



Slovak Fraternal-Benefit Societies in Pennsylvania

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When one analyzes the workings of Slovak-American communities, one quickly realizes that they consisted of three very important components: parish churches, newspapers, and fraternal-benefit societies.¹ The last-named, in fact, appeared first among American Slovaks and often took the lead in establishing the parishes and newspapers. Since almost half of the 619,866 Slovaks who lived in the United States in 1920 resided in Pennsylvania,² it is not surprising that more than half of their national fraternal societies also appeared in this state. This article will outline the origins, growth, functions, rituals, and eventual decline of Slovak fraternal-benefit societies in Pennsylvania.

When Slovaks started to immigrate to the United States in large numbers in search of work in the 1880s, they found this country singularly devoid of social services. If an immigrant fell ill, had an accident, or died, no one gave him or his family any support or compensation. Therefore, the pioneers quickly concluded that they had to help themselves, if they were to survive in America's capitalist society.³

Whether they remembered fraternal-benefit societies or craft guilds that had existed in Hungary, or copied societies that arose among other immigrants in America, Slovaks in the United States established fifty local fraternal-benefit societies in the 1880s, twenty-five of them in Pennsylvania.⁴ By 1890 these local fraternal societies began to federate into national bodies, and about half were headquartered in Pennsylvania.

Between 1890 and 1918, five large and three small national fraternal societies appeared among Slovaks in Pennsylvania. The first, and most important, was the National Slovak Society, with its headquarters in Pittsburgh. Founded on February 15, 1890, its goal was to unite Slovaks of all religious persuasions into a national fraternal that would provide them with accident, illness, and burial insurance, while at the same time championing the right of Slovaks in their homeland, the Kingdom of Hungary, to home-rule or independence. By 1920 it had 39,473 members.⁵

Religious, and other, differences, however, kept the Slovaks from uniting into one national fraternal. On September 4, 1890, Roman Catholic Slovaks in Cleveland established the First Catholic Slovak Union,⁶ and a little later Slovaks of other religious persuasions followed suit. Thus, in 1893 Slovak Lutherans created the Slovak Evangelical Union in Freeland, Pennsylvania, and in 1901 Slovak Calvinists (Reformed) set up the Slovak Calvin Presbyterian Union in Mount Carmel, Pennsylvania. By 1920 the former had 7,821 members and the latter almost one thousand.⁷

Since Slovak men established the first fraternal organizations only for themselves, their wives soon created parallel organizations. Thus, in 1891, a group of Slovak women established the 'Zivena' Slovak National Women's Benefit Society in New York City; it copied the National Slovak Society.⁸ In 1892, Slovak Catholic women in Cleveland created the First Catholic Slovak Ladies' Union, and in 1898, Slovak Lutheran women set up the Slovak Evangelical Women's Union in Pittsburgh. By 1920 the latter had 3,328 members.⁹

Indeed, even regional fraternal organizations split along gender lines. Thus, after a group of men had established the Pennsylvania Slovak Catholic Union in Wilkes-Barre in 1893, a group of women in 1898 created the Ladies Pennsylvania Slovak Catholic Union in Hazleton. In 1920 the men had 21,612, and the women 12,771 members.¹⁰

Finally, personal rivalries and jealousies led to the establishment of two small fraternal organizations in Pennsylvania before World War I. One was the Independent National Slovak Society, headquartered in Pittsburgh, and the other was the Slovak Catholic Brotherhood, with its home base in Braddock. Since neither of these fraternal organizations could attract more than two thousand members, they were later absorbed by the much larger fraternal organizations mentioned earlier.¹¹ As mentioned above, the main purpose of fraternal-benefit societies was to provide accident, illness, or burial insurance to their members. In the early years of their existence, the fraternal organizations generally charged fifty cents a month in dues, and paid accident, illness, or death claims, depending upon their resources. Later, they came to be regulated by the states in which they were located, and the dues paid and the compensation provided was standardized according to state rules and regulations.

Besides providing insurance for their members, local lodges also served many community functions. Almost all Slovak parishes, of all religious denominations, were founded by fraternal-benefit societies. Furthermore, these fraternal organizations controlled their members' behavior by fining them for such spiritual transgressions as drunkenness, swearing in public, or missing certain religious services. In this way they helped to "Americanize" their members.¹²

At their monthly meetings the local fraternal organizations promoted American democracy as practiced through their by-laws. The president opened the meeting with a prayer (or a salute in secular societies), the secretary read the minutes of the previous meeting and the names of the members in good standing, while the treasurer collected the dues. After this the lodge dealt with payments made to ill or maimed members, or to families of the deceased. It also initiated new members, made loans to those who were deserving, and contributed to other lodges or churches which merited their support. The treasurer and financial secretary would report on the lodge's finances, as would the overseers. After dealing with any other business, the meeting would close with a prayer (or another salute).¹³

In the early years the lodges had their own distinctive uniforms, banners, and badges. The uniforms were worn on festive occasions (such as the blessing of a church), or else to funerals. Indeed, every lodge member was expected to attend the funeral of a "brother" (or "sister"). The lodge president might even own a horse, which he would ride during a special procession. Often, the lodges also had bands, which would play music appropriate to the occasion. Lodge badges usually had two sides. The standard side would be in some bright color, and would be worn on regular occasions. The obverse would be black, and would be worn during funeral

processions. The badges of the officers, starting with the president, would be larger than the badges of regular members. The lodge banner usually consisted of the Slovak tricolor (horizontal bars of white, blue and red), with the name of the lodge sewn across it.¹⁴

The larger lodges often built "Slovak Halls," either alone, or in concert with another lodge. Here they would hold their monthly meetings, stage plays, hold gymnastic events, open a bar and, perhaps, a bowling alley, and generally provide an agreeable place for community social activities.¹⁵ Almost every center of Slovak community life in the United States had such a "Slovak Hall," and many still have them today.

At the national level, many Slovak fraternal societies also published their own newspapers, usually weeklies. Among the Pennsylvania-based fraternal societies, the National Slovak Society published the *Ndrodne noviny* (National News, 1911-), the Pennsylvania Slovak Catholic Union the *Bratstvo* (Brotherhood, 1899-1990), the Ladies' Pennsylvania Slovak Catholic Union the *Zornicka* (Morning Star, 1941-), the Slovak Evangelical Union the *Slovensky hidsnik* (Slovak Herald, 1900-1962; since then United Lutheran), and the Slovak Calvin Presbyterian Union the *Slovensky Kalvin* (Slovak Calvinist, 1907-1962; since then simply The Calvin). While some of these newspapers have since folded, or have become monthlies, they served their members well by providing essential information about the activities of their lodges, their members, and the Slovak community at large.¹⁶

Even though Slovak fraternal-benefit societies provided essential services to their communities in the early years of their existence, they began to decline in the second half of the 20th century because they began to lose their *raison d'être*. The Great Depression of the 1930s made it difficult for unemployed Slovaks to keep paying their lodge dues, and many fraternal societies lost members as a result. Furthermore, the social-welfare legislation passed by the United States government as a part of its "New Deal" made many lodge self-help functions redundant. Then, too, the advent of television and spectator sports in the 1950s and 1960s made lodge social functions and entertainment less attractive. As a result, only the National Slovak Society, and the Ladies' Pennsylvania Slovak Catholic Union, among the Pennsylvania-based fraternal societies, are still in existence, and their membership has declined precipitously. The other fraternal societies have merged into larger bodies and have either lost their Slovak identity, or their corporate existence. Thus, the Slovak Calvin Presbyterian Union is now the Presbyterian Beneficial Union, and the two Slovak Lutheran fraternal societies, which merged into one body in 1960, call themselves simply the United Lutheran Society.¹⁷

All Slovak fraternal societies, whether Pennsylvania-based or not, face a struggle for survival. If they are to survive, they will have to find new reasons for their existence. Meanwhile, they have left us an interesting and colorful legacy of one ethnic group's attempts to deal with American society through collective action.

ENDNOTES

1. For more details on these three elements see my *Immigration and Urbanization: The Slovak Experience, 1870-1918* (New York: AMS Press, 1989), pp. 69-109.

2. *Fourteenth Census of the United States, 1920, Population* (Washington: United States Printing Office, 1922), 2:973.

3. Margaret Byington, *Homestead: The Households of a Mill Town* (Pittsburgh: The Russell Sage Foundation, 1910. Reprinted by the University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974), p. 161.

4. Stefan Vesely, "Prve slovenske spolky v Spojenych statoch Amenckych," *Slovdcí v zahraničí*, 4-5 (Martin: Matica slovenska, 1979),
5. P.V. Rovnianek, *Zdpisky za ziva pochovaného. Z mojho 25 rocneho verejného udnkovania na ndroda roli dedicnej* (Pittsburgh: National Slovak Society, 1924), pp. 127-30; Juraj J. Niznansky and Vendelm Platek, compilers, *Dejiny a Pamatnica Ndrodneho Slovenskeho Spolhi 1890-1950* (Pittsburgh: National Slovak Society, 1950), p. 214.
6. Stcfan Furdek, "Katolicka Slovenska Jednota v Spojenych Statoch Americkych," *Kalenddr Jednota, 1896* (Cleveland), 26-7.
7. Stefan Zeman, "Pat'desiat' rokov sl'achetnej prace slov. Evanjelikov v Amenke," in Martin Brozek, ed., *Zlatd kniha Slovenskej Evanjelickej Jednoty 1893-1943* (Pittsburgh: Slovensky hlasnik, 1943) pp 33-6; Frank Uherka, "Kratky prehl'ad S.K.P.J Jednoty," *Kalenddr pre slovenslach Kalvinov, 1927* (Pittsburgh), 37-8; Thomas Capek, Jr., *The Slovaks in America* (Czechoslovak Section of America's Making, Inc., New York 1921), p. 88.
8. Helen Prikazky, "Kratke dejiny 1. odboru v New York, N.Y.," in Pavel Blazek, ed., *Pamatnica k Zlatemu Jubileu Ziveny, '1891-1941* (Pittsburgh: Slavia Printing Co., 1941), p. 211.
9. Kenneth Baka, "The First Catholic Slovak Ladies Association," in Joseph C. Krajsa, et al., *Slovaks in America: A Bicentennial Study* (Middletown, PA: Slovak League of America, 1976). p. 172; Alvin J. Schmidt, *Fraternal Organizations* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press 1980) 343; and Capek, Jr., *The Slovaks*, p. 89.
10. Pennsylvania Slovak Catholic Union," Krajsa et al., *Slovaks in America*, p. 197; "The Ladies Pennsylvania Slovak Catholic Union, 1898-1976," *Ibid.*, 201; and Capek, *The Slovaks*, p. 89.
11. Capek, *The Slovaks*, p. 89; and Philip A. Hrobak, ed., *Slovak Catholic Parishes and Institutions in the United States and Canada* (Cleveland: First Catholic Slovak Union, 1955), p. 183.
12. Stolarik, *Immigration and Urbanization*, pp. 73-4; and M. Mark Stolarik, "A Place for Everyone: Slovak Fraternal-Benefit Societies " in Scott Cummings, ed., *Self-Help in Urban America: Patterns of Minority Business Enterprise* (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1980), pp. 137-8. See also June Granatir Alexander, *The Immigrant Church and Community: Pittsburgh's Slovak Catholics and Lutherans, 1880-1915* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1987), pp. 15-27.
13. M. Mark Stolarik, *Growing Up on the South Side: Three Generations of Slovaks in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, 1880-1976* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1985), p. 40.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 83, 87-8. Examples of Slovak lodge regalia can be found at the head office of the National Slovak Society in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, at the Slovak Museum and Archives in Middletown Pennsylvania, and at the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies in Philadelphia Pennsylvania.
15. Stolarik, *Growing Up*, pp. 39-40; Michael J. Kopanic, Jr., "The Slovak National Home in Cleveland, *Ndrodny kalenddr*, 1990 (Pittsburgh), 46-52.
16. For a discussion of the Slovak-American press, see my "The Slovak American Press," in Sally M. Miller, ed., *The Ethnic Press in the United States: A Historical Analysis and Handbook* (Westport, CT.- Greenwood Press, 1987), pp. 354-68. For the individual titles mentioned in this book see Konstantin Culen, *Slovenske casopisy v Amerike* (Cleveland- First Catholic Slovak Union, 1970), where the titles are organized and described in alphabetical order.
17. Stolarik, *Growing Up*, pp. 88-90; telephone interview with Mr. David Blazek, President, National Slovak Society, October 14, 1994.