Settling Accounts With an Old Adversary:
The Decatholicization of CZECH Immigrants in America

by Karel D. Bicha *

The religious radicalization of immigrant groups, or the large-scale attrition of immigrants from an Old World religious tradition as an integral facet of the immigration process, has hardly been characteristic of the American experience of the foreign-born. On the contrary, the departure from a familiar physical and cultural environment ordinarily strengthened the ties of immigrants to their historic faith, at least in the short run. Religious radicals, such as the freethinking contingent of the German Forty-Eighters, did in fact emigrate to America, and many other groups — Quakers, Mennonites, Hutterites, Doukhobors, Swedenborgians, German Brethren and Haugean Lutherans, for example — fitted the definition of "religious radicals" to one degree or another. In every instance, however, the particular radicalism was conceived, born, nurtured, developed in and defined by the original European culture and transplanted to America in mature form. Secondly, while religious attrition and conversion from one faith to another occurred among immigrants, it was generally unplanned and attributable to the peculiarities of personal experience in the New World.

Ordinarily, however, both radicalism and orthodoxy were transplanted intact. Conversion or attrition occurred after a period of residence in America if it occurred at all. Departure from the native village, though a dramatic change in cultural and emotional environment, was not the efficacious variable in the process. On the whole it must be concluded that European religious traditions were effectively transplanted to the New World. Through much of the nineteenth century, however, Roman Catholic authorities were disposed to doubt the staying power of the Roman Church in America, and a substantial literature on the problem of "leakage" was presented and thrashed over in Catholic circles. In the end the "leakage question" was resolved to the satisfaction of the Church when "proof" was presented that attributions of "leakage" were grossly

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overstated. The major study of the problem, Gerald Shaughnessy's *Has the Immigrant Kept the Faith?* (1925), offered elaborate statistics to buttress the affirmative answer to the question posed by his title and put to rest the problem of Catholicism's intercontinental perpetuity for more than a generation.[1] Yet recently some pertinent new questions have been raised about the "Italian problem" in American Catholicism,[2] and, by implication at least, the entire matter of immigrant religious loyalty has been raised anew.

The religious history of another immigrant group provides further reason to disinter Shaughnessy's conclusions and to submit the "leakage" issue to additional scrutiny. These were the Czechs of Bohemia and Moravia, a small immigrant group but hardly an inconsequential one in the Catholic context. The religious performance of the Czech immigrants in America was a striking contradiction of the positive conclusions regarding the effective transplantation of Catholicism from Europe to America. Between 1848 and 1914 perhaps 300,000 Czechs emigrated to the United States, settling mainly on farms in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Nebraska and Texas and creating sizeable urban colonies in New York, Cleveland and Chicago.[3] The latter city, in particular, dominated Czech-American life by 1880. At least half of the Czech immigrants repudiated Catholicism and adhered to or sympathized with an unsophisticated but formalized Freethought (*Svobodomyšlení*), rooted in the principles of atheism.[4] However small the number of Czechs, they did comprise the sixth largest normally Catholic foreign-language group in America, and, with the inclusion of the Irish, the seventh largest nationality group in American Catholicism.[5]

The decatholicization of Czech immigrants constituted a peculiar case of the non-transference of cultural values, a case of deliberately fractured cultural linkages occasioned by immigration itself. Articulate Bohemian immigrants, and other observers, both sympathetic and hostile, often spec-

[1] Gerald SHAUGHNESSY, *Has the Immigrant Kept the Faith?* (New York, 1925), 214-223, 246-257.

[2] Rudolph J. VECOLI, "Prelates and Peasants: Italian Immigrants and the Catholic Church," *Journal of Social History*, II (Spring, 1969), 217-268.

[3] See Thomas CAPEK, *The Cechs (Bohemians) in America* (New York, 1920), 25-63.

[4] *Ibid.*, 119-136 *et passim.*

[5] SHAUGHNESSY, *Has the Immigrant Kept the Faith?*, 218. Shaughnessy listed Capek's book in his bibliography, but it is apparent that he did not make use of the volume.

ulated about the reasons for the Czech repudiation of the Church in America, largely because its anti-Christian thrust was unique among immigrant groups of Christian background. Agreement was forth-coming only on the fact that the Czech-American farmer was slightly less susceptible to decatholicization than his counterpart in the urban settlements.

Religion, of course, had long been a fundamental concern of the Bohemian people; and in the old Bohemian kingdom religious inquiry and disputation were normative in the society. The national Utraquist Church, the principal institutional derivative of the reform movement inspired by Jan Hus, was testimony to the fact that Bohemia became, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the first Protestant state in Europe. Moreover, Hussite Protestantism fulfilled a dual function, serving both as a distinctive religious movement and as a Slavic rebuke to the Germanization of Bohemian culture. Thus, the destruction of Bohemian independence in 1620 and the brutal recatholicization of Bohemia which followed represented more than political humiliation. It was a German-dominated attempt at cultural annihilation. [6]

Resentment of German predominance became a permanent attitude in the little that survived of the Bohemian collective consciousness. Writing in 1890, the noted social critic Jacob Riis ascribed the propensity for religious infidelity among Bohemian immigrants in New York as "the legacy perhaps of the fierce contention through hundreds of years between Protestants and Catholics on Bohemia's soil, of bad faith and savage persecutions in the name of the Christians' God that disgrace its history." [7] A generation later a Czech-American sociologist declared that the attitudes of anti-Germanism and anti-Catholicism were so deeply imbedded in Bohemian immigrants that they were "mechanistic." [8] Hence, in the history of the Czech people after 1620, domination by Habsburg Vienna became the fundamental social grievance, and at the local and village levels the Catholic clergy served as the willing and repressive tools of the Habsburg state. Immigration, of course, meant physical extrication from

[6] The information in this paragraph is contained in any reputable history of the Czech people. See, for example, S. Harrison THOMSON, *Czechoslovakia in European History* (2nd ed.; Princeton, 1953), 48-158.

[7] Jacob RIIS, *How the Other Half Lives* (1967 ed.; New York, 1967), 109.

[8] Jakub HORAK, "Assimilation of Czechs in Chicago" (Ph.D. thesis, University of Chicago, 1920), 95.

Habsburg control, and, in many cases, emotional and religious liberation from Rome. To ordinary peasants Rome and Vienna were one. Therefore, the objection of Bohemians was to the political and institutional Church, not to its religious dimension; clerical motive, rather than religious faith, was the compelling object of distrust. In America, however, religious faith was the principal casualty. [9]

Thus, the roots of Bohemian-American Freethought were deeply implanted in the history, tradition and culture of the old Bohemian kingdom. With understanding and approbation Jacob Riis quoted a Bohemian clergyman in New York who observed that Czechs were "Roman Catholic by birth, infidels by necessity, and Protestants by history and inclination." [10] On the other hand, contemporaries who observed the attrition from Catholicism among Czechs in America offered a series of naive explanations for it. In turn, the shortage of Czech-speaking priests, the scarcity of churches, the disposition of immigrants to believe the anti-clerical propaganda of renegade priests, and "vulgar materialism" were offered as serious reasons for departure from the Church. [11] At best, these explanations were results rather than causes, and all of them failed to penetrate the essence of the problem.

The decatholicization of Czech immigrants in the United States comprised the five following elements: (1) the history and culture of Old Bohemia, that is, its role as a religious battleground, the predilection of its people for religious controversy, its early and successful protestantization, and the forced and brazen nature of its recatholicization; (2) the marginal sincerity of Catholicism in the peasant villages of Bohemia; (3) the elimination, by emigration itself, of the most meaningful elements in the religious commitment of the peasants, that is, the elements associated with the folk tradition and the physical and cultural milieu of the village; (4) the fortuitous, yet strategic, arrival on the American scene of a group of able, articulate ex-clergymen and seminarians, many of them refugees from the Bohemian political and social upheavals of 1848 and the 1860's; and (5) the domination by these religious radicals of Czech-language communications, especially the press, in the formative

[9] Kenneth D. Miller, *The Czecho-Slovaks in America* (New York, 1922), 133.
[10] Riis, *How the Other Half Lives*, 109.
[11] Tomas Capek, *Padesat let ceskeho tisku v Americe* (Fifty Years of Czech Letters in America) (New York, 1911), 33ff., especially 34-37.

years of the immigrant community. With few exceptions, the editorial and intellectual leadership of Czech-American Freethought consisted of former priests, a few former Protestant ministers, and a sprinkling of others whose experience in theological seminaries was terminated before its completion. [12]

Nevertheless, there is evidence which demonstrates that the Bohemian immigrants of the 1850's, the first sizeable group to arrive, had many in their midst who had already achieved intellectual liberation from Catholicism without the help of professional freethinkers. The first Czech-American newspaper, *Flüg-Blätter* (Flyleaves; 1852-1854), published in German in Milwaukee by Vojta Naprstek, a refugee from the Prague uprising of 1848, was vigorously anti-clerical. [13] Its immediate successors, *Slowan Amerikansky* (American Slav; 1860) and *Slavie* (1861-1918), both published in Czech in Racine, Wisconsin, were enterprises established by religious radicals later prominent in the organization of Freethought societies. [14] Reminiscences of old settlers in the Chicago Czech community, moreover, indicated that immigrants in the early 1860's attended services on Sunday morning in order to subject the priest's sermon to ridicule and dissection at an afternoon meeting in a Czech tavern. [15] In St. Louis, where the earliest Czech urban colony had been formed, a Freethought society was organized in the 1860's and the earliest Czech Catholic parish failed for lack of support. [16]

The decade from 1867 to 1877, which witnessed numerous instances of religious, economic and organizational conflict in the small immigrant community, was determinative of the fractured character of Czech-American life. In 1867 a new and caustic Freethought journal, *Pokrok* (Progress; 1867-1878), appeared in Chicago (later Cleveland), and after its demise its work was carried on by the daily Chicago *Svornost* (Harmony; 1875-1957) and the weekly Cleveland *Dennice Novoveku* (Morning

12 CAPEK, *The Cechs (Bohemians) in America,* 119-125, 130-136; Ernest ZIZKA, *Czech Cultural Contributions* (Chicago, 1942), 70, 83-85; CAPEK, *Padesat let ceského tisku v Americe,* 36.

13 CAPEK, *The Cechs (Bohemians) in America,* 125-127.

14 *Ibid.,* 127, 167-170, 178-179.

15 F. B. ZDRUBEK, "Narodni Zivot Cechu Chicagskych" (National Life of the Chicago Czechs), *Amerikan,* VII (1884), 152-171. *Amerikan* was the yearbook of the Chicago *Svornost.* Zdrubek's article consisted of the edited minutes of the *Slovanska Lipa* (Slavic Linden Tree) society of Chicago for the year 1862.

16 Joseph CADA, *The Catholic Central Union* (Chicago, 1952), 4-5.

Star of the New Age; 1877-1910), allegedly the most literate of all Czech-language journals.[17] The attack on Catholicism conducted by these papers was direct, specific and unrelenting, while the older journals like *Slavie* assisted by indirection and subtlety. To counter the Freethought broadsides the clergy and their supporters could offer only one organ, edited and ineffectively circulated from the declining Czech community in St. Louis.

Two additional occurrences in the 1867-1877 decade helped to convert the growing indifference to Catholicism into outright hostility, and, subsequently, to give substance to the Freethought movement. One was the arrival in 1869 of Ladimir Klacel, Frantisek B. Zdrubek and Vaclav Snajdr in the United States. Arriving independently and unknown to each other, each of the three played a vital role in the making of a viable Czech Freethought. Klacel, an ex-monk who departed the Augustinian order at the age of sixty-one, was a well-known Czech philosopher, who, in spite of a reputation as a dreamer, gave organizational impetus and form to the Freethought phenomenon. Zdrubek, a one-time Catholic seminarian and an ordained Protestant minister, took charge of *Pokrok*, and subsequently edited *Svornost* for thirty-five years. Snajdr, also a former seminary student, sat in the editor's chair of *Dennice Novoveku* for thirty-three years.[18]

In April of 1870 Ladimir Klacel, then resident in Iowa City, issued a call to "revive the first root which lay buried underground," that is, to revitalize the Hussite reform tradition.[19] Not long afterwards the editor of *Pokrok* invited enthusiasts of religious liberalism to meet on November 8, 1870 (the 350th anniversary of the loss of Bohemian independence at the Battle of White Mountain), in order to discuss the political and religious aims of the Czech immigrants in America. By the end of 1870 a Freethinker's Union (*Jednota Svobodomylsnych*), composed of members from twenty-three communities, had been organized and a formal organ, *Hlas Jednoty Svobodomylsnych* (Voice of the Freethinker's Union), made its appearance under Klacel's editorship.[20]

17 CAPEK, *The Cechs (Bohemians) in America*, 127-129, 187-189.
18 *Ibid.*, 129, 130-131, 181-188, 191-194, 196-198.
19 CAPEK, *Padesat let ceskeho tisku v Americe*, 37-38.
20 *Ibid.*, *Hlas Jednoty Svobodomyslnych* is not extant.

Under the aegis of *Hlas*, the organizational dimensions of the early Freethought movement were worked out in 1871. A constitution and by-laws were drafted and approved. *Hlas* was chosen as the official publication of the *Jednota*, and the officers of the society were to be elected annually on July 4. Members pledged themselves not to hold membership in religious bodies, to address each other as "thou," and to employ the terms "father," "mother," "brother" and sister in proper address. The editor of *Hlas*, in turn, was installed as the official arbitrator of disputes in the *Jednota* and received the proper titles of "Brother Mediator," "Father," and "Teacher." [21]

In addition, Klacel provided a formal creed for the *Jednota* in the form of fourteen articles of faith. These were as follows:

(1) We observe, believe and conceive that all things that are, grow and live are subject to certain laws of intelligence.

(2) We teach, believe and conceive that in this variety all natural objects stand in a certain mutual relationship governed by natural laws.

(3) We observe, believe and conceive that mutuality progresses in such a way in which a great number of lower, simple organisms combines, survives and concentrates to form higher, more complex units.

(4) We observe, believe and conceive that man is the most complex and therefore most perfect product of the earth.

(5) We observe, believe and conceive that the highest product of man is his spirit, that is, his mind and will, the self-conscious concentration of which he calls "I."

(6) We observe, believe and conceive that man *per se* is inadequate and incomplete, that persons or individuals are called upon to combine minds and wills into higher units, beginning with small communities, organizing these into larger ones until all humanity is formed into one entity; this self-conscious entity we term the Great Man, who is served by every member as the only Lord on earth.

(7) We observe, believe and conceive the earth to be a member of a higher, more complex unit which we term the "solar system."

[21] *Ibid.*, 37-38.

(8) We imagine the solar system to be likewise a member of a higher, more complex unit and that all further imagined units form one body, which we term the "universe."

(9) We believe every creature has its purpose in the universe as its member; this purposefulness we term "Universality."

(10) We believe and conceive that unconscious creatures fulfill their purposes by their being, growth and life, and we term this "natural religion."

(11) We believe and conceive everything to possess a feeling of this universality and we term this "religion."

(12) We feel, believe and conceive that all conscious creatures are made free by this consciousness, and that therefore they by their own wills perform this purpose, and that this is conscious or "free religion."

(13) We term the magnitude of the universe "beauty," the laws of the universe "truth," and the pattern to be followed by humanity in ordering its affairs "universal goodness."

(14) The devotion of one member of the universe to another is "love," its conscious doings are "justice," the recognition of its laws is "science," and the imitation of universal beauty by the senses is "art." [22]

There is no reason to believe that a majority or even a large proportion of freethinking Czech immigrants subscribed wholly to this rigorous creed, but its promulgation in 1870 is illustrative of the maturity of the movement and the zeal with which its adherents pursued their goals. Secondly, by the end of the 1870's parish crises and public confrontations between clergymen and Freethought spokesmen had further undermined the clerical position and provided additional ammunition to the liberal editors who controlled communications in the immigrant community. In Chicago, for example, a protracted struggle over the ownership of the property of St. Wenceslaus parish, once deeded to the laymen's fraternal society of the parish, produced an attrition of sympathetic laymen from all three of Chicago's Czech-language parishes. [23] The attrition was con-

[22] Quoted in Tomas CAPEK, *Nase Amerika* (Our America) (Prague, 1926), 370-371.
[23] Joseph CADA, *Czech-American Catholics*, 1850-1920 (Lisle, Ill., 1964), 35-36.

firmed, and Czech Catholicism nearly destroyed in Chicago when, in April, 1877, the pastor of St. Wenceslaus engaged in two public debates with Frantisek B. Zdrubek of *Svornost*. Since Czech Catholics in Chicago had no journal until 1894, Zdrubek's ability to publish his version of the debates without fear of contradiction was of considerable value to the Freethought cause.[24]

Similar occurrences yielded similar results earlier in the 1870's in the rapidly growing Czech colony in Cleveland. In fact, the freethinkers pressed the issue to the point that Zdrubek, then editor of *Pokrok* and grossly ignorant of American law, became the prime defendant in a libel action brought by a local priest, who later succumbed to Freethought allurements and defected from the clergy. Regarded as a test of strength by both sides, the freethinkers came away with a newly created and durable Liberal Union.[25] Moreover, though no dramatic religious confrontation occurred in the New York Czech colony, Freethought succeeded even more than in Chicago or Cleveland. As late as 1920, long after the movement's thrust had been vitiated, 620 of every 1,000 New York Czechs professed no religious affiliation.[26]

From the late 1870's to the time of World War I, life in the Czech quarters of American cities and in Bohemian farm settlements was characterized by abrasiveness and unpleasantness between freethinkers and Catholics. With few exceptions the intelligentsia of Czech America adhered to Freethought, and this provided the liberal cause with a major advantage in all matters involving articulation.[27] The obituary notices from 1900 to 1914 in Chicago's major Czech organ, the neutral *Denni Hlasatel* (Daily Herald; 1892 to date), show that all but a handful of the civic, professional, political, financial and artistic leaders of the Bohemian community who died in this period were buried with Freethought services.[28] Though the process is untraceable, Freethought also penetrated the Bohemian farming communities. As late as 1920, for example, Catholic religious

[24] *Ibid.*, 43; CAPEK, *The Cechs (Bohemians) in America*, 198.
[25] CAPEK, *The Cechs (Bohemians) in America*, 128, 131.
[26] *Ibid.*, 119.
[27] *Ibid.*, 120.
[28] In fact, only two prominent residents of the Czech community received Catholic burials in this period.

services were held in only 313 of the 750 American communities which contained 100 or more people of Czech stock. [29]

The decatholicization techniques of the Freethought missionaries were many and varied. Perhaps the most effective were the simplest and crudest — vilification, caricature, and sensational disclosure. Between 1870 and 1900, the activist phase of the freethinking phenomenon, the movement proceeded from anti-clericalism and opposition to the institutional forms of Catholicism to the negation of Catholic theology and faith itself. Translations of the works of ex-priests, "disclosures" by expatriated "nuns" of the iniquity of convent life, exposés of the misuse of the confessional, confessions of the "Popes," and serialized novels romanticizing Bohemia's Hussite past filled the pages of the freethinking journals. [30] One Chicago weekly, appropriately titled *Sotek* (The Imp; 1893-1905), featured a "peep hole" column which concentrated on the indiscretions of a single divine each week. [31] Many Freethought editors also viewed themselves as aspiring *literati*, contributing numerous literacy caricatures of Christian classics, rhymed and comic bibles, humorous lives of saints and similar material to the cause. [32]

On another level, the more learned and refined Freethought editors translated the works of major rationalist thinkers for their readers. The writings of Voltaire, Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason*, and the great German scholar David Strauss' *Das Leben Jesu* were held in particular esteem in the Bohemian Freethought community. Undoubtedly the most influential rationalist, however, was the contemporary American agnostic, Robert G. Ingersoll, whose *Lectures* regularly appeared in the Czech press. [33] Considering the educational level of the ordinary peasant immigrant, however, it would be unwise to conclude that the ideas of the great rationalists were more influential in the success of the Freethought cause than the direct, biting attacks on Catholic belief and on clerical motive and performance.

As Freethought exercised increasing influence in the Bohemian community it acquired institutional forms which were, in a sense, contra-

29 Miller, *The Czecho-Slovaks in America*, 124.
30 Zizka, *Czech Cultural Contributions*, 53.
31 Capek, *The Cechs (Bohemians) in America*, 176, 205.
32 *Ibid.*, 198, 200; Zizka, *Czech Cultural Contributions*, 48-53.
33 *Ibid.*

dictory to its intrinsic individualism. By 1900, when the movement had weakened, it had developed ritualistic practices which were almost liturgical. The fundamental deficiency of the movement then became apparent, for the motive and the intensity of conviction of the immigrant freethinkers were difficult to transmit to American-born children who had never experienced clericalism. Moreover, the immigrant freethinkers were dilatory in developing the agencies necessary to socialize children in their values. Nor were they able entirely to escape the imagery, technique and processes of the faith which they had rejected. Services for the presentation of infants and for funerals were developed,[34] and even special lenten lectures were sponsored in an attempt to supply a corrective for "blind faith in public worship" which was regarded as "poison to the heart."[35] And in 1883, after a protracted legal struggle, the Speaker of the Liberal Union in Chicago was authorized by the state to officiate at marriage ceremonies.[36] Later, catechisms appeared for children enrolled in the Freethought schools. Thus, Freethought emerged as the functional equivalent of a Christian sect. It was, in reality, a religious movement, the product of sincere men who had matured in an environment of religious abuse and who regarded ultimate values as the essence of life.[37] While Freethought must be regarded primarily as atheism embellished by form, this hardly explained the attitude of the grandmotherly Chicago freethinker who observed, "I have my God in my heart, I shall deal with Him. I do not want any priest to step between us."[38]

Freethought was nurtured and preserved entirely within the Czech-American context. Only selected influences from the broader society flowed inward, and the Freethought spokesmen were not disposed to proselytize their views outside of the Bohemian community. Indeed, to the extent that the movement was known outside the Czech immigrant sphere it was regarded as scandalous. A number of untruths circulated about the behavior and attitudes of the freethinkers, the most absurd of which was the contention that the incidence of suicide was remarkably high among

[34] CAPEK, *The Cechs (Bohemians) in America*, 134; ZIZKA, *Czech Cultural Contributions*, 48-53.

[35] Chicago *Svornost* (Harmony), March 4, 1900.

[36] *Ibid.*, January 23, 1883.

[37] See, for example, Emily G. BALCH, *Our Slavic Fellow Citizens* (New York, 1910), 391.

[38] Quoted in Alice MASARYK, "The Bohemians in Chicago," *The Charities*, XIII (December 3, 1904), 208.

members of Freethought societies.[39] Consequently, whenever Freethought officials confronted the general public they commonly employed terms like "Liberal" and "Progressive" to depict their beliefs, hoping that euphemism would afford a measure of protection from hostile public opinion.[40] Only once did Freethought organizations deliberately seek a change in public policy. In 1896 the associated Chicago Freethought societies petitioned the Board of Education to eliminate Bible reading in the public schools. Constitutionality notwithstanding, the freethinkers alleged that such reading "would spoil the young hearts of our children, would deprive them of pity for humanity, good fellowship and tolerance to others, of morals, liberty and education."[41]

By 1900 Czech-American Freethought had become nearly as institutionalized as the Church. The Church, of course, had its parishes, but they were few in number. (In the Southwest quarter of the city of Chicago, which contained the Czech community, the number of churches in 1903 on a population basis was less than one-third of the national average.)[42] To counteract the organizational challenge of the Church, the freethinkers developed the Czech-American fraternal order, the lodge hall, the language school, the benefit society and *Sokol*.[43] Though the early Czech organizations were formally theistic, freethinkers came to dominate them by the 1870's. The earliest societies, the *Slovanska Lipa* (Slavic Linden Tree) chain, apparently took no position on religious questions, but the ease with which these societies merged with the definitely anti-clerical *Sokol* movement in the 1870's was indicative of the attitude of the members. But the largest of all the Bohemian organizations, and the one which most effectively disseminated freethought ideas, was *Cesko-Slovansky Podporujici Spolek* (Czech-Slavic Benevolent Society), ordinarily known as C.S.P.S. Born in a St. Louis tavern in 1854, C.S.P.S. extended its influence beyond that locality by the mid-1870's, establishing lodges and offering fraternal insurance to its members. In

39 Sidney WARREN, *American Freethought, 1860-1914* (New York, 1943), 92.
40 MILLER, *The Czecho-Slovaks in America*, 132.
41 Chicago *Svornost*, May 8, 1896.
42 Ernest P. BICKNELL, "Problems of Philanthropy in Chicago," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, XXI (1903), 384.
43 *Sokol* (Falcon) was a gymnastic-physical culture movement with patriotic and liberal (anti-clerical) religious overtones. It was the equivalent of the German *Turnverein*. The movement was founded in Bohemia and introduced among American Czechs in the early 1860's.

1896 the organization was rent by a major secession of its western lodges, but religious questions played no role in the split.[44] By the early 1870's C.S.P.S. was dominated by freethinkers, for *Pokrok* served as its official organ from 1872 to 1877 and *Dennice Novoveku* for the 1877-1891 period.[45]

Numerous other Freethought-oriented fraternal bodies were established after 1870. C.S.P.S. founded, in 1870, a female affiliate, *Jednota Ceskych Dam* (Union of Czech Women), along with related youth groups. In 1880 *Jednota Taboritu* (Union of Taborites) was formed, taking its name from the old Bohemian fortress of Tabor, headquarters of the radical wing of the Hussite movement. Other organizations, smaller in membership and more localized in influence, were the Czech Fraternal Benefit Union of Women (1890), the Czech-Slavic Union (1892), the Bohemian-American Foresters (1899), and the Bohemian-American Union (1910). While the provision of fraternal insurance was the official reason for the existence of most of these groups, they were at least as important for their role in the dissemination of Freethought ideas through their lodges, the social equivalents of the Catholic parishes.[46]

Chicago, with a Czech population of 35,000 in 1883, boasted fifty-two Freethought societies, a Freethought school, and only three Catholic parishes.[47] And Catholicism was relatively strong in the Chicago Czech community. At least one hundred small benefit societies, generally freethinker in membership, were organized in Chicago in the succeeding two decades. These small mutual-aid groups were overshadowed by 259 lodges of sixteen larger fraternal associations.[48] By 1920, the high point in Czech-American organizational life, Freethought-oriented bodies claimed 123,000 of the 156,000 members of Czech societies in the United States.[49]

Adult freethinkers were tardy and less successful in establishing the necessary mechanisms to transmit their values to their American-born

[44] Josef MARTINEK, *Stoleti Jednoty CSA* (A Century of the CSA) (Cicero, Ill., 1955), 8-130 *et passim; Organ Bratrstva* (Organ of Brotherhood), March 15, 1944, 43-44. This journal was the fraternal publication of the Czechoslovak Society of America. See below, n. 57.

[45] CAPEK, *The Cechs (Bohemians) in America*, 129; *Organ Bratrstva*, March 15, 1944, 43.

[46] Eugene R. MCCARTHY, "The Bohemians of Chicago and their Benefit Societies, 1875-1946" (MA Thesis, University of Chicago, 1946), 40.

[47] Chicago *Svornost*, August 19, 1883.

[48] *Ibid.*, June 26, 1904; Chicago *Denni Hlasatel* (Daily Herald), October 28, 1904.

[49] CAPEK, *The Cechs (Bohemians) in America*, 263-264.

children. Here the principal device was the language school, ordinarily operated as an adjunct to a fraternal lodge or a *Sokol* society. Though language schools were not especially effective, they did permit the freethinkers to take the leading role in the preservation of the Czech language in America. Language schools appeared as early as 1862, but most of the early enterprises existed only briefly. The first successful schools dated from the 1880's.[50] Without exception the schools were of the Sunday-School type, and instruction was provided by a volunteer staff for minimal compensation. In Chicago, where language schools were most actively promoted, 1,340 students were enrolled by 1912 in nineteen separate schools, and the institutions were coordinated by a Federation of Freethought Schools.[51] While instruction in Czech grammar and phonetics was the avowed purpose of the schools, much of the classroom experience was contoured to permit the inculcation of Freethought ideas. The method employed was the formal catechism, again indicative of the indebtedness of the freethinkers to the system which they had rejected. Since the catechetical method is geared to simplicity and forthrightness, the freethinkers obliged with sparse, patently explicit materials for their children. The following excerpts are illustrative:

Q. What is God ?

A. God is a word denoting a transcendent being invented by man.

Q. Are churches useful organizations ?

A. Churches are the greatest obstacle to human development, and it is the duty of every person to suppress them.

Q. Do the priests believe in what they preach ?

A. A large majority does not.

Q. What is the object of their preaching ?

A. To make a good and easy living.[52]

[50] RACINE (Wis.) *Slavie*, January 12, 1865; Zdrubek, "Narodni Zivot Cechu Chicagskych," 159.

[51] Chicago *Denni Hlasatel*, January 22, 1912; HORAK, "Assimilation of Czechs in Chicago," 85-86.

[52] Quoted in MILLER, *The Czecho-Slovaks in America*, 129-130.

The influence of such learning experiences on American-born children of Czech ancestry cannot be discerned, and after 1925 the number of schools dwindled rapidly.

Nevertheless, it cannot be doubted that Freethought dominated Czech-American life in its immigrant phase. In 1911, 50,000 Chicago Czechs turned out for the unveiling of a monument to Karel Havlicek Borovsky, anti-clerical journalist, martyr, and leader of the national revival in mid-nineteenth century Bohemia.[53] Four years later, on the quincentenary of the execution of Jan Hus, the Czech quarter of Chicago was festooned with bunting and likenesses of Hus, youth rallies were organized, and sidewalk vendors hawked Jan Hus post-cards.[54] The Bohemian freethinkers appropriated the Christian reformer to their cause, preferring to cast him in his nationalist rather than his religious role and assuming that, had Hus been a modern man, he would have accepted the Freethought postulates.[55] In their last important organizational activity, moreover, the united Freethought groups promoted vigorously the cause of a nation-state for the Czechs during the years of World War I, while Czech Catholic organizations warily associated themselves with the movement only after the United States became a belligerent.[56]

Although the Czechoslovak Rationalist Federation of America and a few Free Schools have survived to the present and continue to promote the cause of Freethought, the movement was largely a generational phenomenon. Membership in Freethought associations declined rapidly in the 1920's, and in 1933 the major fraternal bodies coalesced into the Czechoslovak Society of America as a survival tactic. An insurance and social organization, CSA operates not as a Freethought society but simply as a "non-Catholic" organization.[57]

Finally, Bohemian-American Freethought was always an insular movement, generally unrelated to and uninfluenced by the rationalist and positivist currents that affected European and American intellectuals in

[53] Chicago *Denni Hlasatel*, July 31, 1911.
[54] *Ibid.*, June 20, 1915.
[55] MILLER, *The Czecho-Slovaks in America*, 132.
[56] Chicago *Denni Hlasatel* devoted dozens of articles to the promotion of a nation-state for the Czechs by Czech-American groups during the war years. See also Otakar ODLOZILIK, "The Czechs," in Joseph P. O'GRADY (ed.), *The Immigrants' Influence on Wilson's Peace Policies* (Lexington, Ky., 1967), 204-223, especially 208-209.
[57] MCCARTHY, "The Bohemians of Chicago and their Benefit Societies, 1875-1946," 52.

the later nineteenth century. The impact of the contemporary American agnostic, Robert G. Ingersoll, on the immigrant freethinkers was an important but unique exception. Nor was the movement related to Freethought activity in Bohemia itself, for formal organization in Bohemia did not commence until 1904.[58]

Some Catholic attempts to repatriate the children of freethinkers were made in the 1920's, but these activities availed little.[59] Descendants of Czech-American freethinkers either affiliated with the commonplace Protestant denominations or remained indifferent. While it was undoubtedly true, as Kenneth D. Miller alleged in 1922, that Czech Freethought in America was primarily a poignant commentary on the religious brutalization of Bohemia and on the deplorable condition of the Catholic clergy in the Austrian lands,[60] the immigrant Bohemian freethinker, on behalf of himself and his ancestors, settled accounts with his old adversary and took his revenge.

[58] Karel PELANT, "Usoustaveni protiklerikalni prace" (Establishing Anti-Clerical Work), *Volna Myslenka* (Free Thought; Prague), II (March, 1907), 169.
[59] MILLER, *The Czecho-Slovaks in America*, 133-134.
[60] *Ibid.*, 133.