



THE CULTURAL ASSIMILATION OF THE CZECHOSLOVAKS IN OKLAHOMA CITY*

(A Study of Culture Contrasts)

William Earl Martin, Oklahoma City

Clash of Czech culture and that which has been claimed to be American culture was found in the Oklahoma City community.

The prohibition amendment was not in accord with the feeling of the Czechs toward drinking beverages. "More people drink here than

* The data and impressions found in this paper were obtained in part by the standardized interview method of research. Conversations were held during the months of June, 1933 to June, 1934 with fifty-two males and forty-eight females of Czech stock and Czechoslovakian birth. These one-hundred Bohemians lived in or near Oklahoma City.

there," said a Bohemian woman in making a contrast of Bohemia and the United States. A Czech male said, "Some of the people do not know how to raise their children because they do not let them have beer and teach them how to drink it properly. Some lock the children out of the cabinet and later find them drunk." An elderly lady who was an immigrant to America recently toured her native land, and found there only one drunk person. She was not surprised to find that he was an American tourist visiting a church.

No exception was found to their strong support of the administration of Franklin D. Roosevelt. A male reported that the newspaper which he read, *The Cpravednost*, was a radical socialist paper and that he was in agreement with it. The possessor of an advanced degree granted by a Czech University stated emphatically that he knew of "much crookedness" in the local government of Oklahoma City. Mr. A., of Yukon and Oklahoma City, made a bid for the ambassadorship of Czechoslovakia. "Mr. A is a business man, not an ambassador," came from a fellow immigrant. "He does not have the education," said a second. Mr. B, of Czech stock, was City Clerk of Oklahoma City for more than twenty years. It is said that he knew of a shortage in the accounts of another city employee but instead of reporting the deficiency he was trying to give the fellow a chance to work out of trouble. The clerk was ousted from office by his political enemies, it appeared, but he was returned to his old position soon after the election of City Manager Orville Mosier.

In *The Daily Oklahoman* of February 20, 1934, it was reported that Jess G. Read, State Insurance Commissioner, filed suit in district court against eleven risk firms for their failure to pay taxes and penalties. The Western Bohemian Fraternal Association was defendant in a suit for \$23,422.00. Approximately \$175,000 was claimed to be due from the eleven risk firms by the Commissioner.

An American by adoption was very proud of his foster country because of her religious freedom. He said, "I can remember that the Protestants and Catholics threw stones at each other on way home from school. I am against religion in the school." Great diversity of religious beliefs was found. "Mr. C is hypocritical; he walks in line with the other Masons and is an atheist," said a fellow immigrant. A college graduate was a member of the First Methodist Episcopal Church, a Unitarian, and a believer in a pantheistic God. It was his opinion that 85 per cent of the Bohemians in Oklahoma City were free thinkers, and that the remaining 15 per cent consisted of Catholics and Protestants with the number of the former being two times that of the latter. A foreign-born father stated, "Most of the Bohemians are Catholics but the children may be different; we leave that to them." A member of the Pilgrim Congregational Church hated the Pope and the Catholics.

The Czechoslovaks did not find many objections to the schools of the United States nor were they especially complimentary in speaking of them. A rather prominent Bohemian of the community said, "The school does not discipline the children as much as it should; it is the fault of the system we have here." He said that his children wanted to do as the American children rather than as he wanted them to do. Those who learned a trade in Europe seemed to believe that there was not an opportunity in this country to learn trades as they were learned in Czechoslovakia. A school where the Czech language was used had been conducted at 515 West Frisco Street, but it is likely that the lack of pupils caused it to be discontinued. All Bohemians granted that the learning of English was imperative for happiness and success in the community. For the most part those who grew to maturity in the old country wanted their children to know two languages—the Czech and the English. Those that came

here during the early years of their lives and those born in this country were majorly interested in having their children learn only English.

Difficulties encountered in trying to learn to speak the English language probably caused more personal and social dis-organization than any other cultural conflict found when the two nationalities met. Little children did not want to learn to speak Czech because they did not use it in conversing with the children of the neighbors. A father, 66 years of age, who arrived in this country at the age of 36 years said, "Me no go show, no go meetings, no go Sunday, stay home—fix harness, children go, me no speak English. Make money but no learn English. Children small. (He made signs with his hands like stair steps), get good shirts, shoes, clothes for them. Me no learn to speak English. Man the other day say to me, 'Mr. Benes, you have fine family.' Me speak English very poorly." He was the father of nine children and had been a widower for two years. A combined English-Bohemian dictionary and grammar book was being studied by him. Another male immigrant, a resident of Oklahoma City for 23 years, was not able to answer in English the questions given by naturalization officials. His daughter, a Central High School student, acted as interpreter when the writer was collecting data. A young lady arrived in America from Bohemia, was married by the use of an American ceremony, and then confessed jokingly that she did not know whether she was lawfully married. A lady, 65 years of age, who had come to the United States as an immigrant at the age of 14 years said, "I will go to my grave without learning to speak English well. I would like to have attended American school." Another said, "You cannot learn the language from the children; they talk to each other in American and to you in Bohemian." A woman, 74 years of age, found that her ability to speak English was gradually being lost and that she was forced to rely upon the language learned during the earlier years of her life. She had arrived in America at the age of 18 years. An arrival of 1927 said that she was kept so busy with her housework and the care of her three American-born children that there was no time to learn the English language. The daughter of Bohemian-born parents is quoted as saying, "The children in many cases cannot speak Bohemian well with the parents and the parents cannot speak English well with the children. It is a mixed up mess." A woman who arrived in 1880 at the age of 8 years informed the writer that she learned Bohemian from her father and English from her four children.

Jealousy was discovered among the Czechoslovaks. The daughter of foreign-born parents said, "They (the Bohemians) are more anxious to trade with people who are of different nationality because they fear that some of their fellow Bohemians will get ahead of them." The statements made regarding the qualifications of Mr. A for the ambassadorship in Czechoslovakia may have been prompted by this same under-current of jealousy. It was believed that Mr. C sold city lots to fellow immigrants for excessive prices.

The strict care of all natural resources in the homeland of the Czechs in central Europe proved to be a contrast to the careless waste of material wealth in young America. A male immigrant, 37 years of age and a resident of the United States for 16 years, commented, "If I order food at a restaurant and it is not good I do not order more like many Americans but eat it anyway because it has cost me money." A lady from the old country said, "It is strange how the American people dress so well when they have nothing ahead." A Moravian by birth revealed, "The Bohemian buys a home first, then gets a car; if he bought a car first he would never have a home. He does without things until he has the money to get them." An arrival 43 years of age, after living in America 26 years, was quoted as saying, "Mother would not step on my rug here (a nice rug in his home)

if I told her that it cost \$52.00. I have a house furnished like one above my class in Europe yet I am a worker." He continued, "The Americans looked crazy to me when I saw them allow their cattle to run loose in a field." A business man that immigrated during the early years of his life suggested, "Now you take many of these old Bohemians, you can't make anything trading with them, but take me—I'm just like the rest of the Americans." A female of Bohemian birth stated, "It is just as hard to make a living here as in the old country but immigrants can save more money because they do not have enjoyable ways in which to spend it. The shows are foreign and the entertainments are not appealing." Many of the older Bohemians had stripped feathers for making of feather beds but the children did not seem to be interested in this practice.

A Bohemian-born lady confessed, "Bohemia has rich natural resources, fine literature, and many fine people, and it is impossible to understand how some of the immigrants can be ashamed that they are Bohemians." A foreign-born Bohemian married an American-born Irish girl. She said that her husband and his brother could not take a joke. They replied that she should have told them when she was joking.

A divorce in which the husband and wife were foreign born had taken place. An elderly male Czech rather sorrowfully said, "John's divorce—I do not understand it; he work hard, she work hard." Another foreign-born couple chose separation rather than a divorce.

Fear of unfair treatment for the reason that they were foreigners lurked in the minds of a number of the Czechs. "The Oklahomske Noviny is a very loyal paper; nothing is against the country in it," was offered by a Moravian-born male. "Just so they don't think I am trying to make too much money and try to take it away from me. They sometimes feel that way about foreigners," came from another, a successful young business man.

A number of the Bohemians were forced to change their names to prevent misnomers, or mutilations. Americans would not give them the Czech pronunciations. "Volf" became Wolf." "Cermak" was changed to "Germak." "Kuchar" was called as if it were spelled "Kuar."

Bohemian music, played by those of Bohemian stock, was broadcast over Station KOMA at various times. Mr. D, of foreign birth, was a violin instructor. Mr. E, musically trained in Europe, was very highly praised for his ability as a teacher of violin. Mr. F directed a community Shrine band. Miss G sang a vocal solo at the Pilgrim Congregational Church.

Very rich and beautiful color schemes were used by many of the Bohemians in the choice of curtains, rugs, scarfs, table runners, pictures, and other accessories for furnishing their homes. Many of the articles in their households were things of beauty. Quality was uppermost in their minds for it has been stated that many of such things were chosen for use during a lifetime. National costumes from Czechoslovakia were found in beautiful colors. A table scarf was hand made in such a way that neither side was unfinished. A likeness of President Thomas Masaryk appeared in colors inside a symmetrical glass paper weight.

"Beseda" was a beautiful Czechoslovakian dance done in the national costume. It has been given in Oklahoma City several times by persons of Czech stock. The Bohemians believed in physical culture and had a local chapter of the American Sokol Union.

The Bohemian women have been ranked high in their cooking ability. A foreign-born female said that her mother taught her to believe, "The kitchen is the heart of the home." The following advertisement appeared in *The Daily Oklahoman* in 1934: "Household help wanted. Want white

woman between 35 and 50; good cook; prefer German or Bohemian. 1712 W. 16th."

The American ways seemed to strike the Bohemian as inferior to those of his native land. He gloried in the opportunity for economic advantage while he deplored the loss of his native environment. The association of his fellows, the music, the language, the dances, the art and literature, clothing, food, beverages, and all those things which made the Czech culture were sorely missed. The Bohemian organizations and the consciousness of the Czechs of their national origin revealed their love of the customs and traditions of their European homeland.

The Czechs seemed to make every effort to accommodate themselves to American ways where they were associating with those without foreign customs and mores. There apparently was a fear of criticism if Bohemian ways of doing things were made public. The love of Bohemia and her culture was clearly evident when the foreign born were segregated in a group concealed from public attention. The old culture was evident in the language, dress, music, and the love of beverages.

The children of the foreign born and some of the foreign born seemed to have double personalities. They were able to be semi-Bohemians when they were with their own nationality and partly assimilated Americans when elsewhere. It seemed that the children of the foreign born were able to become neither thoroughly Bohemian nor thoroughly American. As an intelligent daughter of foreign-born parents said, "I know neither the Bohemian nor the American language well." This young lady regretted her difficult position but she was proud of what she termed, "real Bohemians."

The rate of assimilation of the Bohemian immigrants indicates the comparative rank of their culture. The tenacious way in which they tried to retain things Bohemian in America showed the comparative rank of the various phases of their culture. Hlasatel, Oklahomske Noviny, The Western Bohemian Fraternal Association, Sokol, the halls, "Beseda," and scores of other evidences of a transplanted culture were found to be rooted deeply in American life.

