

A Search for Freedom

Alexander Kobulsky

Slovak Garden Scholarship Contestant

Historically, Slovaks have been a people dominated by foreign powers. Slovaks, however, have prospered under self-rule as shown during Svatopluk's reign of the Great Moravian Empire in the 9th Century. The Slovak Great Moravian Empire slowly disintegrated after the death of Svatopluk, and became a battlefield for imperialistic foreign powers like the Magyars and the Germans. The lands inhabited by the Slovaks were then turned over to the Magyars who ruled over the Slovak people from the 11th Century until the end of the First World War in 1918. Although Slovaks gained political freedom from the Magyars after World War I, they were unable to form an independent nation after the Treaty of Versailles and were assimilated with the Czechs through the negotiations of the first president of Czechoslovakia T. G. Masaryk and prominent foreign minister Edvard Benes. Slovaks finally procured an independent nation under the leadership of Mgr. Jozef Tiso in 1939. However, this republic was short lived. After the Second World War, Slovakia existed as a puppet state under the menacing influence of Moscow and communist Russia for nearly 45 years. Although the Slovaks have finally established their own democratic state in the heart of Europe, their historically oppressive rulers explain why immigration has been an ever-present force in the Slovak Republic. Like millions of other foreign immigrants, Slovaks have reluctantly left their beloved homeland in search of political freedom and economic opportunity in the United States of America.

Slovak immigration to America was most prominent during the heavy-handed rule of the Magyars in the late 19th Century and continuing into the 20th Century. Slovaks were a prominent minority in the Austro-Hungarian Empire who never enjoyed political freedom under the rulers in Vienna and Budapest. Slovaks particularly began to feel Magyar political oppression after the Ausgleich (Austro-Hungarian Compromise) in 1867 where in the Austrian and Magyar governments essentially separated, making the Germans powerful in Austria and the Magyars powerful in the Kingdom of Hungary. Magyars then passed a series of Nationality Acts in their Parliaments making Magyar the official language of the Kingdom and suppressing foreign institutions such as the Matica Slovenska and Slovak

schools.

"Magyarization" also had disastrous political effects on the Slovak people. The lands inhabited by Slovaks had no political representation in Budapest Parliament because of a sophisticated gerrymandering scheme developed by Magyar politicians. The Magyars essentially drew the political districts themselves to ensure they would always have a majority of the seats in the Parliament. Furthermore, this process of implementing Magyar culture on Slovaks was especially successful among the Slovak intelligentsia that sought political and economic benefits in the Hungarian Kingdom. This process nearly destroyed the Slovak intelligentsia having negative consequences when they would develop their own republic after World War I.

Slovaks had economic, educational and national reasons for immigrating to the United States during the emigration boom of the early 20th Century. Industry was very slow to develop in Slovakia, and it remained an agrarian state until the communists took power after World War II. Most Slovaks in the 19th Century were agrarian peasants without any opportunity for personal advancement in society. The Slovak youth had no vision or direction for the future except for mindless bondage to feudal lands because of the dearth of Slovak-based schools. The Magyars dissolved the few schools established by Slovaks. Those fortunate enough immigrated to Germany, the United States or Canada to become educated. Denis Ernest described this horrid situation saying, "the schools of the Kingdom of Hungary are machines from which one side is fed by Slovak children and from the other side come out Magyars" (qt. in Stasko 26). Besides depriving Slovaks of national identity by closing Slovak schools, the Magyars also denied Slovaks basic human rights that United States citizens had enjoyed for over 150 years. Slovaks were forbidden to use their language in official communications, and many prominent Slovak leaders were thrown in prison. Slovaks were deprived of the right to assembly, and the freedom of speech and press. Without these basic freedoms it is understandable why nearly one million Slovaks migrated from their homes from 1850 until 1921.

The seemingly endless opportunities and freedoms of the United States made it the ideal place of immigration for many Slovaks. The Slovaks truly found the United States the ideal immigration destination when noting the Slovak rate of immigration to the United States in 1910 was the highest of any other European nationality with 18.6 Slovaks for every 1000 migrating to the

United States (Stasko 34). Most Slovaks did not remain in the large urban center of East Coast of the United States like Boston or New York when they emigrated from Slovakia. Many Slovak immigrants came to the United States without any technical skills and sought employment in anthracite mines or steel processing plants in the Midwest. Unfortunately Slovaks had a difficult time integrating into the labor market. This forced Slovaks to live in separate districts in cities such as Cleveland and Youngstown, in Ohio and Danville, Wilkes-Barre, and Pittsburgh in Pennsylvania. This had both a negative and positive effects on the Slovak population living in the United States. Living in these districts allowed the Slovaks to preserve their language and culture, but they also had to endure horrendous living conditions. Furthermore, many Slovak religious leaders were concerned about the immoral lifestyle Slovaks were adopting by living in the cities and moving away from their morally pure lifestyle on the farm.

Slovaks were not hesitant in establishing their presence in mainstream American society. American-Slovaks were extremely active in constructing their own schools, parishes and social organizations. Such fraternal organizations include The First Catholic Slovak Union of the USA and Canada (Prva Katolicka Slovenska Jednota), and The First Catholic Slovak Ladies Association of the USA (Prva Katolicka Slovenska Zenska Jednota) both of which are centered in Cleveland, Ohio. These and many other organizations have had a positive effect on Slovak immigrants in helping them deal with the responsibilities of living a free life in the United States. Because the Slovaks lacked freedom of the press under Magyar rule, they were eager to develop their own newspapers and periodicals in the United States. However, many Slovak newspapers were unable to continue for extended periods of time because they lacked unity and organization. One example contrary to this generalization is the Jednota (1889-) newspaper, which is still widely circulated in America.

Although Slovaks faced considerable adversity when immigrating to the United States, they encountered a world of opportunity that they could never have experienced at home under foreign control. Slovaks experienced basic freedoms for the first time when they immigrated to the United States, and they have proven to be responsible citizens, never taking their rights for granted.

Bibliography

Stasko, Jozef. Slovaks in the United States of America. Dobra Kniha. Cambridge, Ontario. 1974.

Stolarik, Marian Mark. Immigration and Urbanization: The Slovak Experience,

1870-1918. AMS Press, Inc. New York. 1989.