This paper represents the beginning of genealogical research I hope to undertake on my great-grandfather, Jan Štěpán. I have to admit I don’t know much about him, but what I would like to do is talk to you about what I do know. Perhaps some of you can give me suggestions on how to proceed. I have done some basic research: I have his two obituaries, one in Czech and one in English, and a “remembrance” of him written (in Czech) by a former student. I have looked at Genealogy.com but couldn’t find anything useful. I contacted the librarian at the National Czech and Slovak Museum and Library, but he couldn’t find any records there. This is my first opportunity to come to Cedar Rapids since I decided to research my great-grandfather; thus, I am hoping this trip will yield more information on him and his contributions to Cedar Rapids and the Czech community here. Again, I welcome any suggestions any of you might have on doing this kind of research!

First I’d like to discuss a little about Jan Štěpán and why he and other Czechs might have immigrated in the nineteenth century. Then I’ll talk a little bit about his contributions to Cedar Rapids and the institutions he was involved with here.

Jan Štěpán was born on June 25, 1869 in the tiny village of Chleb, which I believe is northeast of Prague, in Bohemia. He trained in his homeland to be a teacher. At age 20 (thus, in 1889) he came to America, first to Chicago, where on December 30, 1893 he married another Czech immigrant, Kateřina Šnydrová (Katherine Schneider). Kateřina herself was born December 3, 1868 in Kolín nad Labem and had come to the U.S. in 1892 (Cedar Rapidské Listy, April 15, 1948; Cedar Rapids Gazette, April 14, 1948).

Although at this point I do not know the specifics of either Jan or Kateřina’s decision to immigrate to the United States, I would like to say a few general words here about why so many Czechs did come to America in the last half of the nineteenth century. This might be well known to most of you but it seems necessary to provide a little context for my great-grandfather’s story at this point.

According to The Czechs in America by Vera Laska (1978: 7) “[u]ntil the 1840’s few Czechs were inclined to immigrate, as there was no scarcity of employment. But blighting droughts and failing potato crops during the 1840’s stimulated more individuals to consider the move to America, as it is indicated by entries in the town registers in Bohemia.” Although there was resurgence in Czech nationalism in the mid nineteenth century and Czechs were actively encouraged not to leave their homeland, many were unhappy with Austrian rule and especially with the draft into the military. Thus, Czechs also left for political reasons, especially after the internal revolution of 1848 in Bohemia.

Later, according to Laska (1978: 21), “[t]he end of the Civil War and of the Austro-Prussian War resulted in a larger influx of immigrants.” Austria also lifted its ban on emigration in the 1860’s. The Czech population in America continued to grow through the 1880’s: “The number of Czechs in the United States in 1880 stood at 85,361; by the end of this decade it would
swell to 118,106” (Laska 1978: 29). Joseph Chada (1981: 23) notes that the “later Czech immigrant… was distinguished from his predecessors by his economic position.” Czech immigrants after about 1880 tended to be educated middle class, as opposed to the first immigrants who were usually peasants and blue-collar workers. Jan Štěpán certainly seems to fall into the former category, as he had been trained as a teacher in Bohemia.

Before settling in Cedar Rapids, Jan pursued more education in the United States. He graduated from a teaching school in Cook County, Illinois, and also studied at the University of North Dakota. He taught in Chicago, North Dakota, and Minnesota before he and his family moved to Cedar Rapids, where he lived for 45 years (Cedar Rapids Listy, April 15, 1948; Cedar Rapids Gazette, April 14, 1948).

Jan worked in the foreign language department of the W. F. Severa Company. Severa, by the way, is himself a well-known person in the history of Cedar Rapids and Czech Americans. According to the National Czech & Slovak Museum and Library website (http://www.ncsml.org/organizations-profiles-c1.htm):

Severa himself had immigrated to the United States at the invitation of his older sister in 1868. He worked at odd jobs on farms and in factories and attended night classes. He eventually chose pharmacology as a lucrative field and opened a drug store. Later he developed a patent medicine manufacturing company and went into banking. Severa was a leader in many philanthropic endeavors and after 1918, his assistance extended to Czechoslovakia, where among other projects he established an orphanage in Brno.

Severa also established the Council of Higher Education (Matice Vyššího Vzdělání) in Cedar Rapids in 1902, the aim of which was to “offer interest-free loans to men and women to finance their college education” (Laska 1978: 40).

Jan Štěpán had also worked, at various times and in various places, in journalism. He was one of the editors of Svornost, the first Czech daily in America, founded in 1875 in Chicago (Laska 1987: 26). He also worked for the Věstník Iowsky and was editor of the Cedar Rapids Listy for many years.

But more than anything, according to his obituaries, Jan Štěpán was known as an excellent teacher. In addition to his work at the Severa company, he taught American citizenship classes to immigrants from around the world; his obituary in English reads, “As many as 3,000 students- housewives, laborers, tradesmen—have attended Mr. Stepan’s classes, which were held in various schools in the city to reach the population. Students came not only from Cedar Rapids but also from Iowa City, Independence, Belle Plaine, Monticello and Anamosa.

Some could not speak the English language in the Americanization classes, but Mr. Stepan could speak almost every well-known tongue fluently and could still convey the information to them…” (Cedar Rapids Gazette, April 14, 1948). While this might have been an exaggeration, his Czech obituary does note that he knew Lithuanian, Polish, Slovene, Croatian, German, Czech, Slovak, and English (Cedar Rapids Listy, April 15, 1948). Also, “His system
of Americanizing foreigners was described by a Columbia professor as the best in the United States” (*Cedar Rapids Gazette*, April 14, 1948).

Učitel Štěpán was very involved with his students, and he took their education to become Americans very seriously. In “Vzpomínka na Jana C. Štěpán” (sic) “A Remembrance of John C. Stepan”, published in 1948 in the newspaper *Amerikan*, a former student recalls some of his experiences in citizenship classes. He remembers how, after six months of classes, they were still confounded by English, and Pan Štěpán came in and announced, “You will be having an exam before the American Legion.” At this point the color drained from every face and Mr. Štěpán hastened to explain that it wouldn’t be a real exam, that the members of the American Legion simply wanted to hear the immigrants talk about America. And so they did it, they had their “exam”- and the author of this piece notes that he wishes it would have been recorded, for he feels a record of this experience certainly belongs in a museum!

The author further notes that Mr. Štěpán would painstakingly prepare his students to take the citizenship test. He would even accompany his students to the testing site, where they would have to stand before a judge and answer the questions they had practiced so many times. The author recalls a particularly distressing incident. The questions for the citizenship exam were always read in a certain order, and the students knew this and had practiced them hundreds of times. However, during one man’s exam, the judge skipped the first question, so the student was answering questions one ahead of what was being asked. The author notes that many in the audience smiled, or laughed, because there was no way to help the poor man; others, he suggests, were praying that the same thing wouldn’t happen to them when it was their turn.

The judge proclaimed that the man needed more time for preparation. At this point, Mr. Stepan stood up and addressed the judge respectfully. He said, “Look at this man. He’s already an old man who had to slave in his native land and continues to slave here. I know that he knows the answers to the questions, but he’s gotten confused. After all, these questions are so hard that even some college students couldn’t answer them.” The judge smiled and asked Mr. Stepan to ask the questions himself, and everything was fine. The author notes that there were hundreds, if not thousands, of similar experiences with Mr. Stepan (*Amerikan*, April 22, 1948).

In addition to teaching citizenship classes, Pan Štěpán taught Czech language classes at the Czech school on Second Street SE here in Cedar Rapids. By the way, according to the National Czech & Slovak Museum and Library website, this school building was the first to be used as an exclusively Czech school in the United States, and was opened Jan 1, 1901. Mr. Stepan’s employer, W.F. Severa, had supplied the furniture for the school ([http://www.ncsml.org/czechpoints-czechschool.htm](http://www.ncsml.org/czechpoints-czechschool.htm)). Pan Štěpán also had his citizenship students perform Czech songs, one-act plays, Christmas and Easter programs in the tradition (and, of course, the language) of his native land.

Mr. Stepan loved the Czech language, Czech music, and the Czech people. In addition to his teaching, he was an active member of the Czech community in Cedar Rapids. He was a member of the Hus Memorial Presbyterian Church, and a member of the Czech Reading Society (*Cedar Rapidské Listy*, April 15, 1948; *Cedar Rapids Gazette*, April 14, 1948).
He was also a member of Karci lodge No. 4 of the Západní Česko-Bratrská Jednota (the Western Bohemian Fraternal Organization). Czech fraternal organizations, as you probably know, did a great deal to help Czechs here and overseas, and were also actively involved in the promotion of an independent Czechoslovakia (Chada 1981: 137). So these are all very important organizations, and Mr. Stepan did a great deal to support them.

Jan Štěpán died in April 1948 in Mercy Hospital after a brief illness, at the age of 78. He had lived in Cedar Rapids for 45 years, and in the United States for 59. He is buried in the Czech National Cemetery here in Cedar Rapids (Cedar Rapidské Listy, April 15, 1948; Cedar Rapids Gazette, April 14, 1948). I’m hoping that this trip will allow me to pursue some of his history and that of the Czechs here in Iowa, as I am very proud of my Czech heritage. In fact, I have no doubt that it is because of Jan Štěpán’s son Theodore, my grandfather, that I have chosen the career path that I have. When grandfather died, we inherited his Czech language materials, and I’m sure that’s how my interest in Slavic languages -- and Czech in particular -- developed. I would appreciate hearing any of your suggestions or comments as I begin this journey exploring my Czech heritage.

Bibliography


