

## OUTDATED JEDNOTA INSURANCE FILES TELL A LOT OF FAMILY HISTORY

By M. Mark Stolarik

In a previous issue of *Jednota*, I informed our readers about the earliest marriage, birth and death records of St. Stephen's Parish in Streator, Illinois, one of the oldest Slovak Catholic parishes in America. They are stored at the Immigration History Research Center (IHRC) at the University of Minnesota.

Now I would like to inform our readers of another very rich collection of records at the IHRC. They are approximately 40,000 inactive application-membership files of the First Catholic Slovak Union (FCSU) from between 1890 and 1913. In 1913 the Insurance Commissioner of the State of Ohio (as in other states) decided to regulate fraternal-benefit societies by forcing them to abide by actuarial tables and to charge their members premiums based upon their ages. This made the previous application-membership files obsolete. The FCSU then adopted new membership-applications. Fortunately for historians and genealogists, the FCSU kept the old files in the basement of its headquarters in Cleveland, where Professor Timothy L. Smith and his graduate student Mark Stolarik discovered them, covered in coal dust, in 1967. After they cleaned off the coal dust, they shipped these records to the IHRC at the University of Minnesota, where they are available for research.

These inactive application-membership forms contain a wealth of information on early Slovak immigrants to the USA. Anyone who is interested in his/her Slovak ancestry, and whose ancestor was a member of the FCSU between 1890 and 1913, will find the following information in these files, which are organized alphabetically:

The father's name.

His address.

His *Jednota* lodge number.

The name of his parish.

His date of birth

His place of birth (village and county).

The name of his parents.

His parents' address.

His marital status.

The name of his wife.

The village origin of his wife.

The names and numbers of his children.

The schools they attended (public or parochial).

The father's occupation.

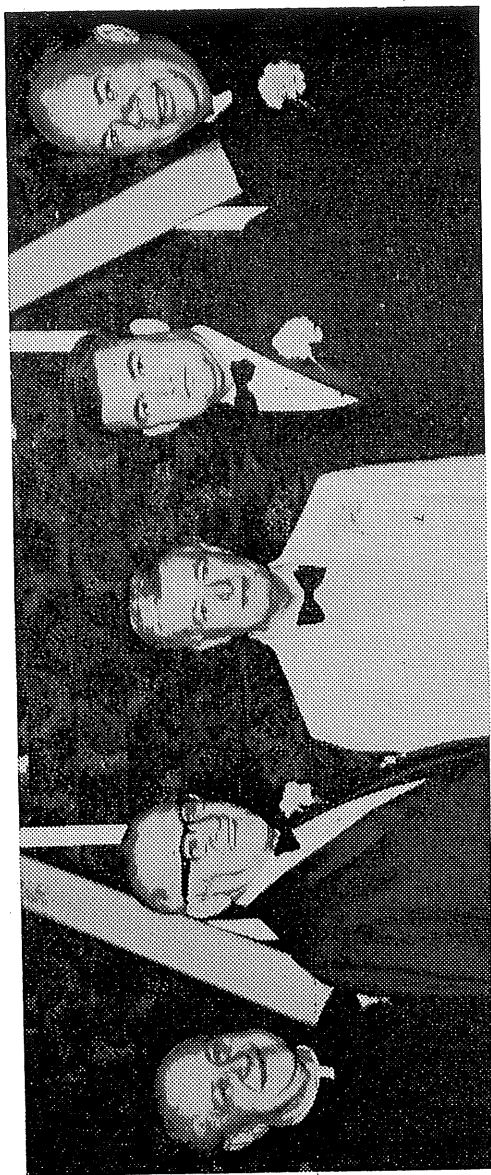
The father's height and weight.

The ages of his brothers and sisters.

The father's medical history.

You will notice that most of this information pertains to immigrant fathers, but not the mothers. That's because before World War I the FCSU was a male organization. Slovak women were encouraged to join the First Catholic Slovak Ladies Union, founded in 1892. They kept their own records.

For those who would like to discover more about what kind of research one can do with these inactive FCSU records, feel free to consult my article "*The Slovak Immigrant is Not Anonymous*," published in the *Jednota Annual Furdek* (1971) on pages 99-105. I hope that you will find this article helpful and enlightening. See below for the article.



The above was taken at the Reception prior to the 37th Jednota Convention Banquet which was held at the Sheraton-Park Hotel, Washington, D. C., Monday, August 17, 1970. Left to right, the Rt. Rev. Msgr. John E. Senglar, S.T.L., Supreme Chaplain; John A. Sabol, Supreme President; John Korfanta, Chairman of the Local Convention Committee; Patrick Buchanan, Special Assistant to President Richard Nixon; and the Right Reverend Abbott Jerome Koval, O.S.B., Protector of the Jednota.

# The Slovak Immigrant is Not Anonymous

BY MARK STOLARIK  
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Frank Thistlethwaite lamented some time ago that historians have traditionally dealt with immigrants through anonymous statistics.<sup>1</sup> They need not have done so. Immigrants have left extensive records of their experiences in America, records that reveal a great deal of their social, economic, religious and demographic situation both in the Old World and in the New.

The inactive application-membership insurance files of the First Catholic Slovak Union (Jednota) are among the best records of immigrant family life in America. They present us with accurate information concerning nearly 40,000 Slovaks who joined the Union between 1890 and 1913. A change in the form of their insurance policies led the officers of the Union to abandon these files and, through the foresight of successive officers they were preserved and eventually donated to the Immigrant Archives at the University of Minnesota.

As one reads these records the anonymity of the immigrant disappears. Here, in bold, clear writing, appear the policy-holder's name, his address and local lodge number and the name of his parish and its location. This information gives us an overall picture of the settlement pattern of Catholic Slovaks in America and the number of lodges of the Union to be found in any one parish, as well as the total number of Union lodges all over America.

At the same time we can trace the immigrant's origin and the pattern of migration from Slovakia. Every membership blank contains the date and place of birth of the applicant, his village and county of origin and the name and address of his parents. With this information we can arrive at the average age of Slovak immigrants in America, we

can deduce the relative number of people who migrated from each county, each village, each city, and we can trace their families back to the Old World. In addition, we can compare the grouping of people in the individual lodges at the parish level. This researcher has already discovered, for instance, that Slovaks tended to group in lodges according to their proximity of origin in the Old Country. Thus, Eastern and Western Slovaks generally formed their own lodges and often the members of any individual lodge came from the same or neighboring village in Slovakia.

In addition to tracing the horizontal mobility of the lodge members, one can compare his travels with that of his brothers and sisters. Every membership form contains the names of all members of the applicant's immediate family, their age and community of residence in America. With these facts we can determine whether or not Slovak families moved to America in groups, and whether or not they stayed in groups or splintered in this land.

Similarly the membership forms clearly reveal marriage patterns among Slovak immigrants to America. The files tell us how many of the men had married and whether or not they had brought their wives to America. This information reveals the relative number of married men versus bachelors in a Slovak community in America, it tells us how many of the immigrants brought their families with them and it tells us where their wives lived if not in America. This last point permits us to compare the village origins of husband and wife and to arrive at some conclusion regarding the endogamy or exogamy of Slovak marriages. In addition, the Slovaks of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often married in the Old Country, then, after a long honeymoon, the husbands left for America to seek their fortunes, leaving their wives behind. They either sent for them later or else they returned to them with money earned in the New World. By comparing the number of married men with families in America with those who left families in Slovakia, we can deduce the relative number of people who emigrated for good or who left, initially at least, only to make their fortune.

More facts about immigrant families can be gleaned from information about the father and his children in these membership forms. The number of children, their names

and the type of school each attended (public or parochial) is always recorded. From this information we can determine average family size and the pattern of parochial or public education. With this beginning we can trace the children's educational concerns through school records and city directories. In this view we can open the door to a study of the occupational and social mobility of the immigrant children. Since the father's occupation is also always given, one can discover the chief occupations of Slovak immigrants in America and one can compare these to the children's occupations and see how they fared in occupational mobility as compared to their fathers.

In the medical report on the inside cover of the policy one will find not only the height and weight of the applicant and any of his physical defects, but also the health history of his entire family. The ages of his brothers and sisters and of his parents and the causes of their deaths reveal a good deal about diseases that afflicted them and industrial accidents that maimed them. Body size and life expectancy also emerge from these records and one can compare these figures with the body size and life expectancy of their descendants and measure the progress made by better medicine, diet and way of life between the entering immigrant and his second and third generation descendants. This last point can become a commentary on American society in general.

To arrive at a more sophisticated story of lodge and parish life among the Slovak immigrants in America, one should consult the minute-books of the individual lodges which one selects to study. From 1896 the First Catholic Slovak Union has published a yearly **Kalendar, Jednota** (Almanac) which lists, among other things, the addresses of all Slovak Catholic parishes in the United States and Canada and the names of their priests. These priests always know the names and addresses of the secretaries of the lodges in their parishes and, if the secretaries prove cooperative, one can borrow their old minute-books and study the business transacted at previous lodge meetings. The minute-books reveal the lodge-members' concern for the church building, for the priest and the parishioners, their concern for the education of their children and the parochial school, the problems or arguments with priests and Bishops they

may have had, their participation in plays, bazaars, weddings, national events and a host of other subjects concerning their role in the life of the parish.

A further glimpse at the parish life can be had from the jubilee-book of the local parish. Every Slovak parish this researcher has worked at has published a jubilee book. In this book one can find the 'official' history of the parish, usually written by one of its priests. The history always includes the story of the role of laymen and lodges in the building of the church and the parochial school and the particular interest of both the priest and laymen in the parochial education of the children. Arguments between priests



Unique dance performed by girls in Slovak costume.

and laymen are usually glossed over and have to be researched from other sources.

Chancery records of the Roman Catholic diocese in which any parish under study is located reveal the rivalries and tensions between priests and parishioners. Here one will find recorded the disputes between priests and laymen about such things as cost and location of a new church, disputes over the size and operation of the parochial school and disputes that resulted from national or personal jealousies and rivalries between priests and laymen.

Ethnic newspapers and **Kalendars** supply even more background information about parish life and attitudes towards education. The newspapers carry reports and letters to the editor about life in almost every Slovak parish in America; they report on the building of churches and schools and they editorialize on the advantages and disadvantages of parochial versus public education. In three ten-year runs of the weekly newspapers **Slovak v Amerike**, **Amerikansko-Slovenske Noviny** and **Jednota**, covering the period 1894 to 1911, for example, this researcher found twenty-four articles which discussed education. These articles presented forty-three ideas about education: fifteen ideas stressed preserving the Slovak language and nationality by sending Slovak children to their own parochial schools, fourteen stressed sending children to Slovak parochial schools in order to preserve their morality and religion, six stressed the need to build parochial schools because other ethnic groups had done so, only three admitted the value of education as a means to social mobility and economic gain, only two recommended parochial education in schools of other nationalities, only two spoke of education as a process of self-improvement, and only one admitted that public schools could serve as good substitutes if no parochial schools existed. The **Kalendars** carried similar articles and expounded on the above ideas in greater detail. One can clearly see from the printed sources that Slovak Catholics in America greatly valued their parochial schools and distrusted the public schools. They did so out of reaction to the policy of forcible Magyarization of the nationalities of Hungary, from whence the Slovaks came, by the Hungarian government's public school system.<sup>2</sup> It would be interesting to compare the attitudes of other nationalities in America towards public education

with that of the Slovaks and to try to determine, by further mobility studies, how well the parochially-educated Slovaks did in life as compared to the publically-educated other nationalities.

If one does not have access to insurance membership files such as those of the First Catholic Slovak Union, one can remove the mask of anonymity from immigrants in America by using ethnic parish records. Most immigrants to America founded parishes quite soon after their arrival. In the case of Slovaks, the Roman Catholics, Greek Catholics, Lutherans and Reformed all established parishes and their location can easily be determined by consulting any one of the hundreds of *Kalendars* which they have published in the last 80 years. The parish priest's cooperation is crucial to the success of this method. If he cooperates, then well and good, but if he refuses, then you can only look for another parish. Once established in a parish record office we can discover, from the marriage records, the names and origins of the marriage partners and we can compare the degree of endogamy of immigrants marrying in America. This researcher has already done this and found that well over half of the Slovak marriages performed in America were endogamous—the partners came from either the same village, a neighboring village or one in the same district of Slovakia. This practice of endogamy corresponded quite well to an even higher rate of endogamy of village marriages in Slovakia where this researcher also used the marriage records. It showed that the Slovaks brought their endogamy practices to America and kept them, at least until the First World War.

Looking up the children of the married couple in the baptismal records can be a tedious but rewarding task. One has to simply look for children with the same surnames as their parents and with the mother's maiden name, year-by-year, until the list is exhausted. The chances of finding unrelated children with the same surnames and with the same mother's maiden name are almost zero.

An alternative in tracing children of immigrants in the case of Cleveland, is to look up the children at the public school census office. The census takers listed, in most cases, all the children attending either parochial or public school at a given period. From these records this researcher has

found that eighty-five per cent of all Slovak children attended parochial school for their elementary education and, thus, they followed the wishes expressed by their parents in the Slovak press.

Once the children are found we can again determine the average family size as well as the names of second generation children and we can then trace their lives through local parochial and public school records and city directories. One of my colleagues will also discuss this aspect of social and horizontal mobility.

From a discussion of the above type of records we can see that immigrants are far from anonymous. Hard work in lodge and parish records can reveal the structure, at any given time, of entire ethnic communities. If one reads the literature of the immigrant group and couples it with the above field-research, one can arrive at a very sophisticated reconstruction of the ethnic community in America. Such a reconstruction has long been wanting and, when accomplished, it will probably confound and amaze those 'general' historians who have not searched hard enough and who have insisted that immigrants have left too few records to make a reconstruction of their communal history possible.<sup>3</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES

- 1) Frank Thistlethwaite, "Migration from Europe Overseas in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries," in Herbert Moller ed. by, *Population Movements in Modern European History*, (New York, 1964), pp. 73-92.
- 2) Those unfamiliar with the Magyarization policies of the Hungarian government before 1918 should consult chapter III, part VII, "The Hungarian System of Civic Education," in Oscar Jaszi, *The Dissolution of the Habsburg Monarchy*, (Chicago, 1929), pp. 440-446, and also Scotus Viator (R. W. Seton-Watson), *Racial Problems in Hungary*, (London, 1908), xxvii-540 p.
- 3) Victor R. Greene is a case in point. Just recently, in his *The Slavic Community on Strike: Immigrant Labor in Pennsylvania Anthracite*, (Notre Dame, 1968), he wrote that, "memoirs of local leaders, relevant parish documents, transcripts of fraternal branch meetings, and many local immigrant newspapers, are very likely lost forever" (p.xvi). Victor Green did not search very hard. Instead of using predominantly ethnic sources he used mostly English-language sources and he should have named his book *The Slavic Community on Strike: Immigrant Labor in Pennsylvania Anthracite as seen by the English-speaking Community*.