

THE ČECH (BOHEMIAN)
COMMUNITY
OF
NEW YORK

WITH INTRODUCTORY REMARKS ON
THE ČECHOSLOVAKS IN THE
UNITED STATES

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CHAPTER VI

OCCUPATION

Cigar makers. For more than sixty years cigar making has been and still is, a distinctive occupation.

Precisely when and under what circumstances the tobacco industry has obtained the upper hand among New York Čechs is an unstudied chapter which will need attention. Indications are, however, that the trade is old—as old as the immigration itself. Already in 1858, Wenceslaus Krechtler was the owner of a cigar store at 157 Canal Street, and in the rear of it he worked up the weed. Frank Korbel, Thomas Juránek and Frank R. Mráček, pioneer settlers (see their biographies in the chapter on Pioneers), were cigar makers about the same time, even earlier. A story is current—it sounds plausible—that a representative of Kerbs & Spiess was sent to Sedlec, near Kutná Hora, where the former Austrian Government operated a tobacco factory, to enlist trained workers for his firm in New York. The wages offered were so tempting that many employees, men and women, took the American agent at his word and emigrated. According to another report, cigar makers from Sedlec began to flock to New York in consequence of glowing accounts sent thither by a band of Sedlec men who had settled in Morrisania. One of these men was Vincent Vaníček; others were John Dvořák, Joseph Stěpánek, John Drahorád, Adolph Mucha and Anna Černý (who became Vaníček's wife). During and after the Civil War every incoming ship brought fresh contingents of workers. Under the

tutorship of the Sedlec men butchers, blacksmiths, bakers, miners, peasants, college students, agricultural laborers and domestics learned to strip tobacco, break bunches and roll them.

Editor L. J. Palda estimated that in 1868, when he landed, 95% of his countrymen were engaged in the tobacco industry.¹ "Every newcomer," relates Palda in his *Reminiscences*, "no matter what his trade or vocation in the old country, ended by becoming a cigar maker, because cigar making paid better than any other line of work." An expert textile worker from Europe, Palda himself learned to make cigars in New York.

Between 1880-95 when the industry attained its high water mark the Čechs worked for the following firms:

Herman Benz, 151 Avenue A.

Bondy & Lederer, 110 Attorney Street.

Isidor Jacobi, 126 First Avenue.

Kerbs & Bro., 232 E. 36th Street.

Kerbs & Spiess, 1020 Second Avenue and East 54th Street.

Emanuel W. Mendel, 243 Third Street and 15½ Bowery.

Adolph Moonelis, 143 Avenue D.

Bernhard Newmark, 318 E. 75th Street.

Abraham and Isaac Rosenthal, 624 E. 16th and 351 E. 73rd Street.

Emil Seidenberg, 360 Second Avenue.

Joseph S. Seidenberg, 66 Reade Street.

Leopold Schwarzkopf & Co., 309 E. 46th and 1329 Avenue A.

M. Silverthau & Co., 340 E. 36th Street.

¹Mr. Vincent W. Woytisek, Deputy County Clerk, an old resident of New York, asserts that Palda's average is too high, 75% being nearer the mark.

M. Stachelberg & Co., 154 So. 5th Avenue.
Straiton & Storm, 204 E. 27th Street, 203 E.
33rd Street and 457 First Avenue.

Morris Prochaska, 102 Attorney Street.

Wertheim & Schiffer, 1020 Second Avenue.

Sixty-odd years of cigar making and not one Čech manufacturer has risen from the ranks of workers! Thousands of privates, not one employer of labor! A co-operative shop which Čech workmen organized in 1874 went into the receiver's hands after a short-lived and stormy existence.

The author asked Mr. Joseph Stěpánek, said to be the oldest living cigar maker in the city, to set down in writing his reminiscences. He arrived as a lad of twelve direct from the factory at Sedlec. As he is now in his eighty-fifth year, he has been rolling "smokers" seventy-three years. The observations of this venerable workman, the author felt, would be exceedingly illuminative. Mr. Stěpánek wrote a modest narrative in which he told of having witnessed the memorable trial by jury at Kutná Hora in 1851, of Charles Havlíček, the tribune of the Čech people. In 1865, he walked with 50 other New York Čechs in the funeral cortege of Abraham Lincoln. He described what keen joy he derived as a member of a New York amateur singing club (he sang tenor); concerning his experiences as a cigar maker he had not a word to say. "That phase of my life," he explained, "was a song without a melody."

Palda's 95% of cigar makers in 1866, does not obtain in 1920. The American born children of cigar makers will not learn and follow the trade of their parents. They find that the office, the store, the mechanic's bench offer greater possibilities of promotion than a cigar shop does.

How many are still attached to the tobacco industry? No. 141 of the Cigar Makers' International Union of America has 952 Čech members (men and women), 621 of whom pay 60 cents per week in dues, 289 40 cents, 42 30 cents. Union No. 90 has also some Čechs. Workers not belonging to any union are said to number 2,500. Outside of Greater New York there are not more than 100 cigar makers. This makes a total of 3,552 organized and unorganized workers.¹

Pearl button makers. Excellent showing has been made in that other distinctively Čech industry, the pearl button manufacture. Though neither as old as cigar making—it was introduced here by workmen from Žirovnice, in Bohemia, after the passage in Congress of McKinley's protective tariff—nor as voluminous (it gives employment to not more than 1,500 or 1,600 operatives), pearl button making has contrived to school not only factory hands but factory bosses as well.

The number of Čech manufacturers is 67, located as follows: Connecticut (West Willington, Staffordville, Higganum), 6; New Jersey (North Bergen, Secaucus, Little Ferry, Cliffside, Guttenberg, New Durham), 20; Illinois (Chicago), 1. Of the 40 plants in Greater New York, 19 are situated in Manhattan, 12 in Winfield, 7 in Astoria, 1 in Maspeth, 1 in Islip.

These 67 concerns represent an investment of from \$1,500,000 to \$1,750,000: 12 manufacturers have invested \$25,000 and over; 15 manufacturers have invested \$10,000 to \$20,000; 15 manufacturers have invested \$5,000 to \$10,000; 25 manufacturers have invested \$1,500 to \$5,000. Several of the smaller manufacturers do not employ

¹Statement by Joseph Wodicka, Secretary of No. 141 of the Cigar Makers' International Union of America.

any outside help, relying solely upon members of their own families for labor.

The number of operatives is 1,550. In normal times this figure would be considerably higher. "The volume of business as based on statistics for 1920 is between \$3,000,000 and \$3,500,000, and it represents," says Mr. W. E. Schwanda, "slightly less than one-half of the total value of ocean pearl buttons produced in the United States."¹

Metal workers. In the several branches of the metal industry, not less than 500.²

The needle trade. Of journeymen tailors there are 300. Merchant tailors are surprisingly few, which proves that the Čech is a better workman than a business man. Ladies' tailors appear to be more enterprising, for they outnumber by far men's custom tailors. Apprenticed to their art in European fashion centers—Vienna, Berlin, Paris, Prague—ladies' tailors are in demand by all the leading houses and command high wages.

Dressmakers, 200.³

Musicians, 50.⁴

Bakers. Boss bakers, 15 in Manhattan, 5 in Queens.⁵ The journeymen bakers' union has 220 members; non-union workers 30, together 250.

Butchers and bologna makers. Workmen and bosses, not in excess of 75.⁶

¹For this information on pearl button manufacture the author is under special obligation to Mr. W. E. Schwanda of B. Schwanda & Sons, Ocean Pearl Button Manufacturers of New York, and to Mr. Christy, Secretary of the Ocean Pearl Button Industry Association.

²Statement by Joseph Modr.

³Statement by J. Kubik.

⁴Statement by bandmasket Frank Turek.

⁵Statement by Joseph Huml.

⁶Statement by Adolph Konas.