

## **A Slovak in Florida**

By Cory Kantor

Slovak Garden Scholarship Contestant

I thought about the three topics I had to choose from for this scholarship, and knew immediately what I wanted to do. There is only one person I know well enough, that I would want to write about. It is a story about love and dedication, helping, caring, compassion, and honesty. It is about one person and the people whose lives he has touched and helped.

He was born on April 19, 1916 in Palmerton, Pennsylvania. His father's name was Andrew and his mother was Katherine Rapcan. His father worked for the New Jersey Zine Co. as a foreman for the railroad that delivered the ore to the mill. He had two brothers. Andrew who was two years older, born in 1914 and Paul who was born in 1918. In 1919, when he was three years old, his mother decided she wanted to go back to Czechoslovakia. She packed up all her children and went back, settling in Rimavska Kokava, Czechoslovakia. In 1928 when he was 12 years old and attending High School, his mother became ill and died very suddenly. His father returned home just long enough to re-marry and leave his three children with their new stepmother. Bad luck and gloom seemed to be the norm in his life, when 2 years later his father passed away while working at the coal mines in the U.S.A. At the young age of fourteen he was forced to quit High School and his studies for the priesthood. His stepmother told him she could not afford to pay for schooling. He would have to quit to help support himself and his brothers.

In 1930 at the age of fourteen he entered an apprenticeship for masonry and by 1933 he had completed his apprenticeship and was working as a bricklayer at the age of seventeen. A year later misfortune found him again, when his sick brother Andrew, whom he was caring for, died of pneumonia, after being sent home from the hospital. Now it was his responsibility to care for himself and his younger brother Paul.

By 1936 the Czechoslovakian army was calling him to enter the military. He was an American born citizen and immediately contacted the American Embassy. They told him if he joined the military he would lose his American citizenship. He had to leave the country and return to the U.S.A. He did reluctantly only because he had to leave his younger brother behind. He settled in his hometown of Palmerton, Pa. As soon as he was able to save enough money, he sent for his brother to join him in the United

States.

It was here, where he first became a member of the Slovak Catholic Sokol in 1936. In 1938 he left the coal mines and Pennsylvania for a better life in New York City. He worked at the St. George Hotel as a pastry cook and in 1941 he fell in love and married his sweetheart, Helen Saas. Their happy marriage was cut short, when in 1942 the war broke out and he was called to military duty. He entered the Army, did his basic training at Maxwell Field in Alabama and in 1944 after being transferred to the Infantry was shipped off to Aachen, Germany, with the 1st Army Division. His marching days took him all through Germany, and in 1945 he was with the 1st division, and was one of the first soldiers to enter into Czechoslovakia and liberate the towns of Plzen and Karlove Vary. To hear him speak about it today, you can clearly understand it was one of the proudest moments and happiest days of his life.

The war ended in 1946 and he joyously returned to the U.S.A to start a family and be back with the wife he loved and missed so much. He started working for a company called A.M.C. Within 10 to 15 years he had worked his way to supervisor of the entire 14 story building the company occupied on 34th Street and 10th Avenue in New York City. As supervisor he was able to hire many of his Slovak friends who had also come over looking for a better life. Many of them are still his friends today and are grateful for the start he was able to give them when coming to this country.

In 1947 his first son was born, George. Three years later my father, Robert came into their lives. Before the birth of his two sons, he had joined the Slovak Catholic Sokol, Group 182 in New York City at St. John Nepomucene Church on 66th Street and 1st Avenue.

In 1948 he became Secretary/Treasurer of Group 182. Then in 1949 he was elected Elder of Youth Group 346. He ended his success with a term as President of Group 182. This gentleman did not stop there. He became involved with the Jednota of St. Matthews Branch 45. He was acting Secretary/Treasurer for a few years and then President for the Jednota. He just couldn't seem to do enough or help enough people. All during my father's early years, he remembers families moving into their home, staying for a few months or a year and then moving on. At an early age he thought that they were relatives and it was not until young adulthood that he learned the truth.

These family members were not family members at all but families whom his father had sponsored to come to this country. He helped them by giving them a place to live and by finding them a job, sometimes with the company he worked for. When they were on their own feet and could support their families they would find a place of their own and move on.

Among the list of offices which he held for this beloved Sokol, were; Secretary of the Slovak League of America, Secretary of the Eastern group of the Slovak League of America, Board of directors - Slovak Catholic Federation, helped form Slovak Republican Club and later served as its President. Years later he became secretary of the Slovak Republican Federation and attended two United States Presidential Inaugurations. He was also active as chairman of a local committee to organize the Slovak World Congress at the Astor Hotel in 1970. Afterwards holding directorship and committee member for the Slovak World Congress. During those years he attended several World Congress' in the U.S.A and Canada.

During his active years with Group 1 he helped organize picnics, Christmas and New Years Eve parties, and church and Sokol fund raisers. My father remembers marching in many parades and attending hundreds of functions in the Slovak organizations in New York City with his mother and father. His father was also responsible for helping to start a fund to help support immigrants entering this country from Czechoslovakia.

In 1967 another tragedy struck this man. His wife Helen to whom he was married for over 25 years died accidentally from a fall. My father who was 16 at the time remembers how shattering it was for his father and him and his brother. But this did not stop this man from his work.

His sincere dedication and love for his fellow Slovaks is never ending. He said his first love when he came to this country was helping Slovak youth. In 1982 after moving to Florida, he decided that he could not remain idle. He was too far from New York City to remain active in Group 1 so he found a group in Winter Park, Florida called the Slovak Garden and immediately asked if he could join, so he could help. In 1983 through his hard work and caring he was made a director and in 1987 he was elected Vice-President. He has been helping ever since, driving over 225 miles round trip each time there is an important meeting or function. He has chaired the Annual Slovak Day for a few years and only a few years ago was given the distinction and the

honor he deserves by being named SLOVAK MAN OF THE YEAR. Having his children and grandchildren there to share in his joy was the second happiest day of his life.

My name is Cory Kantor and I think that it is time to tell you that the person whom I am speaking about is my grandfather, George Kantor. I am very proud to be his grandson and hope that you will agree with me, when I say there is not a prouder or more dedicated Slovak in the State of Florida or even in this country for that matter. He just celebrated his 80th birthday last April and still drives the 225 miles round trip to help at the Slovak Garden.

I hope and pray he gets his wish: 10 more good years, please God. I love him very much and know you would too if you knew him as well as I do. That is why he is the only Slovak in Florida that I could or would write about.