

Dr. Vladimír Kučera: A Biographical Account

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“The golden disk of the setting sun slowly descends toward the horizon of this boundless expanse, and changes it into thousands of strange, ever changing pictures which cannot be comprehended by the eye nor described by the pen. The Great Prairie burns in the blood-red luster of sunset, which, with full intensity, illuminates this unique theater of nature. Here the wildness of arid desert, blends with the smoother view of full green land mixed with raw, sandy beaches and scattered islands of trees tormented by the hot rays of the summer sun and lashed by the blizzards of severe winters.” ~ Dr. Vladimír Kučera.¹

Perhaps one of the most prominent figures involved in the preservation of Czech culture in Nebraska was perhaps the man least remembered or written about, with the exception of a few who knew him personally. That man is Dr. Vladimír Kučera. Dr. Kučera was one of the central-most figures that contributed so much to the lifeblood of this cultural preservation that he is so seemingly overlooked. A man so passionate about his work, he often documented on many influential Czech-Nebraskans, however it could be seen as ironic that besides a few newspaper articles and correspondence, little was documented on Dr. Kučera’s own life and contributions. A legacy so rich, it would be shameful to let it fade away. This will be an attempt through the recollections of his widow DeLores Kučera, various writings, articles and correspondence to piece together Dr. Kučera’s life and work.

DR. KUCERA’S BEGINNINGS

Dr. Vladimír Kučera was born on June 26, 1906 in Brno, Czechoslovakia.² He received his formal education and obtained his Juris Doctorate at Masaryk University (est.1919) in Brno. In addition, he also studied at the Sorbonne in France.³ He earned four doctorates and knew seven different languages—English however, was not one of them. Dr. Kučera worked as the Editor-In-Chief at *Národní Obroda* (*National Revival*).⁴ While writing for the paper, he was seen as an up-and-coming

person to take up leadership with the KDU. As well as being “groomed” to becoming an important political figure for the party he was responsible for making sure the party’s agenda was known, and because of this he was known for his outspoken and often controversial political editorials on freedom and democracy. Of course this came with consequences.⁵

When Nazi Germany made Czechoslovakia a protectorate in 1938, German culture and language were strongly “encouraged” up to the point of enforcement. German was taught in the schools and well-known landmarks had new Germanic monikers. It was one of Hitler’s goals to stamp out any Czech nationalist sentiment. Of course the strong discouragement of teaching Czech culture, language and the belief of a “national identity” led to strong resentment of the Germans and demoralization as a whole. Even Dr. Kucera’s alma mater, Masaryk University, was to be treated as a non-existent entity as per an internal order of the Reich Protectorate.⁶

Dr. Kučera was an active person in the politics before and during German occupation in Czechoslovakia. He was a true Czech patriot who did not shy away from dissidence as well as fighting for freedom and democracy. Czechoslovakia at the time was a “political football”, constantly being tossed from one side to another.⁷ Dr. Kučera was one of the voices of oppositions during this politically turbulent and oppressive time. Politically, Dr. Kucera was a member of the Christian Democratic Union, a center-right party that vehemently opposed socialism and fascism as well as promoting nationalist sentiment.⁸ Naturally, because of Dr. Kučera’s affiliation with the Christian Democrats, his opinions put him in a seriously compromising situation with the German occupiers. For his editorials denouncing the German occupation of Czechoslovakia, the Nazis imprisoned him. Dr. Kučera spent two years in a Nazi prison camp, eventually being freed by Soviet forces. However, shortly after his release, he started writing again for *Národní Obroda*. This of course was seen as a threat to the newly established Soviet-sponsored Communist government.⁹ Once again, Dr. Kucera was imprisoned, only this time by the Communists and branded as an enemy of the people. His release from the prison camp didn’t come from a pardon from the government, but help from the underground resistance. In the middle of the night, this group assisted Dr. Kučera in his escape and flight from Czechoslovakia. Upon leaving Czechoslovakia, Dr. Kučera made a foreshadowing gesture: he took some soil from his native land and placed it in a canister, all the while knowing that he would probably never again see his beloved country. He left Czechoslovakia for Vienna in 1949,

where he remained as a refugee for 14 months, while waiting for word of where he would re-establish himself.¹⁰

ARRIVAL IN AMERICA

Dr. Kučera's intentions would've never taken him to America, but this was to be his new country. He was sponsored by Mrs. Hynek Dostal and relocated to Michigan.¹¹ His time in Michigan was filled with loneliness and a feeling of defeat. He spent his days shoveling manure and doing other menial tasks for a farmer for as little as \$10 a month. As well as working on the farm, Dr. Kučera worked in a nightclub as a cook—still very little money involved. Starvation and cold were the “normal routines” of which Dr. Kučera endured. When he awoke in the morning to do his chores, he would find his clothes literally “white” with the previous night's frost. So demoralized he felt by this existence, he considered taking his own life in the barn he was living in at the time. At that moment he thought about the possibility of the Communists using his death to work against the ideals he had previously fought for. He could not tolerate the idea of being defeated by them. However, he had been receiving numerous death threats from Communist Party members living in Canada.¹²

Seeing that remaining in Michigan could be perilous, he made the decision to move further inward. He had a distant relative living in Lincoln, Nebraska; the Bishop Ludvík Kučera, who had invited him to come to Nebraska, promising to find him work. Dr. Kučera arrived in Lincoln with literally only 54 cents in his pocket. Upon his initial residency in Lincoln, he lived at the St. Thomas orphanage where he spent his days shoveling coal and doing various handy jobs around the orphanage. Although he never had formal instruction in English, he took it upon himself to learn the language via movies and reading books. His English would always have a heavy Czech accent yet becoming increasingly accomplished in speaking in the English language.¹³

CAREER IN NEBRASKA

A “True Renaissance Man”, Dr. Kučera filled many roles during his lifetime. A student, a politician, a journalist, a dissident, an educator, a historian, Dr. Kučera was certainly well rounded in many disciplines. As well as once being the Editor-In-Chief in Czechoslovakia, Dr. Kučera worked at the Nebraska State Historical Society where he worked for 38

years. He was the curator at the Thomas P. Kennard House in Lincoln, NE typically doing any needed maintenance as well as conducting tours. The house, made a historical landmark by the Nebraska State Historical Society in 1968, was built for the Nebraska Secretary of State Thomas P Kennard in 1869. It is the oldest standing building in Lincoln.¹⁴

In 1954, the Nebraska State Historical Society sponsored a traveling museum carried on the railroads, of which they made Dr. Kučera as the curator. Called “Special Train Car Exposition”, he traveled 8 months stopping in various Nebraska towns for a few days at a time.¹⁵ During this time, he noticed a great number of people with accents—noticeably “Czech sounding.”¹⁶ When speaking his native tongue with some of these people, he saw that Czech, once a thriving language and culture, was diminishing with generations becoming more adapted to “the American way of life”.

Upon discovering this, Dr. Kučera became increasingly adamant about his desire to revitalize and preserve the Czech ethnic life in Nebraska. Because of the seemingly “buried” Czech language amongst people living in Nebraska, he was discouraged by the state of the Czech culture in Nebraska.¹⁷ However, he made it a personal mission to work to preserve Czech language and culture. Thus, he began teaching Czech language in several small towns such as Dwight, Wilber and Milligan. After Professor Orin Štěpánek passed away in 1955, there was a long hiatus of Czech language instruction at the University.¹⁸ In 1959, Dr. Kučera found the opportunity he had been looking for in promoting Czech language by teaching Czech at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. Between teaching at night in the smaller towns and the University, he certainly had his work cut out for him. Even though the miles and the hours spent on the road and in the classroom were long and stressful, he felt as determined as ever in his quest to get his students to learn the Czech language. He was instrumental in reviving once again the Komenský Club in 1962 at the University, a club first started in the winter break between December 1903 and January 1904.¹⁹

Dr. Kučera taught Czech using important media such as readings, music and poetry. Music was an important tool for him because he found it a great way to teach his students Czech language—primarily of its way to relate to the minds of his students. At the end of the semester, Dr. Kučera would usually involve his students in reciting poetry and songs—consequently, these activities became quite popular with the public. Thus

was born “The Czech Spectacular”, a presentation of music, dances and the election of the Czech queen. The queen was designated to represent the Komensky Club. So popular were these events, they attracted such guests as U.S. Senator Roman Hruška (b.1904-d.1999) and then Governor Frank Morrison (b.1905-present).²⁰

Along with the popularity of the Czech Spectaculars, came the birth of the many Czech festivals in Nebraska, of which, Dr. Kučera played an important role. Because of these Spectaculars, Czech ethnic groups from smaller towns began to take interest in having their own Czech festival. Usually, these were becoming two to three day events in these individual towns. The Czech festivals were formed primarily to preserve old-world Czech heritage.

These are festivals filled with costume, song, dance (primarily the polka), and Czech ethnic food and of course, beer drinking—all integral parts of the Czech ethnic display. Because these festivals were getting wide recognition, it was felt a state organization was needed to help preserve these events for the future. This organization was known as Nebraska Czechs Incorporated, of which Dr. Kučera was a board member, in 1963. The main concern of this organization was to safeguard the interests of “culture, traditions, and history of the Czechs immigrant to the United States...”²¹ As well, Nebraska Czechs Incorporated was founded to preserve it in the way of how it was for the Czech immigrant living in Nebraska. It was however, not in any position to speculate on how life was in Czechoslovakia or necessarily how life currently is in modern times.²²

WORKS, PUBLICATIONS AND OTHER ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Dr. Kučera spent a great deal of his time in putting together publications featuring the influences and accomplishments of Czech-Nebraskans. This was another facet of his work to preserve Czech culture. During his time here in Nebraska he published 14 books, not including textbooks, with the interest of Czech ethnicity in Nebraska. Unfortunately, only a few of these publications are readily available.

Perhaps his best compilation of Czech heritage was his book, *Czechs and Nebraska*, published first in 1967²³. Because this book was gaining notoriety, the supply was becoming virtually exhausted. Dr. Kučera, along with Alfred Nováček published it once again for the nation’s Bi-centennial

in 1976.²⁴ *Czechs and Nebraska* is primarily focused on the contributions of Czech-Nebraskans, especially in disciplines such as business, farming, music, sports, education, etc. In particular, he goes into depth of the Czech pioneer as well as the homesteader and the establishments of small towns in Nebraska. As well, it highlights the organizations formed by Czech farmers and women. For example, much is written about the Sokol movement, tracing it from its beginnings in Czechoslovakia to its establishments in the midwest, especially in Nebraska. However, it also notes the changes and unfortunate down turn in this movement.²⁵

Czech Music in Nebraska is another publication that is readily available to the interested reader. This publication is based entirely on the importance of music in Czech culture and delves extensively into the history of Czech music in Nebraska. Dr. Kučera wanted this book to help the reader understand the importance of the background of Czech music, making certain to point out its roots. Most importantly, he finds the things that are necessary to the make-up of the Czech soul. Particularly, he notes the light-heartedness and fun of traditional Czech music.²⁶

As mentioned above, Dr. Kučera utilized music to instruct his Czech classes. He didn't just teach the songs just for the sake of learning the language, but to somehow ingrain into the student the traditional folk songs that are purely Czech. Even more so, the knowledge of these songs could be passed down to younger generations—an important strategy he used to preserve the ethnicity. In *Czech Music in Nebraska*, he devotes much of the book to Czech bands. Today it is perhaps taken for granted that these bands even existed, but by reading into this book it gives the reader an in-depth understanding of how important these bands were for entertainment and the social scenes of the day. As important as it was for entertainment, it was also quite long distances of travel for rural Czech-Nebraskans just to go to the nearest town. For example, Dr. Kučera writes about The Pleasant Valley Band, originated in 1913, six miles west of the town of Verdigre, Nebraska. They were formed specifically to meet the need of entertaining people, as the maximum traveling radius of most people was about 6 miles.²⁷

In addition to the above-mentioned publications, he also wrote *Czech Churches in Nebraska*, *Czech Cemeteries in Nebraska*, and *Czech Drama in Nebraska*. All books dealing with the histories of specifically Czech entities. Again, Dr. Kučera covered a wide range of contributions and other notables to aid in the preservation of the history of Czechs in Nebraska.

As well as his love for writing these books, Dr. Kučera also put forth into writing lectures, which in turn were produced and broadcast on Radio Free Europe and Voice of America. Although he was living in the United States, and presumably free from danger, it still hurt him deeply to know of the kinds of travesties taking place at the hands of the Communists back in Czechoslovakia. He wanted earnestly to see his country be free again.²⁸ It was a long time dream he would never live to see come to pass.

CONCLUSION

Dr. Vladimír Kučera passed away August 3, 1988 from complications caused by cancer and Alzheimer's disease. Although he never returned to his homeland, he was buried with the handful of soil he had taken during his flight from Czechoslovakia in 1949. At his funeral, an elegy celebrating his life, was written and read by Father Jan Smutný. This elegy explores the very personal aspect of Dr. Kučera's life.

The average person attending any one of the Czech festivals in Nebraska might not even think twice about how or why the festivals were started—or most importantly, who started them. Perhaps Dr. Kučera would want it that way, as the crucial aspect of the festival is to promote old Czech heritage and customs, not for his personal name recognition. He was never one to make his name a household one. Perhaps that is why so few people know or recognize the name, Dr. Vladimír Kučera. Regardless, his work in Nebraska has given to its citizens an asset by bringing the festivals to fruition.

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1. Dr. Vladimír Kučera, an excerpt from "*The Great Prairie*", *Czechs and Nebraska*, (Lincoln: Self Published 1976), p. 3
 2. DeLores Kučera, Taken from an over the phone interview on May 13, 2003.
 3. DeLores Kučera.
 4. Deaths and Funerals, Omaha World-Herald, August 4, 1988
 5. DeLores Kučera.

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6. Official Website, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic, “The History of Masaryk University Brno”, www.muni.cz, 2003.
7. “The CSL fully renewed its activities as early as May 1945. Acting as party the only non-socialist in the Czech Lands, the CSL associates within its ranks a considerable section of center- and rightwing oriented citizens. In the elections of 1946, the CSL won 15% of votes and resumed its participation through its ministers in the post-war government. So the CSL could seek to halt or least mitigate the increasing nationalization demands of the communists.” From the official Czech Christian Democrat Web Site. www.kdu.cz, 2003.
8. “After the Munich capitulation, the CSL began to pursue the policy of active anti-Fascist resistance and joined to the Political Center, the leading body spearheading the civic resistance. In August 1939 Jan Sramek was driven into exile, where he was elected as Acting Vice-president of the Paris-based Czechoslovak National Committee and later was appointed by President Eduard Benes to exercise the function of Prime Minister in the London-based Czechoslovak Government.” From the official Czech-Christian Democrat Web Site. www.kdu.cz, 2003.
9. DeLores Kučera.
10. DeLores Kučera.
11. Alfred Nováček, “Dr. Vladimír Kučera As I Knew Him”, Voice of the Nation, *Hlas Naroda* (Czech Newspaper) Sept. 10, 1988, Chicago.
12. DeLores Kučera.
13. Alfred Nováček, “Dr. Vladimír Kučera As I Knew Him”, Voice of the Nation, *Hlas Naroda* (Czech Newspaper) Sept. 10, 1988, Chicago.
14. Nebraska State Historical Society Website, Thomas P. Kennard House Nebraska Statehood Memorial, www.nebraskahistory.org, 2003.
15. Alfred Nováček, *Hlas Naroda*.
16. Alfred Nováček, *Hlas Naroda*.
17. DeLores Kučera, Taken from an over the phone interview on May 13, 2003.
18. Editorial in Lincoln Journal-Star, “Orin Štěpanek”, June 7, 1955, Lincoln, NE.
19. “The first Komensky (Comenius) Club at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln was founded in 1903 by professor Boh. Simek of Iowa State University and J. Pipal, a UNL student.” Dr. Vladimír Kucera, *Komensky Clubs, Czechs and Nebraska*, (Lincoln: Self-Published, 1976), pp. 61-62.
20. Dr. Vladimír Kučera, *Komensky Clubs, Czechs and Nebraska*, Self-Published 1976 p. 63

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21. Helen Novak-Baer, "Nebraska Czechs Incorporated", *Czechs and Nebraska*, Vladimir Kucera, (Lincoln: Self-Published 1967) p.
22. Helen Novak-Baer.
23. The significance of this date is that it is the Centennial Year of Nebraska.
24. Alfred Novacek, "Postscript", *Czechs and Nebraska*, Vladimir Kucera, (Lincoln: Self-Published 1976), pp. 178-179
25. This is a great reference to the history of the Sokol Movement in Nebraska. Vladimir Kucera, *Czechs and Nebraska*, (Lincoln: Self-Published, 1976), pp. 124-132
26. Vladimir Kucera, *Czech Music in Nebraska*, (Lincoln: Self-Published, 1980), p. 9.
27. Vladimir Kucera, *Czech Music in Nebraska*, p. 260.
28. DeLores Kucera.