

Immigration of Slovaks to America

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The dream of one day coming to the United States and making a new fulfilling life has been an ambition for an enormous amount of Slovaks. Since the discovery of the new world, known as Northern America, thousands of Slovaks have made the attempt to succeed in this Land of Dreams. Dating back to the sixteenth century, Slovaks such as Stephen Stitnicky, a scholar and poet who was amazed at the English culture. Another influential early immigrant was Maurice Benovsky, he and his wife were the first titled Slovak couple in America. These people were some of the first to embark on their life changing journeys to the free world and started a trend that to this day is still popular; immigration of Slovaks to America.

The first Slovak in reported history to live in the United States is Stephen Stitnicky, professionally known as Parmenius. He had the benefits of training and becoming educated at European universities. His study at Oxford and his many acquaintances with several famous Englishman such as Sir Humphry Gilbert caused him to have a desire to live in England. For sometime he did, although by the time some of the first fleets began to sail to America, Stitnicky had already decided he was going also. He joined the seafaring company and was on the admiral's ship. They left England on June 11, 1583 and sailed on the trying journey until August 3, 1583. When the ship came to land Sir Humphrey Gilbert took possession of the land in the queen's name and this became the first English colony in North America known as St. John's Newfoundland. Just a few short days later, the fleet decided to return back to England to report their findings to the queen. Unfortunately on the voyage home, rough seas overturned the ship and nearly 100 men died. Stephen Stitnicky-Parmenius was sadly one of the victims of the catastrophe.

For most Slovaks, coming into the United States was a highly individualized experience. As time went by, more and more mass migratory movements gained momentum. Why did people want to make the move? In history, Slovaks sent a precedent to all cultures with their close bond with their homeland and their people. The thought of leaving their homeland for a prolonged period of time was unheard of. Throughout the seventeenth

century, craftsman moved between European countries, selling their products and services only to return home a short time later. Although, some occupational responsibilities did find permanent jobs for Slovaks in other countries. In the Eighteenth Century, with the healthy export of cattle and wine, most Slovaks lived comfortably. Many in the manufacturing and mining industries helped support the living wage and the economy of the time. Only after the Austrians started to take control of the industries did the Slovaks find that a move to America may be necessary.

History could not be written with a conclusion without some type of romantic story about a Slovak couple coming to the United States. Count Maurice Augustus Benovsky and his wife were the first Slovak couple to step foot on North American land. Their lives were surrounded with many feuds, because Maurice was a great instigator in fights with the Polish against Russians. He later made friends with Benjamin Franklin and began to support the cause of the growing colonies. On July 8, 1784, he and his wife came to the United States arriving at the Baltimore Harbor. Within a few months, he embarked on another mission to Madagascar believing he was a liberator of the oppressed. With the French awaiting his arrival, he died during sea battle and was buried in Madagascar. His widow finished her lonely life in the U.S.

Once the nineteenth century rolled around, more and more families found the move to the United States to be eminent. The harsh winters back home often left people eating such frugal diets such as cabbage and potatoes on a daily basis. Most peasant workers made a mere 25-29 cents for a days labor. This money was mainly made on the fields working on crops, yet the harvest season would usually only last around sixty days. This left little money to be spent by our Slovak grandfathers. Of course money was needed and could be made in the U.S. Another reason for emigration was Political oppression and inhumane tactics by the leaders of the Austria-Hungarian Empire, which pushed many Slovaks away from their homes. The closing of secondary schools made the opportunity for children trying to get their education harder and harder. With the Hungarian push to eradicate the Slovak people and their heritage, extermination was inevitable. The Slovak people were forced to leave their homeland to escape the untold pain.

One prime example of a Slovak coming to the United States to improve his future during this time was Michael Bosak. Bosak was among the most fascinating Slovaks to immigrate to the

United States. He was from a small village called Okruhle in Slovakia. The spender of coming to United States intrigued Michael, as a young boy. He dreamed of coming to America. In 1886, at the age of 17, he emigrated from Slovakia to New York with one dollar in his pocket. Unfortunately, his dollar was stolen at the Castle Garden on Ellis Island. Michael's first job was at the coalmines. His job consisted of picking slate at the coal breaker for 75 cents a day. Thereafter, he held several minor jobs for other coal companies. However, this young man from Slovakia had enormous dreams. In 1890, he began working for a Slovak merchant delivering merchandise with a horse and wagon. During these years, his talent as a businessman began to shine. Accumulating a small sum of money allowed Bosak to purchase a barroom. This event began his huge business career. Michael's charismatic personality and integrity gained him many friends. Within four years he became a reputable wholesale distributor of liquor and beer. Many people entrusted him with their money to be sent to their families abroad. He thus saw the need to open a foreign exchange and steamship ticket agency. This business endeavor propelled him into the banking industry. In 1897 he established the "Michael Bosak Private Bank". This institution's growth was phenomenal, as well as Bosak's status as a business figure. Michael Bosak was one of the most influential figures in Slovak fraternal organizations. In 1902, Bosak organized the development of the Citizen Bank of Olyphant. He also served as an official at The First Bank of Olyphant, as a consequence, his name appeared on the one dollar banknotes. In 1912, he founded the Slovak Deposit Bank in Wilkes-Barre, Pa and later the Bosak State Bank. Bosak also had other active endeavors such as manufacturing and politics. This led to a nomination as a democrat senator, which he declined.

Michael Bosak, even as a wealthy man, had a great interest in the advancement of the Slovak people. He attended the meeting of Slovak American representatives in Pittsburgh in May 1918, when Thomas G. Masaryk, the first president of CzechoSlovakia, signed the Pittsburgh act. Bosak's name appears on this historic document. In 1920 he purchased the monthly magazine "Obrana", which was soon renamed to "Slovenska Obrana". This magazine became a weekly newspaper and proved to be very popular in the Slovak society. Through the twenties, Michael made several trips back to Slovakia to visit his widowed mother. During his visit, he rebuilt the school he went to as a child. He also bought many books on Slovak history hoping to teach the youth of their heritage.

Even with all of these accomplishments under his belt, the stock market crash of 1929 caused him to lose his stature in society. Journalists began ostracizing him because of the closing of his banks. All the good deeds he performed for the community were quickly forgotten. In 1932, he was tried on charges of conspiracy surrounding the affairs in his banks. However, the courts acquitted him of all charges leading to apologies from journalists, whom he had recently been criticized by. Once the trial was over, he began trying to rebuild his estate. Bosak's efforts were unsuccessful. His wife passed away in 1935 leaving him with little hope to strive for the future. On February 18, 1937, he died after suffering of a stroke.

Stitnický, Benovsky and Bosak are all important examples of Slovaks that immigrated to the United States to escape oppression and achieve financial stability. These individuals left family and friends to reap the benefits of a rich new land. Immigration of Slovaks continues through the twentieth century for many of the same benefits that early Slovaks strived to attain.