

The Czechoslovak Genealogical Society International (CGSI)

by Charles A. Romportl

CGSI's beginnings

In 1988, a small group of twenty-five to thirty people met at the Czech and Slovak Sokol Minnesota Hall in St. Paul. While discussing their common interest in genealogy, they decided to band together to further their common research goals. They named themselves the Czechoslovak Genealogical Society (CGS) and allied themselves with the Minnesota Genealogical Society as an "interest group".

Just one year later, in May 1989, CGS published its first eight-page newsletter and boasted 307 members! The board members pictured in that first issue were Mark Bigaouette, Dave Pavelka, Paul Makousky, Helen Peterson, Lucille Micka, Mary Halbert, Jim Robasse, Teri Buckeridge, Dolores Jorgenson, Al Kranz and Karleen Sheppard. The first Surname Index of our members was published, speaker sessions were being held, a collection of books and maps was accumulating, and queries were being published.

With one more year of growth, CGS had its first Genealogical/Cultural Conference in 1990 in Minneapolis, with sixteen sessions over four time periods. Our library was housed within the Minnesota Genealogical Society Library in St. Paul, the second Surname Index was published and our newsletter, now named Naše Rodina (Our Family) was up to eighteen pages.

Through 1991, CGS grew in leaps and bounds. We had our second Genealogical/Cultural Conference—now a two day event with thirty-six sessions and eighteen speakers from the United States, Canada and the Czechoslovak Federated Republic. It was obvious from this, as well as from the fact that our membership of 1,400 came from all over the United States, that we were no longer a small "interest group" of the Minnesota Genealogical Society. In fact, we had grown larger than the MGS, and we were still growing. We decided to embrace the scope of our membership, step outside of the MGS umbrella, and add the "I" to CGS. In 1992, we changed our name to the Czechoslovak Genealogical Society International (CGSI).

The basic structure and mission of CGSI was already in place in 1992. Growth in size, scope and effectiveness have been the only major changes since then. In October of 2005, CGSI had 3,251 members from forty-nine of the fifty United States and from six foreign countries (Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Canada, Israel and Australia).

The mission and organization of CGSI

From its inception, CGSI has chosen to focus on the geographic definition of the state of Czecho-Slovakia as it existed at its creation in 1918 after the end of WWI. The reason it is important to tie our focus to this specific date is that borders and domination of the lands have changed many times over the years. Before 1918 the Slovak and Czech

lands were districts in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Even though the state of Czechoslovakia existed from 1918 through 1992, Nazi invasion in WWII and the Communist takeover after that war made adjustments to the borders. For example, the Ruthenian "sliver" on the eastern edge of 1918 Czecho-Slovakia is now part of the Ukraine. And even though the state of Czechoslovakia separated into the Czech Republic and Slovakia on 1 January 2003, CGSI will carry on its original mandate.

We continue to emphasize that CGSI is for anyone searching for ancestors in the Slovak and Czech lands as they were defined in 1918. We are ready to help anyone whose ancestors are Slovak, Bohemian, Moravian, German-Bohemian, Silesian, Rusyn, Jewish, or any other heritage, culture or religion that populated the Czech and Slovak lands. Our 2005 conference in Bratislava, Slovakia, and Prague, Czech Republic, demonstrates CGSI's commitment to serve all who have ties to the Slovak and Czech lands.

The other hallmark of CGSI is our ability to accomplish so much entirely with volunteers. Since we are a non-profit organization that is geographically based in St. Paul, Minnesota, most of our seven officers, nine committee chairs and support team are from Minnesota, Wisconsin and Iowa. We have regional representatives, however, in Nebraska, Michigan and the Czech Republic; and the nine at-large members of our board of directors are from throughout the United States.



Fig. 1 - CGSI Board of Directors at their annual meeting

The members of the CGSI Board of Directors as of October 2005 are Eugene Aksamit, President; Pat Reynolds, 1st Vice President, Al Kranz, 2nd Vice President; Suzette Steppe, Recording Secretary; Kathy Jorgenson, Corresponding Secretary; Beth Baumeister, Treasurer; and Sandy Pavelka, Assistant Treasurer. The at-large members of the board of directors show our representation throughout the nation: John Kracha of Chula Vista, California (Chair through 2005); Mike Prohaska of Huxley, Iowa (Chair

beginning in 2006); Leo Baca of Richardson, Texas (Vice-Chair beginning in 2006); Bob Petrik of Lauderdale, Florida; Jack Smith of Denville, New Jersey; Ginger Simek of St. Paul, Minnesota; Margie Sobotka of Elkhorn, Nebraska; Dave Pavelka of Eden Prairie, Minnesota; and Lisa Alzo of Ithaca, New York. Beginning in 2006, John Kracha's term will end, and Helene Cincebeaux from Rochester, New York, will begin her term as a member of the board.

CGSI is most grateful to the innumerable helpers and assistants who generously volunteer their time to make our organization so successful.

CGSI publications

The backbone of CGSI is its quarterly periodical Naše Rodina (Our Family), which contains articles on the genealogical research process, as well as Czech and Slovak history, culture, organizations and more. All CGSI members receive this publication.

Naše Rodina is now a forty to forty-four page journal of exceptional quality and scholarship. Paul Makousky, the current editor, has an extensive network of experts in the field of Slovak and Czech genealogy, and solicits articles of interest and value to all CGSI members. Each issue now has a "theme" of several articles, in addition to the articles of general interest. This list of themes from the last five years shows the diversity and comprehensiveness of the information covered:

- December, 2005 - Passports and Permission to Emigrate Records
- September 2005 - Musical Instruments From the Czech and Slovak Lands
- June 2005 - Occupations and Employers of Slovak Immigrants
- March 2005 - Slovak and Czech Settlements of Cleveland
- December 2004 - Sokol Halls and Organizations in the USA
- September 2004 - Some Czech-born Personalities in America
- June 2004 - Czech and Slovak Settlements in Eastern Wisconsin
- March 2004 - Kroje (Folk Dress) of the Czech/Slovak Republics
- December 2003 - Czech and Slovak Military History
- September 2003 - Czech and Slovak Museums in the U.S.
- June 2003 - Minnesota's Ethnic Settlements from Czech/Slovak Lands
- March 2003 - Moravians, Silesians and Bohemians in Texas
- December 2002 - Hradky, Zamky and Tvrze (Castles, Chateaus and Systems of Fortifications)
- September 2002 - Czech and Slovak Women in America
- June 2002 - Czech Republic and Slovakia Archives
- March 2002 - Czechs, Slovaks and German-Bohemians in Michigan
- December 2001 - Beginners Guide to Czech and Slovak Research

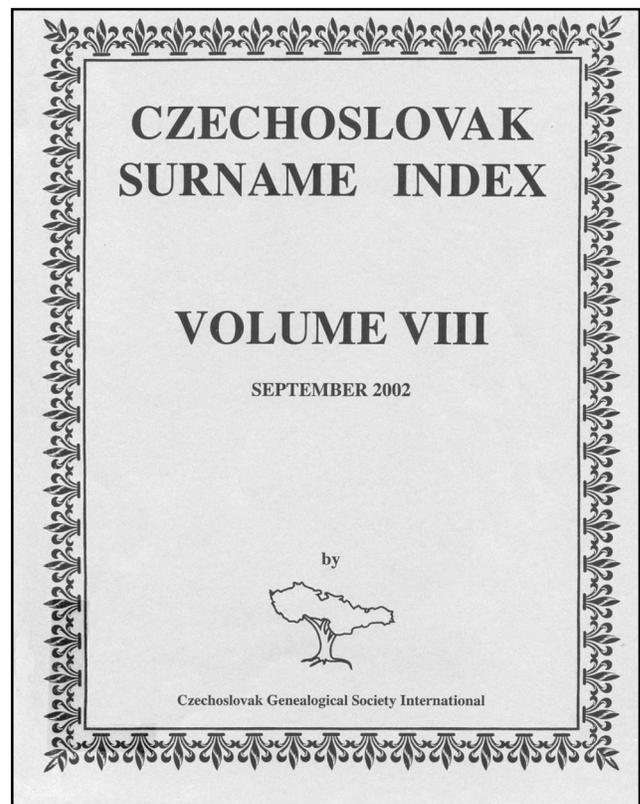


Fig. 2 - Volume eight of the Czechoslovak Surname Index, a great tool for networking and research

- September 2001 - Jewish Settlements and History in Czech and Slovak Lands
- June 2001 - Transportation used by Immigrants
- March 2001 - Slovaks, Czechs, Rusyns of Pittsburgh and Vicinity
- December 2000 - The Moravians of North Moravia
- September 2000 - Slovaks and Czechs in Canada
- June 2000 - U.S. Ports of Immigration
- March 2000 - The Czechs and German-Bohemians in the Banat
- December 1999 - The Rusyns (Ruthenians) in Slovakia

Past editions of Naše Rodina are listed on the CGSI website, including the table of contents for each issue. Those who are interested in a specific topic covered in this quarterly can easily find the individual issue they want to order.

In addition to our quarterly, CGSI publishes Ročenka (Yearbook) every two years, which contains similar articles to those in Naše Rodina, but more detailed and more scholarly. This publication is also included in CGSI membership.

CGSI's starting point for publishing books came with its first Czechoslovak Surname Index, which came out in 1989. New members submit the surnames they are researching and then use the index as a vehicle for networking with others. So far, eight volumes of Surname

Indexes have been published, and more will be coming as new members join CGSI.

A major resource for Czech genealogists was recognized in a book written in 1910 by Jan Habenicht, entitled The History of Czechs in America. Mr. Habenicht traveled throughout the United States around the turn of the 20th century, visiting every Czech community he could find, interviewing every Czech immigrant he could, and researching every Czech organization he could locate, including churches, fraternal organizations, newspapers and theaters. He mentions many names and places of origin and offers a wonderful firsthand impression of Czech immigrant life in the United States from the 1850s to 1910. Since this valuable work was available only in Czech, CGSI took on the task of having this book (all 595 pages of it!) translated into English. We then published it in 1996. The translating and editing of this book was done by CGSI members Miroslav Koudelka from the Czech Republic and Paul Makousky. Additions to the book include an index to the 276 illustrations, a foreword to the English edition, maps of the fourteen states with the largest Czech populations (Appendix I), a list of Czech Fraternal Organizations (Appendix II), a complete index to the over 2,400 names in the book, a geographical name index, and a biography of the author.

CGSI also discovered a companion to the Habenicht book, The History of Slovaks in America, written in Slovak by Konštanín Čulen in the 1940s. We are currently in the process of having this book translated. We hope to have it published and available for sale by 2007.

History of the Slovaks of Cleveland and Lakewood is a 301 page book written by Jan Pankuch in 1930, also in Slovak. CGSI had this translated into English and published in 2001.

Miroslav Koudelka, the CGSI member who translated The History of Czechs in America, also wrote an historical overview of the state of Czechoslovakia which was created at the end of WWI after the defeat of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. This handy twenty-page pamphlet is entitled Czechoslovakia: a Short Chronicle of 27,094 Days and covers events in Czechoslovakia from October 1918 through December 1992.

The Germanic Genealogical Society and the New Prague Area Historical Society asked CGSI to co-sponsor the publication of the New Prague, MN Cemeteries Inventory, which came out in 2005. With over 200 pages, this resource is valuable to anyone with ties to these cemeteries.

CGSI sales department and website

All the CGSI publications, books and periodicals are available for sale from the CGSI sales department. Order forms are available in every issue of our quarterly, Naše Rodina, or from our website. Besides having for sale our own publications, we also have a wide variety of books and maps that are very helpful in genealogical research. Many of these are hard-to-find items that we obtain directly from the

Czech and Slovak Republics. Purchases can be made by mail or online at our website <www.cgisi.org>.

Genealogical library, research and advice through CGSI

Networking with other genealogists is one of the most valuable ways to gain information about one's ancestors, and CGSI has several ways to promote this. We have already mentioned the Surname Indexes in which all members are invited to participate. Members may also publish queries in our quarterly newsletter. At most of our conferences we offer "networking sessions", groupings by geographical area of research, in hopes that connections can be made by those researching the same or similar towns.

Foreign languages can be a hurdle for many researchers. CGSI has a list of member-recommended translators to help with documents written in Czech, Slovak, Latin, and German, including old scripts.

CGSI has been very proactive in creating favorable relations with the Regional and National Archives in the Czech Republic and Slovakia and in assisting members with the process of gaining information from them. Our most recent conference in Bratislava and Prague was co-sponsored with the Slovak and Czech National Archives. We also provide a member-approved list of professional genealogists, since they are often the only ones who can practically use these archives.

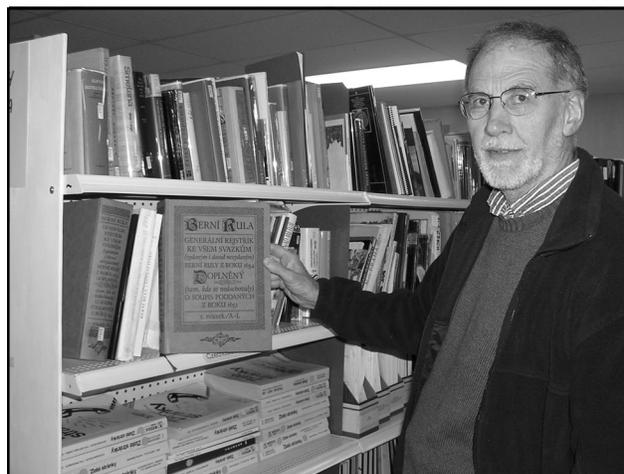


Fig. 3 - CGSI Librarian Wayne Sisel reviewing the Society's holdings at the Minnesota Genealogical Library

CGSI has an extensive library of over 2,000 volumes and is housed in the Minnesota Genealogical Society (MGS) Library, located in Golden Valley, Minnesota. The online catalogue for MGS and CGSI holdings can be accessed through <mngs.org> (at the left column, select "MGS Online Catalogue.") We have an extensive collection of sources from the Czech and Slovak lands, including telephone directories, town and district histories, *Heimatbücher* (homeland books) and travel guides. Some of our "prize" possessions are books that are not easily found in the United States:

- Soupis Poddaných Podle víry z roku 1651 (Census of Religious Belief of Subjects [in Bohemia] in 1651)
- Berní Rula (Tax Survey [in Bohemia] from 1653-54)
- Města a Městečka v Čechách na Moravě a ve Slezsku (Czech, Moravian & Silesian Towns & Villages), by Karel Kuča.
- Ortslexikon Sudetenland, by Ernst Pfohl.
- Zeměpisný Lexicon ČR, by Božena Nováková.

The CGSI Library has many gazetteers, maps, auto atlases, and lexicons available for helping locate ancestral villages or towns. Sample form letters have also been prepared to use to send to people in ancestral villages asking for information (in Czech and Slovak, and with English translations). And of course the library has pertinent resources for following the immigrant trail here in the United States with Immigrant Passenger Lists, by CGSI member Leo Baca, records from cemeteries and fraternal benefit societies, plus state, county, town, family and church histories.

For CGSI members who cannot get to our library in person, we have volunteers who will do research in a particular book or resource for a nominal fee.

CGSI Conferences, Symposia & Quarterly Meetings

National conferences are held every two years. They offer several workshops of two or three days at a convention center and attract hundreds of attendees. CGSI has had ten conferences, from our very first in 1990 in Minneapolis to our tenth in 2005 in Bratislava, Slovakia, and Prague, Czech Republic.

Sites for conferences are chosen for locales where many Czech and Slovak immigrants have settled, for their proximity to excellent genealogical research facilities, and

in places where local CGSI members can help make arrangements. In 1999, for example, we conducted our seventh National Conference in Lincoln, Nebraska, to reach out to the state with the highest number of Czech settlers. Our eighth conference in 2001 was in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where the highest percentage of Slovak immigrants settled. For our ninth conference in 2003, we turned to Houston, Texas, home of a large number of Moravian settlers.

The crown jewel of CGSI Conferences was our five-day “Back to the Homeland” Conference on 20-25 September 2005. Beginning in Bratislava, Slovakia, there were two days of workshops at the Slovak National Archives from their staff, plus presentations by lecturers from the Vienna War Archives (home of the Austro-Hungarian Empire military records). Next was a one-day bus tour through the Czech-Moravian Highlands, with three choices for museum and historic town visits. This tenth CGSI conference climaxed with two days in Prague, Czech Republic. Workshops were held in the new building of the Czech National Archives, with presenters from their staff, as well as representatives from all the Czech Regional Archives. The Czech National Archives even scheduled the opening of their new exhibit on Czech Emigration to coincide with our conference and also made available to our attendees copies of cadastral maps from their ancestral villages. Besides providing a fantastic cultural and learning experience for the 125 attendees, CGSI’s Back to the Homeland Conference created much good will between our countries and paved the way for future collaboration in doing genealogical research there.

Winter symposia began in 1999 to take place between national conferences. They offer several workshops over one or two days in locations more convenient for winter

Fig. 4 - 2005 National Conference attendees at Nelahozeves, Czech Republic



travel, such as Orange, California; Mesa, Arizona; San Diego, California; and Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Quarterly meetings are held four times a year, mostly in the Minneapolis and St. Paul metropolitan area or in neighboring states. They generally offer one speaker, panel or workshop.

Joining CGSI

When someone joins CGSI, they receive a thirty-four page Member Handbook to acquaint the new member with all of the research services CGSI provides. It also gives essential listings of how to conduct genealogical research, which records to search and where to find these records. New members also receive their first copy of the Naše Rodina quarterly publication, plus a form to submit the surnames they are researching into the next Surname Index publication. Member discounts at our conferences, symposia, and quarterly meetings become effective at this time as well. Another benefit is voting rights at our annual membership meetings. Our hope is that all the services we provide will facilitate having our members make personal contact with other genealogists. We try very hard to make obvious the impression that genealogists like to help one another.

CGSI in the Near Future

The October 2007 CGSI National Conference will take place in Madison, Wisconsin, to take advantage of the renowned research facilities at the Wisconsin Historical Society and the Wisconsin Genealogical Library at the University of Wisconsin Madison Campus. In addition to anticipating the final stage of publication of The History of Slovaks in America, by Konštantín Čulen, other possibilities are being considered for publication. Themes for the next several issues of Naše Rodina are selected and their articles are “in the works.”

The greatest amount of effort currently being made is in updating and developing our website. Much CGSI business is already conducted online, including memberships, sales and research requests. The “Members Only” section of our website, currently under development, will also handle queries, message board notices, and sharing of resources. We see our website as the most effective tool in promoting the international dimension of CGSI. To Contact CGSI:

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Fig. 5 - CGSI Executive Committee members for 2005

