

# IDAHO STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

## REFERENCE SERIES

### SLAVIC ETHNIC SITES IN IDAHO

Number 894

1988

Slavic people occupy most of Eastern Europe, and after 1860 a large Slavic migration brought an interesting new element to major cities like Buffalo, Detroit, New York, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Chicago, and to coal mining as well as large steel manufacturing centers. But they reached Idaho in surprisingly modest numbers. A few small Slavic communities have settled in mining and farming areas, and almost every Slavic nationality is represented in Idaho's population centers. They have been more conspicuous in important professional positions (law, medicine, or university teaching, for example) than in most other occupations, and two United States senators, William E. Borah (who came from a medieval Bohemian family) and Henry Dworshak (a Czech), gained prominence in Idaho politics.

From their sixth century historic origin as independent farmers, cattle ranchers, and hunters in modern eastern Poland and adjacent Russian borderlands, they diverged into three major national groups in more than a millennium of expansion. Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, and Pomeranians shifted westward into territory that German peoples vacated while advancing toward modern France.

Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, and a variety of southern Slavs moved into modern Yugoslavia, where Serbs came into Constantinople's Byzantine empire while Croats had a Roman orientation. A much larger eastern territorial expansion led to eventual organization of a Russian empire of eastern Slavs.<sup>1</sup> An interesting variety of western, southern, and eastern Slavic nationalities emerged after centuries of political reorganization and conflict that finally helped to induce representatives of all of those peoples to settle in Idaho. As farmers and miners in more than half of Europe, they had a cultural background appropriate for life in Idaho, but they generally preferred less isolated areas where they could live in large national colonies rather than in an alien society.

Idaho had two primary sources for early ethnic settlements: Mormons and miners. Distinctive Mormon communities included English, Scandinavian, Swiss, and Welsh elements. Although Mormon missionaries to Germany and Austria attempted to penetrate Slavic Europe as early as 1864, intolerance in Vienna delayed those efforts for two decades. Then Thomas Biesinger, a Mormon elder from Wurtemberg, advanced to Prague, where he applied in 1884 to preach to Czechs as well as Sudeten Germans. Denied a

permit, he wound up in a filthy jail for preaching without a license, after which he was banished. He finally was able to return in 1928 and start a Czech mission in 1929. Because of their German neighbors and association, Czech missions had superior possibilities for Mormon access to Slavic peoples, but they were insulated by imperial resistance. Two Slavic converts in Vienna, a Czech and a Pole, resulted from Mormon efforts there, February 2, 1884, but a three-month effort in Hungary proved futile. Some thirty converts in Budapest responded to a renewed campaign there in 1900-1901, but Mormon missionaries again were banished.<sup>2</sup> Serious early Slavic missionary activity was rejected everywhere, and that source for Idaho Slavic settlement was denied.

Gold rushes attracted a conglomerate of miners of many nationalities, but Idaho's rich placers brought in a remarkably small Slavic population that remained beyond 1869, when an excitement on Loon Creek completed that era of settlement. At least a dozen or so Slavs, out of a total population of 17,800 or more, can be identified in census listings, and a few others may have been concealed under changed or Anglicized names. Several Serbs or Croats had gold camp restaurants or hotels in Leesburg or Idaho City, and Poles were represented in military service at Fort Lapwai.<sup>3</sup> A Russian of that era served in Idaho's legislature, but otherwise, Slavic peoples had practically no connection with early mining and resource development. When Idaho became a state in 1890, a few more had turned up, but Slavic elements did not compare with other European nationalities.

Even by 1900, Idaho's Slavic population was too limited and scattered to allow for many substantial communities large enough to preserve national traditions through organizations that had grown successfully for two decades in eastern centers. Shoshone County with a variety of ethnic mining camps had less than 400 European Slavs, and no other county had more than a hundred. Including every one of Slavic descent, Idaho had about 400 Serbs and Croats. Russians with 220, Czechs with 274, Poles with 89, and Hungarians with 59 accounted for most of Idaho's additional Slavic element in 1900.<sup>4</sup> Distributed over a wide area, they brought ethnic diversification to most of Idaho. Small family clusters rather than distinctive national orders emerged in that kind of settlement.

Even though very few of them ever settled in Idaho, rising Slavic nationalism and turbulence in central eastern Europe provided a strong incentive for a large migration to North America prior to 1880. Poland remained divided between German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires, while a variety of Western (Czechs and Slovaks) and Southern (Croats, Serbs, and Slovenians, among others) aspired to overcome Austrian domination. A sequence of Balkan crises that got out of control after a series of Bulgarian horrors of 1876 encouraged a Slavic exodus of

nationalists determined not to serve in Austria's imperial army against their own interests. An Idaho example of that reaction came when sixteen-year-old Anton Goreczky--who had become skilled at cabinet making while still a child, but who needed to avoid military induction during an imperial mobilization early in 1878--had to depart abruptly from Europe. Otto von Bismark's Congress of Berlin resolved that international crisis without resorting to war, but Goreczky wound up a Boise contractor and builder.<sup>5</sup> Other Slavic refugees from unsatisfactory economic and political conditions in Europe had a similar motivation for embarking upon new careers in places as remote as Idaho.

Organized, systematic Slavic settlement in Idaho began unexpectedly on a modest scale in 1892. During North Idaho's exciting mine labor war that summer, some lead-silver companies that had shut down their operation brought in special trains of miners from places like Michigan, hoping they could reopen with new crews unaware of their labor strife.<sup>6</sup> Slavic elements were included in that importation. Upon learning, to their surprise, that they had entered a serious labor dispute, some of them joined union miners who provided them financial support if they would refrain from working until a settlement was reached. Others were willing to become lead-silver miners without waiting for negotiations to end.<sup>7</sup> Many Slavic miners who remained as union workers after 1892 were driven out when violent mine warfare was resumed in 1899.<sup>8</sup> Compared with other nationalities, Slavic minorities remained small, but they contributed to Idaho's cultural diversity.

Other Slavs gradually joined those who mined in North Idaho. Most notable of these was a Pole--Edward C. Pulaski, whose great-grandfather Casimir had been a Revolutionary general in George Washington's army. A miner around Wallace who entered into a distinguished Forest Service career there, Edward gained more than a passing renown for his exceptional leadership and skill in preserving his crew when North Idaho's 1910 forests exploded in a fire storm, August 20.<sup>9</sup> National recognition of Pulaski's achievement helped a little to combat a growing prejudice against Slavic minorities that were gaining strength in many areas outside of Idaho at that time.

A few Idaho communities eventually attracted enough settlers of a single Slavic nationality to develop local chapters or lodges of national associations that flourished in major immigrant centers after 1880. Miners in Kellogg and Mullan supported Serbian and Croatian national orders that followed fraternal and benefit models provided by Elks, Eagles, Moose, and similar lodges. Organized as insurance companies with social and cultural programs for a single language group, they assisted various Slavic nationalities to preserve their European heritage and traditions while living in a strange new world. Native Slavic languages were spoken at all cultural and social events, which were held frequently. Kellogg had a Croatian Fraternal

Union lodge (with headquarters in Pittsburgh) by about 1914, and a Serbian lodge (PNJ) also formed there.<sup>10</sup> In regions with large Slavic populations, each nationality (such as Poles or Ukrainians) had a number of organizations competing for members, with many local lodges of each association available to serve families in each neighborhood of a city like Chicago. Idaho Slavic elements, in contrast, barely were large enough to maintain one such chapter of a major national organization that provided ethnic periodicals and cultural services to hundreds of thousands of members.

No matter where they chose to settle or what they decided to work at in North America, Slavic immigrants had to adjust to a strikingly different way of life. Eastern coal mines and steel mills provided employment under disagreeable conditions that made western farms more attractive to a small minority who could manage to get established in agriculture. Those who got as far west as Idaho found an unrecognizable countryside that challenged their ability to accommodate to a new environment. Some parts of Idaho's Sawtooth range could have reminded a small minority of Poles and Slovaks of their Tatra mountain homeland, but their traditional rural villages could not thrive there. A modest-sized assembly of Czechs, who already had colonized parts of Iowa, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and other plains states were attracted to Twin Falls tract irrigated farms west of Buhl after 1906. But that area differed remarkably from their original habitat. As happened with all kinds of emigrants who occupied open plains or other arid western environments, some adapted to a strange new climate and lifestyle, while others did not. Then, among those flexible enough to survive such dramatic changes, a second generation grew up. For them, European (or even mid-western) farming areas were an alien land to which they could acclimate with similar difficulty. An interesting cultural gap also separated them from their parents.

Large (compared to European scale) irrigated farms also raised cultural problems. Commercial agricultural production with modern equipment did not admit a typical European village organization with communities of peasants who lived in small compact towns from which they went out to till adjacent fields. (Franklin, a non-Slavic Mormon village organized that way in 1860, had originated as a rare Idaho example of such a community, but soon had developed along a traditional western model.) In any event, Slavic farmers who settled in Idaho preferred to emerge as land owners, not as peasants. So they were forced to adopt a more isolated existence in place of their closely integrated small European communities.

Czech settlers around Buhl and Nampa became numerous enough to maintain significant features of their traditional culture. A local Beseda Lodge (named for a Czech dance), was organized in Buhl in 1919 and expansion of Iowa's Western Bohemian Fraternal Association (ZCJB) which established a Buhl Lodge 224 for its

Idaho members, followed in 1920. These societies, similar to Serbian and Croatian national orders farther north in Kellogg, had social and cultural programs that preserved Czech language and traditions. A Beseda Lodge hall, erected in Fairview in 1923, also served (on a rental basis) as a ZCJB hall. Both of those organizations provided opportunities for local Czechs to meet socially and to recapture their close village association of their European heritage. Musical and theatrical events were held frequently, and regular Saturday night dances featured native folk performances. European Czechs--in common with most other Slavic nationalities--gave their children an exposure to their ancestral traditions and an opportunity to participate in Czech language discussions and programs. Second generation Slavs (or Italians or Chinese or Greeks, for that matter) did not always respond too enthusiastically, but some of their children--who did not have to make so difficult adjustment between traditional and conflicting local cultures--showed a much greater interest in their ancestral origins. Too many non-Slavs, nationally even more than locally, disparaged and ridiculed newer ethnic immigrants. Czechs and Hungarians, referred to as Bohunks, may have seemed to be special targets, although nativists whose prejudices and bad manners were reflected in that kind of hostility generally did not distinguish among Slavic peoples. Ethnic lodges helped Idaho's Czech, as well as Croatian and Serbian, settlers solve their problems of living among an alien people and thrived for a generation or so during a difficult transition.<sup>11</sup>

Since Czechs around Buhl and Nampa had lodges of a single national organization, based in an Iowa Czech community at Cedar Rapids, they had an important avenue for communication. Czech plays and theatrical performances were exchanged for their mutual benefit, and their ability to get together helped to compensate for their small numbers of potential members. Czechs in southern Idaho also retained a strong interest in their European homeland.

They took pride in Czechoslovakia's success as an independent nation from 1918 to 1938 and provided financial support to Vojta Benes (whose brother had been president of Czechoslovakia until Adolph Hitler's forces took over in 1938) when he came to Buhl in 1940. Wartime aid to European Czech relatives followed. Restoration of an independent Czechoslovakia from 1945 to 1948 preceded a Soviet dominated government there that brought a divergence in interest between Idaho and European Czechs. By that time, only a few immigrant Czechs survived in Idaho, and their language no longer was used very much. Czech plays ceased, and in 1970 Buhl's Czech lodge hall became a Moose Hall, although ZCJB members continued their national affiliation with its insurance policies and to hold small meetings. A similar Croatian transition occurred in Kellogg. Unlike states with large Slavic populations, Idaho's national lodges have largely become locally inactive.<sup>12</sup>

Non-Slavic perceptions of eastern European peoples have not been restricted to nativist aversion to immigrants with distinctive cultures. Polish mazurkas, Hungarian rhapsodies, Czech polkas, and Slavonic dances were performed by musicians without regard to ethnic origin, and Russian composers were featured along with other Slavic contributors to musical literature. Nineteenth century emphasis upon European national art, music, and literature created a much greater awareness of Slavic culture at a time when Idaho was being settled and developed. Internationally prominent performing artists reached Idaho after rail transportation made such tours practical, and their local response had a major impact upon non-Slavic audiences. Boise's reaction to Helena Modjeska's sensational performance had a substantial impact:

Modjeska was greeted by a splendid audience at the Columbia last evening, who followed her closely through Macbeth, each one sharing his emotions, and when the curtain was finally rung down at the close of the sixth act the audience was loath to leave . . . .<sup>13</sup>

Another celebrated Polish performer, Ignace Jan Paderewski, appeared in Boise more than once; in addition to his brilliant piano renditions, he focused attention upon his native land. Paderewski was not alone as an internationally recognized Slavic statesman to appear in Idaho on behalf of his people. Alexander Kerensky, for example, showed up in Boise to explain Russia's situation after 1917 when his attempt to provide a liberal western revolutionary government collapsed. An additional far more significant source for Idaho awareness of international Slavic problems was Senator Borah's national importance in support of Hungary after 1919 and his endorsement of diplomatic recognition of Russia for more than a decade before that necessity finally was accomplished in 1935. Borah became well known in Russia and received testimonials from communities all over Hungary for his efforts to revise an unfavorable 1919 peace settlement on their behalf.<sup>14</sup> These actions gave Idaho's voters more of a perception of Slavic issues than they otherwise would have gained. Years later, Hungarian refugees who settled in Idaho after Soviet suppression in 1958 revived interest in that nation's problems and brought a few more Slavs to help expand that ethnic element.

Slavic contributions to Idaho's development were not limited to activities of permanent settlers. Montenegrans, for example, drove a major tunnel and constructed North Idaho's stretch of Milwaukee railway from Montana to Avery, Saint Maries, and Plummer in 1908.<sup>15</sup> But Slavic educational and professional achievements continue to have greater importance. In 1988, more than 16% of Boise's medical doctors and attorneys are of Slavic origin--a proportion substantially higher than their

representation in most other occupations. University academic staffs also show a similarly high Slavic ratio, level reflecting a national, rather than local, source for faculty appointments.<sup>16</sup>

Mobility of population in Idaho, as well as in all other states, accounts for a gradual increase in Slavic elements--particularly in occupations where corporate transfers are common. But distinctive ethnic Slavic communities ordinarily do not result from that kind of population movement.

By 1980, national population mobility had redistributed Idaho's Slavic peoples enough that Poles had gained ascendancy over Czechs, Russians, south Slavs, and Hungarians--each of which had more than a thousand descendants identified in census tabulations. Almost every Slavic nationality was represented, but none had as many as one per cent of Idaho's total. Fourteen other nationalities exceeded Poland's contingent, which with other west Slavs greatly surpassed eastern and southern elements combined.<sup>17</sup> Considering that Idaho had more Swiss than Poles, and a much larger Dutch population than all Slavs combined, anything resembling a national distribution of these ethnic stocks had not materialized.

Greater mobility of academic and professional people, including local administrators of regional and national business enterprises, has led to a larger proportion of Idaho's Slavs engaged in those pursuits. That trend, however, only helps to emphasize a long-term Slavic tendency to shift to professional occupations in other areas as well. Since 1960, that occupational trend has become much more pronounced nationally as well as in Idaho.<sup>18</sup> So Idaho's Slavic elements are conspicuous for their prominence in advancing in new directions that typify a significant contemporary national pattern.

#### SLAVS FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Oscar Halecki, Borderlands of Western Civilization: a History of East Central Europe (New York: Ronald Press, 1952), 14-24.

<sup>2</sup>Andrew Jenson, Encyclopedic History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake: Deseret News, 1914), 37-38, 168-169.

<sup>3</sup>Idaho Territory Federal Population Schedules and Mortality Schedules, 1870 (Boise: Idaho Genealogical Society, 1973).

<sup>4</sup>Twelfth Census of the United States . . . 1900: Population, Part 1 (Washington, D.C., 1901), 732-733, 834-839.

<sup>5</sup>James H. Hawley, History of Idaho (Chicago, 1920), 2:977-978.

<sup>6</sup>Mark Wyman, Hard Rock Epic: Western Miners and the Industrial Revolution, 1860-1910 (Berkeley: University of California

Press, 1979), 52.

<sup>7</sup>Robert Wayne Smith, Coeur d'Alene Mining War of 1892 (Corvallis: Oregon State College, 1961), 46; Richard E. Lingenfelter, The Hard Rock Miners: a History of the Mining Labor Movement in the American West, 1867-1893 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 203-204.

<sup>8</sup>Wyman, Hard Rock Epic, p. 55. Idaho adopted legislation in 1897 designed to exclude aliens (mainly intended for Italians and Slavs as well as Chinese) from working in Idaho mines, but miners moved about so much that Slavs were active in camps such as Mackay. Joseph L. Ausich of Mackay, one of Idaho's few Slavic legislators (1961-1966), came from that group.

<sup>9</sup>Ruby El Hult, Northwest Disaster: Avalanche and Fire (Portland: Binfords and Mort, 1960), 105-108, 117-120.

<sup>10</sup>Information provided by Victoria Pelia and Richard G. Magnuson.

<sup>11</sup>James R. Gentry, "Czechoslovakian Culture in the Buhl-Castleford Area," Idaho Yesterdays (Winter 1987), 30/4:2-6.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 6-17.

<sup>13</sup>Idaho Statesman,

<sup>14</sup>Marian McKenna, "A Gift from Hungary," Idaho Yesterdays (Fall, 1957), 1/3:7-11.

<sup>15</sup>Information provided by Richard G. Magnuson.

<sup>16</sup>Data are unavailable for an accurate statistical analysis, but a 1988 Idaho State University faculty survey by Ron Hatzenbuehler indicates a higher representation of French and Slavic elements compared with total Idaho population.

<sup>17</sup>We need a census page number.

<sup>18</sup>Donald E. Pienkos, PNA: a Centennial History of the Polish National Alliance of the United States of North America (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 6.

*Publications--450 N. 4th Street, Boise, ID 83702--208-334-3428*