

# **The Sustainability of Czech Culture in Nebraska**

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## **ABSTRAKT**

Tato práce zkoumá udržitelnost české kultury v Nebrasce. Nejprve se zabývá událostmi, které hrály důležitou roli v historii Spojených států amerických. Dále se soustředí na příchod prvních českých osadníků do Nebrasky, jejich přínos a společenský život. Hlavní pozornost je zaměřena na současný stav české kultury v Nebrasce a její možnou udržitelnost do budoucnosti.

Klíčová slova: čeští osadníci, imigrace, Nebraska, česká kultura, český jazyk, česká hudba, české festivaly, mladá generace

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines the sustainability of Czech culture in Nebraska. First, it discusses events, which played an important role in the history of the United States of America. Then, it deals with the arrival of the first Czech settlers to Nebraska, their contributions and social life. The main focus of the thesis centers on the current state of Czech culture in Nebraska and its possible sustainability for the future.

Keywords: Czech settlers, immigration, Nebraska, Czech culture, Czech language, Czech music, Czech festivals, young generation

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# CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>1 THE NEBRASKA LAND .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>2 IMPORTANT HISTORICAL EVENTS .....</b>	<b>12</b>
2.1 The Louisiana Purchase .....	12
2.2 The Kansas-Nebraska Act .....	13
2.3 The Homestead Act of 1862 .....	13
<b>3 CZECH IMMIGRATION TO NEBRASKA .....</b>	<b>16</b>
3.1 First Czechs in America and Nebraska.....	16
3.2 Reasons for leaving the homeland.....	17
3.3 Difficulties in the new country .....	19
<b>4 SOCIAL LIFE OF CZECH IMMIGRANTS.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>5 CZECH CULTURE IN NEBRASKA .....</b>	<b>25</b>
5.1 Immigration overview.....	25
5.2 Czech language in Nebraska.....	26
5.2.1 From the first to the fifth generation.....	27
5.2.2 The Komensky Club .....	28
5.2.3 The Czech language program and the Czech Language Foundation.....	29
5.2.4 Czech language at festivals.....	32
5.3 Czech music in Nebraska.....	33
5.3.1 The Red Raven Orchestra.....	34
5.3.2 The Nebraska Czech Brass Band.....	35
5.3.3 The future of Czech music in Nebraska .....	36
5.4 Czech festivals .....	37
5.4.1 Lincoln festival .....	37
5.4.2 Czech festivals in Wilber and Omaha .....	40
5.4.3 Czech Heritage Day in Prague and the Kolac Korner Cafe.....	42
5.4.4 The future of the festivals and Czech culture in Nebraska .....	44
5.5 Young generation.....	46
5.5.1 The Czech-Slovak Queen Stefanie Vocasek .....	46
<b>CONCLUSION .....</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY .....</b>	<b>50</b>



## INTRODUCTION

Polka music, Czech folk costumes, *kolace*, Czech beer, *Vitáme Vás*, Czech Komensky Club, names such as Bohaty, Havelka, Prochaska, towns such as Prague, Bruno and other names related to the Czech Republic. This is the heart of one continent but it is not Europe. I am talking about the Cornhusker State, located on the Great Plains in the United States, called Nebraska. You might be surprised that Nebraska is a state with a higher percentage of Czech Americans in comparison to the population of any other state in the United States. It is a state which became a new home for thousands of Czech immigrants who, in the nineteenth century, decided to leave our country in search for a better life.

The aim of my bachelor thesis is to prove that Czech culture in Nebraska is sustainable. First, I look at important historical events of the country which influenced the size and boundaries of the land, opening new possibilities for immigrants. Second, I write about Czech settlers who brought to Nebraska Czech traditions and ideas, focusing on the reasons why they decided to leave their homeland and the difficulties they had to face in the new country. Third, the social life of Czech immigrants is examined, specifically how it played an important role for men and women who were adapting to new country. Finally, the main focus is aimed at the present situation of Czech culture in Nebraska and its possible maintenance. This part is based on the evidence of people from Nebraska who are deeply involved with the Czech heritage in Nebraska. I discuss the Czech language, music, Czech heritage festivals and other events and places where Czech traditions are still alive.

In my bachelor thesis, I also use several excerpts from the book *My Ántonia* written by an American novelist, Willa Cather. Cather, in what is considered her greatest novel, explores the life of a Czech immigrant family, who moves to Nebraska in the second half of the nineteenth century. She portrayed all the hardship immigrants faced, including a longing for the old country, language barriers and cultural differences. As Cather alone said, “The best thing I’ve done is *My Ántonia*... I feel I have made a contribution to American letters with that book.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Willa Cather, *My Ántonia* (New York: Bantam Books, 1994), 292.

## 1 THE NEBRASKA LAND

Willa Cather looked at Nebraska and saw paradise. She saw the sun and the moon on the same sky, and a whole prairie that “was like the bush that burned with fire and was not consumed.” She saw a river turned to copper, cottonwood trees transformed to gold and silver, and grass moving like an ocean.<sup>2</sup>

Stephanie Vaughn, 1994

The area between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains used to be viewed differently. As shown above, Willa Cather, an American novelist and the author of *My Ántonia*, spoke about the prairie as if it was a “paradise”. The prairie is a complex and incredibly rich ecosystem ideal for agriculture. However, in the past, most Americans believed that there was no future for what they viewed as an expansive and unsettled desert. They saw it as a vast and useless plain and the early explorers even called the area “The Great Desert.”<sup>3</sup>

One person who had a different idea about the future of the land was Zebulon Montgomery Pike, an American explorer and soldier. He began with exploration of the West and in 1806 was the first person who reported on the conditions on the plains. He ventured to predict that this western land would “become in time equally celebrated as the sandy deserts of Africa.”<sup>4</sup> John Bradbury, an English naturalist, who made several journeys to the Midwest region of the United States, supported Pike’s assertions. He expressed his opinion that “in the process of time, it will not only be peopled and cultivated, but it will be one of the most beautiful countries in the world.”<sup>5</sup> Nowadays it is clear that Bradbury was right. The land was later settled and cultivated. However, no one would probably predict its cultivation by Czech immigrants who started coming to Nebraska in the 1860s and

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., vii.

<sup>3</sup> James C. Olson and Ronald C. Naugle, *History of Nebraska*, 3rd ed. (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 1, [http://books.google.cz/books?id=pyHHZ2\\_\\_dT0C&dq=History+of+Nebraska&source=gb\\_s\\_navlinks\\_s](http://books.google.cz/books?id=pyHHZ2__dT0C&dq=History+of+Nebraska&source=gb_s_navlinks_s) (accessed January 28, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 4.

“everywhere they came they changed the barren plains into a paradise.”<sup>6</sup> The Czech people who settled the Midwest would leave a lasting impression, not only on the land, but in the culture of this new country.

More about the first Czech immigrants coming to Nebraska, the difficulties they had to face, their contributions and current situation of Czech heritage in Nebraska will be discussed in my thesis later. In the next chapter, a short introduction of historical background is given.

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<sup>6</sup> Vladimír Kucera and Alfred Novacek, *Czech Contributions to the Progress of Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1976), 24, <http://www.unl.edu/Czechheritage/contributions.pdf> (accessed January 28, 2011).

## 2 IMPORTANT HISTORICAL EVENTS

Throughout the history of the United States, several important events took place. In this chapter of my thesis, three events relating to the history of Nebraska will be mentioned. First, the Louisiana Purchase substantially changed the size of the United States, second, the Kansas-Nebraska Act created two new territories, and third, the Homestead Act enabled and accelerated the settlement of the land.

### 2.1 The Louisiana Purchase

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the United States experienced a great change in its geography. In 1803, President Thomas Jefferson purchased the Louisiana Territory from France. It became one of the greatest bargains in the history of the United States and probably the biggest achievement of Jefferson's presidency. The United States paid France the price of \$15 million dollars for 800,000 square miles of land. This meant that the size of the United States nearly doubled. France was a potential threat and Jefferson wanted to avoid the territorial conflicts that could occur if France had access to the port of New Orleans. However, Napoleon decided to sell the whole area to make money to finance his other wars. By purchasing the Louisiana Territory, the ownership of a huge part of the West changed.<sup>7</sup>

The Louisiana Purchase opened new opportunities. It fulfilled Jefferson's long-lasting desire to explore the West. Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, American explorers, were asked to lead the first expedition towards the Pacific Coast through much of this new American territory. In 1804, their journey of mapping and studying a new route to the Pacific began. The aim of the expedition was "to make geographic and scientific observations" and "to cultivate friendship and trade with the native tribes." In reality, their goal was to find the Northwest Passage to the Pacific Ocean to lay claim to the rich land on the West Coast and make inroads in the fur trade, largely dominated by the British. On the way, Lewis and Clark made significant contributions to the mapping of area of the Louisiana Territory and later were welcomed as heroes.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Louisiana Purchase," Encyclopaedia Britannica, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/349302/Louisiana-Purchase> (accessed March 5, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Olson and Naugle, *History of Nebraska*, 36-37.

## 2.2 The Kansas-Nebraska Act

The Kansas-Nebraska Act, passed in 1854, changed the borders of the Nebraska Territory. Before its passage, the Great Plains area was a land inhabited mostly by Native Americans who did not have traditionally recognized borders or settlements as the Europeans did.<sup>9</sup> In 1854, a bill dealing with this land was passed by federal government. This act created two new territories, Kansas and Nebraska. With the issue of slavery already dividing Congress, Stephen A. Douglas, Democratic senator from Illinois, introduced the Kansas-Nebraska Act. He had to deal with answering the crucial question of whether these two newly formed territories would be slave states or free states. Douglas said that the question of whether the new territories would be slave or free would be decided by “popular sovereignty”, the idea that settlers in each territory would decide by popular vote for themselves whether or not to allow slavery in their territories.<sup>10</sup>

With the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Missouri Compromise was repealed. The Missouri Compromise was passed in 1820 in order to keep slavery from expanding, prohibiting slavery north of latitude 36°30'. The Kansas-Nebraska Act was the end of any appearance of compromise between anti-slavery and pro-slavery supporters. Popular sovereignty did not work as planned, and in fact led to several fights over whether Kansas should become a slave or a free state. The situation became so heated, that it resulted in what became known as “Bleeding Kansas”, the series of hostilities and violence between these pro and anti-slavery supporters. Eventually both states entered the Union as free states.<sup>11</sup>

## 2.3 The Homestead Act of 1862

The Homestead Act is another piece of legislation that played a significant role in the history of the United States. Historians have called it “the most important act for the welfare of the people ever passed in the United States.”<sup>12</sup> The intention of the Homestead Act was to give people public land for low price and in return to have new territories

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<sup>9</sup> “Kansas-Nebraska Act 1854 Signed,” NebraskaStudies, <http://nebraskastudies.org/0500/frameset.html> (accessed January 31, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> “Kansas-Nebraska Act,” United States History, <http://www.u-s-history.com/pages/h83.html> (accessed January 28, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> “The Kansas-Nebraska Act,” The History Place, <http://www.historyplace.com/lincoln/kansas.htm> (accessed January 28, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Kathy Weiser, “The Homestead Act - Creating Prosperity in America,” Legends of America, <http://www.legendsofamerica.com/ah-homestead.html> (accessed January 29, 2011).

quickly populated by Europeans who would spread American culture in former Indian territories. After a few unsuccessful attempts, the act was finally passed and signed by President Abraham Lincoln in 1862. It stated that “any man or woman twenty-one years old or the head of a family can have 160 acres of land by living on it five years and paying about eighteen dollars in fees.”<sup>13</sup> The Homestead Act opened the way for European immigrants who started moving into the previously Native American territory. It became a lure for thousands of people who saw the land as a place where they could start a new life.<sup>14</sup>

The act was supposed to bring tremendous benefit to the American people. Both poorer citizens, dissatisfied with the options available to them living on the East Coast, as well as newly arrived immigrants from Europe, were looking to live the American dream of owning their own land. However, the reality was often different. Many settlers lost their land in the end because they were very poor and did not have the money to pay the mandatory fees if crops failed. Furthermore, much of the land covered by the Homestead Act was unsuitable for agriculture and farming, especially in the middle of the plains. The conditions were hard, especially due to wind and blizzards. Lack of the amenities associated with more established towns as well as the social isolation disillusioned many settlers, particularly women. For these reasons, many the homesteaders usually did not stay for the five years necessary for ownership.<sup>15</sup> Another issue was the conflict between the native tribes and white settlers coming in much greater numbers after the act was passed. The fight over territory and other circumstances led eventually to loss of the Native American’s traditional lands and destruction of their way of life.<sup>16</sup>

The Homestead Act was repealed by the Federal Land Policy and Management Act after almost one hundred years, in 1976. Over the years, the homesteaders who did manage to stay helped create new states from the territories and eventually became the main

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Josef Opatrný “Problems in the History of Czech Immigration to America in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century,” *Nebraska History* 74 (Fall/Winter 1993): 120, [http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/Czech\\_Full\\_Issue\\_Print\\_Only.pdf](http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/Czech_Full_Issue_Print_Only.pdf) (accessed January 31, 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Weiser, “The Homestead Act - Creating Prosperity in America,”

<sup>16</sup> “Native Americans and Settlers,” *NebraskaStudies*, [http://www.nebraskastudies.org/0500/stories/0503\\_0109.html](http://www.nebraskastudies.org/0500/stories/0503_0109.html) (accessed January 30, 2011).

agricultural producers to the nation.<sup>17</sup> As previously mentioned, the Homestead Act attracted thousands of immigrants. People from the Czech lands were no exception. In the nineteenth century, thousands of them decided to leave their homes to start lives on a new continent. More about Czech immigrants coming to Nebraska is discussed in following chapter.

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<sup>17</sup> “Teaching with Documents: The Homestead Act of 1862,” National Archives, <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/homestead-act/> (accessed January 30, 2011).

### 3 CZECH IMMIGRATION TO NEBRASKA

The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw a huge wave of non-English Europeans coming to settle in North America. These people came from all parts of Europe, such as Germany, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, Poland, or the area that would become the Czech Republic. These settlers came to rural areas where they created new ethnic communities.<sup>18</sup> In this chapter of my thesis, I will mention first Czech immigrants who came to Nebraska, the reasons why they left their homeland and the difficulties they faced in their new homes.

#### 3.1 First Czechs in America and Nebraska

The first Czech who came to America was Augustine Herman in 1633. He was an explorer, trader, as well as an educated and wealthy nobleman who settled in New Amsterdam (now New York). He was well-known for his drawings and sketches and he mapped the states of Maryland and Virginia. Later, Herman became a leader in public affairs. Belonging to a Protestant group, that was defeated in the battle of White Mountain in 1620, he was a member of the group of Czech immigrants who fled the Czech lands because of the religious persecution.<sup>19</sup>

It was not until the second half of the nineteenth century, that the first Czech settler, Joseph Francel, crossed into territory of Nebraska. Francel was born in Čáslav in 1824 and moved to America in 1851. He traveled through Wisconsin and Iowa and in 1854, he entered Nebraska. Heading for California and the gold fields, he hoped to find wealth for his Czech wife and a son, Fred, who stayed back in Wisconsin. Francel's journey is well documented thanks to the diary he kept during his trip.<sup>20</sup>

The first Czech who settled in Nebraska permanently was Charles Culek (sometimes spelled as Karel Zulek). He was born in Podmoklany in 1822. In 1854, he came to Illinois and then entered Nebraska in 1856. Just like other pioneers, he also had to deal with difficult living conditions and problems that waited in this new country. When he came to Nebraska, he did not have any money and had to borrow funds. He took a homestead near

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<sup>18</sup> Anil Kumar, *Encyclopaedia of Teaching of Geography* (New Delhi: Anmol Publications, 2001), 77-78.

<sup>19</sup> Kucera and Novacek, *Czech Contributions to the Progress of Nebraska*, 9.

<sup>20</sup> Rose Rosicky, *A History of Czechs (Bohemians) in Nebraska* (Omaha: Czech Historical Society of Nebraska, 1929), 33,  
[http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/...mach/history\\_of\\_czechs\\_in\\_nebraska/czech\\_pg33.html](http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.ancestry.com/...mach/history_of_czechs_in_nebraska/czech_pg33.html)  
(accessed February 8, 2011).



the town of Humboldt and tried to make a living in different ways. As he was the first Czech person to settle in that area, later pioneers visited him in order to get advice and help. He became well-known among his compatriots all over the area.<sup>21</sup> The first Czech settlers were then followed by hundreds and later thousands of other Czech immigrants. To them, the first Czechs, “the history of Czechs in Nebraska is dedicated. They were its originators, just as they were the originators of this earthly paradise, Nebraska.”<sup>22</sup>

### 3.2 Reasons for leaving the homeland

There is a variety of reasons why people decided to leave our country and make the long journey to settle in Nebraska. Different sources give different reasons as to the main incentives which drew Czech immigrants from the Czech lands to America.

Czech immigrants came to Nebraska for the same reasons they came to other states, like Kansas, Iowa, Minnesota, Wisconsin and the Dakotas.<sup>23</sup> The primary reason for immigration was the worsening economic situation in the Czech lands. At that time, Bohemia and Moravia were overpopulated and there was a lack of land. Czechs were mostly agricultural people with a love for farming, land and soil. Naturally, they hungered for inexpensive, fertile land. After the passing of the Homestead Act of 1862, they saw the chance to own and cultivate land, which now became available. “The promise of free land proved to be the real inducement to peasants who had to eke out an existence on inadequate land holdings back in Europe.”<sup>24</sup> They took advantage of this opportunity, even though it was thousands of kilometers away.

In addition to causes like the worsening economic situation and lack of land, there was another important factor contributing to the immigration wave to America, namely the tense political and religious situation. From 1867 to 1918, Bohemia and Moravia were a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Empire was constantly at war, losing battles more often than they won them. Some Czech immigrants saw their decision as an escape

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 43-44.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph G. Svoboda, “Czech-Americans: The Love of Liberty,” *Nebraska History* 74 (Fall/Winter 1993): 114, [http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/Czech\\_Full\\_Issue\\_Print\\_Only.pdf](http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/Czech_Full_Issue_Print_Only.pdf) (accessed February 10, 2011).

<sup>24</sup> “The Immigrant Experience: The Czechs Move to Nebraska,” *NebraskaStudies*, <http://nebraskastudies.org/0600/frameset.html> (accessed February 10, 2011).

from Austrian military service. Furthermore, oppression by the Catholic Church, Germanizing Habsburg policies, and the political revolutions in 1848 and 1849 resulting in Bach absolutism and political persecution were just unendurable for thousands of people longing for personal and spiritual freedom. It was just after the revolution of 1848 that the first great wave of Czech immigrants started coming to the United States. Even though nationalistic Czech leaders tried to discourage people from leaving the country, the vision of the new country was stronger.<sup>25</sup> Josef Opatrný, a Czech historian and Ibero-American, summarized these reasons when he said, “The nineteenth Czechs and Slovaks, like Europeans and perhaps the rest of the world, believed the United States offered the especially attractive combination of an exotic destination and many opportunities to try to realize dreams of a better life, especially one of political freedom and economic prosperity.”<sup>26</sup>

As already mentioned before, Willa Cather in her novel *My Ántonia* describes the life of one Bohemian family, the Shimerdas. In the novel, Cather demonstrates reasons why Ántonia’s mother wanted to leave for America and for a life built on a different idea of her husband, one not based on her family’s expectations.

“He [Mr. Shimerda] not want to come, never!” she [Ántonia] burst out. “My *mamenka* make him come. All the time she say: ‘America big country; much money, much land for my boys, much husband for my girls.’ My papa, he cry for leave his old friends what make music with him. He love very much the man what play the long horn like this”-she indicated a slide trombone. “They go to school together and are friends from boys. But my mama, she want Ambrosch for be rich, with many cattle.”<sup>27</sup>

With so many financial and social pressures, many Czech families found the pain of immigration bearable versus the alternative of staying in their homeland. But even they could not foresee the challenges and hardships that would await them in this new land.

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<sup>25</sup> Svoboda, “Czech-Americans: The Love of Liberty,” 111-12.

<sup>26</sup> Opatrný “Problems in the History of Czech Immigration to America in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century,” 120.

<sup>27</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 74-75.

### 3.3 Difficulties in the new country

When people decide to leave their homeland and start life in a different country, there is a strong potential for much good to come from their decision, but hard times are usually a part of the experience. This is especially true when discussing people moving from one continent to another. Czech immigrants decided to leave for America in order to seek a better life for themselves as well as their children. However, they had to overcome many obstacles on their journey to greater happiness.

Most of the first immigrants were poor peasants and farmers who did not have enough money to pay for farmland back home. They made use of the opportunity for cheap land in the New World. They sold their belongings, which ensured them some money for travel and supplies, and simply left. Beside farmers, there were numbers of craftsmen and as well as unskilled workers who thought farming could mean a better future for them. The settlers kept in touch with their families and friends who stayed in the Czech lands. They wrote letters to them describing the way of life in this new country. The messages and reports from overseas spread and attracted people who had also desired to live in a country where freedom was respected and better economic and social conditions apparently waited.<sup>28</sup>

Right from the very beginning, when the people set out for a journey, they had to face difficult conditions. The ocean journey has been often compared to horrors similar to those which African slaves experienced.<sup>29</sup> This fact is supported by evidence of one of many Czech families, the Pabián family from Domažlice. In 1876, eleven members of this family left our country. They travelled on an English steamer which transported cotton and other raw materials from America to Europe. In poor conditions and without any daylight, they travelled below decks for four weeks before they finally arrived to America. After surviving the exhausting voyage, they travelled many hours before reaching their destination, in this case Nebraska. What awaited there were harsh surroundings. The people appeared to live in the middle of a bare prairie, without any visible water or fuel. It took a lot of effort to survive and succeed. Historians have also stated that Czech immigrants became victims of envy and hatred from other nationalities, many of whom had lived in America longer, who resented the success that came of a strong knowledge of farming and

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<sup>28</sup> Svoboda, "Czech-Americans: The Love of Liberty," 111-12.

<sup>29</sup> Kucera and Novacek, *Czech Contributions to the Progress of Nebraska*, 16-17.

dominant work ethic. Another group of people they had to deal with were the Native Americans who were also competing for limited resources on land previously regarded as theirs.<sup>30</sup> The barren environment which awaited the newly arrived immigrants to Nebraska is also portrayed in Cather's *My Ántonia*. Jim Burden, the narrator of the story, describes the land of Nebraska like this: "There seemed to be nothing to see; no fences, no creeks or trees, no hills or fields. If there was a road, I could not make it out in the faint starlight. There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made."<sup>31</sup>

One of the main problems the immigrants faced was the language barrier. Most of them could not speak the English language. "It is true that the average Czech immigrant had language difficulties in his new environment, but he quickly adjusted himself to the new situation thanks to his general intelligence and ability."<sup>32</sup> This language struggle is also described in *My Ántonia*, where the only person from the family able to speak at least some English is young Ántonia. This disparity between generations often resulted in tension between parents and children as the younger group assimilated.

Many immigrants also suffered from isolation and loneliness. It was already mentioned that the first settlers stayed in touch with their families back in the Czech lands, with many relatives following them to the new country. They slowly established small settlements, growing in size as more immigrants came. However, there were still many people for whom the situation was unbearable.<sup>33</sup> Willa Cather in her book described two personalities and the way of coping with the hard conditions in Nebraska. In her novel, the main character, Ántonia Shimerda, manages to overcome obstacles and, despite the disappointment and poverty, lives a happy life in the end. On the other end of the spectrum, there is the character of Mr. Shimerda, who is homesick and longs for his old home and friends. He never adjusts to the life in the country which seems strange to him. He loses the meaning of life. All these stresses were factors which cause him in the end to take his own life.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Bohuslav Hýnek, "Vystěhovalci z Domažlicka v Nebrasce," *Český Dialog*, 2008. <http://www.cesky-dialog.net/clanek.php?idcl=3808&aidci=> (accessed February 1, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 12.

<sup>32</sup> Kucera and Novacek, *Czech Contributions to the Progress of Nebraska*, 39.

<sup>33</sup> Svoboda, "Czech-Americans: The Love of Liberty," 114.

<sup>34</sup> Kucera and Novacek, *Czech Contributions to the Progress of Nebraska*, 27.

The Bohemian family, grandma told me [Jim Burden] as we drove along, had bought the homestead of a fellow countryman, Peter Krajinek, and had paid him more than it was worth. Their agreement was made before they left the old country, through a cousin of his, who was also a relative of Mrs. Shimerda. The Shimerdas were the first Bohemian family to come to this part of the country. Krajinek was their only interpreter, and could tell them anything he chose. They could not speak enough English to ask for advice, or even to make their most pressing wants known. One son, Fuchs said, was well-grown, and strong enough to work the land. But the father was old and frail and knew nothing about farming. He was a weaver by trade; had been a skilled workman on tapestries and upholstery materials. He had brought his fiddle with him, which wouldn't be of much use here, though he used to pick up money by it at home.<sup>35</sup>

Czech immigrants faced many difficulties and obstacles in their new homes. The majority did not speak the English language, leaving them vulnerable to people who would take advantage of the non-English speaking immigrants. Immigrants suffered from loneliness because not all members of their families were able or willing to come to America. They also faced economic and social hardships. However, most of them adapted to the new country and lifestyle and “the initial psychological and economic difficulties were slowly overcome by a dogged determination and a willingness to adjust and to make the best of it.”<sup>36</sup> In their desire to gather with other Czech immigrants and ease their situation, they started to establish different organizations and clubs based on their shared heritage. More about the social life of Czech immigrants is described in next chapter.

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<sup>35</sup> Cather, *My Ántonia*, 22.

<sup>36</sup> Svoboda, “Czech-Americans: The Love of Liberty,” 114-15.

## 4 SOCIAL LIFE OF CZECH IMMIGRANTS

“In union there is strength. Humankind has discovered this fact long ago and since the days when guilds of medieval times came into being, societies, clubs and lodges have multiplied and prospered. This proves that organization meets a real social and economic need and Czechs are no exception to the rule.”<sup>37</sup> As demonstrated in the excerpt, Czech immigrants were aware of the fact that gathering and visiting other immigrants was a way to share experience, feelings and overcome difficult times.

Czechs in Nebraska established schools, churches, gymnastic societies, social and cultural clubs, newspapers and other organizations which would serve their needs and which helped them to adapt to life in the new country. Even though many of them assimilated into American culture, the organizations helped to preserve their culture, with several of the societies and clubs, such as *Sokols*, surviving to the present day.<sup>38</sup>

Czech immigrants organized their social life either around churches or within benevolent fraternal organizations which provided them with life insurance, a safeguard many people would not be able to afford otherwise.<sup>39</sup> Groups dedicated to music, dramatics and gymnastics were also popular. The first Bohemian club was founded in 1867 as a reading society. One year later, the dramatic club *Klicpera* was founded in Omaha. In 1873, the first school was established in Nebraska. Several Czech bands were created, the first one called The Frank Nedela Band of Crete. In Crete, there was also established in 1874 the first *Sokol* in Nebraska.<sup>40</sup> Czechs also founded an important society called the Czech Farmers' Mutual Aid society. It was the only society of its kind in Nebraska aiming to help the settlers and to provide insurance against crop damage. Its official publication was *Pokrok Západu*, the first Czech newspaper in Nebraska which first served as a land advertising sheet.<sup>41</sup> Beside *Pokrok Západu*, there were soon hundreds of other newspapers published in the Czech language throughout the United States and in Nebraska. Newspapers became the most important medium connecting Czech people in America. It

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<sup>37</sup> Rosicky, *A History of Czechs (Bohemians) in Nebraska*, 347.

<sup>38</sup> Kucera and Novacek, *Czech Contributions to the Progress of Nebraska* 40-42.

<sup>39</sup> Míla Šašková-Pierce, “Czech-Language Maintenance in Nebraska,” *Nebraska History* 74 (1993 Fall/Winter): 210,

[http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/fulltext/Czech\\_Full\\_Issue\\_Print\\_Only.pdf](http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/fulltext/Czech_Full_Issue_Print_Only.pdf) (accessed February 20, 2011).

<sup>40</sup> Rosicky, *A History of Czechs (Bohemians) in Nebraska*, 347-349.

<sup>41</sup> Kucera and Novacek, *Czech Contributions to the Progress of Nebraska*, 27.

helped Czech settlers to share experiences, feelings and also explain their political, economical and religious ideas in the United States.<sup>42</sup>

Czech immigrants brought to the United States the idea of *Sokol*, established in Czechoslovakia in 1862. The first unit in the United States was organized three years later in Missouri. It spread quickly through the United States as well as Nebraska. *Sokols* in America had the same ideas as those in the Czech lands, stating “in a healthy and vigorous body there must be a healthy and vigorous mind.”<sup>43</sup> *Sokols* served as an important place where immigrants could gather, socialize and talk to each other in Czech and also English language. It provided families, who had the same interests, with physical fitness opportunities as well as social and cultural activities. The *Sokol* also organized educational programs, such as the Czech language classes for children of Czech immigrants, offered by *Sokol* Omaha.<sup>44</sup> The number of people interested in *Sokols* has decreased over the years. Presently, “there is simply not enough appeal in its traditional program, and the competition from other sports-related organizations is strong.”<sup>45</sup> Across the United States, 44 chapters of American *Sokol* exist nowadays. In Nebraska, there are currently four active *Sokol* units, in towns of Omaha, Crete, Wilber and South Omaha. They offer gymnastic programs, dances, cooking classes, language classes and other cultural, educational and social activities, with the aim to provide fitness and a sense of community for individuals as well as for families.<sup>46</sup>

This chapter of my thesis proved Czech immigrants contributed to the progress of Nebraska in many areas, such as education, religion, music, drama, and sports. Steve Ouřecký, a volunteer at the Omaha Czech Cultural Club and Wilber Czech Museum, commented on the historical connection of the Czech people to the history of Nebraska saying, “The motto of the Nebraska Czechs organization is ‘The Pioneers of the Prairie.’ It sums up the rural contributions of the Czechs. They created many towns, broke the sod so

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<sup>42</sup> Šašková-Pierce, “Czech-Language Maintenance in Nebraska,” 210.

<sup>43</sup> Kucera and Novacek, *Czech Contributions to the Progress of Nebraska*, 199.

<sup>44</sup> Gloria Storch, “Omaha Czech Cultural Classes,” Web.mac, [http://web.mac.com/glolad/Omaha\\_Czech\\_Cultural\\_Classes/The\\_American\\_Polka.html](http://web.mac.com/glolad/Omaha_Czech_Cultural_Classes/The_American_Polka.html) (accessed March 11, 2011).

<sup>45</sup> Svoboda, “Czech-Americans: The Love of Liberty,” 118.

<sup>46</sup> “Current State,” American Sokol South Omaha, [http://sokolouthomaha.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=21&Itemid=29](http://sokolouthomaha.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=21&Itemid=29) (accessed February 18, 2011).

the land could be farmed, and brought civilization to the vast open wilderness.”<sup>47</sup> The Czech people were not only instrumental in settling the prairie, but also dealt with the hardships of the immigrant experience by banding together through cultural organizations. This sense of community provided them the social outlet they needed to fight loneliness while having the side benefit of preserving the rich Czech culture.

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<sup>47</sup> Steve Ouřecký, e-mail message to author, March 2, 2011.



## 5 CZECH CULTURE IN NEBRASKA

Culture is an essential part of every society. It means different things to different people. It can be defined as an “integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.”<sup>48</sup> Every society has a different culture where people share a particular language, traditions, behavior and beliefs. It is a learned pattern, giving the people an identity and uniqueness from others. When people migrate to a different country, they take with themselves their culture, which usually becomes a subculture to the local dominant culture. They absorb the new ideas, traditions and lifestyle and at the same time they try to preserve the culture of their homelands.<sup>49</sup>

Czech immigrants who came to America were no exception. They brought with them Czech culture and imprinted a piece of their homeland into the history of the United States. Even though much Czech culture has been lost over the years, it has never totally ceased to exist. The proof is in Czech organizations, associations, clubs and especially Czech festivals and other places where Czech culture is alive and celebrated today. In this chapter of my thesis, I will focus especially on the Czech language, music and Czech festivals in Nebraska. I interviewed several people from Nebraska who are deeply involved with Czech events and happenings there. These people, who have been working on preserving and renewing Czech culture, provided me with information about the history, current situation and possible sustainability of Czech culture.

### 5.1 Immigration overview

Over the years, Czech immigration to Nebraska vacillated between large numbers of immigrants alternating with low numbers of arrivals.

It was already mentioned in the previous chapter that the main waves of Czech immigrants arrived in Nebraska in the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s. According to the census of 1920, about 51,000 people who were either born in Czechoslovakia or who belonged to the first American-born generation lived in Nebraska. This statistic meant that the Nebraska

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<sup>48</sup> Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, “culture,” Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/culture> (accessed March 24, 2011).

<sup>49</sup> Deepha Kartha, “What Is Culture,” Buzzle.com, <http://www.buzzle.com/articles/what-is-culture.html> (accessed March 2, 2011).

population comprised about one eighth of all people of Czech descent living in the United States.<sup>50</sup> “Czech immigrants created in America Czech communities and within these communities they helped each other. It was like living in Czechoslovakia.”<sup>51</sup>

However, the situation changed as history progressed. With the First World War, several immigration laws preventing new waves of immigrants were passed. Restricted immigration and Americanization policies caused the number of newcomers to Nebraska to decline. During the Second World War, the immigration ceased. This had a negative effect on Czech organizations, associations and also the Czech language in the United States. The two wars brought a rapid decline of ethnic activities. Many Czechs assimilated themselves into American society losing interest in their Czech identity.<sup>52</sup>

The revival of cultural identity in Nebraska came in the 1950s. Several outstanding leaders, who will be mentioned later, were aware of the danger that Czech culture in Nebraska could soon cease to exist. They started to organize Czech festivals, Czech language courses and other events in order to maintain Czech folklore and some of the traditions of the Old World. Thanks to their efforts, the Czech heritage remains alive in Nebraska today.<sup>53</sup>

## 5.2 Czech language in Nebraska

This section of my thesis deals with the Czech language in Nebraska. First, there will be a discussion of the interest in and knowledge of the language from the first to the fifth generation of Czech Americans. Then, I will speak about the University of Nebraska in Lincoln which is the main center of the Czech language in Nebraska. It offers the only Czech language instruction in the country and every year provides the Robitschek Scholarship to students from the Czech Republic and Slovakia. There will also be a discussion about the Komensky Club, the Czech Language Foundation, which greatly supports the Czech language in Nebraska, and also details about several important people, who work to preserve the Czech language in Nebraska. No less important will be the part of this chapter relating to the current situation of the Czech language program. A Czech teacher at the university, Kateřina Čermáková, provided me with more detailed information

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<sup>50</sup> Rosicky, *A History of Czechs (Bohemians) in Nebraska*, 24.

<sup>51</sup> Ann Callahan, Facebook message to author, April 21, 2011.

<sup>52</sup> Svoboda, “Czech-Americans: The Love of Liberty,” 117-18.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

about the program, students, and her view of the future of the Czech language program. The last section will discuss the language at Czech festivals in Nebraska.

### 5.2.1 From the first to the fifth generation

It is a common belief that language is an inseparable part of culture. Some scientists even claim that without language, culture would not exist. Language comprises the historical and cultural background of people, reminding where the ancestors came from. It articulates people's identity.<sup>54</sup> It is quite common that immigrants, coming to a new country, try to retain their traditions as well as their mother tongue. Czech immigrants brought to America their love for the Czech language. Speaking the same language in a foreign country helped the first generation of Czechs stick together and stay informed about events in America as well as back in the Czech lands. It was already mentioned in the previous chapter that many Czech-language organizations and newspapers were created in the United States. Speaking the same language helped the immigrants adapt to the new country and integrate into their expatriate society while providing them with a sense of cultural continuity.<sup>55</sup>

When discussing the first generation of Czechs in America, the people were able to use the language fluently to integrate into the existing society. They were also aware of the fact that they needed to cultivate the language and to preserve it for their children. The second generation of Czech Americans was still able to use the language at a high level and tried to preserve the language by organizing Czech lessons at schools. However, over the years and especially during the periods of the world wars, the number of immigrants started to decline, a reality that had a negative impact on the use of the Czech language as Czech dominated areas did not continue to have a fresh influx of native speakers. As people of the older generation passed away, the knowledge of Czech language started to disappear.<sup>56</sup> It was estimated that only about 500 people arrived in Nebraska out of the third and fourth wave of immigration. Coincidentally, it was at that time when one of the most significant and most enthusiastic promoters of the Czech language, Dr. Vladimír Kucera, came to Nebraska. He arrived from Brno after 1948 and contributed to the revival of Czech culture and language in Nebraska in 1950s. He helped establish Czech heritage festivals

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<sup>54</sup> Wenying Jiang, "The Relationship between Culture and Language," *ELT Journal* 54 (October 2000): 328, <http://203.72.145.166/ELT/files/54-4-3.pdf> (accessed April 22, 2011).

<sup>55</sup> Šašková-Pierce, "Czech-Language Maintenance in Nebraska," 210.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

and other Czech events. He also started teaching the Czech language at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln and helped to restore the Komensky Club. More about the university and club will be discussed in my thesis later.<sup>57</sup> Today, most Czech Americans of the fourth and fifth generation do not know more than just a few Czech phrases. There are no classes offered at elementary or secondary schools anymore, not even in the towns which were established by Czech settlers and where current residents are of Czech ancestry.<sup>58</sup>

However, there are several places where Czech language can be heard, at least to a certain extent. This occurs mostly at Czech festivals, Czech heritage days and within Czech communities and organizations. More about the language at the festivals will be mentioned in the chapter about the festivals. The Czech language is taught at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln for interested students while the public can take private lessons taught by mostly older people in major cities such as Lincoln or Omaha.

### 5.2.2 The Komensky Club

The University of Nebraska in Lincoln has been, for several decades, closely connected with Czech culture and language. In 1904, several students of Czech origin gathered and decided that they would not let Czech culture die. They established the Czech Komensky Club and organized poetry readings, musical performances and other activities to keep Czech culture alive. They also saw the need to have a Czech language program, a wish that came true three years later.<sup>59</sup>

Today the Komensky club is the oldest club at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln and one of the oldest organizations of its kind in the United States. The club organizes cultural activities with the aim to promote and make Czech culture more visible. There are activities such as movie nights, Czech dancing lessons, international food bazaars, Czech weeks, professional lectures, introduction of Czech traditions and customs during Czech feast days and many others.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 212.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>59</sup> Míla Šašková-Pierce, "History of Czech Language Instruction at UN-L," University of Nebraska in Lincoln, <http://www.unl.edu/Czechheritage/language.shtml> (accessed February 26, 2011).

<sup>60</sup> Mike Hollins, "Komensky Club Presents 'divided We Fall' at Czech Movie Night," DailyNebraskan, <http://www.dailynebraskan.com/a-e/komensky-club-presents-divided-we-fall-at-czech-movie-night-1.2512328> (accessed March 28, 2011).

I got in touch with one of the students of the university and current members of the Komensky Club, Brianna Tichy, who told me more about the Komensky Club.

Tichy said that in the past, the Club was more of a haven for the Czech immigrants and their children who were studying Czech at the universities, but now it has turned into a group of people who have interest in the Czech language and culture. The club is comprised of students currently taking the Czech language courses offered at the university, or students who have taken those courses in the past, which usually means the members have Czech ancestry. She also said there are occasionally some students who are simply interested in Czech culture and have joined the club despite not having any Czech origins. As for future of the club, according to Tichy, it is unclear. She says, “I see the future of the club as guaranteed, however, I do not know for how long. I do not think that the Czech communities in the area will allow the club to die, but we are facing a serious problem with numbers of students in the club.”<sup>61</sup> She pointed out the fact that, right now, the situation is good. But, she is concerned about keeping students year to year, as the previously involved students become too busy with other college activities and obligations to help out with the club. Club leaders are trying to evolve the club into a more of a community. They want to get more people to come and have it be a place where students can get help in their Czech language classes and meet people of similar interest in Czech culture.<sup>62</sup>

### **5.2.3 The Czech language program and the Czech Language Foundation**

The University of Nebraska in Lincoln offers students the opportunity to study the Czech language. The Czech program, established in 1907, has a long tradition at the university. The university became one of the first places in the United States where the Czech language was taught. Even though the program has gone through difficult times, and once was the sole remaining Czech program in the entire state of Nebraska, it has been very successful and the Czech language is still taught at the university. Since the beginning, there have been several prominent personalities and professors, who worked hard in order to promote, support and sustain the Czech culture in Nebraska. One of them was already mentioned Dr. Vladimir Kucera. Thanks to him and other people, the Czech language

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<sup>61</sup> Brianna Tichy, Facebook message to author, April 3, 2011.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

program still exists and “enrolls more students than other institutions in the United States, even such as Harvard or the University of California.”<sup>63</sup>

Another person who significantly contributed to the maintenance of the Czech language in Nebraska and who is still active in promoting Czech language and culture is Dr. Míla Šašková-Pierce. She started working at the university in 1989 for the purpose of rebuilding the Czech program. Since then, she has taught Czech and Russian, has become one of the founders of the Czech Language Foundation, and has published several articles and text books related to the Czech language. In 2005, as the representative of the Komensky Club, Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs Cyril Svoboda awarded her the Gratias Agit Award for promoting the good reputation of the Czech Republic abroad and for the cultural contributions of the Komensky Club.<sup>64</sup> Discussing the future of the Czech language in Nebraska, Dr. Šašková-Pierce feels it will depend on the interest of young people in Czech ethnic life. An important factor, which could attract future members, is “the development of a commercial and cultural exchange with the Czech Republic.”<sup>65</sup>

The Czech Language Foundation plays a major role in supporting and preserving Czech language is. Established in 1993, the goal of the foundation is “to endow a chair of Czech Language and Literature at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.”<sup>66</sup> The Czech Language Foundation and the Department of Modern Languages at the University of Nebraska officially asked the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs for cooperation in promoting and sustaining the Czech language at the university. Due to a grant from the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in 2008 the University of Nebraska welcomed a new qualified teacher from the Czech Republic, Kateřina Čermáková. Since 2008, Čermáková has been teaching the Czech language at the university and organizing cultural events for students as well as for the public.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Šašková-Pierce, “History of Czech Language Instruction at UN–L,”

<sup>64</sup> Milena Štráfěldová “Cenu Gratias Agit Získala i Slavná Česká Choreografka z Austrálie nebo Univerzitní Klub Komenský z Nebrasky,” Český Rozhlas, <http://www.radio.cz/cz/rubrika/krajane/cenu-gratias-agit-ziskala-i-slavna-ceska-choreografka-z-australie-nebo-univerzitni-klub-komensky-z-nebrasky> (accessed February 26, 2011).

<sup>65</sup> Šašková-Pierce, “History of Czech Language Instruction at UN–L,”

<sup>66</sup> “Czech Language Foundation,” University of Nebraska-Lincoln, <http://www.unl.edu/clf/> (accessed March 10, 2011).

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

Kateřina Čermáková provided me with information relating mainly to the Czech language program and the Czech Language Foundation. Čermáková said that the program is one of eight Czech programs offered in the United States. It is a part of the Department of Modern Languages which also includes Czech studies, culture, history and politics. According to her, the Czech Language Foundation plays a major role because, without the foundation, the Czech language program would not probably exist. The foundation supports the instruction by giving a \$300 scholarship every semester to all students who enroll in the class and also to the lecturer. The foundation also organizes a Czech banquet and other cultural events. Its members are mainly people who claim some Czech ancestry and who are interested in Czech culture. In discussing the interest in the Czech language program, Čermáková sees it as rather good. She said that mainly students who know about their Czech origin and who have an interest in sustaining the Czech language within their families study the program. The reason for taking classes usually centers on the fact that they want to communicate with grandparents or relatives back in the Czech Republic or sometimes simply have a personal interest.<sup>68</sup>

One of the students who participated in the Czech language program was Celeste Prochaska. I asked her why she decided to take the class. She confirmed the words of Čermáková, saying: “I took it because I was interested in it. I am of Czech origin and hope to visit the Czech Republic some day. I like learning new languages and I thought it would be cool to speak to my grandpa in Czech. The other students who have taken it with me had similar reasons because they were of Czech origin.”<sup>69</sup>

Another question I asked Kateřina Čermáková related to the number of students participating in the Czech program and her view of its future. She said the program offers a Czech language minor after six semesters. The classes have about ten students, a great number for teaching a foreign language because the smaller class size enables the students to participate actively in a way that would not be possible if the class had thirty students. Last semester they had twenty-three students and this semester it is fifteen. It is also possible to study via the internet. Students use the university portal, Blackboard. All blogs, discussions, professional texts as well as tests are available online. Čermáková adds, “I suppose this is a good step forward to opening the Czech language to the general public

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<sup>68</sup> Kateřina Čermáková, e-mail message to author, March 3, 2011.

even outside the campus.”<sup>70</sup>

In discussing the future, she guesses it might be probably harder to find new students, considering the fact that it would be fourth and fifth generation Czech Americans. Students in touch with an ancestry far removed from the original immigrants may not have the same passion for discovering the culture and language. However, she expresses a positive attitude commenting, “I was very surprised by the level and number of activities and by the keen interest of local people about anything connected to Czech. This personal motivation of the people will play a significant role in the continuation of the program.”<sup>71</sup>

#### 5.2.4 Czech language at festivals

Czech festivals in Nebraska serve as places which celebrate Czech traditions and also the language. More about the traditions and program of the festivals will be discussed in the following chapter, while this portion of the thesis is aimed at the language. As already mentioned people involved with the festivals provided information about the current situation of the Czech festivals in Nebraska. One of these individuals is Deborah Vocasek.

Deborah Vocasek is a coordinator the festival in Lincoln. Talking about the Czech language, she said it is an inseparable part of the festivals. However, the majority of people speak English with the exception of older people. “You will hear the older Czechs walking around talking Czech to each other, or at least saying a few phrases. So yes, the Czech language is still spoken, but mostly just a few phrases like *jak se mas* or *vitame vas*.”<sup>72</sup>

A similar situation seems to be at festivals in Wilber and Omaha. Steve Ouřecký, a volunteer at the festivals, confirmed the words of Vocasek about the usage of the Czech language. He said that parts of both festivals are spoken in Czech, but the primary language is English. He and his daughter have taken Czech language classes from a woman who teaches it in her basement in Omaha. The class has had dozens of people participate in the past few years. According to him, the interest in learning the Czech language is growing. He remarks, “I believe part of this is because of the political changes in the Czech Republic in the past twenty years. When I was a child, Czechoslovakia was part of enemy territory in

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<sup>69</sup> Celeste Prochaska, Facebook message to author, March 21, 2011.

<sup>70</sup> Kateřina Čermáková, e-mail message to author, March 3, 2011.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Deborah Vocasek, e-mail message to author, March 3, 2011.



the Cold War. Now, it is considered by most of my Czech-American friends to be their top travel destination.”<sup>73</sup>

According to the evidence, the Czech language in Nebraska is still alive. It is not the same extent as in the past, however, there are several people who try to sustain and spread the awareness of Czech culture and the Czech language among the public. The promoters are usually associated with the University of Nebraska in Lincoln which is the main center of the Czech language. Thanks to their efforts, the Czech language remains preserved in Nebraska today. The university maintains the language through the Czech language instruction which is offered to students. It also offers the Robitschek Scholarship to Czech and Slovak students and gives them the opportunity to study for one year at the university. This is a good step forward because students from the Czech Republic have a chance to learn about American culture while, at the same time, bringing a piece of Czech culture to Nebraska and making the Czech culture more visible. Other events promoting the Czech language are the heritage festivals. But the future of the Czech language appears to be at a crossroads. On the one hand, Czech is spoken mostly by older people, which does not appear very promising towards the future. On the other hand, new interest in the Czech language was noticed at the festivals and there is a steady stream of people who wish to learn the language formally and informally. The difficulty of sustaining the Czech language may face problems because the interest of young people of Czech descent grow farther away from their in heritage. The key to true sustainability is to get young people more attracted and interested in Czech culture and language. A good way seems to be commercialization of the culture, activities and events of the Komensky Club offered to students and the public, exchange opportunities for students and the different activities of the heritage festivals.

### **5.3 Czech music in Nebraska**

This section of my thesis deals with Czech music in Nebraska, focusing on its current state and two Nebraska Czech bands.

Music played an important role in lives of Czech immigrants. At the same time, it contributed to creation of American musical heritage originating largely in Europe. The Scots, the Irish, Czechs and immigrants of other nationalities carried their love for singing

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<sup>73</sup> Steve Ouřecký, e-mail message to author, March 2, 2011.

and dancing to the United States.<sup>74</sup> Music accompanied them wherever they went. This is very true for Czechs, who are often called “the most musical people of all Europe.”<sup>75</sup> Music has always been an important part of Czech folklore and has played an indispensable part of Czech gatherings and meetings. The immigrants also established a number of Czech bands throughout the United States and Nebraska. These bands became “a matter of community pride.”<sup>76</sup> Music naturally goes hand in hand with dancing. Around 1830, a dance called the polka was created in Bohemia. Not only did the polka spread quickly across Europe, but, by the 1840s, it became very popular in the United States. Polka found its place also in Nebraska where many bands dedicated to polka music were created.<sup>77</sup>

Dozens of pages about excellent Czech musicians and composers in America could be written in my thesis and many names could be mentioned. Nevertheless, I am going to focus more on the present time, writing about two Czech bands in Nebraska, to illustrate the current state of Czech music. These bands have been playing Czech songs and polka music up to the present time. I spoke to the longtime leaders of the bands, who provided their knowledge, ideas and thoughts about the history of the bands and especially, about the current situation and the possible sustainability of Czech music in Nebraska.

### 5.3.1 The Red Raven Orchestra

The Red Raven Orchestra is a band of six members, all of Czech ancestry. The band plays a variety of music and is well-known for not only the Czech music but also its Czech vocals. The members play different instruments like trumpet, drums, accordion and others. The band leader is Edward Svoboda, whose father started the band in back in 1942. This band used to be very popular in Nebraska, especially among people of Czech ancestry. Svoboda says, “Singing Czech songs and dancing to music was a way how to share feelings and love for the home country. It was a time when Czech immigrants gathered socially and celebrated. It helped Czech descendants to feel closer to their homeland

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<sup>74</sup> “Music as an Important Part of Culture,” Articlebase, <http://www.articlesbase.com/music-articles/music-as-an-important-part-of-our-culture-479244.html> (accessed March 11, 2011).

<sup>75</sup> Vladimir Kucera, *Czech Music in Nebraska* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), <http://www.unl.edu/Czechheritage/CzechMusic2.htm> (accessed March 11, 2011).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Storch, “Omaha Czech Cultural Classes,”

playing Czech music.”<sup>78</sup> During the war years, many of the Czech people were very supportive of polka music and therefore, it was common to have 400 to 500 people at a polka dance. These dances would occur at weddings, anniversaries and also public dances. However, as time went by, the interest in Czech music started to fade.

When discussing the present situation, he expresses concern, “Nowadays, unfortunately, the younger generation is not very interested in supporting polka music. Our audience is mainly people 60 years old and older. Many of the Czechs that patronized Czech music have passed away. This is a big concern for many of the bands.”<sup>79</sup> He assumes this fact could cause the end of polka music. According to him, people of his generation play the key role in winning the younger generation over.

Svoboda has been promoting Czech folklore in the United States through his position of Director of the Polka America Corporation, where he represents Czech music. In this role, he is involved in organizing different activities and events which support Czech music. In the Polka America Corporation, there are also board members from other states of the United States who represent other European nationalities such as Poland, Slovakia and other states. As he said, their goal is “to attract younger people to become interested in our genre of music.”<sup>80</sup>

### 5.3.2 The Nebraska Czech Brass Band

The second and probably the biggest Czech band in Nebraska is the Nebraska Czech Brass Band playing under the direction of Ken Janak. Originally, the band was called the Omaha Czech Brass, which started in 1960s. The present Nebraska Czech Brass Band is a reincarnation of the Omaha Czech Brass. For Ken Janak, Czech music has been always a part of his life. He adds, “I have always felt compelled to continue the tradition of Czech music as it was an important part of my upbringing and was always included in family gatherings. Through performing traditional Czech brass band and folk music, I feel that the band helps to preserve an important part of Czech culture in Nebraska and America.”<sup>81</sup>

As in the case of the Red Raven Orchestra, this band remains popular mostly among

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<sup>78</sup> Edward Svoboda, e-mail message to author, March 12, 2011.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ken Janak, Facebook message to author, March 19, 2011.

older people, people with Czech ancestry and with fans of traditional polka music. They do not perform frequently because of the cost of the twelve-piece ensemble. Janak comments on the interest in the Czech music saying, “Although the popularity of traditional polka music has dwindled in our area of the country, there is still some interest, especially for festivals and special celebrations. For example, our band will perform for a celebration at the National Homestead Monument of America this June for Homestead Days, a special festival commemorating the Homestead Act of 1862.”<sup>82</sup>

Talking about the interest of the younger generation, he sees the situation just as Edward Svoboda and adds, “Years ago, it was quite common for the Czech-style bands to play for ethnical festivals, celebrations, weddings and anniversary celebrations, but that has declined as many in the younger generation do not identify as much with their ancestry.”<sup>83</sup>

### 5.3.3 The future of Czech music in Nebraska

Edward Svoboda and Ken Janak share a similar view of the future of Czech music in Nebraska. They assume Czech traditions will not die out anytime in the near future. Janak points out that these traditions are not a part of a daily life and they had been for earlier generations of Czech Americans. According to him, “the ethnic festivals and celebrations will continue and the Czech-style bands will continue to entertain the crowds, but for the most, these music ensembles will become part of a ‘living history’ exhibit.”<sup>84</sup>

Both leaders of the bands provide examples of how important role plays the family in keeping and passing traditions and habits from generation to generation. They both were taught by their grandparents, parents or other relatives, and that is why they became interested in Czech polka music and today, continue the tradition. Based on the evidence, the interest in Czech music and polka is decreasing. The main reason is that people of the older generation have been passing away and young people do not identify with the music. Today, Czech songs can be heard at different festivals and celebrations but not as often as in the past. There are people of the older generation who work on preserving Czech music and the future of Czech music in America rests in the hands of these people if they manage to attract the younger audience.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

## 5.4 Czech festivals

This section of the thesis deals with Czech festivals in Nebraska, focusing particularly on festivals in the towns of Lincoln, Wilber and Omaha. I got in touch with several people involved in the festivals and Czech events in Nebraska. These people are familiar with the history and the current situation of the festivals. This section will discuss the program of the festivals, the traditions which are kept and shown there, the development of the festivals over the years and its prospects of the future.

It has been stated that much of Czech culture has been forgotten over the years. Thanks to the endeavors and dedication of several people and organizations, Czech culture in Nebraska is still alive. As a proof of this fact, about ten festivals exist as well as several other events in Nebraska, which are held annually in different towns.

Just like folklore festivals in the Czech Republic, the festivals in Nebraska serve as a place where Czech folklore and traditions are presented and promoted. The towns offer a slightly different program, activities and food, similar to regions of the Czech Republic which present various customs and folk costumes coming from a specific area. Still, the main purpose of all the festivals is the same, “To celebrate Czech heritage and to raise awareness of Czech culture in Nebraska.”<sup>85</sup> An important mission of the festivals is to introduce Czech culture to young people and arouse an interest in Czech traditions. Most of the people who come to the festivals want to share with others their common heritage and show attachment to the country their ancestors came from.<sup>86</sup>

### 5.4.1 Lincoln festival

Lincoln, the capital city of Nebraska, welcomes a Czech festival every year, sponsored by the Nebraska Czechs of Lincoln organization. The Nebraska Czechs of Lincoln is one of eleven chapters in Nebraska operated for the purpose of organizing and planning state programs and coordinating statewide Czech activities. This year, Lincoln will hold the 42nd festival on May 1st. I spoke about the festival with its coordinator and the current President of the Nebraska Czechs of Lincoln, Deborah Vocasek.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Steve Ouřecký, e-mail message to author, March 2, 2011.

<sup>86</sup> Deborah Vocasek, e-mail message to author, March 3, 2011.

<sup>87</sup> “Club History,” Nebraska Czechs of Lincoln, <http://www.lincolnczechs.org/history.htm> (accessed March 25, 2011).

Deborah Vocasek supports the general idea of festivals saying, “The main purpose is to share with everyone that we are proud of our Czech heritage. We wish to celebrate beginnings of our ancestors. I believe we were raised with traditions such as music and food and we grew to love it so we want to carry it on.”<sup>88</sup> The festival is attended mostly by people of Czech origin. Several people from different countries also come just to see what it is all about. Performers from the Czech Republic are not being invited because it would cost the organizers too much. “I would estimate that we have about 3% to 5% of people who are not of a Czech origin and who come just for the fun of the music and entertainment.”<sup>89</sup> Every year, between 600 to 1000 attendees visit the festival, depending on the weather. The majority of visitors are mostly older people. This fact is not very promising considering the future. Deborah Vocasek commented on the number and the age of visitors when she said, “The number of visitors decreased slightly because a lot of the old Czechs are dying off. The positive thing is that we are starting to see some interest coming from the young children and adults, learning how to dance polka, sing to Czech music and play accordion.”<sup>90</sup>

The Lincoln festival, like the majority of Czech festivals in Nebraska, is just a one day event. The exception is the festival in Wilber, which lasts three days. More about the Wilber festival will be discussed later. The festival in Lincoln starts in the morning and lasts all day long. Among the main program and entertainment belong Czech music, accordion jams, polka bands, Queen and royalty coronation, the selling of Czech baked goods and food. There are vendors who come in and sell Czech goods such as Czech crystal, jewelry and crafts. The organizers also invite Czech organization Queens, Princesses and Princes from other chapters in Nebraska to make the festival more attractive. These young people dressed in Czech folk costumes parade and introduce the costumes to the public, explaining from what region their ancestors came.<sup>91</sup>

It is known that Czechs as well as Americans are fond of food. This is very true about the festivals, as the food is an inseparable part of the celebrations. To my question if the people like the food and which dish in particular is the most popular, Deborah Vocasek

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<sup>88</sup> Deborah Vocasek, e-mail message to author, March 3, 2011.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

answers, “Yes, people love it. We have the Czech food at all the festivals, such as pork, dumplings and kraut, rye bread, *buchta* and *kolace*. I think the favorite food is the *kolace* and meat with kraut. Usually, people can not get these traditional foods at home and so they love to eat them at the festivals.”<sup>92</sup> As the food is one of the main things that attract people, the organizers started to include the program demonstrations of kraut making and dumpling making. These recipes are a dying art and by teaching people how to cook Czech food, they want to keep the tradition alive.<sup>93</sup>

In discussing the past and the future of the festival, participants agree it has been, and probably will be, about the ability to make change. The festival used to be just about music, dancing, selling baked goods and crowning the new Queen. As the festival got larger, new programs and entertaining performances were added, such as the demonstrations of food making or selling Czech goods and crafts, which are hard to find. One of the problems that the festival may face in the future is the cost, which increases every year. Today, most festivals are free admission. The organizers feel that more people will come to the event as long as it is a cheap entertainment. However, this precedent becomes harder to continue as the expenses for the festival increase due to inflation. At some point, they may have to charge a small fee at the door to cover the costs of the hall or bands. They are afraid this change will decrease attendance. Another problem is that the older people are not being replaced with younger members as they pass away. Deborah Vocasek expressed her concern. “There are fewer of us and also of the women who bake our *kolace* which are big sales, and frankly, our real money maker. Honestly, I do not know how many more years we will be able to continue without charging at the door, but,” she adds, “as the President, I will do my best to continue because this is important to me and to my family. I will find ways how to get people donate or volunteer to keep it going.”<sup>94</sup>

By using the example of Deborah Vocasek, I wanted to show that there are people in Nebraska who care about their heritage and who work on spreading and sustaining Czech culture. Deborah Vocasek realizes that the future of Czech culture in Nebraska depends on young people and that is why she taught her children about their Czech heritage. Her daughter, Stefanie Vocasek, is the current Czech-Slovak U.S. Queen who greatly

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

contributes to the growth of awareness of Czech culture in Nebraska. More about Stefanie Vocasek will be discussed in the next chapter. The Vocasek family is proof that if the traditions are passed from one generation to other, the culture will survive. Deborah Vocasek says, “I believe we need to get our children interested in their heritage and traditions by doing them. If we do not get our children involved, the Czech heritage will die and be forgotten. We have to imply how proud we are and not feel embarrassed by who we are. Instead of letting someone degrade our nationality, step up and teach others who we are and that we are proud to be Czech.”<sup>95</sup>

#### 5.4.2 Czech festivals in Wilber and Omaha

Wilber and Omaha are other towns which, once a year, became a place where Czech traditions are celebrated and Czech culture remembered. I got in touch with Steve Ouřecký who takes part in organizing the festivals and volunteers at the Omaha Czech Cultural Club and the Wilber Czech Museum. Steve Ouřecký furnished me with information about both festivals.

Wilber represents the symbol of Czech heritage in Nebraska. Czech pioneers settled there in the middle 1860s, after the American Civil War. They primarily settled there as farmers to take advantage of the Homestead Act. In 1961, four men came with an idea of organizing a festival which would perpetuate their Czech customs and traditions. One year later, Wilber hosted its first annual Czech festival, which was a great success with nearly 30,000 people coming to celebrate their heritage and eat Czech traditional food.<sup>96</sup> Wilber was proclaimed the Czech Capital of Nebraska in 1963. Today, over 70% of the people living in Wilber have Czech ancestors, which is about 1200 people in the town. The surroundings community has even a larger percentage due to 3rd and 4th generation of Czech Americans.<sup>97</sup>

The festival in Wilber is the biggest and longest Czech festival in Nebraska. It is a whole town event visited by 50,000 people on the average every year. It lasts three days which makes the festival exceptional and unique as other festivals, such as the Lincoln or

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> “History of Wilber, Nebraska,” Barnasdrug, <http://www.barnasdrug.com/history.html> (accessed March 5, 2011).

<sup>97</sup> Steve Ouřecký, e-mail message to author, March 2, 2011.



the Omaha festival, last only one day. The Omaha Czech festival is attended by 500 to 600 visitors, depending on the weather. The festival in Wilber is held in August and the Omaha festival is held in April. Talking about the visitors, Steve Ouřecký confirms the words of Deborah Vocasek, that the festivals are attended mostly by older people, adding “I have seen only few people under 30 who were not there accompanying an older person.”<sup>98</sup> The Omaha festival is very similar to the Lincoln festival as it attracts more people with an interest or ancestry from Central Europe, like the Czechs, Poles or Germans. In Wilber, the situation is different. Due to the fact that it lasts three days, the interest is much stronger. “The Wilber festival draws Czech Americans from all over the state and country and it attracts all ages and background. People can experience more of what I offered because of many activities which are offered.”<sup>99</sup>

Discussing the food, it plays an indispensable role like at other festivals. Ouřecký says, “At Omaha festival, Czech food available includes roast pork, sauerkraut and dumplings, rye bread and *kolace*. In addition to what Omaha offers, Wilber has roast duck, *jaternice*, liver dumpling soup, Czech beer and Czech recipe wieners as part of a meal. The most popular by far are *kolace*. Close to 250,000 are made for the festival.”<sup>100</sup> In Wilber, there can be also found two meat markets and a bakery that have Czech style food for sale all year long. As stated previously, the food is very similar at all festivals, however, it is not the same. Deborah Vocasek comments, “Each of the festivals has something slightly different, kind of like *kroje* are different in each region in Czech. For instance, in Lincoln area, the most popular baked goods are *kolace*. In Clarkson, they have a lot of strudel.”<sup>101</sup> She stated that this is one of the reasons why it is so fun to go to other festivals, because people can see and experience different things.

As for the development of the festivals, it has not changed much over the years. Ouřecký said that the long standing original Czech traditions have been polka music together with dance and Czech food. As the festivals grew larger, new aspects related to Czech culture were added, like the Czech history pageant, as well as attractions not related to Czech culture, as the car show. An important part of the festivals are Czech costumes

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Deborah Vocasek, e-mail message to author, March 3, 2011.

and instruments. Ouřecký comments, “I have seen more interest in having traditional Czech costume and traditional Czech musical instruments. When I was young, the standard Czech costume was what is now referred as *Americký kroj*. The women are now doing research about where their ancestors came from and making costumes that reflect that region. I have never heard of *dudy* when I was growing up. Now, I know two people who play it. The same is true with the stomp fiddle.”<sup>102</sup>

### 5.4.3 Czech Heritage Day in Prague and the Kolac Korner Cafe

Prague, Nebraska, is another town, established by Czech pioneers in the nineteenth century, which is connected to Czech culture. Every year, Czech Heritage Day takes place there. There can be also found the popular cafe called the Kolac Korner in the town. One of the long-time residents of Prague is Adolf Nemeč, participated for several decades in Czech events as a volunteer and who is the chapter delegate for Prague today. He shared some of his knowledge about the history of the town.

Prague is located in Saunders County. Nemeč said the first Czechs to arrive in this county and settle in Prague were two individuals, Petr Kastl and Anton Hajek. Originally, as did many other pioneers, they settled in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. However, the land in Iowa was beginning to go up in price so they moved to Omaha because the land was cheaper there. Nemeč talks, “Then they traveled by rail to another town called Fremont and asked the local people where the best land for farming would be. They were told that the best land was further south and all they had to do was follow the Platte River to get there.”<sup>103</sup> He adds, “Eventually, they found a plot of land about 160 acres and settled there, and named it Prague, reminding them of their homeland.”<sup>104</sup> The present day town of Prague holds close to 500 people who are all descendants of the original settlers.

Czech Heritage Day is another Czech event which takes place in Nebraska every year. It is organized by the Nebraska Czechs of Prague in September or October. Like the majority of other festivals, this celebration is also a one day event. It starts in the morning and lasts all day long with dinners served at the Kolac Korner Cafe. The main part of the heritage day is Czech music, polka dances and other Czech entertainment. In October 2005,

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<sup>102</sup> Steve Ouřecký, e-mail message to author, March 2, 2011.

<sup>103</sup> Matthew Braunsroth, Facebook message to author, February 10, 2011.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

during my studies in Nebraska, I had a chance to participate in this event. As some people interested in Czech happenings knew that a student from the Czech Republic was present in Nebraska, I was asked by organizers to perform at the Kolac Korner. I played guitar and sang Czech songs for the audience which consisted mostly of older people. It was obvious that some of the people recognized the well-known Czech songs as they tried to sing with me. Afterward, the organizers asked me if I could perform at other Czech events and in some Czech communities because the people were interested in hearing more of Czech songs and Czech language. Several of the older then people talked to me because they wanted to practice their Czech language skills. The majority knew only a few typical Czech phrases, however, some of them were able to speak the Czech language fluently. I was also offered sauerkraut, dumplings and *kolace* which are so popular in Nebraska. The program of the Czech Heritage Day was rich in Czech programming. Besides Czech food, there were different performances connected to Czech culture. The largest Czech band, already mentioned the Nebraska Czech Brass Band, played polka music and Czech songs. I was told the most popular Czech song in Nebraska is *Ta naše písnička česká*. Czech Queens, young ladies dressed in Czech folk costumes, sang the Czech national anthem and other songs.

There are several places in Nebraska where people can experience a bit of the Czech culture throughout the whole year. One of those places is already mentioned Kolac Korner Cafe. About this place, its history and current situation, I was talking with Matthew Braunsroth, whose uncle is the owner of the cafe.

In 1989, Matthew Braunsroth's aunt and uncle Steager needed extra money to help pay for themselves and a three month old child. "They thought that selling *kolace* on the corner of the street in Prague on Husker football game days out of the back of their truck would be a good idea. Hence the name Kolac Korner. Soon they added coffee and other pastries to the menu. People loved what they did and thought that they should do it more often. Then they bought a tent and added hot pork sandwiches and duck dinners."<sup>105</sup> I was further told that, in 1991, they could no longer handle it themselves so they asked Matthew Braunsroth's grandparents for help. His grandfather bought a small building that they used as a cafe and his grandmother made the food there. More members of the family became

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

involved as interest was strong and the family needed help keeping up with the demand. The cafe was going well and they started hiring people and also bringing Czech bands every Friday night, selling everything from duck, pork, sauerkraut and dumplings, blood sausages and much more. The main thing they sold the most were *kolace*. Braunsroth's grandmother was even awarded for making the best *kolace* in the state. In 1998, his uncle, Mark Nemeč, became the main chef and he is still there today.<sup>106</sup>

Today, the Kolac Korner Cafe is used as a place where Czechs of Nebraska can gather and enjoy the company of their heritage with others. "The Kolac Korner is a hot spot for the tourists who enjoy sitting and dining on the finest Czech food in the State. The owner, my uncle Mark Nemeč, is very welcoming. He said 'not many people care about their Czech heritage anymore' so he is trying to bring a piece of the heritage by keeping up with the Kolac Korner."<sup>107</sup> Except the traditional Czech food, visitors can buy Czech beer and other Czech items. Over the years, the Kolac Korner has had visitors from all over the country and even from other states. Visitors included the Nebraska's first district congressman, Jeff Fortenberry, and in 2006 the Czech Republic Ambassador to the United States, Petr Kolář.<sup>108</sup>

#### 5.4.4 The future of the festivals and Czech culture in Nebraska

No one knows what the future will bring. There are different ideas and predictions about future of the festivals and the sustainability of Czech culture in Nebraska.

Steve Ouřecký is familiar with the situation in the towns of Wilber and Omaha and he points out the difference. "In Wilber, the culture has become central to the town identity. In recent years, people have been learning more about the Czech culture and traditions and trying to include them in events. As people are more aware of their heritage, there is more interest in these traditions. So, I believe that it will not only sustain the interest in Czech traditions and culture, but they will grow."<sup>109</sup>

The situation is slightly different in Omaha where, Ouřecký assumes, the traditions will most likely be kept within families, but as a whole for the Czech community, they may

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Steve Ouřecký, e-mail message to author, March 2, 2011.

become diluted. “Czech community in Omaha was traditionally concentrated in certain neighborhoods in South Omaha. However, these neighborhoods have no longer many Czechs in them. These Czech families are now scattered across the Omaha area, living in generic neighborhoods.”<sup>110</sup> According to him, the key to keeping the Czech traditions and culture alive in either of these communities are the people. “Both Omaha and Wilber have a great core of people who are very interested in keeping up their Czech roots. If they stay active in the groups, these people will be what will sustain the Czech ways in these communities.”<sup>111</sup>

Deborah Vocasek’s opinion about the future of Czech traditions is that they will not die, saying, “I think even if there are no festivals or big events, families will not let their family traditions die. It seems that people in every culture are trying to research their heritage and we are teaching children to be proud of their ancestry. With the computer technology, people are more able to research their ancestors and they are proud of it and want to share it.”<sup>112</sup>

Brianna Tichy also speaks about Czech culture, confirming that it faces a real problem today. According to her, there are many people with Czech ancestry, however, a lot of them do not know much about it and, particularly about modern Czech culture. Her idea is that Nebraskans should keep the folk traditions alive, while still keeping with the modern culture and history of the Czech Republic. She comments on sustaining Czech culture, “I think that the culture will be sustained, because while the number is small, there are people here who are learning about the modern Czech Republic. Once knowledge has become more widespread, I think the culture will definitely be sustained. There has always been such a good relationship between the Czech communities here and the Czech Republic that I can not imagine that dying. I think that the Czech Americans in the U.S. are too stubborn to let it die.”<sup>113</sup>

The number of Czech festivals, events and places in Nebraska connected to Czech culture are proof that the Czech culture is not lost. According to the evidence of people involved in the Czech events, it seems that the festivals will remain and continue as the

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Deborah Vocasek, e-mail message to author, March 3, 2011.

<sup>113</sup> Brianna Tichy, Facebook message to author, April 3, 2011.

people are keen on keeping Czech traditions. The fact is that mostly older people of Czech origin show interest in attending these festivals and celebrating their Czech heritage. This may cause problems in the future because not many young people care about their origin. Some arts are dying out and there are few young people ready to replace the old members. On the other hand, positive prospects exist. The festivals prove that there are people who want to sustain Czech traditions by learning and spreading them. Over the past couple of years, interest coming from people of the younger generation has been observed. They are willing to learn how to cook Czech food, make Czech traditional crafts and play Czech folk instruments. Czech costumes have also been brought into bigger focus. People promoting Czech traditions realize that only by learning them and spreading among especially young people, the traditions of Czech culture will not be forgotten.

## **5.5 Young generation**

In my thesis, it was mentioned that sustaining Czech culture in Nebraska is in hands of young people, who need to become interested in Czech culture. It was also mentioned that the family plays an important role. If members of the older generation pass traditions to their children and grandchildren, there is a big chance the Czech traditions will not die out. I am going to demonstrate this fact by examining one family living in Lincoln, the Vocasek family. I already spoke about Deborah Vocasek and her activities related to Czech culture, however, she is not the only member of her family one having an interest in her Czech heritage.

### **5.5.1 The Czech-Slovak Queen Stefanie Vocasek**

Stefanie Vocasek, 24-year old lady, is one of the leading people young people in Nebraska who greatly contribute to sustaining Czech culture in Nebraska. In 2010, Stefanie Vocasek won the title Miss Czech-Slovak U.S. Queen, which gave her even more opportunities to spread awareness of Czech culture in Nebraska, especially among young people.<sup>114</sup>

Deborah Vocasek comments on her daughter's activities, "Stefanie has sparked interest specifically in our state of Nebraska using her love for music and her Czech heritage. She put on a first ever in Nebraska Children's Czech Festival, which had an amazing 86 attendees and was a huge success. Many have asked her to do it again. Now,

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<sup>114</sup> Deborah Vocasek, e-mail message to author, March 3, 2011.

she is trying to collect a group of young children to teach them to sing Czech songs.”<sup>115</sup> Deborah Vocasek adds, “There has also been interest in two young musician groups playing polka. The polka lives on! It is wonderful to see a surge of the young groups.”<sup>116</sup>

Stefanie is a fifth generation Czech American. She learned about her heritage from her parents. “My family has always been proud of being Czech and it is something that has been passed down from generation to generation. My dad grew up in Wilber. My dad was involved in many Czech activities as he was growing up and attended Czech Days every year. I have two brothers and my parents made sure that we learned about our heritage at an early age. We attended Wilber Czech Days every year since we were born.”<sup>117</sup> Stefanie Vocasek started dreaming at very early age of being the national Czech Queen. Already at the age of three, her mother pulled her through the Wilber Children’s Parade in her first *kroj*. When she was twelve, she was a little sister in the Miss Czech-Slovak U.S. pageant as they assign each of the contestants at the national pageant a little sister. Stefanie remembers, “I was proud when my queen won second Runner Up in the pageant. This only fueled my fire to learn more about my heritage and some day be on that stage.”<sup>118</sup>

In 2004, Stefanie ran for the title of Lincoln Czech-Slovak Queen and won. She prepared *kroj* for competition and learned to sing *Písnička česká* in Czech and English for her talent. At that time, she also took some Czech language courses and continued to be involved in the Lincoln Czech Club. In 2009, as the Lincoln Czech Queen, she competed for Nebraska title and won. Stefanie says: “My lifelong dream came true! I sang *Červená Sukýnka* and showed off all my *kroj* from when I was three until now. With winning the title I also won best *kroj*, in stage interview, and private interviews awards.”<sup>119</sup> Stefanie Vocasek said that at the national level, things get more in depth. Some of the questions that were asked of the girls competing for the title were who is their favorite Czech Composer, Artist, Author, who is the most important Czech Inventor, what was the Velvet Revolution and other challenging questions. Today, she continues to be involved with almost all of the

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Stefanie Vocasek, Facebook message to author, January 18, 2011.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

Nebraska Czech Clubs and is getting more involved with the national pageant as her year of being the Czech-Slovak Queen continues.<sup>120</sup>

Stefanie provides an example of how much influence a single individual can achieve. Thanks to her efforts, devotion and love for her Czech heritage, she helps spread interest in Czech culture in Nebraska among many people. Most importantly, she motivates young people and gets young children involved, many for whom she has become an idol they want to emulate. If there could be more young people like Stefanie Vocasek, there is a much better likelihood that the interest and awareness of Czech culture in Nebraska will grow.

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.



## CONCLUSION

Nebraska used to be a state largely comprised of Czech people and with a tremendous influence of Czech culture. The nineteenth century saw several waves of Czech immigrants, desiring to find a better life in a country where they could own land and freely express their ideas. As shown in my thesis, these immigrants, overcoming difficulties and obstacles, contributed to the progress and development of Nebraska. Bringing with them their love for native language, folklore music, food and Czech traditions, they left a lasting imprint in Nebraska history.

Today, Czech culture in Nebraska is still alive and Czech heritage is celebrated. The aim of my thesis was to prove that the culture is sustainable. As there is no work or book discussing the current state and possible sustainability of Czech culture in Nebraska, I gathered information and knowledge from people living in Nebraska, who are involved in Czech events and festivals.

In my thesis, the focus was mainly on the Czech language, music, festivals and other places where Czech culture is celebrated. Based on the evidence, the interest in Czech culture decreased over the years. The main problem is that people of the older generation are gradually dying and there is not enough interest from the younger generation to take their place. The positive aspect of the current situation is that there are still many people promoting and preserving Czech heritage, as well as several organizations who work on supporting and spreading awareness of Czech culture in Nebraska. Recently, there has been observed a new interest from the side of young children and adults. This has happened due to work of Stefanie Vocasek, who, as the current Czech-Slovak U.S. Queen, has contributed to the growth of interest in Czech culture, particularly music and musical instruments. According to the current state of affairs, it seems that Czech culture in Nebraska will be sustained as long as there are people of the older generation preserving the Czech heritage. It is in their hands if they manage to pass the love of, interest in and enthusiasm for Czech culture to the younger generation, for it is this transmission that holds the key for long-term sustainability of Czech culture in Nebraska.

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