

# Exploring Czech Families of Immigrants 100 years later: Those who remained in their "Old World" ancestral villages and those who were raised in the "New World," America

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ABSTRACT .....	1
INTRODUCTION .....	1
ORAL HISTORIES-THE MISSING LINKS .....	1
<i>Heritage by Historical Facts</i> .....	2
<i>The "New" Homeland: America</i> .....	3
THE ASSIMILATION .....	5
DARE WE COMPARE.....	7
CULTURAL AND SOCIAL OBSERVATIONS .....	8
CONCLUSION.....	9

## Abstract

Not everyone who immigrated from the Banat Czech villages in Romania to America during the largest wave of Eastern European immigrations, which did not end until 1915, left with intact families. Sometimes only one sibling in a large family remained in the homeland village while the rest of the entire family immigrated to begin a new life in America. Those descendants who assimilated themselves into the American way of life at the turn of the century have experienced rapid changes from the agricultural and industrial revolutions in the states to the present technological transformations now in progress not only in America but seemingly all over the world. Those who remained in the villages have maintained an agrarian lifestyle that is much the same as when their family and neighbors left for America. Recently a small group of descendants of the Banat Czechs who immigrated from the village Girnic in Romania, to settle in the Virginia farmlands, located their ancestral villages and made a journey to Girnic to reunite with those remaining family members and to explore the homeland of their forefathers. This study explores the cultural, societal, environmental, and economical differences that were noted between the American and Romanian Czech families.

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## Introduction

As grandchildren of immigrant Czechs and Slovaks who settled in Virginia in the late 1890's through the year 1914 we were able, in 2005, to locate, plan, and organize a foreign visit to our ancestral Czech family village Gernik, (Garnic, Girnic,) located in Romania. We learned that some relatives did not migrate to America as intact families and those left behind have continued to live in the same village. Further, we felt it important to connect with our lost relatives during our lifetime so that future generations both in the villages as well as those in the states would be in possession of a source of family heritage that would allow them to continue relationships with foreign relatives well into the future. This

adventure has resulted in contacts and interrelations that otherwise would have been lost forever and has kindled a mutual desire to remain united. Language differences, being the biggest barrier, may one day be resolved with our continued connections among the various families and our future generations. The purpose of this paper is to give and record collective personal accounts of a rare opportunity experienced by several family members from Virginia, between the ages of 16 and 81, who visited their ancestral family village in Gernik, Romania.

### ***Oral histories-The Missing Links***

We should have been, by all standards, well informed with first hand information about our family history and our heritage, however we were not. What we were missing was oral history: hearing and learning from our parents and grandparents where they came from, why they came here, who was left behind in the old country, what the journey meant to their psyche and how they felt about the new country. What we discovered was that our grandparents were as mysterious as the land they left behind and they were the type of people who never discussed their personal lives in front of their children or grandchildren. Unlike our children today, when we were growing up, we were often scolded and told that children should be seen and not heard. Our immigrant grandparents were no nonsense kind of people and had little time to sit around and talk or muse about these things. These Czech and Slovaks seemed to put those things in the past and concentrated on the present and future survival of their farms and holdings.

### **Heritage by Historical Facts**

History has given us clues as to why, as a people, our ancestors came to America. Susan Holland gives us her views in her documentary *The Family Tree: A genealogical Record of the Blaha Family*,

*“World War I was the turning point. When the war ended, the Habsburgs were no longer in power, and Austria-Hungary had been dissolved. Final boundaries for Hungary were formed at the Treaty of Trianon in 1920, and this resulted in the loss of two thirds of her former territory. Land in Transylvania and most of the Banat was awarded to Romania. ...Czechoslovakia became a new country fashioned out of former Hungarian territory...The villagers, whose families had lived in Hungary for hundreds of years, found themselves scattered in three different countries.”<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Boundary information taken from “*History of German settlement in Southern Hungary*” by Sue Clarkson.

## THE NEW “HOMELAND” AMERICA

Long before our families arrived in Virginia others had their own dreams of immigration. “In 1838 Dr. Simon Pollak (1814-1903), a young, brilliant, highly educated and widely traveled physician from Domazlice, Bohemia, arrived in New York. In his colorful autobiography, he discusses at length his plans for emigration to America:

*‘I had read and knew by heart the history of the U.S. I longed for it, and I determined to get there some time. I never could brook the idea that I am not quite as good politically as anybody else. The United States of America, where the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the entire quality of political rights prevail, was my land of choice.’”<sup>2</sup>*

Two Blaha brothers, upon arrival in America, came directly to Dinwiddie along with family and friends all of whom were from the same village, Gernik. Joseph, the older brother was the first to arrive in America in 1889, spending one year in North Dakota before settling in Virginia. Later others from the same villages arrived and as we have learned all settled in Dinwiddie County where they established a Czech farming community, built a church and a life for themselves. In 1903 and again in 1911, Joseph’s brothers arrived in Dinwiddie where they bought land side-by-side and built homes. The village these family members and friends came from was the village they established a generation ago in the mid 1800’s when they emigrated there from Bohemia.

Our forefathers did their research as well before making their decision to arrive in Dinwiddie, Virginia. Nels Anderson in his paper, *PETERSBURG, A Study of a Colony of Czecho-Slovakian Farmers in Virginia* wrote:

*“Once the nucleus of a colony had been established, the increase was insured. The first to arrive corresponded with friends and relatives, and wrote letters to the Slavic newspapers telling of the cheap land and the attractive climate in Virginia. Slavie, a Bohemian paper published in Wisconsin, and enjoying a national circulation, was responsible for many of these migrations. One of the first comers made it his business to write regularly to Slavie, describing Virginia in glowing colors.”<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>2</sup> Rechcigl, Jr., Miloslav, Early Jewish Immigrants In America From The Czech Historic Lands And Slovakia, Austria-Czech SIG

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, Nels, “Petersburg: A Study of the Colony of Czechoslovakian Farmers in Virginia,” Immigrant Farmers and Their Children,” Edmund deS. Brunner, ed., Garden City, NY, Doubleday, Doran & Company, Inc., 1929. This study and publication was sponsored by Institute of Social and Religious Research , a Rockefeller supported organization.

Having close ties and corresponding with each other from the villages to the cities and counties of America, our relatives received news of America from those who came before them. Many of who went to the larger cities to work in the factories and mines only to discover low wages, poverty and social injustices. Others went into the west and mid-west territories of the United States only to find the climate and land conditions quite unsuitable to them. Eventually many left for the South where the weather was better suited and land available. Following the civil war landowners who had depended on slave labor, could no longer keep up the farming plantations and left it barren and deserted. It was for sale very cheap, some acres selling for as little as \$5.00.

Upon arrival in Virginia our relatives encountered many difficult situations. While the land was cheap, in reality, life in the American South was difficult for immigrants. Not only did they struggle with being in a different land, a different culture, and a different language, they had to face social injustice. Americans had formed certain prejudices against those who were different. Virginia especially was known to have a strict "Old South" social order and structure. In an around Petersburg and Richmond, VA unless you were born into the FFV (First Family of Virginia) it was likely that you would be considered an outcast - so in a way this contributed to our ancestors staying in their "old ways" rather than diving right into the American way of life. "Although the emigrants tried to preserve memories of their heritage in their new land, first hand knowledge has all but disappeared."<sup>4</sup>

An elderly and deeply respected Czech immigrant, John Zaruba, my great grandfather, wrote in a 1915 autobiography letter about his experiences. He and his fellow Czechs and Slovaks had proven to others that they were honest, hard-working, and respectable farm owners by their diligence and knowledge of farming. At last they were accepted as trustworthy if not brilliant landowners in Virginia.

*"...greatly neglected farms" are what brought most of the Czechs to Virginia. That is how most majority farms were here before our Czech people came here," he wrote. Continuing he said, "With what was waiting for me-plenty of hard work, even though at that time I was 60 years old, the truth is that every beginning is pentifully hard, but everyone likes to*

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<sup>4</sup> Holland, Susan Blaha. Blaha Family History, Chapter 3, Origin, page 2.

*work when he see progress and good gain that is fruitful and that is how things are here,” his letter said. “Already the children of many parents are having better beginnings,” he said. Continuing he wrote, “Here in the vicinity of Petersburg are many Czech people settles and are progressing wonderfully, and here they are greatly respected by the native older settlers.” Mr. Zaruba continues this letter by mentioning, “In all, our Czech people are sociable, brotherly in time of need, and willing helpful one to another.”<sup>5</sup>*

Abraham Lincoln, during his presidency, was quoted as saying “Never consider an immigrant to become a loyal American citizen unless he retains his love for his motherland.”

The love for the motherland is exactly why our immigrant ancestors felt compelled to instill their ways, culture and traditions in their children. While they left much behind, the important life lessons were deeply planted in their hearts and souls. Although these immigrant relatives continued their ways, their children did not follow in their footsteps and by the time their children had children they were assimilated well into the American life having put the “old ways” behind them.

As progress in industry and businesses continued to erupt in America our grandparents lost their influence and could not keep all of their children on their farms. Our parents were the first generation to marry outside of their ethnic culture and often their religion. They tasted the “American way of life” and broke from their ethnic traditions. For example, they no longer felt the need to marry a “good Czech girl or boy” that had been pre-approved by their parents. Being eager to get out into the world, away from working in the fields from sun-up to sun-down, their value measured by how much work they could do, how many crops they could produce (which depended on conditions out of their control such as droughts, blights or the price of crops in good and bad years) no longer satisfied them. They became Americans and Southerners and except for very slight accents on certain words one could not tell a Czech or Slovak from any other American man or woman.

Now 100 years later, we the second and third born generation of Czech and Slovak immigrants from the village Gernik are writing a new chapter. Fortunately we have the time and desire to devote to the continued research of our family histories. We are finding the missing links and even hearing a few oral family stories that our grandparents, aunt and uncles were hesitant to tell before. We are sure that this is the right time to get to the heart of our work, our personal quest of discovering who we are and what brought us here today. By far, the most exciting development and breakthrough for us was in visiting our relatives’ home village, Gernik in 2005.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, page 3.

## Visiting the Ancestral Village

Visiting our ancestral village was a life-changing event for some of us. Although we had been briefed by others that the villages in the Banat as in other countries in Europe were remote and unlike most of our present cities and towns in the states, we were still unprepared for what we found: beautiful mountain ranges, quaint village houses, people in village dress, few modern conveniences for housing or farming and streets that were unpaved and rocky. A pleasant surprise was that we found the villagers to be warm and inviting. They were friendly as they went about their daily routines and their normal everyday patterns of life, their acceptance of us as foreigners and family and their willingness to make us comfortable and welcome indicated their fine character. We were strangers but to them we were family and they were perfect hosts.

Providence definitely had a hand in this adventure because here are two examples of what happened:

1. It took us more than a year to settle on a date to travel to the village.  
***This was the exact dates of their ethnic festivals, held every two years and it was our villages turn to host it.***
2. Joyce Pritchard, founder of our Southside Virginia Czech/Slovak Heritage Society heard a dissertation on Radio Prague which made reference of work recently written on lost Czech Villages by Dan Mair.  
***Dan along with Professor Uherek agreed to meet our group in Prague and travel to the village with us helping us interact with our relatives.***

Who is to say who had the greatest adventure: the Czech/Slovak families who had strange family members in their homes and community or our group who was experiencing life as it must have been when our forefathers left the villages a hundred years ago? True, in the village were vehicles, a TV, telephone and computers. They had running water piped into their homes from a nearby stream and they had electricity, but electricity was not plentiful and it was not modern or always connected. The village officials were hours away from the nearest internet service and there is basically no industry to provide good jobs and wages. They, being a self-sustaining community, were different and we were reminded of what we take for granted every day of our lives everywhere we went.

We tried to understand and honor their customs for we did not want to appear as an “ugly American,” however I’m sure we made some mistakes. For example, we are not used to eating three heavy meals a day therefore, and we often sent back plates with food remaining on them. We found ourselves sitting in places of honor that was reserved for their elderly not knowing any better. When we saw empty stool, benches or chairs we occupied them until we learned our places. We tried not to stare or point but I’m sure we did at times because there was so much to excite us. The festival that they had planned for that particular weekend was an unexpected treasure. We saw native dress, dance and song from every

Czech village as well as from the entire area surrounding Gernik. Never would we have believed that we would have been so fortunate as to be in the village at the same time they were having this tremendous event.

As we wandered around the village, and participated in their life, we couldn't help but recall memories of our own childhood. Having been forewarned, we expected our accommodations to be a little awkward and not to expect too many comforts such as daily showering, laundry, and so forth. Being there we recalled how we used outside toilets or chamber pots at our grandparents' farms and how we had to pump water by hand from the well into buckets to bring inside for cooking and cleaning. These memories were not unpleasant nor were our accommodations. Just different. We recalled when milking a cow was the way we got milk on the farm and gathering eggs for breakfast meant going into the hen-house for them and not a supermarket. Our grandmothers made aprons, towels, and clothes out of feed sacks and embroidered them to bring beauty to otherwise coarse and strong material. We remembered when our grandfathers and uncles plowed with mules and the first tractor they bought and what it was like to hoe peanuts, cutting the weeds away and not the plants. Boys often gathered green tobacco worms to tease the girls, and to cool off after working in the fields, they'd take a dip in the pond that was heavily stocked with fish. Our accommodations did not shock us but it was a shock to realize that our relatives lived in such a remote area and that it was so far away from where their relatives settled as American immigrants. In our ancestral home village it seemed to us that time had actually stood still and we were taking a journey back in time and one that would stay with us a lifetime.

### **Dare we Compare- Who's to say?**

The differences in the lifestyles of the various families in Gernik and Virginia are very noticeable. There is a distinct division between the families who left and the families who remained. My conclusions are presented with great trepidation because they could be mistaken as judgmental which is not at all what I want to convey. Because our lifestyles in America are so different than in Romania and other parts of Eastern Europe, it is impossible for us not to make comparisons. In doing so, the results are as beauty is, "found in the eyes of the beholder."

The village is indeed beautiful and quaint and the character of its people seems honorable and decent. They appear to work hard and have built a respectful community in a very remote area of Romania. Physically, Gernik is a village that is not up to our modern standards. I seriously doubt that any of us would be willing to trade places with our relatives and to live their lifestyle. We are much too used to the "good life" I fear. On the other hand, our lifestyle would be out of character for the villagers and I doubt that they would like the fast-paced, impersonal, and unhealthy lifestyle that many of us lead. While we have many advantages that are not available to our foreign relatives, they would have a very difficult time adjusting to the developments in our part of the world.

What is so wonderful is that each of us has attributes that are desirable as well as those that are not. We can offer each other a taste of our different cultures and not expect the other to change their own way of life.

A great American President, John Kennedy once said, "Everywhere immigrants have enriched and strengthened the fabric of American life." I would like to think that our visit to our ancestral homeland has brought new thoughts, ideas, and strengthened the fabric of their lives as well. We were blessed to have had this rare opportunity, taking a peek at a new and different way of life that we found in Gernik.

## **CULTURAL AND SOCIAL OBSERVATIONS**

### **As related to the Gernik Czechs/Slovaks**

- Strong sense of family- Father head of household
- Deeply religious
- Strongly upholds ethnic traditions
- Mothers and wives remain homemakers
- Few opportunities to leave village for entertainment and social visits
- Few modern conveniences, appliances or technical devices in the homes/schools
- Must leave village to seek higher education or develop careers

### **As related to the Virginia Czech/Slovaks**

- Strong sense of immediate family – but divorce and separation not unusual. Rarely visits with other family members, i.e. cousins, etc.
- Religion no longer a strong influence for most
- Upholds ethnic traditions only at festivities and celebrations
- Social and recreational activities unlimited
- Mothers and wives work outside of the home/ Homemaking duties shared
- Many opportunities for entertainment and socialization-distance not a hindrance
- Many modern conveniences, appliances and technical devices in every home/classroom
- Many choices for higher education – Local communities have colleges, each state many universities, and higher degrees possible via internet in ones home. An opportunity to work out of ones home is rapidly becoming possible preventing commutes into and out of the larger cities.

## **ENVIRONMENTAL OBSERVATIONS**

### **As related to the Gernik Czech/Slovaks**

- Due to remoteness, air and water is fresh and pure
- Little if any pollution
- Lacks public sanitation and safety controls



### **As related to the Virginia Czech/Slovaks**

- Pollution prevalent in most cities and counties with few days that are pollution free / many environmental controls by federal/state/local governments
- Sanitation and safety controls governed by federal/state/local governments

### **ECONOMICAL OBSERVATIONS**

#### **As related to the Gernik Czech/Slovaks**

- The village offers almost no opportunities for good jobs and wages due to being so far away from larger cities
- Women do not usually work outside of the home to supplement family income
- By raising their own food and animals, cash is rarely needed to supplement the food closets in most homes. Preserving, canning and butchering is part of their daily lives and seasonal routines
- Families must rely on their own farming and local resources for their own needs. Co-ops are most likely productive.

#### **As related to the Virginia Czech/Slovaks**

- Communities that are no longer rural offer many job opportunities and fair wages to men and women
- The majority of women hold jobs outside of the home to supplement income.
- Rarely do women can or preserve food for their food closets. It is still being done as a creative outlet as is sewing and handwork. Gardening is seen as a hobby, not as a necessity in most families.
- There are no longer many Czech/Slovak farms today as it is no longer as profitable as it was in the past years. Those who remain farming often work in other jobs to supplement the family income.

### **Conclusion**

**Today, we know more about our family's heritage than we ever thought possible. We have kindled a flame in our area of Virginia due to the work and diligence of those of us seeking knowledge about our beginnings.... seeking knowledge about our mysterious grandparents...seeking knowledge for the benefit of our future generations. We no longer have as many questions and from the knowledge we have gained we are in awe of what our relatives have accomplished, of how they looked at life and played a huge part in their own fate. We see our ancestors as brave and industrious people, daring to risk everything for the sake of a better life even when it meant venturing into a new world.**