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**Creating and Preserving Community:
Czech Americans in Omaha, Nebraska**

Master's Thesis

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In Prague on

The 2nd of May 2023.....Stephanie Shattuck

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Abstract

Czechs are one of the many diasporic communities that exist in the United States. The state of Nebraska contains one of the largest Czech diasporas in the country. This thesis looks at the Czech diaspora in Omaha, Nebraska – the largest city in the state. Through the use of interviews and archival research, a fragmented microhistory of the community is created answering the questions of how the community has changed since its founding, how it maintains its ethnic heritage, how it represents itself to the public, and what its future holds. This thesis argues that the key challenges to the vitality of the community are generational shifts, conflicts and lack of cooperation between community organizations, and finances.

Keywords

Nebraska, Czech Americans, diaspora studies, ethnic heritage organizations

Title

Creating and Preserving Community: Czech Americans in Omaha, Nebraska

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1. Introduction

As a country founded primarily by immigrants, diasporic communities in the United States are numerous. Many of these communities have maintained some semblance of ethnic heritage and tradition despite migrating to the United States several generations ago. One of these communities are the Czechs. The Czech diaspora in the United States is spread out mainly through the Midwestern region including the states of Wisconsin, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, and Texas (USA Czech Data – Maps & Charts). While not the largest diaspora originating from Europe, Czech Americans still have a considerable presence in American ethnic culture.

The purpose of this thesis is to take a glimpse at the Czech diaspora in Omaha, Nebraska – the largest city in Nebraska and home to a sizeable Czech American population. I will seek to answer the questions of how the Omaha Czech community has changed over time, how it maintains its Czech heritage, how it represents itself to the public, and what its future looks like. Interviews with members of the Czech American organizations in Omaha were conducted using guidelines and best practices set forth by the Oral History Association to gain insight into the past and present day operations of the organizations. By conducting these interviews, examining local museums, and analyzing archives, this thesis provides a portrait of an ethnic Czech community in an urban environment that has changed significantly since its founding in the late nineteenth century.

This microhistory on Czech Americans in Omaha is unique in combining sources from both Omaha and South Omaha, two Czech communities that historically have not communicated or gotten along with each other. It also focuses on an urban Czech diaspora whereas a majority of studies on Czech American communities tend to focus on rural populations (Dutkova-Cope 2003, Zeitler 2009). Omaha is an urban environment with a population of about half a million people, encompassing the whole metropolitan area

including the suburbs of Bellevue, Papillion, LaVista, Ralston and others (United States Census Bureau).

Drawing on Dufoix's writing of diasporas, this thesis argues that the Omaha Czech community is an example of what Dufoix calls "enclaved mode" (Dufoix 2008, 62), meaning that the diasporic community is organized locally with little or no connection to the homeland. Omaha Czechs operate solely within their own community and the way in which they present themselves to the larger Omaha and Nebraska population is clear proof of that. This thesis also argues that though many ethnic and cultural organizations exist within the community, their lack of unity and disjointed operations are a threat to the survival of the diaspora. As the core membership of these organizations age, the Omaha Czech community faces the problem that they may not be able to continue existing as the membership dwindles and, as I observed during my fieldwork, they are unable or unwilling to try harder to recruit new members.

This thesis is divided into five distinct sections. First I will discuss literature relevant to my case study and how it relates to Czechs in Nebraska. Included is literature from diaspora studies and from the study of folklore and heritage museums. Next I will discuss Czech Americans in Nebraska more generally, providing information about the University of Nebraska Lincoln's Czech program and the Nebraska Czech Festival, both outside of Omaha but that are important for understanding the Czech culture in Nebraska as a whole. I will then launch into my specific study of the Czech American diasporic community in Omaha, Nebraska. Several thematic areas are covered in this segment of the thesis including historical Czech Omaha, Sokol organizations, the Omaha Czech/Slovak Cultural Club, museums, polka bands and orchestras, and the future of the Omaha Czech community. Lastly, I will offer my concluding thoughts about the Omaha Czech community.

1.1. A Note on Terminology

The terms Czech and Bohemian are often used interchangeably within the United States to refer to people who immigrated from the Czech lands. A majority of the Czech diaspora settled in the United States during the late nineteenth century when Czechs were emigrating from the Habsburg Empire. Since Czechia was not an independent country at the time, people emigrating from the area were referred to as both Czechs and Bohemians since they were moving from what was considered both the Czech lands and Bohemia (Britannica).

Throughout this thesis, I will refer to the immigrant group as Czechs, unless the material I am referencing calls them Bohemians.

Another important point to consider is how Americans often refer to themselves when referencing their ethnic heritage. Although many Americans are far removed from the time when their families immigrated to the United States, they will still refer to themselves as being from the lands where their ancestors arrived from. This phenomenon is very commonplace (Perez & Hirschman 2010, 26). Therefore when I speak of Czech Americans, Nebraska Czechs, or Omaha Czechs throughout this thesis, particularly when speaking of people in the contemporary era, I am referring to Americans with Czech heritage or ancestry, not of people who actually immigrated directly from Czechia. The exception is when I am talking about the historical period in which Czechs immigrated to the United States and Nebraska in the late nineteenth century.

2. Relevant Literature

2.1. Definitions of Diaspora

The use of the word diaspora and the study of diasporas has changed significantly over time. Until the past couple of decades, the term diaspora has referred to specific ethnic groups, specifically the Armenians, the Jews, the Chinese, and the African diasporas (Dufoix 2008,

38). The concept was not discussed much at all until the 1980s when the word became a hot topic in both academic and nonacademic communities (Butler 2001, 189). Nowadays, the term is used more prolifically, often to refer to any migrant group living across multiple countries away from their homeland (Cohen & Fischer 2018, 3).

Definitions of what a diaspora actually is are numerous as is the literature on the topic. In the simplest terms, the word is defined as “the dispersal of a people from its original homeland” (Butler 2001, 189). In recent years, the term has been used and misused in all manner of circumstances leading to what Rogers Brubaker, an American sociology professor at the University of California Los Angeles, has called “the ‘diaspora’ diaspora” (Brubaker 2005, 4). He suggests that the meaning of diaspora has become so dispersed that it is almost rendered meaningless and useless because it has lost its discriminating power (Brubaker 2005, 3). However, Brubaker identifies three core elements that he believes constitute diaspora: dispersion, homeland orientation, and boundary-maintenance (Brubaker 2005, 5-6). Dispersion refers to the idea that the population consisting of a diaspora is scattered beyond state borders (Brubaker 2005, 5). Homeland orientation refers to a diaspora’s orientation to a real or imagined homeland as the true source of value, identity, and loyalty (Brubaker 2005, 5). Boundary-maintenance involves the diaspora preserving a distinctive identity separate from the identity of the host society (Brubaker 2005, 6).

Ewa Morawska, a Polish professor of sociology at the University of Essex, in a study of diasporas’ representations of homelands, agrees with Brubaker in regards to the word diaspora being far too dispersed. She also proposes several ways in which diasporas can be defined to help clarify what exactly is meant when speaking of a diaspora. In her view, the relationship members of a diaspora have with their homeland, host countries, and their imaginations of their homeland are complex and can even be contradictory (Morawska 2011, 1031). Through her research, Morawska identifies major events or circumstances of a

diasporic group that influence the way members of a diaspora portray and view their homeland (Morawska 2011, 1031). These circumstances can help to illuminate different categories of diasporas and the factors that may lead a group to become a diaspora such as factors in the home country or in the host country, features of the diasporic group, as well as individual characteristics of the people immigrating (Morawska 2011, 1044).

Kim D. Butler, an American historian specializing in African diaspora studies, argues that most diaspora scholars have agreed on three basic features of diaspora (Butler 2001, 192). These features are that first, after dispersal, there must be a minimum of two destinations in which the diaspora is present, second, there must be some relationship to an actual or imagined homeland, and lastly there must be self-awareness of the group's identity (Butler 2001, 192). Butler agrees with scholars that all of these features constitute a diaspora but she also adds a fourth distinguishing feature, one of the temporal-historical dimension, meaning that the diaspora must have existed over at least two generations (Butler 2001, 192). She argues that "diasporas are multi-generational: they combine the individual migration experience with the collective history of group dispersal and regeneration of communities abroad" (Butler 2001, 192). This view of the diaspora existing over several generations sets Butler's characterization of diaspora apart from both Brubaker and Morawska.

In regards to methods used when studying any diaspora, Butler proposes five dimensions that should be covered in any research: reasons for and conditions of the dispersal, relationship with the homeland, relationship with the hostlands, interrelationships within communities of the diaspora, and comparative studies of different diasporas (Butler 2001, 195). Butler's dimensions of diaspora are extremely useful because they provide a clear cut way to think about diasporas and the many facets that should be considered while researching them. While this thesis does not have the space to cover all dimensions thoroughly, thinking about these features within diaspora offers a compelling way of looking

at a diasporic community like the Omaha Czechs because the different dimensions show ways in which a community can be looked at.

For the purposes of this thesis, I will follow Morawska's definition: that diaspora is "referring to ethno-national groups whose members reside out of their home country (moved from there either forcibly or voluntarily) and who retain a sense of membership in their group of origin and a collective representation and concern for the wellbeing of their homeland which plays a significant role in their lives in both a symbolic and normative sense" (Morawska 2011, 1030). This fits in with the Omaha Czech community – a group of people who have a strong connection to their ethnic identity and heritage.

2.2. Changes in Diaspora Over Time

One of the potentially contentious parts of trying to define what exactly a diaspora is comes from the fact that diasporas change over time and are therefore constantly evolving and not static groups of people. A diaspora that is newer looks significantly different than a diaspora that has been around for many generations. Changes in diasporic communities bring up questions of whether an older diaspora can even be considered a diaspora if their population is now fully integrated into the host country.

Many scholars discuss the role of assimilation in diasporic communities. In *Sense of Place: American Regional Cultures*, John M. Coggeshall, an American professor of anthropology, describes the regionalization of ethnic folklife in a town in Southern Illinois populated by Poles, Italians, and Slovaks. He notes that these ethnic populations in the coal mining town of Egypt, Illinois assimilated due to the pressure and xenophobia exhibited by their Anglo-American neighbors in the area (Coggeshall 1990, 103). This process is described by Coggeshall as regionalization meaning when different groups interact with each other, often their own folklife traditions are changed as a result of the changes happening in

their new regional community (Coggeshall 1990, 103). Coggeshall's theory of regionalization is extremely relevant particularly to ethnic populations in the United States who were encouraged or forced to assimilate to American standards. In regards to Czechs in Omaha, assimilation can clearly be seen in the community since its founding because the community has gone from consisting solely of immigrants to being American citizens that celebrate their Czech heritage.

Coggeshall's study also shows that it can matter whether immigrant populations move into an urban or a rural area. The populations in his study immigrated to a rural region of Illinois and therefore faced pressure from existing populations in the rural area to assimilate (Coggeshall 1990, 118). In other cases, however, entire immigrant communities formed new towns and communities and stayed true to their ethnic background without the outside influence of other ethnic groups. Formations of ethnically exclusive towns can be seen in Lida Dutkova-Cope's (2003) study of two rural towns in Texas, Granger and West, both with a mostly ethnic Czech Moravian population, as well as in studies of the small rural town of Wilber, Nebraska (Zeitler 2009, Tichy 2014). While noting Coggeshall's example of assimilation within a rural region, I would contend that assimilation is more commonplace in urban areas that hold many different diasporic communities. It is possible that assimilation may occur quicker and be more pronounced in urban rather than in rural communities because of the higher likelihood of the mixing of different cultures.

Assimilation combined with maintaining culture is a significant matter for any diasporic community. John Bodnar, an American historian, claims that "rapid structural assimilation into the mainstream of American society" was still possible (Bodnar 1985, 184) but there were elements of folk culture that permeated and served "to reinforce group identity in the face of meeting new groups" (Bodnar 1985, 185). Examples of these folk elements include Czech harvest festivals which had been "widespread in the homeland" and continued

to be held throughout the United States, but were adapted to the new community with people participating as both actors and spectators (Bodnar 1985, 186). Another example comes in the form of song and dance in which traditional ethnic music was put together with more American sounds to create a distinct sound unique to immigrant communities (Bodnar 1985, 186-187). Blended ethnic and American sounds can be seen in the polka bands and orchestras of Czech Nebraskans. Immigrant communities preserved their ethnic roots through fraternal organizations, ethnic schools, athletic clubs, and theatre organizations (Bodnar 1985, 188-189). In Nebraska, numerous organizations of this nature were formed within the Czech diasporic community and still continue to exist in some way.

French professor of sociology Stephane Dufoix argues that no community exists on its own and that unity of a community “rests on signs, values, and rules controlled by community authorities” (Dufoix 2008, 73). He contends that “promoting purity is an effective argument, since the community operates on an ideal of continuity with its origin. But traditions are never transplanted in exactly the same way. Sooner or later, the influence of changes in the mental attitudes of the migrants and their descendants begins to have an effect” (Dufoix 2008, 74). According to Dufoix, traditions change when communities do. What once was a pillar of a community, whether that be a certain event or organization, can change over time. The Omaha Czech community exemplifies this idea of change throughout its history because it has changed so extensively since its founding.

One last concept to consider when looking at changes in a diaspora over time is that of communicative memory. Communicative memory, as described by Jan Assmann, are the “varieties of collective memory that are based exclusively on everyday communications” (Assmann 1995, 126). It is through this type of communication that people forms memories that are related to a group and are socially mediated. Communicative memories are formed through communication with others, with the ‘others’ being a set of people that form a

specific group “through a common image of their past” (Assmann 1995, 127). An important point about communicative memory is that it has a limited temporal horizon, meaning that after three or four generations, communicative memories will likely cease to exist within the collective memory of a community (Assmann 1995, 127). This is an important concept to consider when looking at the Omaha Czech community because they are potentially reaching a point where communicative memories will fade away which could greatly affect the viability of the community.

2.3. Relationship Between the Nation State and its Diaspora

Another area of focus in diaspora studies is the relationship between a diaspora and the nation state it hails from. This relationship can take many forms and can look different for each diaspora. Each individual within a diaspora might also have their own relationship to the nation state depending on whether they still have family in the home country or the length of time it has been since their relatives became immigrants (Dufoix 2008, 71).

Dufoix introduces in his work on diaspora a typology in regards to what the diaspora’s relationship is with the nation state. He identifies four structuring modes: centroperipheral, enclaved, atopic, and antagonistic (Dufoix 2008, 62). The centroperipheral mode involves a diaspora in which the diasporic community is closely linked to the home country (Dufoix 2008, 62). The enclaved mode involves the local organization of a community within a host country. This mode is not based on any formal link of nationality but on shared identity within a community (Dufoix 2008, 62-63). The atopic mode is best expressed through dispersion (Dufoix 2008, 63). The antagonistic mode is typically formed by groups who refuse to recognize the legitimacy of the current regime in their country or consider their country to be under foreign occupation. The goal of a diaspora in this mode is to liberate their country, nation, or people (Dufoix 2008, 63). These modes vary along three

axes namely the relationship to the existing regime, the relationship to a referent-origin that is separate from the state or from an identity, and the interolarity of individuals, groups, and communities (Dufoix 2008, 64). The Omaha Czech community falls within the enclaved mode, creating their own community without any ties to the land of origin.

One of the main types of relationships between a nation state and its diaspora is political. Štěpánka Korytova-Magstadt's case study of Czech Americans during World War I is an excellent example of how a diaspora can be politically motivated. Korytova-Magstadt, a migration historian, explains the roles of different members of the Czech-American elite, their organizations, and the way in which the Czech American diaspora worked for the cause of the independence of the Czech lands to form Czechoslovakia (Korytova-Magstadt 2006, 5). She suggests that it is often believed that the Czech diaspora in the United States successfully lobbied Congress and the White House for the cause of Czechoslovak independence despite there being no evidence that this was the case (Korytova-Magstadt 2006, 4). However, there were numerous people and organizations that did lobby for the cause such as the Czech branch of the Socialist party in America and multiple Czech language newspapers across the country (Korytova-Magstadt 2006, 9). Korytova-Magstadt points out that the community that actively helped in the movement for Czech independence was quite large, with many elites touring the United States giving impassioned speeches in favor of their homeland (Korytova-Magstadt 2006, 7). The movement for Czech independence was not cohesive across the entire Czech American diaspora. There were several factions – those for independence, those who were for independence but also for socialism in the Czech lands, and those who were anti-war altogether (Korytova-Magstadt 2006, 9-10). Ultimately, Korytova-Magstadt explains that it was generally not the everyday diasporic population that was involved in the politics of Czech lands with a majority of Czech diasporic communities strengthening “their ties with their families in on a communal level

and, as a result, developed their own American-Czech identity” (Korytova-Magstadt 2006, 14). This phenomenon can be seen in the Nebraska Czech community. While some elites in Nebraska were involved in rousing support for Czech politics like Mr. Ptak of the Socialist party in America (Korytova-Magstadt 2007, 9), overall the community mostly kept to itself (Sokol South Omaha Local History Project).

Another way of looking at the relationship between a diaspora and a nation state is to look at how diasporans relate to their homeland in more casual and social ways and less political ways. Jillian L. Powers, a researcher in American culture studies, takes a look at homeland tourism and “how American diasporans use place to narrate and construct imagined community” (Powers 2011, 1363). She argues that “homeland tourism provides opportunities to narrate collective identities that allow participants to remain American yet accept and incorporate their ethnic heritage through consuming these brief homeland encounters” (Powers 2011, 1363). She attests that individuals, while existing within the boundaries of their own country, can also extend past those boundaries to have allegiances to their ethnic homeland outside the country of their citizenship, even if that connection is imagined (Powers 2011, 1364). Powers concludes that “it is not the cultural context enclosed by the boundary but the boundary itself and the symbolic representations of that border (language, food, etc.) that perpetuate the community” (Powers 2011, 1374). Symbolic representations of heritage and ethnicity in the Omaha Czech community are very prevalent markers of history and identity, especially in relation to food culture.

2.4. Museums, Heritage, and Folklife

Scholarship on museums and heritage and their relationship with folklife in the United States can also provide useful insight to analyze the Omaha Czechs. Many folklore scholars argue for the placement of folklife objects in museum not simply as “curious old stuff that everyone

already knows about, which thus needs no care” (Vlach 2017, 54) but that the objects and processes that are part of folk life actually play a key role for museums (Baron 2017, 48). Scholars in the field describe folklife as a representation of a community at a particular time in which traditional knowledge and values of that community can be ascertained (Baron 2017, 39). Unfortunately in the United States “folk artifacts in museums are usually seen as historical statements, as leftovers from faraway times and dead-and-gone people” (Vlach 2017, 58). Museums in the Omaha area that deal with Czech immigration and heritage fall into the trap of artifacts being seen or displayed as leftovers from the past.

Robert Baron, a folklore scholar, argues that “folklife approaches and practices need to be more widely communicated and better articulated with the museum field as a whole” (Baron 2017, 28). In his view, the relationship of museums to communities needs to consist of mutual engagement and that this relationship should entail shared authority for curation, programming and interpretation” (Baron 2017, 29) and “participation in museums entails creating performance and programming structures that interactively engage audiences” (Baron 2017, 33). Baron says that folklife projects should allow the communities to present and maintain their traditions on their own since it is people in a particular community who share the values and traditions of their community’s past (Baron 2017, 34 - 35). In *Museums and Galleries*, Gerard Corsane, a lecturer in museum, heritage and gallery studies at the University of Newcastle, emphasizes the importance of public participation in all states and activities of the overall process of heritage, museum, and gallery work arguing that the process of public participation should be circulatory and dynamic in character (Corsane 2005, 2). One of the two museums presenting information about the Czech diaspora in Omaha seems to actively work to engage the community and encourage community participation though success is varied. While I agree with Baron’s point that it is important for folklife museums to engage local communities, I would argue that in the hands of museum curators

who are volunteers or not versed in proper museum techniques, too much community engagement could become overwhelming and lead to a plethora of folklife objects in a museum that serve no purpose. This situation is applicable to the Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum in Nebraska.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, chief curator of the core exhibition at the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, looks at the relationship between heritage and museums. She defines heritage as “a mode of cultural production that has recourse to the past and produces something new” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2017, 178) and notes that “heritage refers to the self-conscious selection of valued objects and practices” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2017, 179). According to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, communities choose which objects they deem important for preservation. In a diasporic community as many generations removed as the Czech community in Nebraska, the objects that remain in cultural museums can speak volumes as to what the community cares about and chooses to keep and display.

In relation to intangible heritage at museums, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett states that “museums, while repositories of tangible heritage in the form of artifact collections, have always had to address the intangible aspects of culture” with examples of intangible heritage being things such as indigenous knowledge, belief systems, techniques of the body, performance or other manifestations of culture that are linked directly to people (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2017, 180-181). The Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum in Omaha works with intangible heritage through cultural events and other related programming. In line with Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Corsane argues that museums should widen the meaning of what is considered heritage stating that it is important for museums to provide opportunities for learning in a community (Corsane 2005, 10). Corsane contends that museums hold a unique position because they “facilitate learning by making available heritage resources and information through exhibitions, educational material, and

activities along with other public programmes. If the visitors and users have been empowered through well-thought-through orientation, then they can become active interpreters” (Corsane 2005, 11). The idea that visitors can be active participants and interpreters of information is something that the Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum is certainly attempting to do, albeit passively, by providing books and records regarding the history of the Czech diaspora of the United States and Nebraska.

3. Methodology

This thesis relies on several methods to put together a fragmented microhistory of the Omaha Czech community. A bulk of the data and stories gathered during fieldwork comes from semi-structured interviews conducted with members of Omaha Czech community organizations and people in groups adjacent to the community. Interviews were conducted using the principles and best practices for oral history research as set by the Oral History Association. Principles of oral history interviews include allowing narrators to give their full story grounded in reflections on the past and commentary on contemporary events, narrators voluntarily giving their consent to be interviewed through signing a release form, and respect being given to the narrators’ authority in the interviews as well as honoring the right for narrators to answer questions in their own style (Oral History Association). All of these principles were followed during my interviews with members of the Omaha Czech community.

Interviews took place in December 2022 and January 2023 while visiting Omaha, Nebraska. Each interview lasted between one and two hours. Basic questions to guide the conversation were crafted ahead of the interviews, but each interviewee was asked a slightly different set of questions based on their affiliation with the Omaha Czech community and the content of their answers to previous questions. Following best practices, interviews were

conducted in a quiet space, the length of the interview was agreed upon ahead of time, and each interview session began with a “lead” (Oral History Association) to focus the narrators’ thoughts towards the goals of the interview session. I interviewed Jason Cadek, member of the Omaha Czech Slovak Club, board member of Sokol Omaha, and president of the Bohemian Cemetery in Omaha; Marlene Mahoney, member at large of the Omaha Czech/Slovak Cultural Club; and Kenneth Janak Jr., founder of the Kenny Janak Orchestra.

I was given a tour of the Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum by Nancy Daniel, museum volunteer, who allowed me to record the tour for the purposes of this thesis, but she was unwilling to sit for a full interview. The tour audience consisted only of myself so while not a formal interview, Daniel did sign a release form and agreed to be asked questions during the tour lending me to classify the tour as an interview more than simply a tour I participated in.

Archival and historical research on the Omaha Czech community was conducted by visiting museums in Omaha as well as reading numerous texts about the community. Museums visited were the Durham Museum and the Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum. Texts analyzed about the Omaha Czech community were found online and through the local Omaha library. These documents include histories compiled by the local community such as the Sokol South Omaha Local History Project, the Sokol Omaha Anniversary Program Book as well as histories compiled by scholars from the 1920s (Čapek 1920, Rosicky 1929).

4. Brief Information about the Czech Diaspora in Nebraska

The Czech diaspora in the United States has been around for nearly two centuries with the first known Czechs coming to the United States in mid-nineteenth century (Čapek 1920, 28). Czechs began immigrating to the United States from the Czech lands in mass numbers due to

political and economic reasons, stemming from the revolutions happening in the Habsburg Empire, of which the Czech lands were a part (Čapek 1920, 28). Czechs migrated to cities and rural parts of the United States. The Homestead Act of 1862 made it easier for immigrants to settle in the more western parts of the United States, such as Nebraska, because it granted heads of families 160 acres of surveyed public land for a minimal filing fee as long as the grantee occupied the land continuously for five years (Čapek 1920, 47). The Homestead Act was appealing to many Czech immigrants because they often originated from farming communities (Čapek 1920, 47). By 1914, it is estimated that over a quarter of a million Czechs had settled in both urban and rural areas throughout the United States (Korytova-Magstadt 2006, 5). Czechs were scattered across the country with the largest concentration in the states of Illinois and Nebraska (Čapek 1920, 60). Presently, the state of Nebraska has the largest amount of people with Czech heritage per capita in the United States (USA Czech Data – Maps & Charts). While the Czech diaspora is spread throughout the state, much of it is concentrated in Southeast Nebraska in both rural areas and in larger cities such as Omaha and Lincoln. It is estimated that about five percent of people living in Nebraska are of Czech heritage (USA Czech Data – Maps & Charts).

A significant influence of the Czech diaspora in Nebraska was the formation of a Czech language program at Nebraska's largest public university – University of Nebraska Lincoln, located in the capital of the state. The Czech language program was one of the first of its kind in the United States, founded in 1907, and continues to present day (Saskova-Pierce). University of Nebraska Lincoln has its own Czech Komensky Club, named for Jan Amos Komensky who was a pioneer educator in the Czech lands living from 1592 to 1670 (Saskova-Pierce). The aim of the Komensky Club is “to form a bond among Czech-Americans and to provide a model of cultural association to other university settings, where students could study Czech language, history and literature first informally, and later

formally, in regular courses” (Saskova-Pierce). Presently, University of Nebraska Lincoln offers three years of undergraduate instruction and a minor in Czech language as well as several exchange programs with the Czech Republic (Saskova-Pierce). While there is not any direct cooperation with the University of Nebraska Lincoln Czech program, the Omaha Czech community has occasionally invited people associated with the program as speakers at their events (J. Cadek, personal interview, 6 January 2023).

The largest Czech event in Nebraska is the annual Nebraska Czech Festival held in Wilber, Nebraska during the summer. Every year, the festival attracts thousands of people from around the United States over a weekend (Nebraska Czechs of Wilber). Visitors are primarily from Nebraska but come from states throughout the country. The festival is run by Nebraska Czechs Inc., the umbrella organization of all Czech clubs across Nebraska (Nebraska Czechs Inc.). The festival hosts numerous events over the course of the weekend. Planned for their 2023 festival are performances by polka bands and folk dancers, an art show, bingo games, a production about the history of the Czechs, a kolache eating contest, a parade, and the main event of the festival – the Miss Czech-Slovak U.S. Pageant (Nebraska Czechs of Wilber).

The Miss Czech-Slovak U.S. Pageant has been hosted in Wilber since 1987 (Nebraska Czechs of Wilber). The pageant was established in 1986 by John Fiala and his wife Lois, members of the Lincoln, Nebraska Czech community. Each year, every chapter of Nebraska Czechs Inc. holds their own competition for the Czech-Slovak queen to compete at the festival. Currently, Czech organizations from eight other U.S. states – Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Texas, and Wisconsin – also send their own representatives to compete. As of this writing, nine of the winning queens have been from Nebraska (Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum, 2022).

5. The Czech Diaspora of Omaha

This thesis focuses specifically on the Czech diaspora in Omaha, the largest city in Nebraska. The community is now over 150 years old, with most of the existing diaspora from the third, fourth, or fifth generation since initial immigration. While the community has some contact with other Czech heritage groups around the state through the Nebraska Czech Festival and the Miss Czech-Slovak U.S. Pageant, the Omaha Czech community is an insular community full of several Czech American organizations that try to preserve the Czech heritage and culture of the community.

One of the main problems within the community is that while many organizations exist, none of them work together. Because of this problem, this microhistory of the Omaha Czech community is divided into thematic sections, each related to one specific type of organization or group. The first section will focus on historical Czech Omaha looking at what the community was like and who were the major figures when it was initially founded. The following section is about Sokol organizations encompassing a brief history of Sokols in the United States and about Sokol organizations in Omaha specifically. Next, I will look at the main social heritage organization for Czechs in Omaha – the Omaha Czech/Slovak Cultural Club. Museums in the Omaha area that have displays about Czech immigration and the community is the topic of the next section. This segment will look at the Durham Museum, which has some information about Czech immigration in Omaha but is not run by the Czech community, and the Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum, which is operated by community volunteers. Polka bands and orchestras is the subject of the next segment, looking briefly at some historical information about Omaha's polka past as well as a dive into one local musical polka family that is still creating polka music today. The final section examines the future of the Omaha Czech community and if it is sustainable in its current form.

5.1. Historical Czech Omaha

Czechs began settling in Omaha and Douglas County around 1868. The main motivation was the Homestead Act of 1862, but there were also job opportunities in Omaha's booming industrial industries with immigrants primarily the ones hired for these jobs due to the low cost of their labor (Rosicky 1929, 180). Omaha was considered a gate city for Czechs coming to Nebraska. This was because many immigrants only stayed long enough to find out where in the state they wanted to relocate or they came to earn money to purchase land through the Homestead Act (Rosicky 1929, 177).

The main Czech neighborhood in Omaha was located on South 13th Street, south of the downtown area, now called 'Little Bohemia' in honor of the Czech immigrants who originally settled the area. Though the area is currently in the process of being revitalized and gentrified, the neighborhood formerly housed Czech businesses, organizations, and families. Many of the Czech businesses on this street referenced the homeland such as the Prague Hotel, named after the capital of the Czech lands, and the Bohemian Café restaurant, referencing Bohemia which is a part of the Czech lands, which served traditional Czech cuisine. One of the main local Sokol organizations, a gymnastics movement started in Prague in 1862, was also on this street as well as the Czech Catholic church in Omaha, St. Wenceslas Church, named after the patron saint of Bohemia.

At its founding, Omaha was a much smaller city and only grew when it annexed surrounding towns and neighborhoods. South Omaha used to be one of these separate towns and was incorporated into the city of Omaha in 1915 (DCHSADMIN). South Omaha had its own thriving Czech community separate from the Czechs settled on South 13th Street, only a couple of miles away. The Czechs of South Omaha settled in the area of Brown Park which is due south of the Little Bohemia neighborhood in Omaha. Many who lived in South Omaha worked in meat packing plants (Rosicky 1929, 180). There was a distinct divide between the

Czech immigrants living in Little Bohemia and those living in South Omaha. Although there were likely many factors for this divide, the main one was that those living in Little Bohemia were primarily part of the merchant class whereas those working in South Omaha were part of the working class, employed in meat packing plants and other heavy industry (Sokol South Omaha Local History Project). Though South Omaha is now part of the greater Omaha area and those descended from Czech immigrants in the area no longer have distinct class positions, the two Czech communities still do not cooperate.

Several Czech immigrants were extremely influential in the early years of the city of Omaha. Two of these were Edward Rosewater and Jonas L. Brandeis. Edward Rosewater was one of the leading newspaper editors and politicians in Omaha. He founded a Czech language newspaper in Omaha called *Pokrok Západu* in 1871 which provided news, advertised land, and gave advice on where immigrants could build their new homes. He also founded and became chief editor of the *Omaha Bee* which grew to become one of the leading Republican newspapers in the Midwest (Durham Museum, 2022). Jonas L. Brandeis was a Bohemian Jewish immigrant who traveled to Omaha with his family in 1881 (Durham Museum, 2022). The Brandeis family was one of the most influential in the Omaha area due to their successful business ventures. They are most well-known for the Brandeis Department Store located in Downtown Omaha from 1906 to 1980 (DCHSADMIN). Brandeis Department Store was an anchor store for several of the malls that were built around the Omaha area, namely Crossroads Mall and Southroads Mall. One other prominent Czech immigrant to Nebraska was Roman Hruska, the first senator of Czech heritage elected from Nebraska who was a vocal conservative in the Senate during the 1960s and 1970s (Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum, 2022).

Not much information exists about the Omaha Czech community between its early days and the contemporary era. Much of the literature and displayed information at museums

in the Omaha area focus specifically on immigration and not on how the community changed over time or what it looked like after the initial waves of immigration. Organizations such as Sokol Omaha had some fragmented historical records but these records have been donated to various organizations across Nebraska and Iowa and are not readily accessible by the public (J. Cadek, personal interview, 6 January 2023).

Nowadays the Omaha Czech community has diminished significantly from its robustness of the twentieth century with members of the community fully assimilated into American culture. While the community is more American than Czech, the members of the community still readily embrace their Czech heritage. Going back to Bodnar's work about diaspora, he claims that elements of folk culture still persist in diasporic communities despite assimilation into the mainstream culture because it gives the group a clearer sense of ethnic identity (Bodnar 1985, 185). The Omaha Czech community still holds onto its cultural and ethnic roots despite being essentially fully assimilated into American culture.

While the historical neighborhood of Little Bohemia still exists, the Czech community is virtually absent in this area with much of the neighborhood taken over by gentrification. The last holdouts were the Bohemian Café established in 1924 (Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum, 2022) and the Sokol Auditorium established in 1926 (DCHSADMIN). But even these institutions of the Omaha Czech community closed down with Bohemian Café in 2016 and the Sokol Auditorium in 2020. Without a centralized location, the Omaha Czech community is scattered throughout Omaha and has no home base.

5.2. Sokol Organizations

Sokol organizations started forming in the Czech lands in 1862. The purpose of Sokol organizations was for people to have “a sound mind in a sound body,” as described by its founder Miroslav Tyrš, which would develop character, discipline and cooperation and lead

to self-governance (Sokol Museum & Library). As the Sokol Museum and Library states on its website, Sokol organizations were first and foremost gymnastics clubs with an undercurrent of emphasizing Czech identity, equality of people, democracy, and morality (Sokol Museum & Library).

Czech American Sokol organizations were a large part of the Czech immigration experience to the United States. The first Czech American Sokol club was founded in St. Louis, Missouri in 1865. By 1919, the American Sokol Organization had become the largest Czech club organization in the United States with over 10,000 members (Nolte 2009, 1963). Czech American Sokols differed from their Czech counterparts particularly in the meaning behind the organization. In Czech lands the meaning leaned more towards the national struggles within the Habsburg Empire, whereas in the United States the meanings were “more consonant with the exigencies of the immigrant experience” (Nolte 2009, 1964).

Sokol organizations were significantly more than gymnastic organizations in the beginnings of the Czech immigrant experiences in the United States. Nolte points out that “they often served as anchors of national life in the immigrant community” (Nolte 2009, 1967). Sokol organizations celebrated Czech-Americans, offered English classes to new immigrants, honored prominent Czechs visiting the US, and operated weekend schools to teach the Czech language and heritage to new generations (Nolte 2009, 1967).

Sokols were one of the major institutional foundations for the Free Thought movement among Czech Americans (Nolte 2009, 1969). The Free Thought movement, with its proponents called Freethinkers, was followed by those who rejected religious authority or dogma (Edwards 2005). The Free Thought movement alienated Czech American Catholics who, as a result, created their own Sokol organizations within the same communities (Nolte 2009, 1970). Czech American Sokols increasingly moved towards using the English language instead of Czech and the immigrant communities continued to assimilate to the American

way of life (Nolte 2009, 1975). Although the Czech communities assimilated into the United States by the use of English, they still kept their ethnic ties to their Czech heritage by the continuance of the Sokol organizations. As Bodnar mentions, elements of folk culture reinforced group identity in the face of rapid assimilation (Bodnar 1985, 185). Sokol clearly served this purpose of reinforced group ethnic identity for Czech Americans.

Catholic Sokols also formed in the United States because there was often a divide in the Czech diasporic population in the United States due to religion. Bodnar points out that “Czech Catholics were even building schools before churches for fear their children would attend schools operated by free thinkers” (Bodnar 1985, 195). The first Catholic Sokol was formed in 1893 in Omaha, Nebraska. Soon after, Catholic Sokols were established in small Nebraska towns, Texas towns, Chicago, Baltimore, and Detroit (Sokol Museum & Library). In 1909, the Catholic Sokols formed a Catholic Union Sokol to separate themselves from the National Union Sokol which they viewed as influenced by the free thinkers (Sokol Museum & Library). The Catholic Union Sokol was formed to continue the gymnastics traditions of Sokol organizations but to still be faithful to church teachings (Sokol Museum & Library). After the First World War, the Catholic Sokol organizations did not thrive, however prior to the war there were 70 Catholic Sokol clubs (Sokol Museum & Library).

Today, Sokol organizations in the United States fall under two separate national organizations. The American Sokol Organization is for Sokols falling under Czech heritage. Sokol USA or the Slovak Gymnastic Union Sokol of the USA is for Sokols falling under Slovak heritage.

5.2.1. Sokol Organizations in Omaha

Throughout the history of the Czech community in Omaha, there have been many different Sokol organizations. The first Sokol in Omaha was organized in September 1877, twelve years after the first US Sokol, as the Tel Jed Sokol Omaha. Eventually several other Sokol

organizations appeared in the area: the Tyrš Sokol, which was initially formed due to disagreements with how the Tel Jed Sokol was operating (Sokol Omaha 100th Anniversary Program Book), the Catholic Sokol, and Sokol South Omaha. In the early 1900s, the Tyrš Sokol merged with one of the other Sokol organizations – both the Tel Jed Sokol and Sokol South Omaha claim that they merged with the Tyrš Sokol (Sokol Omaha 100th Anniversary Program Book, Sokol South Omaha Local History Project). Either way, for most of Omaha’s history, three Sokol organizations existed in Omaha all within a fifteen mile radius of each other. Today only the Tel Jed Sokol and Sokol South Omaha remain in existence though their form and mission have changed since their establishment.

Despite being a small community, historically Tel Jed Sokol and Sokol South Omaha do not work together or even get along. There is bad blood between the two organizations from when they were first founded and they have not worked together since, though knowledge of the conflict is about is not widespread in the community (J. Cadec, personal interview, 6 January 2023; M. Mahoney, personal interview, 7 January 2023). The only instance of noted cooperation between the two organizations was when Sokol South Omaha’s building burned down in 1975. Prior to the building being rebuilt, the Tel Jed Sokol shared their gymnasium with South Omaha gymnasts for a year and a half (Sokol Omaha 100th Anniversary Program Book).

An important activity in the life of American Sokols, as well as Czech Sokols, were the *Slets* – mass gymnastics festivals where all Sokols come together. There have been three National *Slets* hosted in Omaha. The first National *Slet* was held in Omaha in July 1914. This *Slet* had 350 men and women competitors and 750 men, women, juniors, and children who participated (Sokol Museum & Library). The second *Slet* in Omaha was in June 1946 (American Sokol Library and Archives). In June 1989 the third *Slet* was held in Omaha which was the seventeenth National American Sokol *Slet* and had the theme ‘The Future is

Yours', and had 1,190 overall participants (Sokol Museum & Library). The Tel Jed Sokol was also quite active in the Western District of Sokols and co-hosted the Western District Slets several times, the last recorded in June 1976 (Sokol Museum & Library). Both of these Sokol organizations have greatly contributed to the preservation of Czech heritage in Omaha because they have operated as a constant organization for the Czech diaspora in Omaha to gravitate towards.

Sokol Omaha (Tel Jed Sokol)

The most prominent Sokol organization in Omaha was the Tel Jed Sokol (referred to as Sokol Omaha from here on), the first Sokol organization in the city. It began strictly as a gymnastics organization and then morphed into more of a social hub for the Czech diaspora in Omaha. It was given membership to the American Sokol Organization in 1881 (Sokol Omaha 100th Anniversary Program Book). Sokol Omaha had several clubs, including the Sokol Dramatic Club, the Czech Ladies Sewing Circle, a choral group, and a bowling league, in addition to the gymnastics portion of Sokol (Sokol Omaha 100th Anniversary Program Book). Sokol Omaha financially supported Czech schools fundraised for both local and international Czech organizations throughout its history (Sokol Omaha 100th Anniversary Program Book). Sokol Omaha owned the Sokol auditorium which was the cultural and social center of the Omaha Czech community. The building was opened in 1899 and still exists today, though Sokol Omaha no longer owns it. Marlene Mahoney, who lived in Little Bohemia for her entire childhood, said that "life centered around Sokol Hall in Little Bohemia" (M. Mahoney, personal interview, 7 January 2023). She recalls that, in addition to being the home of the Sokol organization, it also hosted dances and held other social events (M. Mahoney, personal interview, 7 January 2023). Sokol Omaha also had plans in the 1920s to have Czech plays given every evening for seven days and each time by a different dramatic club in Omaha

(Sokol Omaha 100th Anniversary Program Book). While these plans were quite ambitious, Sokol Omaha did have theatre productions every year between 1893 and 1937 and some thereafter until the 1950s (Sokol Museum & Library). A record of the content of these performances was not kept.

Sokol Omaha put together a short booklet for its 100th anniversary with a scattered history of the organization. The booklet includes past speeches of community members from the early twentieth century as well as a rough record of Sokol Omaha's past events, mostly about improvements made to their building. This is an example of a piece of communicative memory that the community tried to preserve through writing it down so that it could be passed down to future generations to see what the common image of the Sokol's past was at the time of its writing. However, the information provided in the booklet is a partial history at best, with not a significant amount of material provided. As of the writing of the booklet in 1977, the organization had about 180 members (Sokol Omaha 100th Anniversary Program Book). Today, membership is reduced to forty (J. Cadek, personal interview, 6 January 2023).

The Czech diaspora was a close knit community through the influence of Sokol Omaha. In addition to the social activities happening around Little Bohemia and at the Sokol Auditorium, many Sokol member families in the early 1930s would camp together in Valley, Nebraska near the Platte River. Sokol Omaha owned the Vlcek farm where the camping took place. Sokol Omaha also held summer camps for Sokol gymnast boys and girls on alternate ten day periods under the supervision of Sokol gymnast instructors. The camping filled the gap from late June and early fall when the gymnastic season was not taking place. As Bodnar points out, immigrant communities often used fraternal and other organizations, like Sokol Omaha, to continue celebrating and remembering their ethnic roots (Bodnar 1985, 188).

Today, Sokol Omaha is a philanthropic organization with no home. For years the Sokol auditorium served as an event and concert venue for all of Omaha but now the organization has sold the building to a local production company that continues to produce concerts of touring musicians. Since the sale of the venue, the Omaha Czech community no longer has a central location to meet that was historically part of the Omaha Czech neighborhood (J. Cadek, personal interview, 6 January 2023).

Though without a home, Sokol Omaha still exists as an organization and has its own board. Their main event of the year is the Sokol Omaha Polka Hall of Fame. They host an induction ceremony each year to recognize musicians who were or are involved in promoting and preserving polka music (Sokol Omaha Polka Hall of Fame). Jason Cadek, who is a member of Sokol Omaha, said that the primary goal of Sokol Omaha is to invest in other organizations that meet the mission of American Sokol (J. Cadek, personal interview, 6 January 2023). However, the organization has no website or any information available about how these goals are achieved or what other activities the Sokol Omaha board is involved in, other than the Polka Hall of Fame.

Sokol South Omaha

Since South Omaha was separate from Omaha and because of the class differences between Czechs in both neighborhoods, the Czech diaspora of South Omaha formed their own Sokol organization separate from other Sokol organizations in Omaha. Sokol South Omaha was established in 1888 consisting of just 23 members (Sokol South Omaha Local History Project). Within two years, the Sokol began holding public exhibitions and competing in tournaments with other Sokol gyms in the area. In 1904, Sokol South Omaha opened their own Bohemian National Hall at the corner of 21st and U Streets (Sokol South Omaha Local History Project). In 1975, the Sokol's hall burned down but reopened two years later

(Sokol Gymnastics Nebraska). During the 1989 American Sokol National Slet in Omaha, Sokol South Omaha played a central part with many exhibitions held at Sokol South Omaha (Sokol South Omaha Local History Project). The Sokol also hosted several national American Sokol Organization schools in the 1980s and 1990s. The schools had students from other Sokol organizations in the United States and Canada come to Omaha each summer for a two week intensive training in the Tyrš System of Gymnastics and Physical Education (Sokol Gymnastics Nebraska). The membership of Sokol South Omaha grew the most between 1963 and 1972 when the organization transitioned from Czech to English language in their instruction and communications (Sokol South Omaha Local History Project).

Sokol South Omaha purchased 27 acres of land and built the Sokol Park Corporation in 1936, incorporated under Nebraska state law as a non-profit physical and cultural organization (Sokol South Omaha Local History Project). The new facility included a dance floor and space for cabins to be built (Sokol South Omaha Local History Project). The park also included old street cars which were converted into housing for gymnasts. Later on, the park corporation bought three kiddie rides: a train, a merry-go-round, and a Ferris wheel (Sokol South Omaha Local History Project). The Corporation eventually replaced the housing street cars with dormitories. In 1985, after the roofs collapsed in winter under heavy snow, the dormitories were torn down without a replacement. Sokol Park existed until 2004 as a center for Sokol South Omaha's patrons for picnics and club dances (Sokol South Omaha Local History Project).

Sokol South Omaha still operates as a fully operating gymnastics center but no longer has its home in South Omaha. Having sold its old building, it now has its center in the western part of Omaha. They offer gymnastics options for toddlers, recreational gymnastics for those wanting to go at their own pace, and team gymnastics for competitions. Most

weekends during the season, Sokol South Omaha gymnasts compete in gymnastics tournaments around the Midwest (Sokol Gymnastics Nebraska).

Sokol South Omaha has also established their own Czech and Sokol Museum (different from the Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum) displaying Czech and Sokol artifacts and claims to have a library of thousands of books and periodicals in the Czech language available to the public (Sokol Gymnastics Nebraska). The museum was formed in 1986 by Ed and Bea Pavoucek, members of the South Omaha Czech community. The pair worked with the museum's twelve person board to put together a wide assortment of memorabilia that highlights Sokol South Omaha history and the general history of Czech Sokols (Sokol South Omaha Local History Project). Since their recent building move to west Omaha, the museum and its library are not currently open to the public. They are in the process of putting the museum back together and plan to host an open house for the public once complete (Sokol Gymnastics Nebraska). It appears that most of the stuff listed as being in the museum resembles the content of the Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum. The logic of having two separate museums in a city of less than a million people that essentially displays the same type of artifacts and information is debatable. The Sokol South Omaha community and the Omaha Czech community behind the Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum would be better served to pool their resources to create one museum together than two different ones with the same material.

5.3. Omaha Czech/Slovak Cultural Club

For people of Czech heritage, the primary organization is the Omaha Czech/Slovak Cultural Club, founded in 1965. It is primarily a social heritage group but also has a scholarship competition and is in charge of selecting the Omaha representative for the Miss Czech-Slovak U.S. Pageant (J. Cadek, personal interview, 6 January 2023). The Club's current

mission and directive is to try to fill the gap between all of the different Czech organizations in Omaha (J. Cadek, personal interview, 6 January 2023). Whether they are successful in this regard is debatable.

The Club boasts a membership of about 140 but with only 20 to 30 people attending meetings regularly. In 2020, the Club sent a survey to gather information about Club members which yielded responses from 68 people. According to the results, 60% of the membership have belonged to the Club for less than 15 years and heritage and family connection were the main reason people joined (J. Cadek, personal communication, 29 March 2023). Monthly meetings of the Club were previously hosted at the Sokol Auditorium in Little Bohemia but are now held at several different locations around the Omaha area after the Auditorium was sold. The organization has annual holiday events for Christmas and Easter, a picnic in the fall, and some larger event in the spring months, all for members. None of these events are specifically Czech other than that the organization putting them together consists of people of Czech heritage. Their Christmas parties bring more people than most other events with the last one bringing in about 85 members (J. Cadek, personal interview, 6 January 2023).

In addition to holiday events for members, the Club has also participated in events held in the Omaha community to celebrate the diversity of Omaha's heritage such as the Christmas Cultural Festival at the Durham Museum which brings together many different ethnic clubs from the Omaha area. The Club also participated in a cultural fair run by the Chinese Club at the University of Nebraska Omaha. These public events allow the Club to get their name out into the city and to potentially attract new members to the organization and to make the entire Omaha community aware of the Club's existence.

The Club holds monthly meetings to learn more about Czech heritage and culture between September and May each year. The topics covered have brought a wide variety of

guests to talk with members of the Club such as professors from the University of Nebraska Lincoln's Czech department and even musicians from the Czech Republic who joined via Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic. A range of topics have been explored such as how to research your own genealogy back to what village families originated from or when families came to Omaha, programs on how to make food like kolaches and braided bread, having the Omaha Folk Dance Group come and show people folk and polka dances, craft related topics such as embroidery, and some unsuccessful attempts at Czech language classes. Despite the interesting topics covered, attendance to these regular meetings has been minimal and has largely consisted of members of the older generation. The Club survey asked what topics members were interested in covering with the most popular answers being music, cooking, culture, and language (J. Cadek, personal interview, 6 January 2023). The Club tries to get different speakers for each topic but as Cadek claims, it is difficult to find people who can talk knowledgably about the subjects. The Club has also tried to introduce new events but was unsuccessful: "the board talked about trying to do a Czech movie night, but again, that was kind of hard to do. Most movies are two hours and we would have to figure out how to play them" (J. Cadek, personal interview, 6 January 2023).

Active members of the Club are aging which could be detrimental to its survival. Club leadership is aware of this issue and has progressed towards a solution:

We hired an outside consultant to kind of do a strengths, weaknesses, kind of triage of the Club and kind of focusing on what their core mission was because we'd kind of been all over and that had significantly changed post-COVID. So I think they have a plan whether they'll be able to execute on it, I think it's kind of a struggle because I think any organization that's been around for a long time, and particularly with a demographic of people in where they are, it seems that they're a little bit adverse to change. I think there's lots of things they could do to bring in a different

demographic. It's just whether they have the time and effort and willingness to embrace that change (J. Cadek, personal interview, 6 January 2023).

Moving the Club forward seems depend on having the resources to put forward engaging and popular programming as well as the board having the will to change with the times. Based on my conversation with Cadek, it is the latter situation that appears to be the main problem with the Club progressing. If leadership is unwilling to embrace change, the future existence of the Club is in question.

Like with many organizations, the Omaha Czech/Slovak Cultural Club was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the advanced age of most members, the Club successfully moved their meetings to a Zoom format throughout the pandemic. Moving online allowed them opportunities that they may not have had otherwise like being able to talk with musicians in the Czech Republic who were acquaintances of one of the Club members.

The Club as an institution does not have any formal ties to present day Czechia. Connections that the Club does have in Czechia are only because some members have familial relations in the country (M. Mahoney, personal interview, 7 January 2023). Since the Czech diaspora formed in Omaha several generations ago, most families do not have any familial or other ties in the Czech Republic. Lack of connections to the homeland reinforces the idea that the Omaha Czech community is in the enclaved mode of diaspora as described by Dufoix (Dufoix 2008, 62).

The Omaha Czech/Slovak Cultural Club is the only ethnic heritage organization for members of the Czech diaspora in the Omaha metropolitan area. It is also unique in the grand scheme of Czech ethnic heritage organizations in Nebraska. Most of the towns in Nebraska that have some history of Czech immigration have their own organization for members of the Czech diaspora. However, these organizations typically only meet annually to choose their

representative for the Miss Czech-Slovak U.S. pageant. Omaha's Club is rare because they meet monthly and try to learn about their Czech heritage and Czech culture (J. Cadek, personal interview, 6 January 2023). This sets them apart from other Czech cultural groups in Nebraska.

5.4. Museums

Two museums in the Omaha metropolitan area feature the Czech diaspora of Omaha at least to some degree: the Durham Museum and the Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum. These two museums, though both theoretically history museums, could not be more different in both content and style. I visited both of these museums to see how they represented the Omaha Czech diasporic community to the general public. Through signage, photography, and artifacts presented and drawing on scholarship from folklife and heritage museums, I examined what knowledge exists about the Omaha Czech community and identify potential faults and gaps in the museums' presentations in order to shed light on how the Omaha Czech community is presented to the public.

The Durham Museum, formerly the Durham Western Heritage Museum, founded in 1975, is housed in what used to be Omaha's Union Station before passenger trains were phased out in the late twentieth century. On its website, the Durham Museum claims that it offers a "look at the history of our region and offers a broad-range of traveling exhibits covering subjects ranging from history and culture, to scient, industry and more" (Durham Museum). The museum is affiliated with the Smithsonian Institution, the world's largest museum, education, and research complex, and has strong ties to the Library of Congress and the National Archives, all based in the United States capital. The museum includes permanent exhibitions featuring the history of Omaha and Nebraska as a whole. It is in these sections

that the museum talks about the immigrant history of Omaha which includes Czech immigrants.

The exhibit mentions Edward Rosewater and Jonas L. Brandeis as prominent Czech and Bohemian immigrants that had influence in the early days of Omaha, elaborating on their businesses and the influence they had in Omaha. For Rosewater this was his two newspapers, *Pokrok Západu* and the *Omaha Bee*. Rosewater is also acknowledged for his financial contributions in opening the Wise Memorial Hospital and the Rosewater School. For Brandeis, the exhibit discusses the influence of the whole Brandeis family on Omaha particularly in regard to the Brandeis Department Store and their other retail ventures including a dry goods shop on South 13th Street, which would have been in or near the Czech neighborhood in Omaha.

Other than Rosewater and Brandeis, the museum mainly refers to Czech and Bohemian immigrants in context of the greater sum of immigrants in Omaha. The exhibit describes Omaha as a ‘melting pot’ of customs and traditions of all of the immigrants that settled there. The only mention of Czech immigrants in this section is a brief description of Czech migration to Omaha:

Czech immigrants were also known as Bohemians. They began arriving in the 1870s drawn by newspaper reports and railroad posters advertising affordable land. Many were farmers. By 1900, 13th and William streets formed the heart of “Little Bohemia,” Omaha’s main Czech neighborhood. Immigrants strolled the streets in Old World clothing, shopping in Czech stores. Rolls and kolaches from Czech bakeries, beef with dill gravy, sauerkraut, and dumplings attracted hungry customers of many cultures (Durham Museum, 2022).

The quote presents a particular image of the Czech immigrant community, one based in the past and ignoring the ongoing legacy of the Czech diaspora in Omaha. The information given

also implies that the community was contained to one specific area of Omaha. While the area of Little Bohemia was the center of the Czech community, the members of the South Omaha Czech community are completely forgotten in this description. This is perhaps because the museum is trying to paint a specific picture of immigrant communities in Omaha in line with what the general public visiting the museum already knows about the city. Czechs in Omaha are almost exclusively viewed as having lived in Little Bohemia. Including South Omaha Czechs in the picture of Omaha Czechs would shatter that image.

While not specifically a folklife museum, the Durham does present pieces of the folklife history of Omaha immigrants, including Czechs. However, it is unclear if the local Czech community was consulted as a part of the curation process when the display on immigration was put together. As Baron suggests, the relationship of museums to communities needs to consist of mutual engagement which should entail shared authority for curation, programming, and interpretation (Baron 2017, 29). The Durham Museum fails to engage the local Czech community and does not present any folklife artifacts to help tell the story of Czech or other immigrants. All information is provided through text and minimal photography.

The Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum is substantially different from the Durham Museum. The Museum is housed in what used to be an office space in one of the suburbs of Omaha – LaVista. Run and supported exclusively by volunteers from the Omaha Czech community, the Museum is only open for minimal hours on the weekends. Originally opening in 2008 inside the Crossroads Mall complex, it had to move to its current location in LaVista when the mall was demolished in 2020. With only about twelve volunteers, the Museum hopes to eventually attract more volunteers to introduce more regular opening hours (N. Daniel, personal interview, 31 December 2022).

As a former office space, the layout of the museum is unusual with small rooms, that would normally have been separate offices, each dedicated to a specific theme surrounding the Omaha Czech community, in contrast to the large exhibit halls like the Durham Museum. The rooms show exhibits on Sokol, Bohemian crystal, music, the Bohemian Café, and immigration. The museum also includes a two room gift shop and a media library where people can read the books on the Czech diaspora as well as listen to records – mainly polka music. There are many photographs and pieces of art lining the hallways outside of the rooms. They have several photographs of Prague, the capital of Czechia; numerous paintings by Josef Lada (1887 - 1957), a well-known Czech artist; and a variety of pictures exhibiting regional Czech folk costumes. There is also a wall display of the nine Nebraskan winners of the Miss Czech-Slovak U.S Pageant ranging from 1987 to 2019.

The museum begins with the Sokol room. The items on display are on loan from Sokol Omaha. One of the walls features several Czech American athletes from Nebraska who had qualified to compete in the Olympics in 1980 but did not due to the United States' boycott of the Olympics that year with the Olympics hosted in the Soviet Union (US Department of State Archive). This room also includes a brief display of a women's organization: The Western Star Unity of Bohemian Ladies Organization. No information is provided about this organization and the staff of the museum were unaware the organization existed until they had received the material from Sokol Omaha (N. Daniel, personal interview, 31 December 2022). On the bottom shelf in the room is a booklet that compiled handwritten documents discussing the history of Sokol Omaha. The author of these documents is not provided. The handwriting is in a very old school cursive font and is practically impossible to read.

Next comes the crystal and pottery room which features many items of Bohemian crystal and pottery. Bohemian crystal is glass produced in the regions of Bohemia and Silesia

in Czechia and has a centuries long history of being internationally recognized for its high quality and craftsmanship (Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum, 2022). A majority of the items were donated to the museum both from Nebraska residents and other Czech communities in the United States. The signage in the room discusses the difference between crystal and glass and also gives a history of Bohemian crystal. The only signage about the pottery, which makes up half of the contents of the room, is that it was donated by various people with no description of what the pieces of pottery are.

Music and polka bands are the subject of the display in the following room. It holds a very large donation of accordions and other instruments traditionally used in polka bands such as clarinets and drums. On top of that, the room includes several pieces of memorabilia from the Eddie Janak Orchestra – a popular polka band in Nebraska until the 1970s – which were donated by Janak’s wife for the benefit of the Omaha Czech community. The exhibit also contains some objects and memorabilia from other polka bands from Nebraska but no additional description other than the names of the groups are given so it is hard for visitors to know anything about the bands. The room also mentions other polka bands from the Omaha area such as The Famous Saint Wenceslas Band of Omaha, the Smetana Club, and the Red Raven Orchestra. The only information provided are the names of some of the members as well as advertisement posters from a couple of their gigs. There are newspaper clippings about the bands around the room, but they are not accessible to visitors as they are placed behind larger objects in the room which visitors cannot get close enough to read them. The singular sign in the room is a small explanation about Czech music which generally talks about Czech traditional music, unrelated to Omaha or Nebraska.

The next room is the Bohemian Café room, containing memorabilia and newspaper clippings about the business. The Bohemian Café was a prominent Czech restaurant in Little Bohemia from 1924 to 2016. After the business closed, the owners donated several objects to

the museum which are on display such as old menus and some of their interior décor. The most unique object is an old beer keg that was transported to Omaha from the Czech lands when the Bohemian Café first opened. According to the tour guide, “this beer keg when it came over from Prague to the United States so they could sell the beer at Bohemian Café, it was too large to go through customs, so they had to write a special legislative bill to allow it to come through” (N. Daniel, personal interview, 31 December 2022). This story is not provided on any signage, rendering the beer keg irrelevant for visitors of the museum not taking a tour.

Immigration is the subject of the final room. It contains the most information on signage directly relating to the Omaha Czech community, as compared to the other rooms in the museum, and provides an explanation of how people become citizens of the United States. In addition to displaying items related to immigration, this room seems to be the place where the museum staff put leftover donations that did not fit in with the other themed rooms including marionettes and various dolls, pottery, and other objects only labeled as ‘donated to the museum’. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes, the artifacts a museum chooses to display speaks volumes about the priorities of a community (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2017, 179). The objects and artifacts presented in the Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum shows visitors that the curators of the museum are not certain about what the priorities of the community are, so the best way forward is to display everything donated.

In general, information provided about the contents of each display is minimal. Most of the descriptive signs give a basic explanation about the theme of the room more than how it relates to the Omaha Czech community and this information is typically only a couple of sentences. Overall the museum feels more like someone’s attic than an actual museum. There are an overabundance of objects on display and hardly any descriptions or explanations of them. Essentially, everything displayed resonates with Vlach’s description of the problem

with folk artifacts in museums, “usually seen as historical statements, as leftovers from faraway times and dead-and-gone people” (Vlach 2017, 58). The museum does not include any information about the Omaha Czech community as a whole, focusing on the themes of various rooms instead of a comprehensive portrait of a community. With the way the museum currently operates, the communicative memory of the community contained within the museum through the artifacts and pieces of information will be lost because it is not well maintained by the museum volunteers.

To help with the lack of information provided by signage, the museum offers tours given by its volunteers. I was given a tour of the museum by Nancy Daniel, one of the museum’s regular volunteers. Daniel seemed reluctant to talk to me or give the tour at all – I had apparently just missed the main tour guide and Daniel had not given one in a while. I was the only person on the tour. Daniel provided vague explanations for why the museum housed certain objects and some background history about different Czechs from Omaha that was not on any of the signage. The information she provided was nothing more than the names of the people in the photographs. She seemed more fascinated by the strictly Czech elements of the museum, such as the Josef Lada paintings, than the parts of the museum dedicated to the Omaha Czech community.

The most compelling hallway display is the plans for a future Czech village located in between Omaha and Lincoln. The museum was deeded the land for the Czech village and there were renderings created for what they would want the place to look like. The goal would be for the village to include a museum, church, restaurant, music hall, and space for other retail offerings. The renderings were done over ten years ago but the museum has no financial support from any person, group, or institution to move forward leaving the project in limbo on the walls of the current museum (J. Cadek, personal interview, 6 January 2023).

The museum occasionally holds events for the Omaha community. A kolache and potato dumpling presentation occurs regularly where one of the local members of the Czech community in Omaha shows guests how to make the food, followed by a food tasting. The event is popular and usually sells out. In the past couple of years, they have had a tarot cards class, an egg decorating class for Easter, and an open house for the Omaha Czech/Slovak Cultural Club to recruit new members (M. Mahoney, personal interview, 7 January 2023). The museum also occasionally hosts touring exhibitions from the National Czech and Slovak Museum and Library in Cedar Rapids, Iowa (Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum). Travelling exhibits in the past five years included “Leaving Czechoslovakia” about the different ways immigrants fled communist Czechoslovakia during the Cold War and “Twists and Turns, The Story of Sokol” discussing the history of Sokol in the Czech lands and the United States (Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum).

Overall, both the Durham Museum and the Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum give an incomplete history of the Omaha Czech community. The Durham Museum mainly glosses over Czech contributions to Omaha and packages them together with the many other immigrant communities of Omaha. The Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum, in contrast, suffers from an overabundance of artifacts and yet too little information. Neither museum paints a comprehensive portrait of the Czech immigrants and their diasporic community in Omaha. Even when viewed together, visitors would fail to figure out what impact, if any, the contemporary Czech diaspora community has in the Omaha area. As pointed out by Baron (2017) and Corsane (2005), it is important for museums to engage community and to facilitate learning. The Durham Museum fails to be adequate in both of these areas. Whereas the Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum does work towards engaging the community by hosting events and by

facilitating learning through providing a library for visitors, it does not do so in a cohesive and organized way. The information provided by the museum is held mainly within the memories of the museum volunteers meaning that there is no current way of preserving their communicative memory of the Omaha Czech community to pass on to subsequent generations.

5.5. Polka Bands and Orchestras

Polka music, a popularized version of songs and dances from the European immigrant folk past from cultures such as Czech, German, Polish, Ukrainian, Hungarian, was common amongst the Czech diaspora in the United States (Greene 1992, 2). It is believed that polka music originated in the Czech lands in the 1830s (Greene 1992, 50). Polka bands were a prevalent part of Czech culture in Omaha and to this day, many polka bands still perform for festivals and other cultural events. The polka phenomenon confirms Bodnar's point that communities can retain their ethnic heritage despite pressures of assimilation (Bodnar 1985, 185).

Since its founding, the Czech diasporic community in Omaha has had a rich history of polka bands. In its heyday, there were more than twenty polka bands performing in the Omaha Czech community (Sokol South Omaha Local History Project). While there are not as many polka bands in existence as there once were, there are several that still remain. Many groups perform for free but there are some that still play professionally. Polka bands perform at festivals and ethnic events around Nebraska, keeping the Czech American music tradition alive.

Polka bands were often a family affair and Omaha bands were no exception. One of the most prominent musical families in the Omaha area are the Janaks. The family has at least six inductees into the Sokol Omaha Polka Hall of Fame, including one of the original

fourteen inductees (Sokol Omaha Polka Hall of Fame). The first Janak to get involved in polka music was Pete Janak, born in 1901. At an early age, Pete learned to play clarinet from his father. He then passed on the musical tradition to his four sons as they got older with Eddie playing saxophone and clarinet, Dick playing bass, Leonard playing drums, and Kenny playing saxophone. In 1938, Pete and Eddie joined the Charlie Kucera band. Later in 1956, Eddie took over the Charlie Kucera band and renamed it the Eddie Janak Orchestra (Sokol South Omaha Local History Project). The Eddie Janak Orchestra was one of the most popular polka bands in the Omaha area from its founding until Eddie's untimely death in 1973 (Sokol South Omaha Local History Project). Along with playing at local and regional events around the Midwest, the Eddie Janak Orchestra made numerous album recordings of their music. Pete remained in the music business for 57 years later performing in the Jim Bochnicek Orchestra and doing arrangements for other Janak family orchestras until his death in 1980 (Sokol South Omaha Local History Project).

Pete's other sons also had careers in music and polka bands. Dick started The Dick Janak Orchestra which began performing in 1975 and continued until 1986. Kenny Sr. continued to play informally at family gatherings. Leonard played drums in the Jim Hovorka Band in the mid-1950s, joined the Eddie Janak Orchestra in 1956 for about four years, then played with the Frank Hazuka Band for ten years (Sokol South Omaha Local History Project).

The Janak family musical tradition lives on to this day through one of Pete's grandsons, Kenneth Janak Jr. The Kenny Janak Orchestra was founded in 2016 by Janak Jr. once he received the music library of the Eddie Janak Orchestra from his cousins after Eddie's wife passed away. The music arrangements sat idle for forty years after his uncle's death until Janak got a hold on them (K. Janak Jr., personal interview, 9 January 2023). The Kenny Janak Orchestra is a seven piece group that plays authentic Czech style folk music as

well as some German, Austrian, Slovenian, and American tunes. According to Janak Jr., the group is unique from other American polka bands as well as groups in the Czech Republic because they play traditional European folk music but the instrumentation is heavily influenced by American big band music (K. Janak Jr., personal interview, 9 January 2023).

Janak Jr. played in groups like the one he now runs since he was fifteen years old with his uncle and his grandfather, mainly performing at weddings and Saturday night dances of the Czech diasporic community (K. Janak Jr., personal interview, 9 January 2023). Now the Kenny Janak Orchestra plays fifteen to twenty events per year, mostly in Nebraska, with the bulk at festivals where they play simply as musical entertainment and with the people who see them perform not necessarily coming strictly for the band (K. Janak Jr., personal interview, 9 January 2023).

In addition to performing at festivals, the group has also put on their own events. Most recently, they hosted an event at the Polish Home in Papillion, Nebraska for Masopust, the traditional Czech carnival celebration before lent (K. Janak Jr., personal interview, 9 January 2023). Most polka bands in Nebraska are volunteer groups, but Janak Jr.'s ensemble is of professional musicians meaning that they require payment to perform. Asking for compensation sometimes makes it difficult for the band to find gigs as Janak Jr. explains: "I was trying to make this somewhat of a professional group, very difficult. People don't want to pay the money. Very expensive to hire a group like that...the interest doesn't really seem to be there for that level of authenticity" (K. Janak Jr., personal interview, 9 January 2023). With Omaha Czech organizations strapped for cash, it is logical that they would not want to pay for polka entertainment when they can easily hire a different group for free, no matter the level of authenticity.

Janak Jr. has been leading his band in his uncle's footsteps not only by playing the music catalog of the Eddie Janak Orchestra, but by putting out a studio recording of the band.

He expects the record to come out in the next couple of months (K. Janak Jr., personal interview, 9 January 2023). While the visitors that come to festivals and ethnic events are not specifically coming for them, Janak has no plans to stop performing anytime soon: “As long as we have a few people that show up when we play, we’ll keep playing. The crowds aren’t what we always hope and what they were back in the 60s or 70s or even the 80s. But as long as some people are still interested in what we have to provide musically, we’ll still keep it going” (K. Janak Jr., personal interview, 9 January 2023). For the time being, it appears that polka music, played by both professional and volunteer groups, will live on in the Omaha Czech community.

In 1972, Sokol Omaha established the Sokol Omaha Polka Hall of Fame to recognize musicians, band leaders, and other people who were included in promoting and preserving polka music (Sokol Omaha Polka Hall of Fame). As of their last induction ceremony in 2022, the Polka Hall of Fame has 154 inductees (Sokol Omaha Polka Hall of Fame). Their webpage is one of the few sources of information about Omaha’s polka band past. Knowledge about polka music in Omaha is another example of a piece of communicative memory that could be lost because of poor archival upkeep by the city’s Czech American organizations. The information provided on Sokol Omaha’s Polka Hall of Fame website is a fraction of the information that could exist if those with the communicative memory of polka bands in Omaha worked together to compile more complete information.

5.6. The Future of the Omaha Czech Community

The future of the Omaha Czech community is in flux. The community faces many issues that will affect the sustainability of the cultural organizations that hold the diaspora together, including generational shifts, conflicts between organizations, and financial stability. Some of my interviewees were quite optimistic about the future of the community but others believe

there is a good chance that the community will disintegrate as the older generations pass away. Overall, there was a sense that there were ways to continue the legacy of the Omaha Czech community, even if what the community would look like in the future differs drastically from how it operates now. As Dufoix pointed out, “sooner or later, the influence of changes in the mental attitudes of the migrants and their descendants begins to have an effect” (Dufoix 2008, 74). People and traditions change and so do communities, with the Omaha Czech community not an exception. Changes in the Omaha Czech community may also mark the end of communicative memory because the community is assimilated into mainstream American culture and has lost many of its original traditions.

Marlene Mahoney, age 88, was the oldest person I spoke with during interviews. She lived in Little Bohemia during her childhood but has only been a part of the Omaha Czech/Slovak Cultural Club for the past five years. When asked about the future of the Omaha Czech community, she provided conflicting answers. Mahoney said: “So after this fifth generation [since Czech immigration], there will be a lot lost. It will be lost, I think, which is I think a lot of us are concerned about that now” (M. Mahoney, personal interview, 7 January 2023). What Mahoney describes here is the loss of communicative memory within the Omaha Czech community. Since the community is so far removed from immigration, knowledge about how the community used to exist will be lost because communicative memories are not being preserved or passed down to future generations. But Mahoney was also optimistic about the steps the Omaha Czech/Slovak Cultural Club is taking the community together and to recruit new members:

In 2021...when things start[ed] to open up a little bit [after COVID-19] we had at the Czech Museum an open house and invited all the [Czech] organizations to come and have a table there and then meet everybody. And as people went through, it was pretty

successful. It was good we tried to connect with each other (M. Mahoney, personal interview, 7 January 2023).

Although Mahoney was optimistic about the possibility of all Omaha Czech organizations working together, another joint meeting or event has not happened since 2021. This makes it unclear if the Czech organizations in Omaha are interested in working together at all. Without another meeting set, any progress made during the initial meeting is likely to fade.

Nancy Daniel who is from Mahoney's generation, has been a part of the official Omaha Czech community organizations for decades. While my interview with her was not particularly fruitful when discussing the future of the Omaha Czech community, we did speak briefly about the plans for the Czech village which had renderings in the Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum. Daniel explained:

We're hoping at some point to have a whole Czech village out by Nebraska Crossing which is halfway between here and Lincoln. We have the land, but it's going to take millions of dollars still to actually come up with because they want to have a church and a restaurant and a museum. So it'll take a lot of money. Yeah, probably not in my lifetime (N. Daniel, personal interview, 31 December 2022).

Daniel recognizes that there are many barriers to this project coming to fruition and it will take many years beyond her life for anything of that scope to be accomplished, if ever. However, she seems content about the museum having twelve volunteers, despite this number not being enough to sustain and grow the museum.

Kenneth Janak Jr. had mixed feelings about whether the Omaha Czech community was growing or waning:

I can see a real effort, and I think it's because of the popularity of social media.

Maybe I see it through the lens where people at least seem to be trying to preserve some of those customs and want to stay in touch with their heritage, but not always to

the extent where they're willing to do a whole lot more than sit on Facebook and talk about it (K. Janak Jr., personal interview, 9 January 2023).

Janak Jr. attributes some of the waning in the community to assimilation: "Maybe it's because [it has] been so long since that immigration [of Czech immigrants] took place and everybody's been somewhat diluted or watered down as far as the appreciation of the culture. Not always easy to pass that down from generation to generation" (K. Janak Jr., personal interview, 9 January 2023). He also says that assimilation "made it hard for some of those customs to survive that were pushed aside" and that "maybe in later years people wanted to revive them, but [that] was hard to do" (K. Janak Jr., personal interview, 9 January 2023). When asked if he believed any customs could survive the time passed since immigration, Janak Jr. says:

I think certain aspects will always survive, whether they be some of the stereotypical or kitschy kind of things, but I think they'll always survive to a certain extent. But as far as appreciated the modern culture of what's happening in Czech Republic in Europe, there only seems to be a small segment of the Czech people here that have any interest in that (K. Janak Jr., personal interview, 9 January 2023).

The matter of assimilation, as Bodnar (1985) discussed, is a central way in which a community can change over time since initial immigration. There are no longer any first generation immigrants from the original wave of immigration from the Czech lands to Nebraska and that has an effect on how the community operates and expresses itself. Through Powers' (2011) research on homeland tourism, it can also be seen that "American diasporans use place to narrate and construct imagined community" (Powers 2011, 1363). Omaha Czechs are certainly no exception in this regard. Though many members of the community have never set foot in Czechia, they still use the place to relate to and define themselves. The constructed imagined community that Omaha Czechs have built around century old Czech

customs is difficult to maintain as members of the community relate more to their American culture than their Czech heritage. This is another example of how communicative memory in the Omaha Czech community is likely coming to an end.

Jason Cadek, who is a member of multiple Czech organizations in the Omaha area, expressed frustration with how the ethnic organizations operate: “I think it’s hard for the lines become gray and the mission of each one kind of not only either overlaps and we duplicate efforts or we miss an area” (J. Cadek, personal interview, 6 January 2023). He felt though that there were definitely ways in which the community could move forward and improve: “I think there’s a learning curve there and I think it's also people want things to be successful, but they also are a little bit reluctant to let go of what they’ve been doing and hand power and resources over to someone else that they can’t control” (J. Cadek, personal interview, 6 January 2023). Not being able to relinquish control or being unwilling to change appears to be a key factor in the continued success of Omaha Czech organizations. As Cadek explains:

I think, unfortunately, there’s a handful of people in each organizations that’s trying to make sure that it sticks around and grows where the majority are just happy with what it has always been. And that population is kind of aging out that I could see even between five to ten years some of these organizations either not existing or existing completely different than they do today because their aging population is either passed on or is no longer able to participate (J. Cadek, personal interview, 6 January 2023).

Cadek and I also discussed his opinions about the planned Czech village displayed at the Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum:

Personally, I think an idea of a location makes sense. I don’t know that their original idea of putting it out in Gretna makes sense. I think that was more of a necessity because they were deeded some land...I think if all the organizations could work

together, I think the goal of having some sort of cultural center would be more achievable. I think if you could tap the right people, the resources are out there to make it happen. I'm kind of surprised with the Little Bohemia 13th Street being revitalized, to me, that seems the ideal place to build something or sort of rehab an existing building, because that's historically where the community was. Now that that area has kind of been developed, that price point is going to be much higher to get into. I think there's probably a handful of people that have deep pockets in Omaha that would contribute. I think it's getting to them. Getting a concise idea in an area that they want to do and getting them all behind it is going to take a lot of effort (J. Cadek, personal interview, 6 January 2023).

After my interviews and visiting the Omaha Czech community with fresh eyes through the perspective of this research and taking into consideration my knowledge and experience as a former Omaha resident, I have mixed feelings about what the future of the Omaha Czech community could look like, similar to what my interviewees discussed. There is clearly a core group of people that care deeply about the Omaha Czech community and keeping it alive. However, as pointed out by both Cadek and Janak Jr., this group tends to be resistant towards change that could help propel the Czech diaspora organizations in Omaha forward into being accessible and interesting to younger generations. Even in reaching out to the Omaha Czech organizations to ask questions regarding the community, I was mostly met with silence despite people in these organizations being enthusiastic about their heritage. One would think they would want to discuss their organizations and their heritage.

One of the most pressing matters for the Omaha Czech community to grapple with is the lack of communication between the Czech community stemming from the Little Bohemia area of Omaha and the Czech community originally from South Omaha. Organizations belonging to these separate communities rarely, if ever, communicate which hampers any

progress that could be made for a collective Omaha Czech community. Organizations from Omaha and South Omaha would be better served if they pooled their resources and worked together to create one cohesive dynamic community. While these organizations may have not worked together for decades, there is always an opportunity to change and grow and Omaha Czechs from both sides would likely benefit from a collaboration between the communities. This harkens back to what Dufoix emphasized: that no community exists on its own and that unity of a community “rests on signs, values, and rules controlled by community authorities” (Dufoix 2008, 73). Without a centralized community, Omaha Czech organizations are unorganized and are not serving their community as well as they could.

In addition to not being centrally organized, the community also has no centralized location which is a significant problem for place as spread out as the Omaha metropolitan area. Though the historical Czech neighborhood still exists, none of the Czech cultural organizations and institutions are located there any longer and there is no home base for the community. A lack of location raises financial as well as logistical issues. Since the community does not own their own space, they must bear the cost of a space for meetings and events. Being spread all over the city can make it hard to bring everyone together and coordinate where to meet or hold events. As Cadek explained, Little Bohemia would be the ideal place for a community building, but moving forward with having something in that location seems unlikely at this point with real estate prices in the area sky-rocketing (J. Cadek, personal interview, 6 January 2023).

Overall, the future of the Omaha Czech community is up to the actions of community leaders. The organizations have enough members to keep running for the time being. It is also a testament to the dedication of the Club that they were able to keep meetings going during COVID on Zoom, especially considering the advanced age of members. However if the organizations are unable to recruit more active members of younger generations, it is likely

the organizations will cease existing when the last members pass. With the passing of older members, the community will also lose a significant wealth of information through the loss of communicative memories provided by the older generations of the Czech diaspora. Though communicative memories have a “limited temporal horizon” (Assmann 1995, 127), these memories could still be preserved in some way for the benefit of the collective memory of the community. As the community operates now, this is unlikely to happen.

6. Conclusion

The Omaha Czech community has changed significantly since its founding in the late nineteenth century. This thesis strives to answer how the diaspora has changed over time and if it can even be considered a diaspora anymore. What began as a distinct immigrant community has over the years morphed into a mosaic of different niche organizations spread throughout Omaha with no centralized location. Through archival information provided by two cultural and history museums in Omaha, The Durham Museum and the Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum, as well as through historical documents, a portrait of the Omaha Czech community throughout its existence can be pieced together. However, due to a lack of archival upkeep within Czech heritage organizations and the loss of communicative memories, there is a significant amount of information that has been lost over the decades.

Although the Omaha Czech community is far past the time of initial immigration, it can still be defined as a diaspora in reference to Morawska’s definition that diaspora are ethnic groups that live outside of their country of origin but still have a sense of membership, symbolic or normative, to their homeland (Morawska 2011, 1030). Butler’s definition of diaspora also helps boost the case that the Omaha Czechs are a diaspora since by her definition, diasporas must have existed for at least two generations since immigration to be

considered a diaspora (Butler 2001, 192). Specifically looking at what kind of diaspora the Omaha Czechs are, it is important to consider Dufoix's modes of diaspora in which the Omaha Czech community fits into the enclaved mode, meaning that the diasporic community exists through its own organization without any formal connection to the land of origin (Dufoix 2008, 62). The community has always had its own organizations separate from the nation it originates from and it appears that this trend will continue for as long as the organizations remain.

Additional questions this thesis tries to answer are how the Omaha Czech community maintains its ethnic heritage and how it presents itself to the public. Despite being essentially a fully assimilated population, the community still holds on to its ethnic roots through its traditions and its imagined relationship with the homeland even if a majority of the population has never been there. As Powers points out, symbolic representations of ethnic borders, such as language and food, perpetuate communities (Powers 2011, 1374). Symbolic representations of Czech heritage are what bolsters the Omaha Czech community. The numerous Czech American organizations in Omaha each have their own tradition and heritage that they keep alive based on what they view as important to their organization. The Omaha Czech/Slovak Cultural Club presents programming and events to acquaint their members about Czech traditions such as food and music. The Sokol organizations work to maintain the tradition of Sokols with Sokol Omaha hosting the Polka Hall of Fame and Sokol South Omaha running a gymnastics center. The Czech and Slovak Educational Center and Cultural Museum celebrates and displays Czech American heritage in the Omaha community through its presentation of cultural artifacts and traditions. Traditions are also kept alive through the performances polka bands and orchestras, like the Kenny Janak Orchestra, that play ethnic Czech folk music with an American twist. Although these organizations work within their own bubble to maintain their heritage, I would argue that overall their efforts are

weak and will not be successful in the long run for their goal of preserving and maintaining the Omaha Czech community.

Key to this microhistory of the Omaha Czech community is the final research question asking what the future of the Omaha Czech community looks like. Through the interviews I conducted, it is clear that the community faces many challenges. The greatest threat to its longevity is the lack of organization and cohesiveness as well as its aging population. While the community still continues to keep its traditions and history alive, the generations running the organizations are getting older and not recruiting younger people at the speed they need to sustain the community. With the end of communicative memory in the community, more information about the community's past, traditions, and heritage will be lost if these memories are not preserved. The organizations representing the Czech diaspora in Omaha, Nebraska are many pieces of a puzzle and if they could work together, they could create one engaging, multifaceted, and perhaps, cohesive community. As it stands now, the community is fated to wither away with the passing of time to become just another historical marker in the greater history of Omaha.

This thesis offers a unique perspective on Czech diasporas in the United States. Existing literature on Czech Americans focuses on rural towns with majority Czech ethnicity instead of on urban spaces such as Omaha. The combination of sources from both Omaha and South Omaha Czech communities is also beneficial to understanding the Omaha Czech community as whole instead of fragmented portraits of two communities that are in the same city. Research on communities like the Omaha Czech diaspora can help aid in understanding ethnic identities within the United States that still have an effect on how people relate to and find meaning in their heritage, culture, and community.

Summary

This thesis is a glimpse into the Czech diaspora in Omaha, Nebraska. Through the use of interviews and archival research, it aims to create a fragmented microhistory of the Omaha Czech community by looking at how the community has changed over time, how it maintains its ethnic heritage, how it represents itself to the public, and what its future holds. This thesis argues that while the Omaha Czech community has several community organizations to maintain its heritage and traditions, the lack of cohesiveness, its aging population, and financial stresses show that the community is not sustainable in its current form and is likely to wither away as older generations pass.

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