Poppies, Pillows, and Polkas: Czech-American Folk Culture

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No one knows how many Americans can trace their ancestry to the Czech Lands. According to a recent study, about 2 million people in the United States claim to have at least one parent or grandparent who was a native Czech speaker, but this is hardly indicative of the true number. We do know that some 400,000 Czechs immigrated to the United States, the vast majority of them between the liberal revolutions of 1848 and the onset of World War I. Most of these immigrants came from Bohemia, but there were also considerable numbers from Moravia.

Some Czech immigrants settled in large urban centers such as New York, Cleveland, and especially Chicago. There they found employment as factory hands, laborers, and domestics. However, many of them sought land and agricultural opportunities in the midwestern and southwestern states. By the turn of the century, well over half of Czech Americans worked in agriculture, and they still may well constitute the highest percentage of Americans of Slavic origin employed in farming. The first groups of immigrant farmers settled in Wisconsin in the 1860s. Ten years later, large numbers of Czechs began settling in Texas, sailing from Bremen or Hamburg, Germany, directly to the port of Galveston.

Immigrants in Chicago from the Bohemian town of Domažlice formed a social club to preserve memories of their homeland. Costumes are still worn on certain festive occasions, as they were by this mother and her American-born daughter pictured in 1935.

Photo courtesy G.M. Prince

The state of Texas now has the greatest proportion of Czech Americans, followed by Illinois, Wisconsin, Nebraska, Iowa, and Minnesota. The Czech farming villages in these states are the heartland of Czech-American folk culture, the places were poppies bloomed, where goose down filled pillows, and polkas flourished.

One such village is Heugen, Wisconsin. Vaclav and Ludmila Tomesh settled there in 1915 on logged-off, "cut-over" acreage. The story of the Tomesh family — Vaclav, Ludmila, and their ten children — is typical of the Czech-American agricultural community.

Like many of their Czech neighbors, the Tomesh family planted a garden alongside their house, and in this garden they grew poppies. Poppy seeds are an integral part of the Czech diet. They are essential ingredients for traditional pastries such as kolaches (sweet, round pastries stuffed with poppy seeds or cottage cheese) and *rohliky* (crescent-shaped pastries). Kolaches and *rohliky* are special treats, and the Tomesh family took great pride in their pastries. Even today, the Tomesh women and their neighbors make kolaches with poppy-seed and other fillings for the fundraising dinners held regularly in Heugen's Holy Trinity Church. These dinners, served "family style," are an opportunity for the community to show off their traditional recipes. Plates are piled high with chicken, pork, sauerkraut, potatoes, rye bread, and *knedlíčky* — enormous dumplings sometimes dubbed "Bohemian sinkers."

It takes considerable skill and practice to make perfectly shaped kolaches. By making

such kolaches for a suitor, a young woman was showing off her ability as a homemaker. Years ago, when Albert Tomesh was courting Regina Uchytil, the girl worked for hours preparing a plate of pastries to serve him. As a prank her mischievous brothers tried to embarrass her by swapping her plate of perfect pastries for poorly shaped ones.

During Prohibition, federal agents harrassed Czech gardeners by claiming that the poppies were being used to produce opium. Many people gave up their gardens and grudgingly began to purchase imported seeds. Others were more daring; they continued to cultivate the flowers in carefully hidden patches behind their barns. Although poppies are no longer cultivated, kolaches are still an important part of the local culture. In the 1970s, Heugen began celebrating an annual Czech-American festival. The festivities begin with a parade led by a truck with a giant model of a poppy-seed kolach.

Geese are another important element of Czech-American culture in Heugen. The egg-white sheen that coats kolaches is often applied with the homemade goose-feather brushes that hang in the Tomesh family's kitchens. Like many Czechs, the Tomesh family kept geese until recently. In late autumn, the geese were a major source of meat and, of course, feathers. To pass the time while plucking the soft down from feathers, neighbors sometimes gathered for winter "stripping bees" — community events that included storytelling, singing, and a "big lunch" at the evening's end.

Sometimes, however, family members were required to pluck a pile of down as part of their household chores. Joe Tomesh recalls how, in the 1930s, he hated this particular task. "I was one of the outlaws at home. Mother had a hundred geese, and we had to strip a big pile of feathers every day." Rather than put them in piles, Joe stuffed most of his quota in his pockets and later hid them in a snow bank. When the feathers appeared in the spring, "Mother wondered where they came from. They were there for the birds to make nests." His sisters were more diligent: the down pillows and comforters they brought to their marriages are now family heirlooms.

Joe and his brother John did, however, love music. The Hrdlicka, Soukup, and Subrt families each had dance bands that played regularly in local taverns and the spacious hall built by Heugen's chapter of the Západní Českobratrská Jednota (Western Bohemian Fraternal Association). Other neighbors, like Joe Sperl, played the accordion at house parties, and everyone loved to get together to sing favorite songs like *"Louka zelená, Baruška"* and *"Švestková alej."*

Everyone also loved to dance, especially the polka. The polka is a quick-paced dance for two partners, based on a hop and three short paces. Originally from northern Bohemia along the Polish border, the polka became fashionable among Prague's upper class in the 1830s, caught on in Paris a decade later, and soon spread throughout the world. Polka bands emerged wherever Czech Americans settled, and they frequently entertained crowds well beyond their ethnic community. In America in the 1920s, regional bands led by Romy Gosz and "Whoopee John" Wilfahrt forged a new Czech-American polka style that became popular among the Tomesh family and their neighbors through records, radio broadcasts, and barnstorming performances. Like kolaches stuffed with poppy seeds and pillows stuffed with goose down, the polka became intrinsic to the Czech-American experience.

This experience is slowly evolving. Feather-stripping bees disappeared along with subsistence agriculture, kolaches are heated up in microwaves, and polka music is now found on compact discs. But to the Tomesh family and millions of Americans like them — in Heugen, Wisconsin; New Prague, Minnesota; Cedar Rapids, Iowa; Abie, Nebraska; Dayton, Ohio; and Ennis, Texas — poppies and polkas, along with family, church, and club affairs, are expressive symbols of Czech-American folk cultural identity that contribute to the cultural pluralism of their respective communities.

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