

## FROM POLOM TO AMERICA

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Emigration from Bohemia and Moravia into America has dates back to early 17<sup>th</sup> century, to shortly after the Battle of White Mountain. At first, Czechs and Moravians did not leave their country directly for America, but rather found their way there only after spending some time in Holland, England or Saxony. The (mass) exodus started in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Traveling by rail to German ports, the weary travelers found respite at these ports before setting across the ocean. According to various statistics, it is estimated that during the 1850s about 23 thousand Czechs and Moravians left their country for the states, during the 1860s about 33 thousand, during the 1870s about 50 thousand, and during the 1880s about 62 thousand. After 1890, the number of immigrants from Bohemia and Moravia dropped precipitously. At that time, a sharp rise in the number of immigrants from Eastern Europe started. In 1895, for the first, time more immigrants arrived the US shores from Eastern Europe than from Western Europe.

Although the causes of emigration were numerous, for analytical purposes these can be divided into two main categories: The first category comprised factors that can be generally characterized as unfavorable conditions in the country or area of origin. This would include economic depression, religious and ethnic repression, overpopulation of agricultural areas and in lack of arable land, threats of war, conscription and various personal and familial difficulties. The second category was not altogether with being premised on the first, as it reflected the collective aspiration, the holding out of the promise of a new start, of a better life on a new continent. Doubtlessly, paramount was the yearning for religious and political freedom, the availability of land and economic opportunity.

Leaving Bohemia and Moravia was not easy. The would-be emigrants had to obtain a permit from the Austrian authorities or risk leaving illegally. Illegal means had to be resorted to if one wanted to dodge the compulsory military service or when an estate owner refused to grant permission of leave to a peasant.

Most went by rail to one of the ports, usually Bremen or Hamburg, and then directly to the United States. Earlier on, however, the preferred route was through England and on board English ships. On board a steamer the voyage took approximately two weeks, by sailboat four weeks or

more. Few of the ships took them to the east coast– New York, Baltimore, Boston and Philadelphia, some dropped them off in New Orleans, Louisiana, or in Galveston, Texas. Voyages to ports in the Gulf of Mexico took longer. Once ashore, the new immigrants boarded trains or steamboats. At the end of the line, oxen driven carriages took the newcomers to their chosen destinations.

In the second half of the 19th century, Czechs and Moravians went mostly to Illinois, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, New York, Ohio and Wisconsin. More than 80% of all Czechs and Moravians who lived in the US lived in these seven states. In cities like New York, Chicago and Cleveland, they found many fellow-countrymen who helped them find work in the blue-collar professions. As a contrast, those who settled in Minnesota, Nebraska and Wisconsin worked predominantly in agriculture. At the very end of the century, for many the destination of choice became that of California and Texas. The American Midwest is comprised of 12 states: North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana and Ohio.

During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, not only Czechs and Moravians came to this area, but so did settlers from Germany, Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Ireland. Many Czech and Moravian farmers differed from the majority English speaking neighbors in that they bought their farms from their savings, as opposed to the customary financing of farms from banks. They saved their money during their first months and years of their stay in the US, when they worked as laborers in cities or as cattlemen on farms and ranches.

Another way in which the Czech and Moravian farmers were different from the locals was that on average they grew four-plant crops, while the Germans grew three and Americans only two. This conservativeness type of farming served the farmers well during poor crop years or when crop prices were at their lowest. A third way these Eastern European immigrants differed from the rest was that they arrived in complete family units. The practices of other ethnic groups were that men would arrive alone and only when settled would their wives and children follow.

### **The Ondráčeks**

Among those Czech and Moravian immigrants who settled in the American Midwest were many families from the area of Czech-Moravian Highlands. Štěpán and Marie Ondráček with their

children Marie (\*1880), Josefa (\*1882), Růžena (\*1884) and Adolf (\*1887) arrived in 1890. The father was 35, the mother 37. The children ranged in age from 2 to 9. Another two children, Josef (\*1891) and Sofie (Žofie, \*1894) were born in the US.

Based on the application for US citizenship, submitted by Štěpán Ondráček in November 1890 in McLeod County, Minnesota, and according to the family history, the family arrived in New York in July 1890. Seven years later, in August 1897 Štěpán Ondráček was granted citizenship.

It is known that Štěpán Ondráček and his wife Marie (maiden name Křížová from Rozsochy), married in February 1879 and that they lived in Polom 9. Štěpán Ondráček earned his living as a peasant. Based on information gathered from living family member who also worked in Polom, it is likely that the two first met through Marie's sister. Štěpán's parents, Josef Ondráček (1814 – 1894) and Anna, maiden name Procházková (1814 – 1892) had 15 children. Štěpán was the 13<sup>th</sup>. Seven of their children never reached adulthood. Of the four boys and four girls Štěpán was the youngest. Marie Křížová was a daughter of Jan Kříž (1801 – 1861) from Rozsochy and Kateřina (\*1818), maiden name Neškrabalová from Blažkov. Jan and Kateřina were married in 1840 and had seven children. One can only speculate as to what led the Ondráčeks to want to go to America. A reliable source would be the testimony of their great-granddaughter Nancy Zimmer (\*1945).

Nancy is the granddaughter of the Ondráčeks' eldest daughter Marie and husband Frank Hajicek. In the early 60s, while in high school, Nancy was assigned homework relating to her family roots. Her grandfather Hajicek told her then, that Štěpán and Marie had had few problems with their relatives in the native country. Moreover, Štěpán wanted to avoid the risk of having to serve in the Austro-Hungarian army. They found hope in the possibility to leave for America. Most probably, the decision to travel across the ocean was caused by the lack of available arable land.

According to archival evidence, Štěpán's ancestors owned a farm. More precisely, Štěpán's grandfather owned a field measuring a half-hide, or about 9 hectares (23 acres). This land could have been part of the farm. After their wedding, Štěpán and Marie must have lived in Velké Tresné 33. Their first two children, Marie and Josefa, were born there in 1880 and 1882. Their third and fourth child, daughter Růžena and son Adolf were born in Polom 9 in 1884 and

1887. The young family could have hardly tended the fields as independent farmers. In the first years after their wedding they lived in the very place where the Ondráčeks from Polom did before them. According to still living witnesses, their distant relatives, later on they lived at the groom's father's farm. As already discussed, their decision to leave might have been the result of limited access to arable land, the risk of being drafted and family disputes.

Before setting off on the voyage they made certain that their crossing would not take more than three weeks. Normally, it took six. Once on board the ship, each family member was allotted a small amount of space. Each passenger had to bring along requisite provisions for the duration of the voyage. Although water was carefully rationed, nevertheless, it ran out and none was had for three days. The crew of a Russian ship came to aid the ship in distress. The stories told about the length of the voyage seem to be exaggerated. Mr. Donald C. Ondracek discovered that his grandparents traveled to America on a steamer by the name of Fulda. Although the steamer records do support an unusually long crossing, it could have taken four weeks at most. Doubtlessly, the delay caused serious hardship to all the passengers.

Štěpán and Marie Ondráček along with their four children first set foot on American soil on the 8<sup>th</sup> of July 1890. The family took the train to Chicago. En route, they were frequently beleaguered by rats, especially at railway stations. The parents had to protect not only themselves, but more so the children, especially the youngest child Adolf, who was under three years of age. There were numerous Czech communities in Chicago. One can suppose that Štěpán left his family there and that he sent for them once he had settled. The Ondráček family settled in a small town of Silver Lake, Hale township, McLeod County, Minnesota. As to how they supported themselves after arriving in Minnesota is not known.

According to the 1895 census, it appears that they had rented a farm in Hale township. Records from the all-American census show that as of 1900 they were still farming on a rented farm. Even though both parents were literate in their native language, the 1900 census records indicate that they did not speak English. Růžena, Adolf and Josef were attending school. During the census taking the oldest daughter Marie was 20 and presumably single, as she married in 1909. She worked either as a maid at a wealthier farm or at some job in a town. No record exists about

second daughter Josefka from that time. In 1902, she married Harry Cotton of Minneapolis and gave birth to a son.

Records from the 1905 Minnesota census provide evidence that the Stepan Ondracek family lived in the small town called Hutchinson in the same county. From other resources, we can surmise that they moved between 1900 and 1902. Information about another member of the family is missing – their daughter Ružena. She was married at the time of census. Their sons Adolf and Josef were reported as being as stable. The family was also intact, consisting of the parents and children Adolf, Josef and Sofie, or so it is reported in 1910. By then, it is reported, that Štěpán and all three children could speak English, although the mother, Marie, could only speak Czech. In the 1920 census, only information about the 66-years-old patriarch Štěpán was submitted. His wife died in 1917. Their son Adolf married in 1913, their daughter Sophia in 1918. Their son Josef went to France with American Army in 1918. Upon his return in 1919 from France he returned home to Minnesota where he was self-employed as a carpenter. Personal records of his son Donald indicate he remained in Minnesota until sometime around 1925 when he moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where he was again employed as a carpenter. It was here in Milwaukee that he met his wife Elizabeth McGraw of Irish-Scottish descent. They married in August 1928. Between them they raised five children.

Records show that Štěpán Ondráček bought a 10 acre (about 4 hectares) farm from Louis Lucash for \$1030. The farm was too small to provide adequately for the family. Štěpán must have held another job or at least rented additional farmland to make do. When Štěpán died in 1929, the farm passed on to his heirs. As his wife had died 12 years earlier, the children were the natural heirs. Son Josef in 1929 returned to Minnesota from Milwaukee with his family to take over the farm. He borrowed money and bought off his siblings in 1934. Josef returned from Wisconsin to take over the farm. Prior to that, he had lived in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Milwaukee belonged to cities with many immigrants from Bohemia and Moravia. Fellow-countrymen called this city Milváňky.

Štěpán and Marie Ondráček were members of the Evangelic Church and they belonged to the congregation in Veselí. Štěpán's great grandfather Martin Wondraczek was listed in tolerance registrations for Polom. Štěpán and Marie became members of Bohemian Brethren congregation

in Silver Lake. This congregation was established in 1871. By the time the Ondráček family began to partake, the congregation had already been in existence for 20 years. The congregation was established by the coming together of several families that made their way to Minnesota from Evangelic congregation in Telecí in the Czech-Moravian Highlands. Religious and local connections might suggest that Štěpán and Marie went to McLeod county by design, to meet up with someone they had already known.

The church register in Silver Lake shows that their daughter Sofie was baptized on the day of her first birthday, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of November 1895 and that their son Josef was confirmed at the age of 12 on the 12<sup>th</sup> of June 1904. Further records about the Ondráček family are available in the church, including baptism dates of some of their grandsons and granddaughters.

McLeod County was one of three counties in Minnesota with the highest number of persons born in Bohemia or Moravia. The other two were Le Sueur and Ramsey. In 1890, in each of these three counties in the southern part of the state, at least 1,200 residents, had been born in Bohemia or Moravia. The city of St. Paul is now located on the spot where Ramsey used to serve as a county seat. McLeod and Le Sueur Counties are rural counties situated to the west and southwest from Minneapolis. Most of Czechs and Moravians came to these rural areas in 1870s. The immigration flow slowed down considerably the following decade.

The Ondráčeks arrive at the end of the immigration wave, when the total number of inhabitants of the county started to level off and it remained at less than 20 thousand inhabitants. By the time the Ondráčeks attempted to buy land, most of the area must have been bought up thus explaining above mentioned difficulties in obtaining sizeable property for his family. Inasmuch as it may have been hard to get farmland at that time, it is known that Štěpán had rented a farm earning his living as a farmer. There were two ways for one to farm. In 1900, 47 farmers rented out their farmland for direct cash payments. Five times as many farmers, 256, rented their farmland for a share in the harvest. It is not know how Štěpán chose to farm. In 1900, there were 2,335 farms; the average farm had 129 acres (about 52 hectares). Most farms could have been considered as being large. There were 1,305 farms with the square area ranging from 100 to 499 acres. Another 1,016 farms were smaller than 100 acres, while only 14 were larger than 500 acres. It is not known as to what crops were grown in 1900. Presumably, it would not have differed much from

those grown in the 1890's. At that time, wheat was grown on one fourth of the farmland, oats on about 6% and corn on 4%. Other cereals, such as barley, rye and buckwheat were grown rather randomly.

It has already been mentioned that in 1900, the year of the millennial census, Štěpán could not speak English. His wife Marie could not speak the language in 1910 and it is improbable that she had learnt it by the time she died in 1917. This does not mean that they were not able to communicate with the people around them. Members of the Evangelic congregation of more than a thousand Czech inhabitants of the county, could not only speak among themselves, but presumably also communicate with the numerous groups of German speaking inhabitants. There were more of them than Czechs and Moravians in this county. In 1900, there were 2,588 people born in Germany and 89 born in Austria. Given that the Ondráčeks could speak German, they ought to have been able to communicate with at least one fifth of the residents of the county either in Czech or in German.

Štěpán and Marie Ondráček had six children and twenty grandchildren. One of the grandchildren is Donald Crawford Ondracek (\*1930), who lives in Watkinsville, Georgia. He has been researching the family tree for many years, and can personally link 44 great-grandchildren and at least 40 great-great-grandchildren to Štěpán and Marie.

In the American branch of the Ondráček family, stories are told as to how in the old country the religious freedoms were repressed and how arrogant the clergy was. The passed down oral history relates to times during the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when Anna Procházková's great-grandmother, and Štěpán's mother, lived through the persecution of secreted Protestants. The Catholic Church, supported by the state authorities, forbade the possession of Kralická Bible, or "the Word" in the Czech language. From time to time, Catholic clergymen would raid villages and search cottages to make sure that people respected the dicta. For this reason, Protestant children would play near the roadways in order to warn of the approaching clergymen.

One day, Anna Procházková's great-grandmother and three other women were making bread. A child rushed into the kitchen informing them of the presence of a clergy in the village. Reacting, the mother took the Bible off a shelf, wrapped it into a blanket and hid it into the kneading dough. A priest arrived within several minutes, together with two other clergymen. The

priest stayed in the kitchen with the women while the others searched the cottage. Finding nothing, the angered priest stuck his dirty staff into the dough; fortunately not finding the hidden Bible. As he was leaving, the priest told mother clean the kneading trough.

It is known that Štěpán and Marie Ondráček corresponded with their family in Polom. Donald Ondráček is in possession of a letter that must have come from Štěpán's father Josef. A man in the letter addressed them *Dear children!* He thanked them for their letter and assured them that they all were well. Further in the letter, he alluded that his health was not that good and that he did not feel well enough to go to America. He also mentioned that they were suffering through a harsh winter. That a lot of snow was everywhere and the "apples" were frost damaged. In Czech-Moravian Highlands, "apples" means potatoes, or basic sustenance. The situation was serious.

Taking into consideration other documentation, strong evidence exists to suggest that the letter was written by Josef Ondráček, and that it was written on March 10, 1893. Whoever replied addressed František's situation, who after Pavel was to have been at school in Bystřice studying to become a teacher. Who was František after Pavel? Štěpán Ondráček had a brother Pavel, two years older and who was said to have been very close to him. František was Pavel's only son; he was born on April 18<sup>th</sup> 1879. He could have been nearly 14 in March 1893.

### **František Ondráček**

As witnessed by descendants, František Ondráček became a teacher. Not much is known about what František did before his departure for America, but apparently teaching was not his calling. What is known is that his father died in 1883, when František was just a small child. His parents Pavel and Vincencie also had two daughters both of whom died shortly after birth. Thanks to records of American Immigration Offices, a lot of information is known about his arrival into the US. František traveled with his fiancée Anna Filipi. She was born on 26<sup>th</sup> February 1887 in Velké Tresné in the Czech-Moravian Highlands. They arrived in America on board the German ship Kaiser Wilhelm II and they were processed at Ellis Island in New York on April 12<sup>th</sup> 1905. František was nearly 26; Anna was merely 18 years of age.

Kaiser Wilhelm II was one the four giant steamers in the Norddeutscher Lloyd fleet. One of the fastest ships in the northern Atlantic the Kaiser Wilhelm II held the Atlantic crossing record

in 1906-07. The ship was 216 m (236 yards) long and 22 m (24 yards) wide. The steamer cruised at the speed of 42 km/hour (nearly 22.7 knots) and accommodated 1,888 passengers. It is known from other resources that it landed in New York once again on May 10<sup>th</sup> 1905. The voyage between the continents must have taken less than a fortnight. More likely it only took about 10 days.

Since František and Anna went through the immigration at Ellis Island, it is almost a certainty that they traveled in lower deck cabins. In 1905, only 3 thousand out of more than 100 thousand passengers of the first and the second classes were subject to immigration checks. On the other hand, all 800 thousand passengers who arrived in the lower deck cabins had to be processed at Ellis Island. Traveling in the on lower decks space was not easy. In fact, it was horrible. At times, ten percent of the passengers did not survive the crossing. The transport of passengers in the bowels of a ship was very profitable for shipping companies. A tickets cost about 30 dollars. Board cost about 60 cents per day. Subject to these miserable conditions, large ships were able to transport from 1,500 to 2,000 passengers at a time. These passengers were forced to cope with noise, foul smell, dirtiness, gloom, food and the lack of fresh air and water.

Huge rooms with low ceilings lined with double-deck bunks with dimensions of 180 x 60 cm (70.87 x 23.62 inches) accommodated for up to 300 people. There were several rooms of this type on the lower decks. Notwithstanding the hardship, the would-be immigrants believed in a better future in America. During the course of the voyage, which took, depending to the type of ship and weather, from 10 days up to more than a month, the passengers played cards, sang, danced or just talked. Nonetheless, concerns about their future and whether they would indeed be welcomed in the US or sent back to Europe must have laid heavily on their minds. At the end of their voyage, they were physically, mentally and emotionally exhausted.

Before being paroled into US, they were subjected to medical checks and quarantines. These preventive measures served to limit the outbreaks of contagious diseases such as: cholera, plague, pox, typhoid fever, yellow fever, scarlet fever, measles or diphtheria. Most of the passengers traveling first and the second class were allowed to disembark without being scrutinized by the immigration authorities. The rest, the passengers from the lower decks were taken to Ellis Island by smaller boats, an immigration screening center that opened in 1892.

Medical check continued. Doctors examined the immigrants, attempting to ascertain whether they suffered from heart disease or any mental ailments. Everyone was checked – one’s face, hair, throat and palms. About one fifth underwent more detailed medical examinations. Serious diseases, which rendered would-be immigrants from gainful employment in the US were refused entry. Many families were split up. Provided that the immigrants passed their medical check, they still had to face the immigration officer who controlled their documents. With an interpreter at hand, this process took only two minutes. Only 2% were rejected at this stage. The fortunate received an entry permit. At Ellis Island, they changed their money, gold or silver for US dollars and they bought railway tickets or boat tickets for their journeys inland. From Ellis Island they were taken directly to their train.

František and Anna stated that Tyndall; Bon Homme County, South Dakota was their ultimate destination. There, based on the 1900 census, 2,320 persons were of Bohemian or Moravian descent. It is important to note that, František’s cousin Tomáš Švanda was supposed to have lived in Tyndall. The young couple was married in New York before continuing westwards. It is not know whether they ever arrived in Tyndall. Doubtlessly, they met with Tomáš.

Their first son Frank was born in 1906 in Lake Andes, Charles Mix County, right next to Bon Homme County. However, the couple did not settle there. Another child, their son Vlastimil, was born in Dallas in 1910. Dallas is situated about 100 kilometers (62.14 miles) from Charles Mix County. Another child, son Luis was born in 1911 in Jordan, about 50 kilometers (31.7 miles) far from Dallas. Afterwards they left South Dakota and tried their fortune in Nebraska. They went from about 600 kilometers (372.8 miles) to Omaha, where their fourth child was born.

So far no one has been able to determine whether they were availed of the opportunity to live among Bohemian and Moravian Evangelics in South Dakota. Had they searched, they could have found it in Omaha. A small group of Evangelics formed a congregation there in 1885, built their meeting-house and called it, in commemoration of Jan Hus, Bethlehem Chapel. This congregation was fully functional since 1890. In 1904, Bohdan A. Filipi came to this congregation and he stayed there until late 1913.

Anna’s and František’s fourth child, daughter Lillian, was born on 12<sup>th</sup> October 1913. It is possible that, for at least several months the young couple attended the congregation of Anna’s

namesake. Whether members were relatives or not is not known, although it is rather improbable. Bohdan Filipi was born in Malčín near Kutná Hora. His father Antonín was a teacher who came from Telecí near Polička. Presumably Anna Filipi's family were denizens in Velké Tresné.

The growing family did not stay near Omaha. The fifth child, son Otto, was born in Milligan, which is about 200 kilometers (124.28 miles) far from Omaha. A Czech – American Protestant congregation was established there in 1924. This was unique, as among 14 Czech Protestant congregations, this was the only one which was Czech – American from the very onset. It is not known whether the family took part in the life of the congregation. What is known for certain is that Milligan was not the place where the family stayed for long. Of course, Milligan is not far from Friend, only 25 kilometers (15.53 miles). Where their sixth child, son Joe, was born is not known. What is known, and corroborated from other sources, is that the family lived in Friend in early 1930s. Their eldest son Frank did get married and settled in Omaha, where he died in 1966.

Again, what is known is that the family lived in Friend. Further, their second son Vlastimil's wife Olga Kasl came from there. The fact that the Czech Protestant congregation was located there does not seem as sufficient for them to have stayed there. American Congregation had established two missions among the Bohemians and Moravians some years earlier, but the number of members dwindled and the operation ceased altogether in early 1920s. Free thinking prevailed among Czechs and Moravians in the district Saline. People who endorsed this movement refused ecclesiastical institutions and they did not practice religion.

It is not known, whether František was in close contact with his uncle Štěpán or his children. What is known is that Štěpán's son Josef visited his cousin in Nebraska at least once. They met in 1946. Josef lived with his family in Hutchinson, Minnesota. Even though it was nearly 700 kilometers (435 miles), Josef traveled to visit his relatives at least once again in 1960.

František Ondráček died in Friend in 1949, his wife Anna in 1961. Three of their six children settled in Friend. It seems likely that one could find their descendants there.

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