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Czechs and Balances: Preserving and Revitalizing Czech Heritage in 21st-Century America

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The Great American Melting Pot wouldn't be complete without the millions of Czech-Americans who still celebrate and identify with their heritage. Since the arrival of the very first Czech immigrants in the United States, the Czech-American community has long valued the preservation of their cultural heritage. For over 150 years, Czech immigrants and their American-born descendants have upheld their traditional dress, cuisine, customs, and art in communities across the nation. The love and pride that Czech-Americans have for their heritage and the legacy of Czechs in the United States have the potential to be a bridge, an incredible unifier, for Czechs and Americans. This link that both countries and their citizens share through the Czech-American community is invaluable for the mutual flow of ideas and culture, the strengthening of interpersonal and diplomatic relationships, and the promotion of national interests. The Czech Embassy in the United States can lean on the longstanding history of Czech communities and Czech influence in the United States as a technique for bolstering Czech-American diplomatic relations. However, both the United States and the Czech Republic have changed drastically in the past 200 years, and our world has evolved technologically, politically, socially, and economically into a place that would have been unfathomable by our ancestors. The Czech community has always recognized the important role of young people in carrying on our traditions and keeping our heritage alive, but capturing the attention of young Czech-Americans and maintaining the integrity of our traditions from generation to generation proves to be an increasingly difficult task. Within the ever-advancing United States, continuing to preserve, or even reinvigorate, our communities, our traditions, and our connections to the Czech Republic remains a continual yet addressable challenge, as modern American ideals can sometimes clash with Czech identity.

Czech immigrants began arriving in the United States in large numbers in the mid-19th century (Library of Congress). At this point, the Czech people did not yet have their own nation; the inception of Czechoslovakia was many decades away, and the birth of the Czech Republic was still further into the future. Rather, Czech immigrants were leaving Austria-Hungary, a land where rural Czechs living agrarian lives had little autonomy or power. Some began to emigrate in search of new opportunities, safety, and a fresh start. In a large portion of the Czech lands at this time, many people still wore traditional kroje, baked ethnic pastries, practiced ancient folk customs, and devoutly adhered to a religious faith. While these traditions still exist in the Czech Republic today and are even seeing a resurgence in popularity, they are not as widespread or as significant to daily life for the majority of today's Czechs compared to the Czech people of the 1800s (Kuča & Hampton). Our Czech ancestors were not present for the national and international historic events that shaped the Czech Republic and its people over the 20th-century, and thus did not transform with these events. The Czech Republic, as our ancestors knew it, no longer exists in the day-to-day lives of Czech people. The cultural heritage of Americans with Czech ancestry whose relatives immigrated during the late 1800s and early 1900s represents just one point in time in the long and complex history of the Czech lands. In short, we are a time capsule of the 19th-century Czech Republic.

Just as our ancestors' Czech homeland morphed and developed over time, the United States, too, has transformed in the years since Czech immigrants began settling in this land. Oklahoma, my state of residence and the proud home of several large Czech communities, had not yet been granted statehood when many of the original Czech settlers who founded Oklahoma's historically Czech communities arrived here. Given that the United States was still expanding westward and forming its own national identity, the concepts of race and ethnicity

have drastically evolved from 1800s America, along with the issues, policies, and culture surrounding interpersonal and systemic discrimination. The evolution of America's definitions of race and ethnicity has greatly contributed to the assimilation, privilege, and role of Czech immigrants, and therefore the Czech community, in American society. In addition, 19th-century American daily life lacked much of the technology, infrastructure, communication, pressures, and resources of the 21st-century United States. Somehow, we must reconcile these differences between the past and the present to effectively preserve the Czech-American connection. We must acknowledge the context in which the Czech-American community was created, as the circumstances that produced it and its unique culture do not entirely resemble that of the Czech or American countries we know today, to determine how best to move into the future.

The need for a robust Czech community in the United States came about partially as a method of survival. Some Czech immigrants living in the Midwest struggled so direly for resources due to lack of economic opportunities that they lived in dugouts carved out of the side of hills or dug into the ground. Often, dirt and varmints would fall from the ceiling onto occupants or the sod roofs would entirely collapse. Having a community to depend on was truly a matter of life and death. Most Czech immigrants did not speak English, nor did they have the same opportunities as many other European-Americans due to anti-Slavic sentiment (Zecker). Due to discrimination and the language barrier, the few jobs Czech immigrants were able to find usually paid very low salaries. Communities of people who spoke the same language and could support one another provided greater access to life-sustaining resources. Beyond the basic need for subsistence, the close-knit Czech community also ensured that members could turn to a safe haven of peers that shared the same culture and lived experiences in a foreign country. Comfort and commonality were valuable in America's harsh, unfamiliar atmosphere. America of the

late-19th century and early-20th century was, in many cases, a hostile place for Slavic immigrants. Many Czech families faced unemployment due to their ethnicity and nation of origin. Like my own family, some were targeted by white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan for holding onto their language, names, identities, and culture. Simply put, Czechs were fiercely pressured to assimilate. The Czech immigrants who resisted assimilation in a fervent attempt to preserve their culture faced the bitter consequence of being "othered" and ostracized by white American society. Like a drop of oil in water, the Czechs who resisted assimilation, proud of their homeland and fiercely attached to their culture, stuck together. Such hardship only further motivated these individuals to hold onto their identities and pass on Czech heritage to their children. This origin of the Czech-American community has given Czech-Americans an immense sense of pride in their identity.

The history of our Czech-American community that I have just described presents a series of problems that threaten the community's preservation in the 21st-century United States. First and foremost, almost all members of our community now speak English. Removing the language barrier means that members of the Czech-American community are not as dependent on each other to acquire basic necessities. Furthermore, most community members' careers do not directly involve their Czech-American identity. As a result, language assimilation has played a part in loosening the former cohesion of the Czech-American community by dissolving interdependence. In addition, it has also torn members from the community by providing them the need and means to spend the majority of their time living in areas, working at jobs, and receiving an education in schools with people who do not share the same cultural background. Language assimilation, or the adoption of English as the primary spoken language in the Czech-American community, is not inherently negative, nor is it a shift that needs to be entirely

reversed. However, the impact of the language shift on the Czech-American community needs to be recognized before we can identify the factors most important to the preservation and expansion of Czech-American heritage.

As more and more Czech-Americans have assimilated to various degrees into American culture, either as a result of pressure from unfriendly interactions with other Americans or out of necessity, there is a lesser sense of kinship among members of the Czech-American community. This is not to say the members of the Czech community in the United States cannot relate to each other or that they no longer find a sense of belonging in their local Czech communities. However, as members of our community moved from the identity of “Czech immigrant living in America” to “American of Czech heritage,” many have begun to feel equally at home in the culture of the United States. Prior to assimilation, the Czech community was “home” for Czech immigrants living in a country that was not theirs and often did not make a significant effort to accept their Czech culture. Post-assimilation, the U.S. is no longer a foreign place, with sometimes inhospitable neighbors and a difficult-to-navigate social and financial system from which Czech-Americans need to seek refuge in their ethnic community. Many descendants of Czech immigrants have felt so comfortable in their American-ness that they moved away from the communities where their ancestors lived upon arrival in the U.S. in favor of educational or job opportunities. The Czech-American community still holds a very special place in the heart of many Czech-Americans, as the community is still full of familiar people with a shared origin story and common traditions. However, the strength of the glue that holds the Czech community together is not what it was prior to assimilation, through no fault of our own. As such, we as a community now have to reckon with the changing role of American culture in the lives and identities of Czech-Americans as we search for ways to preserve our Czech heritage.

Many of the changes in the Czech community, namely the language shift, are not reversible. As the Czech community has evolved with the everchanging American nation and culture, we have to redefine the Czech-American community, the Czech-American identity, and Czech-American values. This is a suggestion that might see some resistance from those who prioritize tradition, so I would like to clarify. Tradition is not a bad thing. In fact, it binds our community together and contributes to defining our identities, and there is no reason we cannot move into the future with our traditions intact. However, adhering to tradition alone could spell doom for the Czech-American community, as we have to stay “relevant” to ensure our own survival. Sometimes, ensuring the survival of our traditions means accepting new approaches and ideas, especially those related to how the community brands itself and promotes Czech-American culture in the context of American society. One of the more significant pieces of American culture that has impacted our Czech-American community is the fast-paced, capitalistic culture. Since college is such an important milestone for many Americans, a significant portion of secondary-school students choose to devote their time to extracurricular activities that provide an advantage in the college admissions process, such as sports, scholarships, jobs, and community service. Many students overlook the benefits of heritage preservation in the college admissions process and the life skills gained through participation in Czech heritage activities, as these benefits and skills are not always recognized by American society. While these students and their families might value and enjoy participating in heritage activities, some might view them as “less essential” compared to the aforementioned extracurricular engagements that have a clear monetary, social, political, or physical benefit because they are not externally validated by our political, economic, and social systems. This perspective is not the result of Czech-Americans’ flippancy towards their heritage, but rather it is

borne out of the natural desire for survival, success, and in some cases, acceptance in a society that does not always value ethnic heritage.

Similarly, college students suffer from a related problem, being completely bogged down with their studies or career-oriented activities, and failing to set aside time for or find benefit in participating in the Czech-American community. While it is important that we have very young Czech-American children participating in our community, as early engagement fosters a strong Czech-American identity, the participation of high school and college-aged adolescents is equally, if not more, essential to the preservation of our community. The young adult stage of life is a crucial time when students move from passively participating in the community to taking ownership of their heritage. It is also a time when adolescents figure out their identities, have the freedom to travel unencumbered by careers and large responsibilities, and make long-term life plans. If young Czech-Americans are pulled away from our community by these other “essential” activities during such a formative window, they will never have the experiences needed to create a deep-rooted bond with their heritage, nor the opportunities that will pique their interest and motivation to continue involvement over a lifetime. The US is a very value-oriented society, and instead of faulting these young people for focusing on survival, success, and acceptance in American society, we need to support these aspirations in the activities, values, and support that the Czech-American community can provide. I do not see this shift as stepping away from tradition but rather an opportunity to come full circle, as the Czech community originally came about as a support system for its members. The needs of its members have changed as America has grown and evolved, but the Czech community can still provide Czech-Americans necessary support with some new strategies and opportunities.

Young people are the best place to start in refocusing the efforts of the Czech community to support its members and preserve its traditions for generations to come. Losing young adults in our community has exponential consequences, as the loss of just one young adult means the loss of all of their Czech-American descendants. Members of our community of this age also have an opportunity to pass on our heritage to younger generations, serve as an example for the younger or newer members of our community, and gather and bring back knowledge to our community. Since we cannot change American society as a whole, we must create opportunities in our community and make marketable the benefits of participation for students who might otherwise be forced to overlook their Czech-American heritage in favor of engagements unrelated to their heritage. Though it might be a cold and transactional perspective, balancing the expectations of American society with the preservation of Czech heritage means our community has to provide incentives, specifically in the form of monetary, educational, political, social, or physical benefits, to keep members involved. In the balancing act of navigating Czech heritage and the expectations of living in the United States, Czech involvement will begin to disintegrate if we cannot justify to others outside of our community that Czech involvement is valuable, beneficial, or productive. These incentives must bring Czech-Americans “home” and allow them to take refuge in our community once more while simultaneously proving to non-Czechs that there is benefit in participating in our heritage. They must show that time spent in our community is constructive, productive, and valuable to people who have no vested interest in our traditions. In essence, these incentives must state that Czech heritage is not at odds with the duties and expectations of life in American society, but rather an asset. The need for justification to American society coupled with the dwindling resources to connect with Czech identity is the crux of the problem of ensuring the survival and integrity of Czechness in the United States.

The following recommendations are but a small subset of the infinite possibilities for the Czech community to create “incentives,” and the needs of each community will differ based upon the group’s history, origin, geographical location, and values. Following the example of other successful heritage organizations, such as the Carpatho-Rusyn Society, Czech heritage-oriented scholarships are a means for students to include their extensive Czech heritage involvement on a resume or application. Furthermore, they assist students in acquiring skills and opportunities that they can bring back to the Czech community to carry on its legacy. These scholarships do not just benefit students, but all Czech-Americans, as they provide a clearcut and tangible way to contribute to the wellbeing of the community and its young people. The Carpatho-Rusyn Society also offers to its members sponsored lectures, courses, and educational opportunities on topics such as folklore, culture, immigration, politics, diplomatic relations, and genealogy. These opportunities empower those of Rusyn heritage, give them the resources to preserve their heritage, and offer members skills, connections, and knowledge that are valuable beyond the context of their cultural community (Carpatho-Rusyn Society). Czech-Americans would benefit from these kinds of Czech-heritage-related activities. Czech-related internships, leadership opportunities, and research programs can serve as a way for Czech-Americans to devote time and energy to their heritage while gaining skills that will be marketable to those outside of our community. The Czech Embassy in the United States’ Masaryk Diplomatic Program is a prime example of this type of opportunity, as Czech students in this program are able to dig deeply into their Czech heritage, meet other people with an interest in a multitude of Czech-American topics, and gain diplomatic skills that will benefit them in other areas of life.

Programs, resources, and opportunities that will rebuild and expand the connection between Czech-Americans and the Czech Republic are equally worthwhile. Studying abroad can

be advantageous for high school and college students, as this provides students the opportunity to connect with the modern-day Czech Republic, gain exposure to Czech language, and research and study their Czech heritage, all while participating in a program that can be included on a resume or application. The Alliance Française d'Oklahoma City Eleanor Kirkpatrick Franco-American Fellowship, a two-week study abroad and research program for French-speaking students, is a great model to reference when implementing this recommendation. I had the opportunity to study abroad in France as an Eleanor Kirkpatrick Franco-American Fellow in 2018. Over the course of the program, I picked a research topic related to French culture and society, stayed with a French host family, attended high school for two weeks in the town of Nogent-sur-Oise, traveled the country to see cultural sights and work on my research, and formally presented my findings in a research paper and presentation after the conclusion of the trip. A similarly designed opportunity centered around Czech language, culture, and research could enormously benefit community members. More extensive research fellowships tailored to college students and adults could serve a similar purpose. Additional opportunities to travel to the Czech Republic to research heritage and ancestry that are less academically oriented but are still accredited by an overseeing body would offer an abundance of well-defined and accurate resources for reconnecting with the traditions, history, and culture of our Czech ancestors. Although visiting the Czech Republic on a heritage-oriented trip is a widely desired opportunity, many community members might lack the resources or knowledge to organize and navigate their travel. Thus, providing a structured opportunity to visit the Czech Republic would allow those of Czech heritage to “dip their foot in the water.” The additional support would guide travelers through their first-time exposure to navigating the Czech

Republic, which is needed for further independent connection with and exploration of the country.

Just as taking Czech-Americans to the Czech Republic would contribute to the strength and continuity of the Czech community in the U.S., bringing Czechs to the U.S. would have a similar impact. Virtual or physical visits with ethnographers, Czech language teachers, Czech folk artists and musicians, museum officials, Czech textile and kroj makers, and the like would be highly valued and well-attended. Czech-Americans want to learn more about their heritage, but due to the inaccessibility of credible resources or the language barrier preventing the use of those resources that are accessible, those who want to learn more, reconnect with the Czech Republic, and revitalize old traditions lack the necessary support to do so. Providing Czech-Americans with the opportunity to connect with these experts, learn from them, and ask questions would not only revive many traditions and customs, but also create the missing link to the modern-day Czech Republic. Based on personal experience, reconnecting to the modern-day Czech Republic gives Czech-Americans further insight into the lives, stories, and traditions of our ancestors, something that should not be undervalued in the effort to preserve our heritage.

There are a variety of reasons why the opportunity to learn Czech language is valuable to Czech-Americans, including but not limited to the translation of family letters and genealogical documents, the research of heritage and ancestral history using resources written in Czech language, the ability to connect or reconnect with friends and relatives in the Czech Republic, the capacity to travel independently in the Czech Republic, the increased ability to connect with one's heritage, and the cohesion it offers our community here in the United States. Czech language is one of the most important parts of Czech identity. While our Czech-American identities are still valid regardless of our ability to speak Czech language, the opportunities and

resources to learn our ancestral language should be available to those who have the interest. However, there are so few resources for learning Czech in the US, and those that do exist often cannot serve a language learner from A1, all the way to C2 language proficiency. Czech schools for children and university-level Czech courses taught by native Czech speakers should be more widely accessible for Czech-Americans and would be a worthwhile investment into our community. For those who are unable to learn Czech language, we need to have translated to English as many of the Czech resources that pertain to our community's history, culture, folklore, and stories as possible. In short, the community needs more support in learning Czech language and translating Czech documents related to our heritage.

Sokol organizations in the US have a longstanding history of supporting and fostering Czech heritage preservation, camaraderie between members, physical health, and education through its various programs and events. On a local, state, and national level, I have observed that Sokol groups have had some of the most profound impacts on keeping Czech-Americans involved in their heritage and community, maintaining a healthy group dynamic by emphasizing teamwork, and contributing to the holistic well-being of their members. Sports have a uniquely powerful unifying effect. Childhood sports teams and teammates are something that people remember for a lifetime. Sports have become so ingrained as a central component in the American way of life that almost every school, from elementary age to college, has its own sports teams. It would be impactful, both for individuals and the community at large, to organize more recreational sports teams for Czech-American kids and young adults. These do not have to be high-stakes or high-pressure teams; they can play in local tournaments if that is what best suits that particular group or community. Putting a Czech heritage "twist" on this highly thought of American pastime and using it to preserve our heritage and strengthen our community would

be a wonderful way to promote involvement in the Czech community, care for the health of our young people, and give members experiences that will serve both their American way of life and their Czech identity. Sokol or Sokol-like groups would be the perfect place to house these activities and expand those that already exist. As Sokol has become one of the most successful and influential Czech-American organizations, the establishment of at least one Sokol branch in every state could enormously benefit the promotion and longevity of the Czech-American community.

The Czech-Slovak Royalty pageants are another popular topic of interest regarding Czech-American heritage preservation. The purpose of these competitions is to encourage young people's involvement in Czech cultural activities, promote awareness of Czech heritage by creating knowledgeable ambassadors for the Czech-American community, and support the young women of our community through scholarships, leadership opportunities, and interpersonal connections. Due to my conflict of interest as a current Royalty member, I cannot give an unbiased recommendation regarding Czech heritage pageants. However, I can instead offer some of the pros and cons on the subject of heritage pageants that I have heard expressed by community members. Like any competition, pageants have the potential to create feelings of discontent or bring out cattiness between contestants and their supporters. Some have commented that the heritage pageants can be divisive rather than unifying or that the competitive atmosphere is not conducive to building or maintaining a community. Others have criticized that the pageants prioritize the preservation of an individual contestant's familial story and traditions even if they are not representative of authentic Czech culture or the Czech community as a whole. Many have also lamented the lack of royalty opportunities for boys and young men in the Czech-American community. On the other hand, many view the pageants as an opportunity for

participants to travel when they visit other Czech communities as part of their Royalty obligations, as well as an opportunity to gain public speaking skills and serve as the face of the community they represent. The queens are at the center of the gatherings that give us the opportunity to remember, reinforce, and renew our Czech heritage. The pageants themselves and the events that the royalty attend during their reign are the environments where our elders teach the younger generations how to practice our Czech traditions. Furthermore, the pageants give communities, families, and contestants a platform to discuss their ancestral lineage, share their Czech heritage involvement, and inspire younger members of our community to follow the same path of preserving and celebrating their heritage. Current and former royalty are some of the most active members in our community, even many years after their reign has ended, and many speak favorably about their time serving as heritage ambassadors.

My final recommendation is that scholars and community members conduct more formal academic research and theorization on the history and experiences of Czechs in America, Czech-American heritage, and Anti-Slavic sentiment in the US. Research is beneficial because it formally records our history, legitimizes our culture and experiences in American society, and allows for the contribution of brainpower from brilliant and motivated individuals who can provide additional insight and recommendations to our cause. These benefits could aid in resolving the issue of having to justify participation in Czech heritage to American society. Such research would also inadvertently serve as publicity for the community and our heritage, as the interest would provoke more participation in and discussion of Czech identity across many different mediums, fields, and academic associations. In writing this paper, I could not find any academic sources discussing Czech heritage or the history of Czech-Americans in the US. Such a lack of research prevents people from starting a conversation about Czech heritage and the

Czech-American experience. Without these conversations, we are missing out on so many brilliant ideas regarding the preservation of Czech-American identity and heritage. Research centered on the community's history and heritage might be groundbreaking for Czech-Americans, but it is not a new concept for other American communities. In fact, so much research has been done on the histories and experiences of other races and ethnicities in the US that I have taken college courses on the importance of dance to African American history and how to build Latinx communities. These courses often produce student research papers that are granted publication, which is another opportunity to bring awareness to Czech heritage and record our history. Similar classes centered on Czech-American heritage would have a tremendous impact on preserving and sharing our community's stories, and students with no connection to the Czech Republic could walk away from the classes with new interest in and knowledge about the Czech community to share with others. However, these college courses can never come about without formal academic research concerning Czech heritage in the US, making research all the more essential.

While many of these recommendations could potentially benefit both the Czech-American community, whose start in America began centuries ago, as well as the newly immigrated Czech community in the US, there are likely many wonderful recommendations for the more recently established community that I have not covered in this paper. The issue of maintaining Czech heritage in the US comes down to balancing Czech and American identities and ways of life, such that American society sees value in our involvement in Czech cultural activities and our Czech heritage maintains its integrity and vitality. The recommendations I have provided aim to find this balance and are just a few of the infinite possibilities to preserve and strengthen Czech-American communities and heritage. By adapting to the needs and

expectations of American society while still focusing on our heritage and ancestral connection to the Czech Republic, we can provide a foundation for the strength and success of our heritage for many generations to come.

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