

## **The Immigration to America from the Czechlands<sup>1</sup> and Slovakia in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

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Although a major exodus of Czechs to America did not take place until after the revolutionary year of 1848, there is plenty of evidence on hand attesting to numerous cases of individual migrations from the Czechlands not too long after the New World was discovered.

**Discovery of New World** - As surprising as it may sound to most of you, according to some scholars, Czechs could actually claim some credit for the discovery of the New World. I am referring to German author Franz Loeher (1) who made the claim that Martin Behaim, rather than Columbus, or for that matter Amerigo Vespucci was the true discoverer of America. Loeher celebrates Behaim, whom he considers to be a German, not only as the first European to view the coast of America off Brazil in the year 1483 but also as the instructor in western navigation of both of the putative later discoverers and explorers, Columbus and Magellan. Although Loeher's claim was later disputed, and even ridiculed, Behaim was known to take part in the expedition of Diego Cap (1485-1486) that followed the coast of Africa to Cape Cross. His most important work, which places him among the greatest geographers of the Renaissance, was his terrestrial globe, the earliest extant known, that has been preserved in Nuremberg. What role this globe played in the actual discovery of the New World is not known. As the name indicates, Behaim was not a German at all but rather a Bohemian. The name Behaim is the old German equivalent of the later used term Boebme (i.e. Bohemian) which, prior to the usage of family surnames, was commonly used to designate individuals coming from Bohemia or the Czech Lands. According to the family tradition the Behaim family moved to Nuremberg from Bohemia after the death of the Czech Duke Vratislav I(2).

Be that as it may, the news of the discovery of the new World reached the Kingdom of Bohemia as early as the first decade of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, during the reign of Vladislav the Jagellonian (1471-1516). Proof of this is given by the existence of an early print in the Czech language, Spis o nowych zemiech a o nowem swietie o niemzto jsme prwe zadne znamosti nemeli ani kdy tzo slychali, the origin of which was placed to about 1509. It is an adaptation of the renown letter of Amerigo Vespucci addressed to the Medici family, appended with other texts. The Czech version apparently preceded the other European nations in this regard since only the Latin original exists from that period. The printer and publisher of this rare print is purported to be Mikulas Bakalar, originally Stetina, of Pilsen, Bohemia (3).

The first visitors from the Czechlands in the New World were an anonymous group of miners from Jachymov, Bohemia who, prior to 1528, were sent to Little Naples (present Venezuela) to establish the silver mines in that country, while in the employ of the banking house of the Walser

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<sup>1</sup> The term Czechlands was originally coined by Ambassador Michal Zantovsky. Personally, I prefer this term which is analogous to the Netherlands.

family (4). The project apparently ended with failure since during a short time the Walsers gave up their efforts of mining silver there and the miners returned home. We also have a record from that period regarding a Moravian jeweler in Mexico who was accused in 1536 of heresy and sentenced to do public penance and expulsion from the Spanish territory (5).

**First Colonists from the Czechlands** -The first documented case of the entry of a Bohemian on the North American shores is that of Joachim Gans of Prague who came to Roanoke, NC in 1585 with an expedition of explorers, organized by Sir Walter Raleigh (1552-1618) and commanded by Raleigh's cousin Sir Richard Greenville (1542-1591). It is noteworthy that this expedition originated from Plymouth, England, thirty years before the Pilgrims set sails from the same port on their historic voyage to America. Due to lack of provisions for the colonists and the inherent dangers from the Spaniards and the Indians the expedition had to be abruptly called to an end on June 19, 1856 when Sir Francis Drake (1516-1590) was asked to take the whole company of colonists back to England (6)..

Who was the first Czech permanent settler in America we cannot say with certainty. It is certain, however, that among the first settlers was the famed Augustine Herman (1621-1686) from Prague. He was a surveyor and skilled draftsman, successful planter and developer of new lands, a shrewd and enterprising merchant, a bold politician and an effective diplomat, fluent in several languages - clearly one of the most conspicuous and colorful personalities of the seventeenth century colonial America. After coming to New Amsterdam (present New York) he became one of the most influential people in the Dutch Province which led to his appointment to the Council of Nine to advise the New Amsterdam Governor. One of his greatest achievements was his celebrated map of Maryland and Virginia commissioned by Lord Baltimore on which he began working in earnest after removing to the English Province of Maryland. Lord Baltimore was so pleased with the map that he rewarded Herman with a large estate, named by Herman "Bohemia Manor", and the hereditary title Lord (7).

There was another Bohemian living in New Amsterdam at that time, Frederick Philipse (1626-1720) who became equally famous, in his own right. He was a successful merchant who eventually became the wealthiest person in the entire Dutch Province. He descended from an aristocratic Protestant family from Bohemia who had to flee from their native land at the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War (8).

Preserved records document that other natives of the Czechlands lived in New Amsterdam, some of who might have been there even prior to the arrival of Augustine Herman and Frederick Philipse. One can find in the archives of the Reformed Dutch Church the record of a marriage between a Moravian by name of J. Fradel and Tyn Hersher which took place in February, 1645. Several other Czech sounding names appear in the Dutch records, including that of Hollar, Adam Unkelbe, John Kostlo, and Loketka. There is also evidence of the presence of Czechs in Virginia, as attested by early ship passenger lists. Czech names also appear in some documents in Massachusetts and Connecticut. Signs of early Czech presence can also be found in parish records in Barbados, as evidenced by such names as Richard Benes, Anthony Slany or John Hudlice (9)..

**Bohemian Jesuits** - During the anti-reformation period, while the Czech Protestants in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia were undergoing their greatest persecution, the Czech Jesuits took the initiative of launching their extraordinary ambitious missionary world-wide effort among Indians, Filipinos, Chinese, and Ethiopians. The Bohemian Province of the Society of Jesus sent 160 of its members overseas, among whom 36 went to Mexico, 3 to Lower California (now a part of Mexico), 3 to New Granada (present Venezuela), 17 to Ecuador, 17 to Peru, 26 to Paraguay, 12 to Chile, 9 to China, 7 to Annam (present Vietnam), 4 to Goa and 2 to the coast of Malabar. Half of them were clergymen and half were lay brethren, trained in some trade or craft (10)..

Valentin Stansel (1621-1705) was apparently the first Jesuit who worked in Latin America. After joining the Jesuit Order he became a professor of rhetoric and mathematics in Olomouc, Moravia and later in Prague. After ordination he opted for missionary work in India and left for Portugal where he awaited the arrival of a ship. In the meantime he taught astronomy at the university in Evora. When his trip to India did not materialize, he was sent in 1657 to Brazil and taught at the Jesuit College and Seminary in Bahia (present Salvador). First he held the position of a professor of moral theology and later was promoted to a chancellor. In addition to his teaching career, he also conducted research in astronomy and made a number of important discoveries, especially of comets. Some of his observations were subsequently published in Prague, under the title Observationes Americanae Cometae.

A steady stream of missionaries began leaving for Latin America soon after the Bohemian Societatis Jesu was admitted for the missionary work there in 1644. This brief narrative hardly touches on the varied activities of Czech missionaries in Latin America, nor does it do justice to the hardships and stress and the inhumane conditions under which they had to live - in impenetrable jungles, under the most severe climatic conditions, often exposed to incurable diseases, not to mention frequent hunger and constant dangers by wild Indians.

**Moravian Brethren** - The first significant wave of Czech colonists to come to America was that of the Moravian Brethren who began arriving on the American shores in the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Moravian Brethren were the followers of the teachings of the Czech religious reformer and martyr Jan Hus (1370-1415) and John Amos Comenius (1592-1670) (11). They were true heirs of the ancient *Unitas fratrum bohemicorum*, who found temporary refuge in Herrnhut ("Ochranov", in Czech language) in Lusatia under the patronage of Count Nikolaus Zinzendorf (1700-1760). Because of the worsening political and religious situation in Saxony, the Moravian Brethren, as they began calling themselves, had to seek a more permanent home and also a new territory where they could freely profess their faith and expand their missionary activities. The North American continent, with its abundance of fertile land and large Indian population, was ideally suited for their aims. After initial visits to St. Thomas in 1732 and Greenland in 1733, ten selected Brethren sailed to the English province of Georgia in November 1734, arriving in Savannah in February 1735. In the summer of the same year a second group, under the leadership of Bishop David Nitschmann, followed. This group comprised twenty-five persons, the majority of whom were from Moravia or Bohemia. Among the passengers on the ship was John Wesley (1703-1791), the founder of the Methodist Church, who became acquainted with the Brethren, attended their services, worshiped with them, and lived in their homes during his initial stay in Georgia. Through the efforts of Bishop Nitschmann, the Brethren were soon organized into a congregation. Brother Anton Seiffert, a native of Bohemia, was ordained as their preacher and

named their elder. In 1736 they built their first church in North America. Despite their efforts, the Moravians did not find Georgia adequate for their religious pursuits and in 1740 the majority decided to leave for Pennsylvania which offered better conditions.

The third group of Moravian settlers, called by early Moravian historians "The First Sea Congregation", arrived in Philadelphia in June 1742. The largest contingent of Moravian Brethren ever to come to America arrived May 17, 1749 in New York, with the John Nitschmann Colony, with whom came Christian David of Zenklava, Moravia, the founder of Brethren's Herrnhut, and Matthew and Rosina Stach, Moravian missionaries in Greenland.

The ranking place among the early Moravians was held by Bishop Daniel Nitschmann (1691-1749), a native of Suchdol, Moravia, who devoted his entire life to the Moravian Church. In 1724, he fled to Herrnhut and was immediately engaged in evangelic work in Germany and Russia. In 1732 he went, together with Leupold Dober, to St. Thomas, Virgin Islands, as the first Moravian missionaries "among the heathens". In 1735 he was consecrated the first bishop of the renewed Unity by Bishop Jablonsky of Berlin, the grandson of the famed John Amos Comenius, thus assuring the continuation of the evangelic work of the ancient *Unitas fratrum* of Bohemian Brethren. The following year he led the Moravian colony to Georgia. In 1740 he came to Pennsylvania and in 1743 purchased a track of land on the Lehigh River where he founded a small colony, from the abandoned settlement in Georgia, which he named Bethlehem. In 1744 he returned to Saxony but later extended his labors to New York and North Carolina. During his lifetime he visited the principal countries of Northern Europe and the West Indies, making close to fifty sea voyages. In 1755, he returned to Pennsylvania and resided in Weissport and Lititz, later at Bethlehem.

Thanks to the foresight and historical sense of George Neisser (1715-1784) from Zilina, Moravia, we have a detailed account of the early events in Bethlehem as well as of the history of the Moravian Church during the formative years. Rev. George Neisser was the first archivist and diarist of Bethlehem, its first schoolmaster and postmaster. Nathaniel Seidel (1718-1782), a descendant of Bohemian emigrants in Silesia, served for twenty years as the President of the American Provincial Board of the Elders.

David Zeisberger Jr, whose parents forsook their considerable estate in Moravia and fled for conscience sake to Herrnhut, after coming to America in 1738, embarked on an intensive study of Indian languages which provided a foundation for his illustrious career among American Indians, lasting more than sixty years. Zeisberger's able assistant, John Heckewelder, of Moravian ancestry, also attained prominence as a missionary among the Indians. Besides his missionary labors, he was a postmaster, a justice of peace, as well as justice of the court of common pleas. In the last years of his life he engaged in literary pursuits which led to his election in the prestigious American Philosophical Society of Philadelphia. Thanks to Zeisberger's and Heckewelder's writings we have preserved accurate documentation of the life and the customs of American Indians.

Another noteworthy personality among the Moravian Brethren was the organ builder David Tanneberger (1728-1804) of Moravian parentage, born on Count Zinzendorf estate in Berthelsdorf. He was a skillful joiner, was a notably good tenor, and played the violin. He

learned the organ-building craft and soon became well-known for his unique technical skills. Organs of his manufacture were in high repute and were shipped all over eastern Pennsylvania from his Lititz shop, even to such distant places as Albany, NY.

The members of the Demuth family who originally came from Karlov, Moravia, were tobacconists by trade and successful merchants whose shop in Lancaster, PA, still in existence, is the oldest of its kind in the entire United States. Some of their descendants were talented artists, particularly Charles Demuth, water-color illustrator and still-life painter, who was considered the predecessor of Andy Warhol. Another noted descendant of this family was Barbara Bush, the mother of President George W. Bush.

Cultural contributions of Moravian Brethren from the Czechlands were distinctly notable in the realm of music. The trumpets and horns used by the Moravians in Georgia are the first evidence of Moravian instrumental music in America. Johann Boehner (1710-1785) from Zelena Hora, Moravia is the first recorded Moravian instrumentalist. The program of music in Bethlehem was greatly stimulated by the arrival in 1761 of two talented musicians, Jeremiah Dencke, a Silesian, and Immanuel Nitschmann, a Moravian. Johann Frederick Peter of Silesia is considered the first Moravian composer in America, having composed over 80 hymns. The America-born Christian Till of Bohemian ancestry, who succeeded Peter as organist of the Bethlehem church, was also a composer of note (11).

**The Early Jewish Immigration** - As was already mentioned, Joachim Gans, a Bohemian Jew, was a member of the first English settlement in Roanoke, North Carolina in 1585-86. He was purported to also be the first Jewish visitor ever in America. Gans must have been a man of strong religious convictions, since upon his return from America to England he was arrested in 1589 in the seaport of Bristol for professing his Jewish faith. No record has been found as to the resolution of this matter or whether or not he returned to Bohemia or whether he remained in England.

The next recorded presence of a Bohemian Jew in America is found in a Last Will and Testament filed with Surrogate's Office of the County of New York in 1740 and in an advertisement posted in Zenger's **New York Weekly Journal** in 1741.

Around the same time, Matthias Bush, a native of Prague, later a prosperous merchant and communal leader, settled in Philadelphia. There he was naturalized in 1749, one of the first to benefit from the Act of Parliament of 1740, authorizing the naturalization of foreigners after a seven year residence in the colonies. There are numerous records revealing Bush a prominent member of the Jewish community in Philadelphia. He is known to have owned property in Philadelphia and Northampton counties, Pennsylvania, and Frederick and Hampton counties, Virginia. On October 29, 1765 he affixed his signature to the Philadelphia Merchant Non-Importation Act, the first American document of civic rights on record. During 1782 and 1783 he served as collector of taxes for Germantown. Bush left numerous descendants, some of whom are still living today. His son, Solomon Bush (1753-95) was a soldier in the American Revolutionary War. His grandson John Altamont Philips (1806-62) was a successful Philadelphia lawyer and the latter's son Henry Phillips (1839-95) was a numismatist, philologist and translator of note. Another great-grandson of Mathias Bush, Hon. Henry Myer Philips (1811-84) was elected to the

House of Representatives in the Thirty-fifth Congress.

There was another Philips family of Bohemian descent, not related to the above, living in Philadelphia at that time. The progenitor of the family, Jonas Philips (died 1794), son of Phineas Philips, emigrated from Bohemia to London in the mid-eighteenth century and several members of the family later moved to the US. One of their descendants, Barnet Philips (1826-85) was a prominent journalist on the staff of the New York Times.

Of note was also Joseph Karpeles, the son of Wolf Karpeles of Prague, who came to America around 1783 and lived in Philadelphia during 1784-85. According to a preserved letter, the famous financier of the American Revolution, Hyam Salomon (1740-85) engaged Karpeles to represent him in a legal dispute concerning an inheritance worth eight hundred ducats, which was to be decided by court of arbitration (12).

**The First Slovaks in America** - The first individual of Slovak origin to visit the territory of the US was Isaac Ferdinand Sarosy. Trained as a Protestant preacher, Sarosy came to Pennsylvania in 1695 to join the colony of Francis Daniel Pastorius (1651-1720) at Germanophilia, later renamed Germantown. According to Pastorius' account, Sarosy could not get used to preacher's work without fixed compensation. Disillusioned, Sarosy left Pennsylvania for Maryland whence he intended sailing to Europe. Another Slovak brought to the shores of America in the eighteenth century was an adventurer by the name of Andrew Jelik (ca. 1730-83). In an effort to avoid military draft, after a series of mishaps and adventures, including a shipwreck, he finally drifted to the coast of England, from where he sailed with a Dutch captain bound for the New World. He spent some time on American soil but soon left for Europe as a crew member of a Dutch ship.

There was another adventurer of Slovak descent whose name is tied to America, Count Moric Benovsky (1746-86), a native of Vrbove, in the Trnava district. He was a soldier of fortune and a globe trotter, whose various exploits are detailed in his two volume memoirs, preserved in the British Museum. One of his memorable encounters was his takeover of the French colony of Madagascar and his success in having himself proclaimed King of the Island. In 1782 we find him in Philadelphia with letters of recommendation from Benjamin Franklin, offering George Washington, through General Baron Steuben, "his blood, his skill and his courage to serve the US, of which he is desirous to become a citizen". His offer was, however, respectfully declined. His brother Francis, a Lieutenant of Lauzan's Hussars, died in America in 1789.

According to Slovak sources, the first immigrant of Slovak descent who permanently settled in America was Major John L. Polerecky (1748-1830). In studying the early records of the Moravian church, I came across the name of an individual from Bratislava who already lived in the Moravian community of Bethlehem, PA in the mid-eighteenth century (13). He was Anton Schmidt (1725-93), a tinsmith by trade, who emigrated with his parents for "conscience sake" and came to Bethlehem in 1746. He must have been an adherent of the renewed *Unitas fratrum* since he was buried with other Moravian Brethren in the Old Moravian Cemetery in Bethlehem.

The most celebrated early settler of Slovak origin in America was the already mentioned John L. Polerecky, Major of Lauzan's Polish Lancers, a grandson of Major Matthias Polerecky (1662-1709) of Moscovie, Turiec County in Slovakia, who had lost his life in the Hungarian War of

Independence. Born and educated in France, Major Polerecky was a member of the Allied French Military Force engaged in the American Revolutionary War. At the conclusion of the War, he decided to stay in America and settled in Dresden, Maine, where he for many years held the office of Town Clerk.

**Conclusion** - Most immigrants from the Czechlands and Slovakia were of humble origin - artisans and craftsmen by trade - seeking better and happier lives in the New World. Some were motivated by the promises of new riches or high adventure, while others left for conscience sake or missionary zeal. What made them unique was their distinct individuality, formidable competitiveness and impressive accomplishments

## Notes

1. See his *Geschichte und Zustände der Deutschen in Amerika*, Cincinnati, OH: Eggers and Wulkop, 1847.
2. *Ottuv Slovník Naučný*, Praha: I. Otto, 1890. vol. 3, pp. 618-619.
3. For more information about Bakalar and his work, see Jiri Hrubes' article in *Ibero-Americana Pragensis*, vol. 9 (1975), pp. 167-179.
4. Cited by Josef Polisensky, in *Cesky Lid*, vol. 88, No.1(1981), p.5.
5. See Josef Polisensky et al., *Dejiny Latinske Arneriky*. Praha: Svoboda, 1979.
6. For more information, see David B. Quinn, *Set Fair for Roanoke: Voyages and Colonies, 1584-1606*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.
7. For an appraisal of Augustine Herman's life and his achievements, see my study, "Augustine Herman Bohemiensis", *Kosmas*, vol. 3 (Summer 1984), pp. 139-148.
8. See Thomas Capek, *Ancestry of Frederick Philipse - First Lord and Founder of Philipse Manor at Yonkers, NY*. New York: Paebar Co., 1939.
9. Some information about the early Czech settlers in America can be found in Thomas Capek's book, *The Cechs (Bohemians) in America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1920, Pp. 1,418.
10. Information on the Czech Jesuits in Latin America is based on my heretofore unpublished, study. Some information can also be found in Vlastimil Kybal's article: "Czechs and Slovaks in Latin America". In: *The Czechoslovak Contribution to World Culture*. Edited by Miloslav Rechcigl, Jr. The Hague: Mouton, 1964, pp. 516-522.
11. For more information on Moravian Brethren and their work in America, see my two earlier studies, "The Renewal and the Formation of the Moravian Church in America" *Kosmas. Czechoslovak and Central European Journal*, vol. 9 (1990), pp. 12-26; "Moravian Brethren from Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia: Their Arrival and Settlement in America", *Bohemia*, vol.

32, No. 1 (1991), pp. 152-65.

12. See also my study, "Early Jewish Immigrants in America from the Czech Historic Lands and Slovakia", **Review of the Society for the History of Czechoslovak Jews**, vol. 3 (1990-91), pp. 157-79.

13. Miloslav Rechcigl, "The First American Settler from Slovakia", **Nase rodina** (September 1996), vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 100.