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A Transatlantic Bond: Czech Women's Clubs in Chicago, 1890-1914

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This essay focuses on the establishment and an evolution of the Czech middle-class women's organizations in Chicago from 1890 to 1940. It also follows the umbilical cord connecting the motherland and the daughters in the New World, the cord that was never severed, especially not with the old generation of women-founders of these organizations.

1 Introduction

The Czech middle-class women in nineteenth century Chicago never sought assistance from Jane Addams, *they* offered charity to others. They led a relatively sophisticated life in spite of the fact that a majority of them had lived in the United States for less than a decade when they began founding their clubs. These immigrant women had to adjust to a different environment and institutions that were often unfriendly to newcomers, especially those from Central and Eastern Europe. The elite Anglo-Americans treated with the same disdain immigrants from Central Europe whether these were educated middle-class women working to help others or unskilled laborers eking out their existence.

Czech women also faced discrimination from within their ethnic group. Even as privileged middle class women they had to overcome many barriers and challenges. They were pressured to support their husbands in a "strange industrial world," but in return they received nothing – they were expected to mind their household and as mothers to be an intermediary between their husbands and their Americanizing children (Heinze 2003: 133).

Based on the newspaper articles in their organ the *Ženské Listy* [the Women's Gazette] it becomes clear that their roots were in the Czech organizations in their homeland and that the bond – that was often a two-way tie – with the Czech lands was very strong. The emotional link between the women in the Czech lands and the Czech women in the United

States took the form at times of financial support crossing national and geographic boundaries suggesting the mutual relationship fueling development of women's education and activism in both the Czech and American settings.

In Chicago, as in other Czech communities, they built on the foundations brought from home. Some of the intellectuals – such as the women writers and Vojta Náprstek, an early male feminist – living in the Czech lands became icons for the Czech women in Chicago and in other Czech communities in the United States. To honor these “icons,” Czech-American women's lodges bore their names and commemorated their lives.

Although the Czech women were put in a different context in the United States – a context that required being mutually supportive – the confidence they brought with them from the old world helped them to create long-lasting organizations. They were grateful for the strength their mother country had given them. Consequently, they never forgot their cultural heritage and their background. This they expressed in Chicago by generously supporting various causes in their homeland and perpetuating their culture through a support of the Czech language and of various patriotic activities.

These Czech women's ideas were similar to those of their contemporaries of other ethnic groups in the United States and also to women's middle class movement in Europe. Both European and American influences had an effect on them: their middle class concerns and ideas included emancipation in its full extent – an access to education, voting rights, and women's right to choose whether to work at home or outside the home.

There were issues, however, that drove the Czech women apart from – and probably got them into conflict with – the mainstream American women's movement. As an ethnic group from a Central European country they did not identify with other “American” women's issues – such as prohibition. The drinking of alcohol was not considered a sin to be eradicated. Furthermore, a majority of women in Chicago were freethinkers, and thus the Protestant fervor was absent. Moreover, “[t]hey viewed prohibition as an illegal and unconscionable intrusion into their private lives” (Hewitt 1978: 318). Another example of an urban (i.e., immigrant) vice the Czech women did not concern themselves with was prostitution. Generally, the articles published in their periodical the *Ženské Listy* never had a moralizing character.

2 The Czech Chicago

The Czech community in Chicago was founded in the 1850s, when the first arrivals came to the north boundary of the city along the lake. With the growth of the city, Czechs gradually moved to the western part of Chicago, finally reaching maturity by the end of the nineteenth century, when they settled around Canal and Beach Streets. Later on, in the early 20th century, other Czech settlements appeared on the perimeter of Chicago. By this time the community had grown to a respectable 110,000.

First- and second-generation immigrants, Czechs included, had a double ethnic consciousness. Although they were becoming Americans, they were unable to forget their origin and continued to be interested in their homeland. In 1862, the Czechs in Chicago established three social institutions in Chicago: the *Slovanská Lípa*, a Czech school, and a Woman's Club *Libuše* (Jozák 1998: 155). In the summer of 1862, the ladies of the *Slovanská Lípa*, for example, organized their first dance party to benefit the organization. They dressed in folk costumes: a pink dress with a white apron and blue piping, and a blue ribbon tied round their waists. During the whole evening they chose their own dance partners. This must have been unusual for the non-Czech bystanders, who decided to name them “the Amazons” – which was considered a derogatory term (Pšenka 1926: 18). In order to meet, discuss, and

help each other and assist their homeland, Czechs, like other groups, organized mutual support organizations in most of their communities. These organizations were also crucial as a protection against becoming destitute as a result of sickness or death, since prior to 1911 an American employer was not liable for any work-related accident or for the death of an employee (Jozák 1998: 152).

In mutual organizations Czechs had a freedom that they had not known from their homeland – they could freely express their political persuasions and their faith, they could read any newspapers they chose to, and they could meet freely. “Their national and cultural life in the United States soon developed in a variety of activities including amateur theatre company performances, music and choir concerts, discussions, balls, lectures, trips and festivals” (Jozák 1998: 152).

3 Jednota Českých Dam

The men's clubs were largely closed to women, and so women began to seek out each other and create networks and later clubs. Thus women, some of whom were originally associated with patriotic organizations such as *Slovanská Lípa*, decided that a separate organization was the only option open to them. They retained “membership in a separate female sphere, one which they did not believe to be inferior to men's sphere and one in which women could be free to create their own forms of personal, social, and political relationships.” They founded their organizations based on the structure of the Czech-Slav mutual support organizations, (Machovská 1895: 8), rather than “gaining access to the male domains” (Kish and Dublin 2002: 15).

The first *Jednota Českých Dam* or JCD [Czech Ladies Unity, sometimes translated as the Union of Bohemian Ladies] organization was founded in 1870 in Cleveland, Ohio. “We had to settle among strangers and unfriendly people. Our men worked hard and knew that if they died we would be left with nothing. And so they [men] founded clubs, lodges, and associations. And when the Czech women watched the activity of men and felt lonely they decided to follow in the men's footsteps to lessen the burden in case of death,” one woman recalled. “No Czech woman needs to be ashamed of this purely Czech organization” (*Ženské Listy* 17, 1900: 282). The women in the JCD were expected to and they were willing to transmit their national culture and the language to their children. “The first rule here is the Czech national life and a survival of the Czech language in America. In many respects we are better than other ethnic organizations and we have no luxurious offices and no highly paid officers, no corruption; ours is an honest business” (*Ženské Listy* 17, 1900: 282).

Within a decade, the JCD became the most important middle-class women's organization, despite various obstacles, mainly from Czech men who thought women's place should be exclusively at home minding the household. By 1880, there were 18 lodges that met in two-year intervals in the areas of major Czech settlements such as Cleveland, Detroit, Milwaukee, Chicago, and St. Louis. Forty years later it boasted 20,000 members, most of them from Chicago.

The organization had a two-fold purpose: esoteric and materialistic. It was a mutual benefit organization that also supported various Czech national causes. The mutual work between Czech and Czech-American organizations is the most interesting aspect of the JCD women's lodges. They supported education of women, schools in general, and building of monuments to Czech national heroes in the Czech lands and in the United States. They supported the *Ženský Výrobní Spolek Český* [the Czech Women's Industrial Association] in Prague, and in 1894 the JCD started fundraising for the construction of their “new building.” When in 1890 Vojta Náprstek's and Eliška Krásnohorská's efforts to open Minerva

Gymnasium for girls came to fruition, the women in Chicago, proud of their Prague colleagues' achievement, frequently wrote about the Gymnasium in their magazine, the *Ženské Listy*, sponsored fund-raising on behalf of it, and some of them also visited the school. The fundraising was hard in the times of economic crisis. In the 1890s, for example, as documented by October 15, 1894 article in *Ženské Listy* in Chicago: “[T]here have not been many social events to raise money for our sisters overseas . . . [b]ut we should organize something for the benefit of Prague Minerva.” The Chicago Czech women realized that the education they received in the old country set them apart from some of the other ethnic groups, and so they wanted to send money as a gift of thanks to the Czech schools in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Individual lodges' activities were an evidence of ongoing support of the Czech culture and education in the United States and in the Czech lands. Many social events were organized in honor of the Czech women writers whom the JCD leaders regarded as patrons. In the late nineteenth century, Czech-American women apparently lived in a world of their own with only faint ties to their new home. The Czech community was large enough and active enough to provide stimuli for this self-contained cultural life to exist.

Besides supporting educational causes in the homeland, they wanted to perpetuate the Czech national culture in North America. The lodges owned libraries and portraits of the Czech national heroes and heroines. Lodge *Vlasta* became one of the founding members of the *Matice Školská* in Chicago (an organization supporting Czech schools in Chicago). The members often taught the Czech classes themselves. This lodge also financially contributed to American *Matice Školská*, which in turn gave financial assistance to schools in the Czech lands. Contributions to *Matice* were permanent features in the budgetary plans of the lodges. The women made financial gifts to the building of monuments to national heroes. For example, in 1892, the JCD lodges in Illinois raised money that was sent to a village of Borovany, Bohemia, to build a monument to Jan Žižka, the heroic Hussite warrior. Support of monument building in the United States and in the Czech lands was important to the women as practically all the lodges mentioned it in their reports. A monument was a display of an ethnic group's worth.

The mission to pass on the Czech culture to the future generation was imbedded in the laws of the organization: until the rule changed in the late 1920s, one of the conditions of membership was an ability to speak Czech. Healthy women between the ages of 18 and 45 could become members. Each woman had to pay an initiation fee of \$2.00 when she joined, and following a six-month membership she was eligible for financial support in illness: She would get \$2.00 a week in the first six months of sickness, after which any payment depended on the goodwill of the lodge. Generally each lodge set the various fees individually. By the 1890s the payment upon death was \$400.00 paid out within 60 days of the woman's death. In case of a single mother, underage orphans received interest from this amount and were paid the whole amount when they came of age. The death benefit was increased at every congress.

The grand committee of JCD in the State of Illinois was founded in 1880 with three lodges – *Přemyslovna*, *Dobroslava*, and *Jaroslava*. Their lodge numbers were 5, 7, and 8. The low numbers indicate that they were among the oldest ones, since *Libuše* in Cleveland was the No. 1 lodge. Names given to the lodges had patriotic connotations – they were names of famous women from Czech history and from Czech legends. Some lodges used the names of the well-known Czech women writers such as Eliška Krásnohorská, Sofie Podlipská, and Božena Němcová. The women chose these names carefully, for they symbolized the debt many Czech-American women felt toward those who fought for women's education and emancipation in their homeland, and some of them may have had personal contacts with them. Only Chicago lodge No. 52 – a relatively recent one – had a non-Czech name – Martha Washington (Machovská 1895: 17).

Some lodges used the name of their chapter as a theme for their social activities. In 1880, sixteen women founded Lodge *Karolína Světlá*, named after a Czech woman writer, and in 13 years it grew to 181 members. The women members organized two balls a year, one for the public to celebrate its existence and one private – to celebrate Karolína Světlá's birthday. During the balls, the president usually said a few words about the purpose of the occasion and about Světlá's life. The members proceeded to recite Světlá's poems by heart, and then the free entertainment began. A real veneration of the Czech writer and a fighter for women's rights (Machovská 1895: 196)!

The lodges' cooperation with other Czech organizations was common. The individual lodges did not live in isolation. As a sovereign organization they sometimes cooperated with the men's fraternal organizations – the *Československý Podpůrný Spolek* [Czech-Slav Fraternal Organization] and for a fee used their halls. Women would visit other lodges in the state and out of state. Many belonged to various kinds of similar organizations.

Much can be learnt about the content and issues discussed by the women in JCD from their organ the *Ženské Listy*. The editors prided themselves that “the issues of the *Ženské Listy* were purchased by a rich lady, as well as by a girl – a maid whose job was to wash windows.” The editors wanting the paper to appeal to a wide readership; they described the magazine as not “revolutionary, it is calm and expresses our sisters' warmth and sincerity” (*Ženské Listy* October 15, 1894: 6). In the 1890s they did not consider an equal access to education and equal rights in the public and private sphere as revolutionary but a natural right of women.

Josephine Humpal-Zemanová, a supporter of the women's suffrage movement, laid the foundation for the *Ženské Listy* in 1894, and worked as an editor for twenty years before she retired (Čapek 1920: 201). Her Czech “sisters” overseas supported her and they sent her articles – another evidence of the mutual support of the Czech and Czech-American women. The material published in the *Ženské Listy* is an evidence of a degree of sophistication: The articles were well written and catered to an educated readership. Those published between 1894 – the year the magazine became an organ of the JCD – and 1914, reflect the unique character of this Czech-American women's middle class organization with emotional attachment to the homeland.

Contacts through correspondence and an exchange of articles between the *Ženské Listy* published separately, in Prague and Chicago, led to personal visits as the Czech-Americans who had emigrated in the 1850s began to visit the Czech lands in the 1890s. Many came to visit the Náprstek home in Prague, where they were always welcome. They would also meet with the women from the American Ladies Club, who showed them Prague and discussed various issues with them. Thus an important alliance and a flow of information and ideas between the Czech women and Czech-American women was kept alive (Secká 1998: 11).

The content of the *Ženské Listy* in the pre-World War I issues was very similar to the issues published in Prague – biographies of the famous Czech and Czech-American women, and extracts or series of *belle lettres*. For example, in 1900 it printed the novel *Anna Karenina* serially. There were also educational articles, news about women's world events, household ideas, news from the lodges, and recipes. Interestingly, these recipes are further evidence of the social level of the readership since most of them are made of large quantities and expensive ingredients. A recipe for cake called for 9 eggs, one-quarter pound of granulated sugar, and three-quarter pound of almonds.

Women who published and wrote for the JCD weekly (later biweekly) had to fight men's opposition to the all-female press. Their magazine was discussed on the pages of the Czech Chicago's mainstream newspaper *Slavie* – the most important and relatively progressive Czech-American newspaper (*Ženské Listy* 25, 1900: 423). Men whose rhetoric was progressive and egalitarian were often conservative when it came to women's issues, just

as in the case of women in the Czech lands, as we have seen earlier. Women were appalled by these articles for they did not consider their goals and aims to be radical: “There are unfriendly magazines, saying that the *Ženské Listy* will make Sarkas and Vlastas (Czech legendary women leaders who – like the Amazons -- fought against men) out of our women and girls. Women will no longer show affection for men and for families and ‘poor’ men will not have any women from which to choose” (*Ženské Listy* 23, 1900: 381).

Summing up the development of women’s status in 1894, an editor of the *Ženské Listy* wrote, “Women’s lives have improved. There will not be any earth shattering changes if women get the right to vote. We do not expect that political life will be dramatically better, societal life will not be dramatically different, but we support this movement because: taxation without representation is unjust.” Characteristically, women organized in the JCD thought women who owned property and those who have children “should have a say in what laws should govern the country.” They likened the “struggle of the people in the homeland” with those that “we have here on behalf of women. We want a woman to be recognized as human being and that she has rights to perform her duties as a mother. We do not ask for chivalry if men are not offering it but we request justice and truth” (*Ženské Listy* 7, 1894: 5-6).

In the 1910s it became apparent from the articles in the *Ženské Listy* that teaching of the Czech language was on the wane – the children were not interested in studying the language of their parents. It had always been difficult for the freethinking organizations to support the Czech language. The children of freethinking parents went to public schools unlike those of the Catholics, whose children were taught Czech as a part of their parochial school curriculum. The children of the freethinking parents had to study Czech on Saturdays or Sundays. When anti-immigrant propaganda began taking its toll, the Czech-American children were even less inclined to study the language in their free time.

The death-knell for the organization and for other ethnic mutual organizations sounded when the laws regarding clubs and mutual support organizations became stricter. The by-laws of the mutual benefit organizations had to be changed and the death benefit had to be increased. “This makes the volunteer aspect less important, while the insurance aspect is becoming more prominent. This is how the new law looks at the lodges,” and, reflecting an anti-alien sentiment on the part of the state, concluded, “[t]he large American mutual benefit organizations supported this law and also the commercial insurance companies, in order to eliminate the less expensive *non-American* insurance groups” (*Ženské Listy* 47, 1913: 756).

World War I, besides being a tragedy for humankind, created many opportunities for women in search of finding a niche in American society. The war provided a stimulus that the organizations needed to survive. It united – albeit temporarily – the Czech women and men under two causes – the fulfillment of their patriotic duty, and the goal of liberating their former homeland. Immigrant women generally felt a sense of gratitude for their new country but also nostalgia for the homeland (Heinze 2003: 133). The war was a catharsis of all the ideas that the Czech women had discussed up to now – women’s issues, concerns with the homeland, their new homeland and the style of life and allegiance it required from women immigrants. During this period of “*unhyphenated Americanism*,” Czech women must have felt at times as though they belonged to a clandestine organization, since their ideals – perpetuation of their native culture and helping the homeland – were all but anti-American. In this confusing situation they chose to throw their energy into “fighting” on the home front for the benefit of peace and for the support of the soldiers, and for supporting the Czech and Slovak struggle for an independent country. They also went about their business as usual – raising money to accomplish the dreams of their organization (*Ženské Listy* 3, 1918: 49, the term “unhyphenated Americanism” used by Heinze 2003: 145).

Czech middle-class women in establishing an organization in the United States combined Bohemian and American spirit. They built their organization on the ideas of emancipation started by the first Czech feminist, Vojta Náprstek, and on the pragmatism discovered in the United States – the need to have women's mutual benefit organizations. Separately from their native-born contemporaries they fought for an access to education, for the right to lead an independent life, and for an access to the voting booths. As educated immigrant individuals they were expected to pass on the native culture – a task they willingly did – and to adapt to the new country. They sponsored the freethinking Czech language schools in Chicago, and they sent money to the schools in the Czech lands. Their newspaper during the heyday of their organization was evidence of a high degree of sophistication and gave the reader insight into the life of the Unity of Czech Ladies. The Czech women in Chicago, as most other immigrant women anywhere in the United States, felt a strong sense of gratitude and nostalgia for their mother country, and they felt obliged to be patriotic to their adopted land.

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