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## Revamping Outreach: How to Target the Younger Generation

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## **Revamping Outreach: How to Target the Younger Generation:**

Czechia is blessed with a rich history and robust cultural traditions. As a result, there many themes that can be utilized by the Czech Embassy in Washington DC for outreach to great success. There is an issue in getting younger generations engaged with Czech events both with the Czech embassy in DC, and with Czech organizations in general. I don't believe this is because young Czechs have low national pride, and I don't believe this is because young foreigners do not find Czech culture interesting as some claim. Indeed, in my experience it is quite the opposite. Young Czechs are proud people with quite a bit of interest in Czech traditions, and my American (without Czech heritage) friends, peers, and colleagues are always very interested in Czech culture, history, and current events. I believe that amongst young people there is quite a bit of interest in Czech affairs, but the issue is events are not presented in a way that is appealing to them and sometimes topics they find interesting are neglected.

While I am not an expert in this subject, I do have the practical experience of managing a social media project: Hardcore Czechs and Slovaks to draw from. This project is geared towards promoting Czech and Slovak history, traditions, and culture to young Czechs and Slovaks both in the diasporas and in Europe. While the project is geared towards Czechs and Slovaks all over the world, 60% of our following is from Americans (both the Czech-American community and other Americans). Therefore, I think I can draw from my experience and provide recommendations to the embassy on how to improve outreach to the younger generations.

My recommendations are as follows:

### **1. Promote Czech folk costumes and folklore:**

In the past it seems that it was somewhat frowned upon to promote Czech folklore, kroje, and folk music internationally and this impacted embassy events. Some argued that Czech customs would seem too exotic for American and western audiences, and others argued promotion of these traditions would make an American audience think that Czechs still wear these costumes daily and remain in rustic poor villages, as was the case in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, this view I believe is a bit antiquated and carries "shame and stigmas" from the totalitarian eras of communist and Nazi occupation where Czech folk traditions were either sidelined or appropriated for the gain of the totalitarian regimes.

- Today, young Americans are highly interested in the different traditions and costumes of the world. Young Americans realize that folk costumes are no longer worn daily by most of the globe, but rather are a way to preserve and honor global cultures.
- In a globalized world, where people have access to cultures from all over the world, there is a movement to honor and preserve one's own culture. Consequently, there is a renewal of interest amongst both young Czechs and Czech Americans in wearing kroje, observing Czech traditions, and listening to Czech music.
- In managing Hardcore Czechs and Slovaks, I have been happily surprised with how much of our audience is interested in Czech folklore and traditions. There are notably around 20 Czech folklore and tradition-oriented Instagram accounts.

#### **Putting this to action:**

1. **Hold Kroje fashion shows, exhibits, and demonstrations:** There is the Miss Czech/Slovak US pageant with both state and national levels. There are many young Czech American girls who would be eager to participate in embassy events that are part of this program. Czech American men who have kroje would also be eager to participate.

**2. Host folk bands both traditional and modern:**

- Host folk ensembles from various Czech regions (South Moravia, Valasško, Chodsko)
- Host folk-rock/traditional singers/bands with a modern twist.
  - Cechomor
  - Fleret
  - Vesna
  - Jaromir Nohavica
  - Tomas Drgon (a local DC Slovak-American who plays gypsy/folk inspired music)
  - Nova Galanecka: (a folk band from South Moravia that plays polka/folk with a modern, catchy, twist)
  - Petr Luftner: a Czech singer and accordionist who's style blends Czech folk and country elements
  - Slovak bands: (Kollarovci, Kandracovci, Bystrik Banda, Ondrej Kandrac, Veronika Rabada, Stefan Stec, Mafia Corner, Kapela Basewell, Hudba Skupina Perfekt). While these are Slovak bands, they do perform many Czech songs.
- While I understand that cost is a major factor in who performs at the embassy, I know that some of these singers/bands perform in the US, and may consider performing at the Czech embassy, because it would be highly prestigious.

**3. Host both Czech and Czech American dance groups**

- Americans really are interested in other cultures dances and customs. Many other embassies such as the Italian or Irish embassies regularly host traditional dance groups.
- There are a few Czech dance groups located around the country such as: United Moravian Societies, and local dance groups in Texas, South Dakota, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Oklahoma.
- While funding these dance groups could be pricey, I believe many of these groups would fund themselves for the honor of performing at the Czech embassy.

**2. Promote the history and culture of the Czech American community:**

The Czech American community has a robust and interesting history. Czech American history is both a story of dealing with anti-Slavic/anti-Catholic/anti-secular prejudices, and also one of success in many fields and professions. Common themes in Czech American history are hard work and humble frugality. Czech Americans became successful and overcame prejudice in the US due to our strong sense of community, and ability to make ends meet in adverse situations. In this new era of American appreciation for the history and challenges of our nations various communities, I believe that some Americans would be interested to learn about past Czech American challenges and successes.

- The stories of other European communities such as Irish, Italians are well known today in American discourse, and I believe the stories of Czech, Slavic, and other Central and Eastern European immigrants should have time in the spotlight. We endured the same hardships as Irish and Italians, and our story should not be forgotten.

I acknowledge that promoting Czech American history, can present challenges because the Czech American communities are diverse. We came at different times, have different religious beliefs, and different mentalities. Texas Czechs are staunchly Catholic, whereas Czechs in Chicago had a strong “free-thinking element”, and many recent Czech immigrants are not religious. Additionally, Texas Czechs will let you know to the maximum that they are Moravians, while Nebraska Czechs are very vocal about being Bohemian.

- However, despite our differences there is and always has been unity in the Czech American community. We are united in our pride in our Czech identity, folklore and traditions, and our shared experiences as immigrants and descendants of immigrants. In Nebraska one can find Czech Catholic and freethinking cemeteries right beside each other. In Texas, both Czech Catholics and non-Catholics frequent Czech festivities such as church picnics.
- I believe a major strength of the Czech American community is that it transcends geographic, cultural, and religious boundaries. Czech Americans are united in our shared sense of “being Czech”.

### **Putting this to action:**

Host events that honor Czech contributions to American culture. There were many prominent figures such as former mayor of Chicago Antonin Čermak and Texas Czech country singer Adolph Hofner (The Texas Czech Elvis who sang American country songs in Czech). Events that honor such Czech American figures I think could bring young people.

### **Event Ideas:**

1. Showcase Czech American folk music. Polka and folk music are “the rhythm and soul” of Czech American communities. Czech Americans oftentimes lived difficult lives as immigrants and had to deal with a significant amount of prejudice. Polka/folk music offered them an escape and functioned as a way to bring Czech communities together. There are a few folk songs that are unique to Czech Americans such as the “Hills of Shiner Polka” and “The Shiner Song” an Americanized remix of an old Czech song.
  - Perhaps contemporary Czech American folk musicians could be interviewed and asked about the history and future of the genre in the US, and how it impacts Czech Americans today.
2. Show the history of the Czech American community and highlight how Czech Americans overcame past hardship to become successful Americans. I noticed that the Irish embassy had a similar event geared towards Irish Americans. There are many different possibilities for such an event, such as covering the early 20<sup>th</sup> century political climate in Chicago, where Czechs and other immigrant groups were effectively disenfranchised, or the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century environment in Texas where Czech Americans property and organizations were targeted by the Ku Klux Klan. An informative event showing how Czech Americans dealt with and overcame these hardships would be very interesting.
3. Show the impact of Czech American folk music on other cultures, namely Mexican culture. In Texas, Czech folk music highly influenced Texas Mexican music and culminated in the Tejano/Norteno genre that characterizes Mexican folk music today. Accordions and polka and waltz music were adopted by Mexican immigrants, and “remixed” to Mexican rhythms. It is a well-known fact in Texas, that Central European and Mexican immigrants interacted culturally and musically, but is not known around the US. Such an event would be intriguing and inspire people’s curiosity. This event would be appropriate around Cinco De Mayo.
4. Explore the impact of American country and bluegrass music on Czech culture, especially during the communist period.
5. An event that highlights Romani culture in Czechia and Slovakia. While this community is often stigmatized, they have seen success in recent years particularly in the music and entertainment industry. Czech/Slovak rap culture for example has a heavy Romani influence, that makes it unique. While it is not something many Czechs realize, Romani influence in rap is exotic to Americans, and I believe it is something young Americans would be interested in learning about.

- While studying at the University of Texas, I took a course that explored the impact of Romani culture on Balkan pop culture, and the course had high attendance for such a niche topic (200 people). Therefore, I believe Americans would be interested in this topic.
6. An event that tells the history of the Czech language and shows how Czech language and culture are resilient and survived despite nearly impossible odds.

### **3. Broaden outreach to Czech American communities:**

While outreach to Czech American communities, dispersed across the nation and far from Washington DC, is challenging, it is possible. Texas and midwestern states have robust Czech communities, that are just looking for an opportunity to showcase our culture and heritage. I think the cost of funding Czech American groups at the embassy can be mitigated because Czech Americans may fully or partially fund their expenses. Perhaps their travel can be incentivized if they win competitions, and their reward is to participate in an event at the Czech embassy

#### **Putting this to action:**

1. Host a Koláče bake workshop. Partner with Czech American organization(s) to have someone travel to the embassy and teach the public how to make koláče
  - Perhaps someone can be incentivized to travel to the embassy if they win a koláče contest. The embassy could partner with Czech American organization(s) to hold a kolače bake contest where the winner could travel to the Czech embassy and have the honor of teaching others how to make koláče.
2. Host a similar Guláš workshop
  - A Guláš workshop could be interesting and engaging, particularly if the guláš is cooked outside, as it done traditionally for large events in parts of the Czech Republic and amongst Czech American communities.
3. Host interactive and educational events
  - Many of the events mentioned in recommendations one and two could involve Czech Americans.
4. Promote Czech American musicians, actors, and other leading figures
  - Host a Czech American folk/polka band
  - Host Czech Americans who are involved in the mainstream American entertainment and music industries.

### **4. Promote Czech athletes that play in the US:**

I think that the embassy already does an excellent job with this recommendation, but I still wanted to mention it as a strategy to continue. I am not as familiar with this topic, and the possibilities it can offer, but I believe it is a significant part of an outreach strategy targeting the younger generation.

### **5. Promote successful the Czech fashion and entertainment industries:**

The combined Czech and Slovak entertainment and fashion industries is robust and successful. Today the bad fashion and cringey music that characterized Czechia, Slovakia, and other post-communist countries in the 1990s has been replaced with a thriving industry. Notably, the Czech fashion start up “Don Lemme” is very popular in Czechia, Slovakia, and the broader Central European region. I actually had the opportunity to message one of their founders and learned that she apparently will be attending American University, so perhaps she could be involved with an event at the Czech embassy.

- Czechs and other Central European nations like Poland have a reputation for cheap and bad fashion, and I believe this is an outdated stereotype that has been overcome. While older generation Czechs may still be wearing socks and sandals, many younger Czechs are trendy and interested in fashion. Some would say young Czech people's fashion today is better than some western nations.
- The Czech and Central European fashion industry is growing, and I believe is taking on unique characteristics. This is something to watch, and perhaps promote as the industry grows.

## **6. Continue to livestream events when appropriate:**

Livestreaming events has been essential during the pandemic and offers a way to continue to reach people all over the US. Maybe after seeing an interesting event via livestream hosted by the embassy, people around the country will come to events in person, if they are visiting Washington DC.

## **7. Share images of Czech landscapes, castles, and cities on the Facebook and Instagram accounts.**

While this recommendation may seem unnecessary, I do believe it is worthy of mention. I have found in managing Hardcore Czechs and Slovaks and observing similar pages, that the posts that get the highest engagement tend to simply be pictures of a nation's landscapes, and architecture. People like to see landscapes around the world, as it gives them rest and enjoyment from their busy daily lives.

- I think sharing images of Czech, landscapes, castles, and cities in moderation will boost the embassy's Facebook and Instagram accounts overtime and may result in more people seeing more events on the embassy's social media accounts. Ultimately attendance to events could see a minor boost over time if this strategy is implemented.