florida mainly from New York, New Jersey, Illinois and Connecticut started the unit. Representatives went to Prague in 1990 to participate in the Sokol Slet there. This group will probably disband in 2004.

The American Czech & Slovak Friends in South Florida meets once a month at a community center in the Fort Lauderdale area. It was founded in 1979. There are about 120 members.

The American Czechoslovak Club of Lake Worth was founded in 1955 by residents who had come from the mid-west and New York. In the 1960s a clubhouse was purchased and it was enlarged in the 1970s when membership peaked at about 250. Due to diminishing membership, the clubhouse was sold in 1998. The club meets at local restaurants twice a week during the winter season. Currently there are about 25 members.

On the west coast of Florida, the Czechoslovak Cultural Center is located in Gulfport, in the St. Petersburg area. It has a large building containing a restaurant and bar. It is open on Sundays, except in July and August. It was formed in 1953 and its peak membership was more than 300, about 20 years ago.

New Immigrants

During the 1990s there was a small wave of young immigrants to South Florida coming mostly from the Czech Republic. Relatively few immigrants arrived from the Slovak Republic, largely due to the fact that the United States government issues considerably fewer visas to citizens of the Slovak Republic than to those of the Czech Republic. Many of these young people come on tourist or student visas and just stay on in Florida after their visas expire. Many of these

recent arrivals live in Key West, which has a total population of about 25,000. Current estimates are that there are about 2000 young Czechs and Slovaks living there. Another concentration can be found in Broward County in the Fort Lauderdale area.

With this paper I hope to have contributed to a better understanding of the Czech and Slovak presence in Florida. While membership in some of the organizations described has diminished, the continued immigration of young Czechs and Slovaks gives hope that the culture will continue to thrive for a long time to come in Florida.