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The Americanization of Czech Given Names

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THE AMERICANIZATION OF CZECH GIVEN NAMES

PRACTICALLY all the commoner Christian names exist as loan words in the Czech language, and some of them, despite differences from our spelling and pronunciation, are easily recognizable: *Antonín*, Anthony; *August* or *Gustav*;¹ *František*, Francis (feminine

¹ These names, though spelled as in English, are pronounced quite differently. The values of Czech letters (and digraphs) occurring in this essay are approximately as follows:

- a* = a in what
- á* = a in farm
- au* (German) = ou in house
- e* = e in met
- ě* = ai in air
- é* = ye in yet
- i* = i in hit
- í* = i in police
- ie* = *iě* (Italian *ie*)
- o* = o in German *dort*
- oi* (is foreign) = Czech *oj* (oi in oil)
- ů* = German u in *Fuss*
- u* = oo in moon
- ja* = the German *ja* (affirmative)
- je* = *ě*, and is the only instance of redundancy in Czech orthography
- ji* = yi in the word Yiddish
- jo* = yo in yore
- aj* = i in hike
- ej* = a in ate
- oj* = oy in boy
- ŷ, ý* = *i, í*, except that they do not affect *d, n, t* as do *i, í*

The consonants are practically as in English, excepting:

- c* = always ts as in parts
- č* = ch in church (usually represented in English orthography by cz; hence Czech instead of *Čech*)
- d* before *ě* or *i* = French d in *diable*
- g* is always hard as in get
- h* = wh in whom. It is never silent
- ch* always as in German *Buch*. (The combination is counted as one letter in Bohemian)
- is* a semi-vowel; = y in yet

Františka); *Jan*, John (*Johanna*, Jane); *Marie*, Mary; *Marketa*, Margaret; *Matěj*, Matthew; *Pavel*, Paul (*Pavlina*, Pauline); *Petr*, Peter; *Tomáš*, Thomas, and *Valentin*, Valentine (masculine). The Bohemian form is promptly discarded for the corresponding English form or for some abbreviation or nickname current in America—Tony, Gus, Frank, Fannie, Jennie, Mae (Mamie, Minnie), Maggie, Matt, Polly, Pete, Tom, etc.—as soon as the immigrant becomes acclimated. The native *Blažena* finds a counterpart in Beatrice, and *Růžena* in Rose (rarely Rosina). The substitution often requires an alteration in the signature: e.g., *Jindřich Arnošt Suva*, who signed himself *J. A. Suva* in the old country, writes "H. E." here, the initials standing respectively for Henry and Ernest; and *Vlasta Jiřinka Břeťanova*² embroiders the monogram "P. G. B." on her lingerie to agree with Patricia Georgia Brestan. Similarly, *Alžběta* becomes Elizabeth or Bessie; *Eliška*, Alice or Elsie; *Filip*, Philip; *Jindřiška*, Henrietta, Hattie or

n before *i* or *í* = Spanish *ñ*

ř is unmanageable except by a Czech. The nearest imitation is rsh in Pershing

š = sh in shape

t before *ě* or *i* = French t in *tien* as usually pronounced

ž = z in azure

All Bohemian words are accented on the first syllable. There are no silent letters. Two consonants occurring together (excepting *ch*, which is a digraph) are never combined in pronunciation; each is sounded distinctly.

² For a woman the family name, in this case *Břeťan*, always takes a possessive form. Compare Pavlova, Petrova, and other Slavic names familiar to the American public.

Harriet; *Jití*, George; *Karel*, Carl or Charles, and *Karolina*, Caroline, Carrie, Charlotte; *Ondřej*, Andrew; *Vilém*, William or Bill, and *Žofie*, Sophie. Between *Bohdanka* and Dorothy, *Libuše* and Amelia, *Vavřinec* and Lawrence, the difference seems considerable, but etymological scrutiny discloses that the names are practically the same: compare *Bůb*, God, *dáti*, to give, with the components of Theodora; *libiti se*, to be pleasing, with the Latin *amari*, to be loved, and *vavřín*, the laurel, with the Latin word for the same idea. (The terminations *-ka*, *-uše*, and *-ec* correspond roughly to our *-ess*, *-er*.) *Milada* is a compound of a first-person possessive pronoun and *Lada* (in Slavonic mythology the goddess of youth, love, fertility), and means, therefore, my love. For this, Mildred (or the diminutive Milly), having no connection with the Bohemian name, is often substituted. Amata or Amanda would seem more reasonable, but the American-Bohemian female named Mandy is non-existent, as far as I am aware. The *Kalendáře* (Calendars), published annually by the Chicago *Karolka*, the St. Louis *Hlas* (Voice), and other American-Bohemian newspapers, repeat in each issue a list of Christian names, extending through several pages of small print, from which it is possible for the latest arrival in this country to determine what he should call himself here.

The information, however, is not always acted upon fully, probably because it is sometimes difficult to establish the connection between the Bohemian name and the translation or substitute offered. Who, for instance, ever heard of an American Bohemian called Valerian? Yet, Valerian is the only substitute vouchsafed for the very common Czech *Jaroslav* (praise of spring). The American Vernon, it would seem, should have sug-

gested itself quite naturally, but *Jaroslav* generally becomes Gerald or Jerry, either of which also takes the place of *Jeremiáš* (Jeremiah), and of *Jaromír* (the peace of spring). For this last, Gerard, given in the *Kalendáře*, is as often assumed. Jeffrey, or Jeff—despite the popularity of Mutt's little partner,—as substitutes for *Bobumír* (the peace of God; Godfried, Geoffrey) have made little appeal, and the name is turned arbitrarily into Theodore, for which the Bohemian equivalent is *Bobdan* (God-given). Another form, *Božidar* (the gift of God) is more popular with the Southern Slavs, especially the Serbians, than with the Czechs, who use the word euphemistically as a common term for a feeble-minded child, simpleton or idiot. In explanation of this there is a rather curious association of ideas, involving the evangelical "Blessed are the poor in spirit." *Bobumil* (dear to God, beloved of God) is translated, correctly, Theophile, but also sometimes Theodore, probably because Theophilus is uncommon in America. More rarely *Bobdan* and *Bobumil* are rendered Felix—possibly through further association, unconscious withal, of mental deficiency, moral irresponsibility, and, therefore, practical assurance of eternal felicity. At any rate, Felix is generally dropped as soon as the boy's companions nickname him "Happy Hooligan." *Bobumil*, as my own middle name, was a source of endless embarrassment to me as a child. My schoolmates made it "Bug-mill." On one occasion the subject of middle names was brought up in the class room, and being asked by the teacher for mine, I unblushingly resorted to "Bennie" to escape the snickers which I knew would have followed a truthful answer. Patrick, a fair exchange for *Vlastimil* (dear to the fatherland), is unknown as the adopted name of a Bohemian anywhere—

except perhaps in Ireland. *Miloslav* (*milosti oslavený*, crowned, by mercy, grace-adorned; or from *milovati*, to love, *slaviti*, to celebrate) is, favoring the first parenthetical interpretation, given as Mansuetus in the calendars, but that Latin name, as well as Gratian, is not known here, and *Miloslav*, by a very direct process of Americanization, becomes Mell. The particle *slav* (*sláva* = glory; *slavený*, praised, honored, and *slaviti*, to praise, celebrate; perfective *oslaviti*, to crown, decorate, honor) occurring in this name and others to be mentioned is, by the way, according to some authorities, the origin of the generic name of the Slavs, *Slované*. *Miroslav* (*mír*, peace, and *slav*) might conveniently be translated by the Latin *Pacificus*; but, excepting a rare Morris or Maurice, is generally exchanged for something suggested neither by the etymology nor the sound of the Czech name. *Bedřich* is a Czech corruption of the German *Friedrich*, and is rendered, in America, Frederick (Fred) or Alfred. *Bobuslav*, correctly Timothy, is invariably changed to something irrespective of the original. The venerable Slavic *Ladislav* (*vláda*, government, and *slav*) and *Stanislav* (of Polish origin; meaning, a person famous for his deeds) become Laddie, Luddie, Lutie, Leslie or Louis, and Stanely—one made it Standard!—with no attempt at accuracy; and *Bronislav* is indiscriminately Bernard, Bert, Bart or even Barney, either of which also replaces *Barnabáš*, *Bartoloměj*, *Bartolděj*, and, of course, the Czech pronunciation of *Bernard*. *Čeněk*, an old name dating back to pagan times, is still in use among modern Czechs. It is a corruption of *Castoslav* (*častovati*, to treat, show hospitality). For no apparent reason, Vincent is sometimes taken instead. *Hynek* is a corruption of the German nickname *Heinz* (*Heinrich*), and, through

resemblance to the Spanish *Hinigo*, is often incorrectly translated Ignatius, which, in turn, exists in Bohemian as *Ignát* or *Ignác*. Both *Hynek* and *Ignát* sometimes become Enoch in this country. I have heard *Ignát* shortened to Iggie, but never Heinie for *Hynek*, though the latter nickname exists for Henry (*Jindřich*).

The popular *Václav*—the name of Bohemia's patron saint—seems to bristle with difficulties, and the only near-English equivalent ever given anywhere is the German-looking Wenceslaus. Even Mr. Thomas Čapek, an authority in matters pertaining to Bohemians in America, evidently gives up in despair:

No name has caused its bearers greater disfigurement than *Václav*. . . . Somehow or other the American *Václavs* . . . are not content with the name. A number of the milder malcontents have given it a German or a Latin form: Wenzel, Wenceslas, Wenceslaus; the majority, though, figuratively speaking, have thrown *Václav* overboard, assuming in lieu of it William, Wesley, Wendel, James, according to the fancy of the bearer. *Václav* is, of course, as untranslatable as Roland, Kenneth, or Leslie.³

Whatever may be true concerning Roland, Kenneth and Leslie, *Václav* is by no means as untranslatable as Mr. Čapek would have us believe. The form Wenceslaus, moreover, is German or Latin only in the termination. *Václav* is derived from two good Slavic words, *věnc*, a wreath, and *slav*, and is correctly interpreted *věncem oslavený*, crowned with a wreath. The original form was *Věnceslav*, and many older Czechs still write it so. It is translated almost exactly by the Greek word *stephanephoros*, which, being obviously too long for practical purposes, might conveniently be abbrevi-

³ Thomas Čapek: "The Čechs (Bohemians) in America." Houghton Mifflin Company, New York. Page 117.

ated to Stephen (*stephanos*, the conqueror's wreath, crown of victory), or Steve. Evidently, this possibility has occurred to no Czech, learned or otherwise, and parents will dub one boy *Štěpán*, the accepted form of Stephen, and his brother *Václav* without suspecting that they are giving both practically the same name. Victor, which already exists in Bohemian as *Viktor*, likewise recalls the ancient custom of crowning prize winners with a laurel wreath, and has the advantage of necessitating no change in the initial. Mr. H. L. Mencken, as well as Mr. Čapek, has observed that *Václav* becomes William,⁴ and adds in a footnote that the Bohemians of Central Kansas make it James. My own experience has been that most grown-up *Václavs* are known in America as Jim or James and comparatively few as Bill or William. Small boys christened *Václav* are frequently called Wesley until the Catholic parents become aware of the incongruity of putting their offspring under the patronage of a Methodist saint. Occasionally, however, Wesley remains, or is shortened to Wes. *Šilvestr* (Sylvester) turns also to Wes; or to Vester, Wester, as well as Syl.

In connection with *Václav*, Mr. Mencken notes that *Vojtěch* also becomes William, but Albert is the substitute given for *Vojtěch* in the *Kalendáře*, and is as often chosen. It is, of course, not a translation. *Vojtěch* is derived from *boj*, a battle, struggle (*vojsko*, the army) and means, literally, a soldier, warrior, leader of an army. Its confusion with Albert arises from the fact that the Bohemian saint, Vojtěch, had been confirmed by Bishop Adalbert of Magdeburg, whose name he assumed, without, perhaps,

⁴H. L. Mencken: "The American Language." Alfred A. Knopf, New York. Page 349, third edition.

intending to discard his own. It is still customary among Catholic Bohemians to give a child but one name at baptism, and the middle name is taken, usually, at the confirmation ceremony. In America, this custom has fallen into desuetude, and the bestowing of two or more names at the christening is not exceptional. If, subsequently, another name is taken at confirmation, it is rarely used thereafter in ordinary transactions.

Jakub (Latin *Jacobus*, James) is common enough among the Czechs, but is not translated otherwise than Jacob. The nickname is never Jim, but Jake; or, less frequently, Jack, by which American-Bohemians do not understand John. *Džán* and *Džim*, incidentally, have obtained recognition in print as Bohemian versions of our John and Jim; there are also the diminutives *Džáník* (Johnnie) and *Džimík* (Jimmie). *Ludvík* is Louis, which finds favor also as a substitute for *Alois* (Aloysius), and females named either *Aloisie* or *Ludovíka* become Louise or Eloise. Both *Míchal* (Michael) and *Mikuláš* become Mike, though *Mikuláš* is the Czech form of Nicholas and should, therefore, be rather Nick, which I have not heard among American Czechs. It is difficult to account for the initial M instead of N: the Greek *Nikolaos* exists in Russian as *Nikolaj*, and *Nikola* or *Nikoláš* have been suggested as Bohemianized forms, but are never used, probably because, in Czech, *n* before *i* is sounded *ñ*, and to preserve the hard sound of the consonant the first syllable would have to be written *ny*. This orthographical rule, while frequently overlooked in borrowed words, could hardly be disregarded with impunity here. *Nikola* or *Nikoláš*, pronounced as spelled, would, without doubt, bring up an association with *nikoli* (not at all!), which would

never do. Mitchell for *Míchal* is rather unusual, but one of my brothers so spells it. Another, christened *Otomar*, was called Ottie or Otis until he grew up, and then changed to Ode, a Western cognomen that seems to be increasing in popularity.

Ludmila (dear to the people) becomes Lilian or Lily, and *Anočka*, properly Agnes, is occasionally mistranslated Ann or Annie (*Anna*). *Andulka* (little Annie) is as plebeian among Czechs as Maggie or Sallie with us, but one American girl seized upon it as something out of the ordinary to have engraved on her cards instead of her own middle name, Ann. *Perla* is not, I believe, used elsewhere than in America; the girl, of course, calls herself Pearl, and possibly Ruby, Opal, Beryl, or after some other precious stone. *Gladyska* is typically American-Bohemian for Gladys, which, as far as I know, does not exist in Czech proper, though *Blažena*, already mentioned, might be translated by the almost extinct Letitia (Latin *laetare*, to be glad). *Albina*, a very popular name in the old country, the native *Béla*, and the rarer *Blanka* (Italian *Bianca*) seem not to yield to Blanche as readily as might be expected. Allie, Aline, Arline and Belle are occasionally substituted. *Božena* becomes Bessie or Beatrice rather than the unfamiliar, in

America, Beata, and very rarely Dea or Thea, more exact renderings, from which Dee has been evolved. *Cecilie* (Cecilia) is common as a feminine name, usually abbreviated here to Celia, but no boy is ever dubbed Cecil. The masculine name, as pronounced in America, sounds too much like *sysel*, the Czech word for marmot (diminutive *syslík* = gopher, woodchuck). Chauncey is another American cognomen from which Bohemian boys are safe. I have been told that it suggests *čunče*, a sucking pig. Bohemian-American Mabels I have met, but one father, at least, objected to his wife's naming their daughter "Furniture" —German *Möbel!* One mademoiselle, to my knowledge, aspired at her confirmation to Kimona,—an investiture which the officiating bishop prudently declined to perform. Further consideration of fanciful names would lead us too far afield, but fond Bohemian-American mammas have tried everything from Abalina to Zymola on female infants, and Kenneth, Chilson, Luther, Dewey, Woodrow, Calvin, etc., have been bestowed upon the sons of families clinging to surnames like *Kubíček*, *Ševčík*, *Borecký*, *Pospíšil*, *Veverka* and *Vrba*.

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