Project Abstract

The German-Bohemian people possess a unique cultural, spiritual and historical place in both European and American history. Although German, they have assimilated many Czech qualities while living an isolated life on the borderlands between Germany and present-day Czech Republic; essentially creating a new ethnic identity. Thriving in the areas harshest land conditions they gave quiet testimony to an indomitable spirit that has sustained these German-Boheminians through domination, poverty, want and expulsion. The German-Bohemians people have typically gone unnoticed, always over shadowed by the dominate culture of Germany or the Czech Republic. It is my intention to give voice to their story and to articulate their experiences from 19th Century Bohemian village life to an existing ethnic enclave in New Ulm, Minnesota.

Project Objectives and Methodology

The objective of my research was to visit the actual geographical locations where the German-Bohemian people once eked out a modest livelihood, and to recapitulate their harrowing conditions, cultural contributions and terrible expulsion following World War II for a modern generation. Many of these old Bohemian villages have been destroyed or are in the process of rapid deterioration due to continued neglect. Before these historical foundations disappear forever and before the living story is forgotten due to the passing of time or cultural assimilation, it was and is my sincere desire to explore, witness, record and preserve portions of this unique history for future study and reflection.

I am very familiar with the German-Bohemian experience having been reared in the small town of New Ulm, MN. Here one can still hear German being spoken in cafes and on street corners, and to the trained ear the Bohemian dialect. Many of the people not only bear the characteristic spellings of names like Bartl, Zangl or Schroedl but also hold to the customs of their Heimat in the Bohemian Forest. Influenced by their love of family and tradition I have continually sought to promote this heritage through research and study.

This current SAIF request complements the research of two previously funded grants which have laid the foundation for this more specialized focus. Initially I looked at German immigration patterns into the Minnesota River Valley and how these patterns impacted social and economic development of New Ulm, MN, in pioneer times. My second grant allowed me to look at factors leading to the mass emigration phenomenon from the Rhineland area of Germany in the mid 19th Century and the actual circumstances of the trans-Atlantic journey.
My current research focuses in on a specific group of people, the German-Bohemians including their history, culture and traditions. I have explored their life in Bohemia as it existed in the late 19th Century, certain factors that led up to their departure from the Heimat and the surprising choice of New Ulm as their final destination. My investigation, moreover, examined the fate of those left behind, the displacement patterns of millions following the expulsion of 1945-46 and most recently the reaction of these German-Bohemians in reconnecting with abandoned or destroyed villages.

Let me describe how I reached my research objectives. The actual written records of these German-Bohemian people are extremely limited and that which is accessible is only available in local Czech and German archives. Many of these people were illiterate and passed stories on via an oral tradition. It is this tradition that I experienced while actually visiting the borderland villages and the people who still live or once lived there. Over the past few years I have established contacts with several knowledgeable individuals who helped facilitate this exchange of information and provided me an introduction to the Bohemian village life. My command of the German Language was sufficient to engage in this investigative process; however, it was necessary to employ the services of a Czech interpreter for a significant portion of my work.

I coordinated this research gathering expedition to coincide with an annual Heimattreffenung (or gathering) of the border people. Every year in early May since the boundaries between Germany and the Czech Republic have reopened, German and Czech people assemble for a three day event of story-telling and cultural exchange. The purpose of the Heimattreffenung corresponded exactly with my research objectives: collect data, exchange stories, interpret experiences, reconstruct memories and unite lost families and neighbors. German-Bohemians from America returned to their homeland villages as did the expelled Germans of 1945-1946. Here I engaged the visitors and locals about their customs, traditions and memories. I also presented some of my previous research on German immigration at the gathering on an informal basis.

In addition to this gathering, I visited select museums and cultural venues, appropriate to the German-Bohemian population, which, like the villages, are now located in the Czech Republic. Many of these German villages were destroyed after 1945-1946 and only figuratively exist in city or national archives of Pilsen or Prague. Here I needed the services of a Czech Language translator and a professional consultant to locate salient village sites and histories. I questioned individuals attending the homeland gathering for stories, photographed existing and destroyed Bohemian villages and collected available materials from museums and cultural venues to assemble an evolving narrative of the German-Bohemian experience.
**Project Benefits**

The ongoing benefits of this project are to continually expand knowledge on the role and significance of the German-Bohemian people who once lived on the borderlands and who have now reestablished themselves throughout Germany, the United States and the world. Rather than simply experiencing history from a textbook perspective this research tries to personalize history, focusing on lived experiences of particular German-Bohemian émigrés. At a time when immigration studies are becoming popular in the academy and even more politically relevant as the United States debates growing immigration problems, the German-Bohemian story can be a testimony to successful resolutions born of struggle.

**Sharing of Information**

The parameters of my German-Bohemian research were presented at UWP Poster Day, an annual event at the university, and a written summary forwarded to the Office of Sponsored Programs in fulfillment of the SAIF Grant requirements. I presented some preliminary investigations at the 33rd Annual Symposium for the Society of German American Studies held on April 17-19, in New Ulm, Minnesota. I will be presenting more complete research findings at the German-Bohemian Heritage Society and other historical organizations that request or invite my research. On campus I will offer seminars based on my study for the Literature of Ethnicity and Immigration (Eng. 375), appear as a guest speaker to the German Club or select German classes, facilitate research seminars for UW Extension and make presentations to local genealogical, historical and library organizations. The Brown County Historical Society and the German-Bohemian Heritage Societies eagerly welcome written articles or presentations relating to German-Bohemian history and German-Bohemian emigration narratives. Additionally, I have collected a CD of historical images associated with the German-Bohemian people, village photographs and a CD or related historical documents which are available for viewing upon request. All collected materials will continue to be utilized in ongoing research and future presentations.

My research was also reviewed by a UWP student writer and featured in the Daily Pioneer News, on May 7, 2009.

**Budget**

The 2008 SAIF Grant was fully encumbered