



## Excerpt from “The Community Grows”

From: THE SLOVAK AMERICANS, by M. Mark Stolarik. The Peoples of North America Series. Copyright 1988 Chelsea House Publishers, a subsidiary of Hights Cross Communications. pp. 45-48, 57-58.

*\*Numbers in brackets at right margin indicate original page numbers.*

Once the Slovaks had established themselves firmly on North American soil and their [45] communities had begun to grow, their families, boardinghouses, and saloons no longer met all their social needs. Immigrants thus founded numerous civic and religious institutions, the most important of which were fraternal benefit organizations and churches. The original goals of these institutions included the preservation of Slovak religious and cultural life and also the improvement of conditions for Slovak immigrants and Slovaks still living in Europe.

### Helping Themselves: Slovak Fraternal Organizations

Slovak fraternal benefit societies lent formal structure to the immigrants' lives and provided a means by which to stem the tide of assimilation. Many of the early immigrants wanted to preserve their native culture, and Slovak organizations helped maintain a distinct Slovak identity in North America. But by easing the immigrants' adjustment to the New World, fraternal ultimately encouraged assimilation.

Because the first Slovak immigrants landed in an America devoid of a welfare system, [46] fraternal organizations frequently provided disability insurance and death benefits to workers and their families. When workers received injuries, lost limbs, or even died on the job, few employers and no government agencies paid their families any compensation. The fraternal benefit societies sought to fulfill this need. At monthly lodge meetings, they elected officers to oversee operations, collected dues from members, and discussed working conditions, life in America, and other crucial issues. They deposited their dues in treasuries, from which they paid out benefits to needy members.

Fraternal activities also helped immigrants adjust to American and Canadian ways. By electing officers, debating at meetings, and taking up collections to pay out benefits, lodge members learned the rudiments of democracy. Those who won lodge offices and presided over lodge debates sometimes graduated into local politics, while members with a journalistic bent found plenty of opportunity with the newspapers that the fraternal published. After tasting this freedom to govern themselves, most Slovak immigrants lost all desire to return to oppression in Hungary. [47]

For the most part, fraternal benefit societies established membership on the basis of religious denomination. Roman Catholic, Greek Catholic, Lutheran, and Calvinist Slovaks set up their own organizations, sometimes within the same community. Many of these helped establish local church parishes and maintained an ongoing relationship with the church. Catholics often cemented this bond by naming the churches they built for the patron saints of their fraternal. Slovak immigrants also set up nondenominational organizations to further their nationalist aspiration of winning political independence for Slovakia.

By 1890, Slovaks had founded more than 40 fraternal organizations throughout the northeastern and midwestern United States. A movement was born to transform the Slovak fraternal system from a scattering of small local lodges into a collection of organizations capable of acting on a nationwide basis. Peter V. Rovnianek, Slovak-American journalist and nationalist, led this movement. Rovnianek dreamed of a national fraternal organization that would not only be more effective in preserving Slovak culture and bettering Slovak life in America, but could also make a real contribution to the fight against the oppression of Slovaks in Hungary. His dedication to this ideal made Rovnianek one of the great leaders of the early Slovak-American community.

Born on June 27, 1867, in Dolny Hricov, Trenčín County, Slovakia, Rovnianek went to Budapest, Hungary, to study for the Roman Catholic priesthood. As he studied, his pride in his Slovak heritage grew, but at that time the Hungarian government kept a close watch on the priesthood in an effort to suppress Slovak ethnic movements. Because nationalist Slovak priests often passed along their ideas to their congregations, the Hungarians singled them out as potential trouble-makers. An avowed nationalist, Rovnianek was expelled from the seminary.

In 1888 he left Europe for Cleveland, Ohio, where he enrolled in the local seminary. His [48] interest in Slovak nationalism outweighed his desire to be a priest, however, and he never sought ordination. Instead, Rovnianek went on to become a prominent journalist, reporting on, among other things, the activities of the multiplying Slovak fraternal benefit societies.

After observing the fraternal organizations, Rovnianek came to the conclusion that a national federation of fraternal organizations might help local societies achieve their aims. He led a small group of leaders in founding the National Slovak Society on February 15, 1890. This society hoped to recruit local Slovak fraternal organizations from across America, with the goal of forming a single union with a central treasury and a coherent set of objectives.

As he organized the National Slovak Society, however, Rovnianek did not foresee the difficulties such a union would have because of the religious divisions within the Slovak community. He was dismayed when, a few months later, the Reverend Stefan Furdek of Cleveland opposed the nondenominational national fraternal. Furdek feared that without the guidance of Roman Catholic priests, such an organization would take an anticlerical (antipriest) stance. He pointed to the example of the Czech Slavic Benevolent Society headquartered in St. Louis, which had, in fact, rejected church involvement in fraternal activities. Furdek and Rovnianek had first met at the Cleveland seminary where both had studied. Although they shared many interests and had an equal love for the Slovak people, they took different approaches to the concerns of Slovak Americans, and their lives ultimately followed very different routes.

Born in Trstena, county Orava, Slovakia, on September 2, 1855, Stefan Furdek came to the United States in 1882 to complete his studies for the Roman Catholic priesthood. He enrolled in the Seminary of the Diocese of Cleveland, where he was later ordained. Although assigned to a Czech parish in Cleveland (Slovaks had, as yet, no parish of their own in the United States), Furdek devoted much of his energy to Slovak immigrants arriving in that city. In 1888 he helped Slovak Roman Catholics establish one of their first American [57] parishes, Saint Ladislaus, in Cleveland.

Furdek combined his religious and civic interests through his involvement in Slovak fraternal life. When his rival Peter Rovnianek set up the National Slovak Society in 1890, Furdek countered by instituting the First Catholic Slovak Union, and when Rovnianek in 1891

helped found Zivena, a women's organization, Furdek organized the First Catholic Slovak Ladies Union in 1892. By appealing to the devout Roman Catholic Slovak majority, the fraternal societies established by Furdek became the two largest Slovak fraternal benefit societies in the world. Furdek also cofounded the literary society Matica Slovenska v Amerike in 1893, and in 1907 set up the Slovak League of America, a network organization for all Slovak-American societies.

Because of the efforts of leaders such as Rovnianek and Furdek, the last years of the 19th century saw a tremendous proliferation of fraternal benefit societies. Organizations sprang up to serve a wide variety of interests. In 1892 Lutherans founded the Slovak Evangelical Union, and in 1901 Calvinists formed their own Slovak Calvin Presbyterian Union. Slovak women, excluded from men's fraternal societies, set up their own societies, including some dedicated to the practice of gymnastics.

Dozens of societies throughout Canada and the United States modeled themselves after these flagship groups, but some militant nationalists grew dissatisfied with the social and civic bent of most fraternal societies. In 1896 a group of them established the Slovak Gymnastic Union Sokol in New York City. The members of this fraternal sought to attain physical fitness through gymnastics, in preparation for what they considered an inevitable war against the Hungarians. The union's Roman Catholic members, though, became uncomfortable when some of the group's leaders began expressing anticlerical ideas. They broke away in 1905, establishing the Slovak Catholic Sokol, a rival organization that eventually outgrew its model.

Fraternal lodges helped Slovak immigrants maintain a sense of community and [58] cope with life in the New World, but the sheer number of organizations tended to splinter the Slovaks into smaller, and often competing, groups. This division reflected the religious differences among the immigrants, the legacy of a history of domination by foreigners that had fragmented Slovakia into four major Christian denominations. Slovak immigrants carried their beliefs with them to the New World, so their communities in North America reflected the same denominational divisions that had characterized their homeland.