

**THE CECH (BOHEMIAN)
COMMUNITY OF
NEW YORK; THE
SLOVAKS IN AMERICA**

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The Cech (Bohemian) community of New York; The Slovaks in America by Thomas Capek

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THOMAS CAPEK

**THE CECH (BOHEMIAN)
COMMUNITY OF
NEW YORK; THE
SLOVAKS IN AMERICA**

THE ČECH (BOHEMIAN)
COMMUNITY
OF
NEW YORK

WITH INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON
THE ČECHOSLOVAKS IN THE
UNITED STATES

By THOMAS ČAPEK
AUTHOR OF "THE ČECHS (BOHEMIANS) IN AMERICA," ETC.

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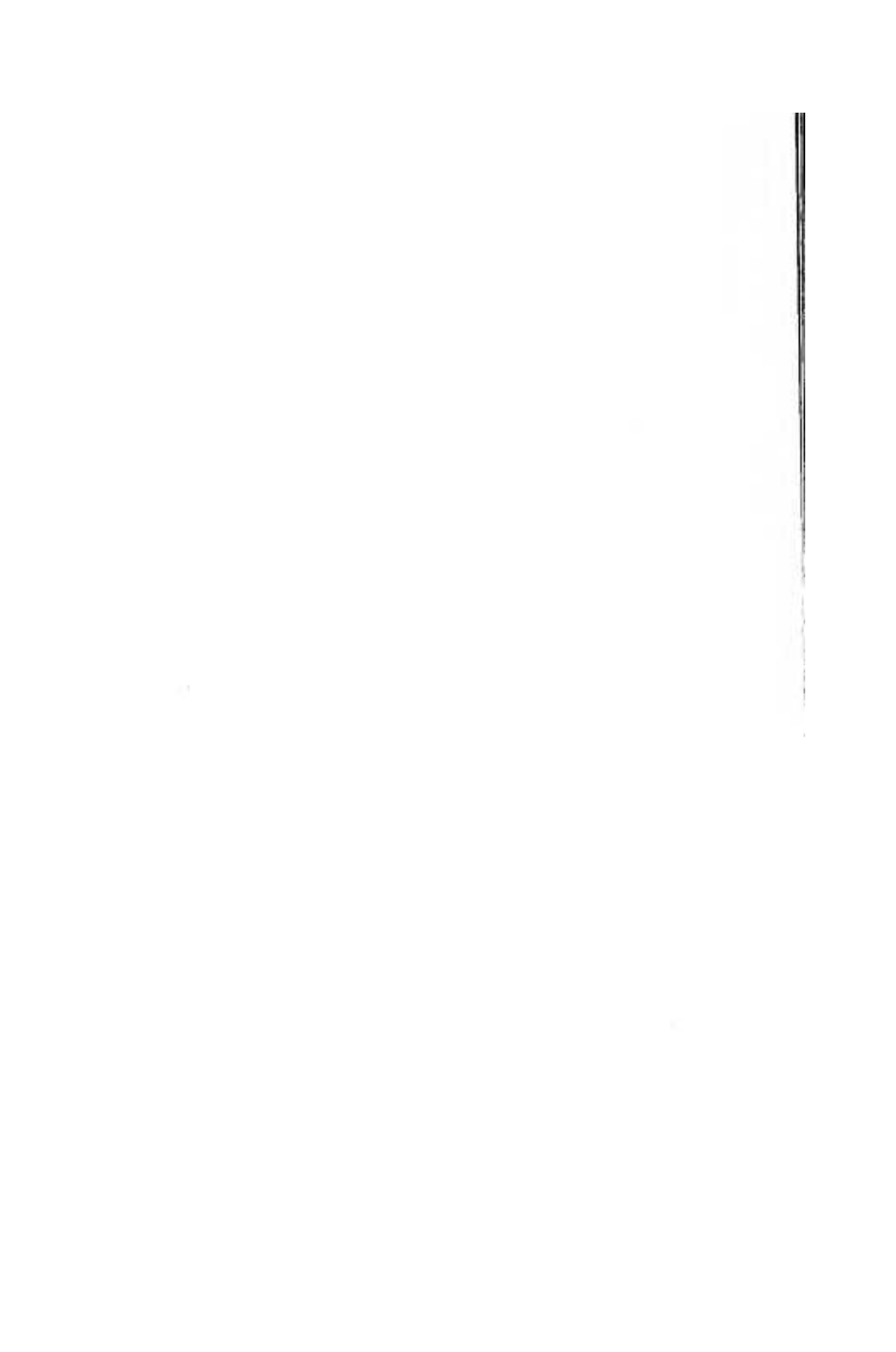
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PART I

THE ČECHS

CHAPTER I

OLD COUNTRY IDEOLOGY TRANSPLANTED TO THE NEW

If we analyze the currents and cross currents of the national life of the Čechs, we shall find that every great movement in the mother country, has produced repercussion among the nationals in America, that it synchronized perfectly with like responsive actions here. A brief survey of their principal activities proves it.

Slovanská Lípa. A society styling itself the *Slovanská Lípa* (Slavic Linden) was organized in Prague in 1848. Its program was national and political—equal rights before the law for Čechs and Germans, Slavic reciprocity, constitutional liberty. The name and the purpose appealed to American Čechs so strongly that in a dozen years every larger settlement boasted of a *Lípa*. The by-laws of the domestic *Lípas* provided for the fostering of the mother tongue, founding of circulating libraries, encouraging choral singing, theatricals, etc. The American *Lípas* fully justified their existence. Later, when the advantages of personal insurance became more fully appreciated several of the *Lípas* became charter members of the Č. S. P. S. benevolent organization.

The Sokols. The Sokols had their inception also in Prague, in 1862. It is a mistake to think that the system of physical training as practiced by American Sokols is patterned after that of the German Turners. Back of the Čech system, as elaborated by Miroslav Tyrš (1832-84), and Jindřich Fügner (1822-65) was an idea which aimed higher than the mere training of the body. The Sokol was required to be like the Samurai of old Japan—courageous, faithful to duty, lover of his country. From Bohemia the Sokol ideology spread to other Slavic countries. How accurately Tyrš and Fügner had visualized the future significance of this body was demonstrated in the war just ended. The Sokols were at the bottom of every move directed against the Hapsburg monarchy.

Choral singing and amateur theatricals. No national group is more given to amateur acting—producing plays in the national tongue—than the Čechs. So much importance is attributed to these theatricals that local historians are wont to register not only the titles of plays acted in this or that settlement, but likewise the names of the talent impersonating the leading rôles. Since the Civil War, New York was never without a dramatic society—at times it had as many as six. Priests, editors, farmers, mechanics, business men, domestics—immigrants and their American-born progeny—all were eager to taste the exhilaration and the glory of the footlights. Lately amateur impresarios are compelled to lean more and more on volunteers drawn from the ranks of the native born; in the choral societies, it is no secret, Americans are already in the majority. Amateur stage folk and singers combined, have even invaded the field of light opera. That the fondness for this sort of amusement

has been brought over from old Bohemia goes without saying. Under the Austrian régime, which kept a watchful eye over the doings of the Čechs, the stage, the amateur stage and later, when actors had been trained and Čech stock companies started out on their itineraries from town to village, the professional stage, constituted a strong link in the chain of national revival.

Opposition to theocracy. One-half—according to some authorities more than one-half—of American Čechs have given up their inherited faith. Some joined other religious bodies, but the bulk of the dissenters do not affiliate with any church. One finds nothing quite like it among other immigrants, certainly not among American Slavs. What is the cause of this religious abstention? Here again, to understand, we must turn back to the fatherland for explanation, read the story of this war-scarred country, study the national characteristics of the people.

The old-time Čechs, historians tell us, were given to religious meditation, clinging tenaciously to their beliefs. For faith and country the Hussites in the fifteenth century faced huge armies of crusaders sent to crush the "heretics." The Church of Bohemian Brethren, from which the Moravians in England and the United States claim descent, sprung from a desire of its founders and followers to lead purer lives in strict accord with the precepts of the scriptures. The emigration from Bohemia after 1620, following the victory of the Hapsburgs over the Protestants, was of a religious character. Tens of thousands preferred banishment to the renunciation of their faith. The most merciless persecution on the part of the civil and ecclesiastic authorities during the era of the restoration of Catholicism

which extended from 1620 to 1781, when the Patent of Tolerance was issued, could not wholly eradicate the "hidden seed."

In past ages every village boasted of its "písmák," a wise man, who was versed in the "písmo," meaning the Bible and who expounded its lessons to the villagers. Prior to the Battle of White Mountain (1620), the Čechs had been Protestants. By 1914, ninety-six per cent. (according to Austrian official figures) professed the Catholic faith. That such a fundamental religious re-making of a people could not be accomplished without leaving a mark on its character and without influencing the direction of its thought, is self-evident.

At present Bohemia again finds herself in the throes of a religious rebirth. A concerted movement is on foot (it was inaugurated in October, 1918, when Čechoslovakia rid herself of the Hapsburgs), which can be expressed in three words: "Away from Rome!" Already hundreds of thousands have severed their connection with the old church and have joined the Čechoslovak National Church. The self-same propaganda, "Away from Rome!" has been carried on in Čech America for more than half a century. The result is as stated at the outset of this paragraph.

Slavic solidarity. No one in particular propagated here the thought of closer cultural relations with other Slavs—Slovaks, Russians, Poles, Serbo-Croations—yet the idea of Slavic reciprocity, of close comradeship, was popular from the start. Slavic "congresses" had been called and societies had been organized to foster and encourage Slavic fraternization. The first body of men to volunteer from Chicago for service during the Civil War received the name Slavonian Rifle Company. In the sixties,