

A LITTLE HISTORY

THE CZECHS CAME TO INHABIT THEIR PRESENT-DAY LOCATION SOMETIME AFTER 500 A.D. ACCORDING TO ANCIENT LEGENDS, THEY WERE LED TO BOHEMIA BY A CHIEFTAIN NAMED "CECH", FOR WHOM THE LAND, PEOPLE AND LANGUAGE WERE NAMED. DURING THE NINTH CENTURY, TWO MISSIONARIES NAMED CYRIL AND METHODIUS CREATED AN ALPHABET AND DEVELOPED A WRITTEN LANGUAGE.

AFTER A SHORT RULE BY CZECH KINGS, THE HAPSBURGS BECAME THE ROYAL FAMILY IN 1526. FROM THEN ON, BOHEMIA AND MORAVIA WERE DRAWN EVER MORE TIGHTLY INTO THE AUSTRIAN EMPIRE AND AUSTRIAN RULE BECAME ESPECIALLY OPPRESSIVE AFTER 1620.

THE NATION OF CZECHOSLOVAKIA WAS NOT CREATED UNTIL 1918 AND UP UNTIL WORLD WAR I, BOHEMIA, MORAVIA AND SLOVAKIA WERE RULED BY QUITE SEPARATE GOVERNMENTS. AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR, CZECHOSLOVAKIA WAS CREATED OUT OF THE RUINS OF THE OLD AUSTRO-HUNGARIAN EMPIRE. (IN 1992, BOHEMIA AND MORAVIA BECAME KNOWN AS "THE CZECH REPUBLIC".)

THE REMARKABLE SIZE OF THE AUSTRIAN EMIGRATION IS A MEASURE OF THE WIDESPREAD DISCONTENT WITHIN THE EMPIRE. BEFORE THE REVOLUTIONARY YEAR OF 1848, AUSTRIA WAS IN SOME WAYS A CENTURY BEHIND WESTERN EUROPE IN POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT. IN AN AGE WHEN DEMOCRATIC IDEAS WERE INFLUENCING THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIETIES IN WESTERN EUROPE, CZECH PEASANTS WERE STILL PERFORMING FEUDAL OBLIGATIONS AND PAYING MANORIAL DUES TO THE NOBILITY, THE STATE AND THE CHURCH. THESE DUES AND OBLIGATIONS, WHICH HAD EVOLVED THROUGH TEN CENTURIES, KEPT THE PEASANT IN ALMOST TOTAL ECONOMIC BONDAGE. BY THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY THE CHURCH, THE STATE, AND THE NOBILITY TAXED AWAY ABOUT 70% OF ALL THE PEASANT EARNED, RAISED OR GREW.

OSTENSIBLY THESE TAXES WERE PAID BY THE PEASANT IN REGARD FOR SERVICES PERFORMED FOR HIS BENEFIT, ESPECIALLY BY THE LORD, FOR THE RIGHTS TO FARM ON THE MANOR OF THE LORD, RELY ON A LOCAL JUDICIAL SYSTEM AND APPEAL FOR PERSONAL PROTECTION. IRONICALLY, THE PEASANT SOMETIMES LITERALLY NEEDED PROTECTION FROM HIS "PROTECTOR". BEATING A PEASANT WITH A CANE FOR FAILURE TO MEET HIS DUTIES TO THE LORD WAS LEGALLY PERMITTED UNTIL 1848.

THE MOST DESPISED OBLIGATION THE PEASANT OWED THE LORD WAS "ROBOTA". THIS BOUND THE PEASANT TO WORK FREE FOR THE LORD A SPECIFIED NUMBER OF DAYS A YEAR. OF COURSE, THESE DAYS WERE TAKEN DURING THE MOST IMPORTANT PERIODS OF THE YEAR - DURING PLANTING AND HARVESTING. WHILE THE ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL POWER OF NOBLES OVER PEASANTS WAS OPPRESSIVE, THE SOCIAL OBLIGATIONS WERE DEGRADING.

THE TERM "PEASANTRY" CAN REFER TO MOST RURAL INHABITANTS OF AUSTRIA AT THIS TIME BUT WITHIN THIS CLASS THERE WERE THREE DISTINCT SUB-CLASSES. THE FARMERS, COTTAGERS , AND DAY LABORERS. THE COTTAGER CLASS MADE UP THE MAJORITY OF THE CZECH IMMIGRANTS IN TEXAS. TYPICALLY, THEY OWNED A HOUSE AND A VERY SMALL PLOT OF TWO TO TEN ACRES OF LAND.

IT WAS TRADITIONAL FOR THE FATHER TO PROVIDE A FARM FOR EACH OF HIS SONS AS HE REACHED THE AGE OF TWENTY. WHEN THE LAND WAS DIVIDED, EACH STRIP

WAS PARTITIONED LENGTHWISE, RESULTING IN A SERIES OF EVER-NARROWER, LONG STRIPS. IT WAS BECOMING IMPOSSIBLE FOR A FATHER TO DIVIDE HIS SMALL HOLDINGS AMONG HIS HEIRS.

ALONG WITH ECONOMIC DIFFICULTIES CAME INCREASINGLY OVERCROWDED LIVING CONDITIONS. COTTAGES WERE VERY SMALL, SOMETIMES CONSISTING OF ONLY ONE ROOM; THE AVERAGE NUMBER OF PEOPLE PER HOUSE WAS TEN.

THE EXPERIENCE OF ECONOMIC HARDSHIP, UNFAVORABLE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONDITIONS AND THE HOPE OF AN IMPROVED STANDARD OF LIVING WERE THE CHIEF MOTIVATING FACTORS FOR EMIGRATION. OTHER FACTORS SUCH AS NATIONALISM AND COMPULSORY MILITARY SERVICE WERE ALSO SIGNIFICANT. THE GOVERNMENT ALLOWED LITTLE ARTISTIC EXPRESSION. THE PEOPLE STRUGGLED TO PRESERVE THEIR CULTURE. GERMAN WAS THE LANGUAGE OF LITERATURE, COMMERCE AND POLITICS. THE PRESSURE OF GERMANIZATION HAD BEEN SO GREAT IN THE PERIOD FROM THE EARLY SEVENTEENTH TO THE BEGINNING OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY THAT THE CZECH LANGUAGE ALMOST DIED OUT. TODAY, THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN STILL OFFERS COURSES IN THE CZECH LANGUAGE.

AN AUSTRIAN POLICY WHICH GREATLY INFLUENCED IMMIGRATION WAS A THREE-YEAR COMPULSORY MILITARY SERVICE FOR MEN, WITH FEW EXCEPTIONS. OBVIOUSLY, AN ETHNIC GROUP WHICH CONSIDERED ITSELF SUPPRESSED BY ITS GOVERNMENT DID NOT RELISH DANGEROUS MILITARY SERVICE IN THAT GOVERNMENT'S ARMY. THE MEN WERE EXPECTED TO LEAVE THEIR LOVED ONES AND RISK THEIR LIVES SERVING IN THE ARMY OF A GOVERNMENT THEY HATED WHERE THEY WERE TREATED BADLY. THEIR PAY WAS SIX CENTS A DAY FOR FOOT SOLDIERS AND EIGHT CENTS A DAY FOR CAVALRYMEN. THEY WERE REQUIRED TO KEEP THEIR BOOTS SHINED AND THEIR BEARDS WAXED. AFTER BUYING SHOE POLISH AND WAX, THEY HAD NO MONEY LEFT FOR ANYTHING ELSE. EACH DAY THEY GOT BLACK COFFEE FOR BREAKFAST, A NOON MEAL, BUT NO SUPPER AT ALL.

IN 1851 THE AREA AROUND NORTHEASTERN BOHEMIA WAS SEVERELY DEPRESSED AFTER SEVERAL YEARS OF BAD HARVEST. THE PEOPLE'S DEPRIVATION WAS SUCH THAT THEY WERE SELLING FURNITURE, CLOTHES, FEATHER BEDS, ALMOST ANYTHING NOT ESSENTIAL TO LIFE IN ORDER TO BUY FOOD.

THE FIRST CZECH SETTLERS ARRIVED IN TEXAS IN THE 1850'S TO A TOWN NOW CALLED PRAHA. LETTERS FROM AMERICA REACHED NOT ONLY THE RELATIVES AND FRIENDS OF THE EARLY IMMIGRANTS BUT WHOLE VILLAGES AND REGIONS. IT WAS VERY COMMON FOR LETTERS FROM AMERICA TO BE THE TALK OF THE TOWN. NEWSPAPERS PRINTED THE LETTERS ABOUT EMIGRANTS EXPERIENCES. TEXAS CZECH NEWSPAPERS CARRIED ADVERTISEMENTS TO PRE-PAY PASSAGE FOR ANYONE IN EUROPE TO COME TO TEXAS. IN THE 1880'S AND 1890'S, FROM 35% TO 65% OF IMMIGRANTS TRAVELED ON PRE-PAID TICKETS. STEAMSHIP COMPANIES, LAND AGENTS AND RAILROADS ALL ADVERTISED TEXAS TO EUROPEANS. THE GREAT MAJORITY OF THE IMMIGRANTS THOUGHT OF THEMSELVES AS FARMERS AND THEY WERE DRAWN TO THIS VAST RURAL LAND WHERE THEY EXPECTED TO REMAIN FARMERS.

BUT, THERE WAS SOMETHING ELSE SPECIAL ABOUT TEXAS. HERE WAS A LAND THAT, ONLY A FEW YEARS EARLIER, PICKED A FIGHT WITH MEXICO AND WON ITS OWN FREEDOM! TEXAS WAS A SEPARATE REPUBLIC FOR NINE YEARS, FROM 1836 UNTIL IT BECAME A STATE IN 1845. STORIES ABOUT TEXAS INDEPENDENCE WERE VERY POPULAR. THE CZECH SETTLERS, WITH THEIR INTENSE CRAVING FOR A POLITICAL LIBERTY THEY HAD NEVER KNOWN, FOUND THE STORIES ABOUT TEXAS ALMOST AS APPEALING AS THE PROMISE OF ABUNDANT, RELATIVELY INEXPENSIVE, FARM LAND.

THE IMMIGRANTS WERE A COMBINATION OF THE MOST ADVENTUROUS AND THE MOST DESPERATE OF PEOPLE. EVEN CONSIDERING THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE TIMES, IT MUST HAVE BEEN A VERY DIFFICULT, IF NOT HEART-BREAKING, DECISION FOR THE PEOPLE TO MAKE; HOWEVER, BY THE END OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, TENS OF THOUSANDS OF CZECH IMMIGRANTS HAD LEFT THEIR HOMETLAND, THEIR FRIENDS, PARTS OF THEIR FAMILIES, EVERYTHING THEY HAD EVER KNOWN, AND WITH THEIR MEAGER LIFE SAVINGS SEWN INTO THE HEMS OF THEIR CLOTHING, BOARDED SHIPS FOR AMERICA AND A NEW START.

INFORMATION TAKEN FROM:

**"KRÁSNÁ AMERIKA": A STUDY OF TEXAS CZECHS, 1851 - 1939
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