

# Czech Language News

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## Message from the President

What's in a name? The North American Association of Teachers of Czech is—this year at least—presided over by a resident of Great Britain, and the Book Review Editor of *Czech Language News* is an Englishman. We have two residents of the Czech Republic on our Executive Board, and 46 out of 203 members live outside North America. How North American are we? Or more to the point—how North American should we be?

Two conferences this summer brought this question sharply into focus for me. The Ústav bohemistických studií FF UK and the Ústav pro jazyk český AV ČR held meetings devoted respectively to the teaching of Czech as a foreign language and to Czech linguistics. American members of NAATC (among others, Laura Janda, Susan Kresin, and Milan Fryščák) were present; however, the bulk of the attendees and presenters were from Europe. Most of us—myself included—know little about Czech studies beyond that in our own backyard, and everyone seemed surprised and pleased at the number and variety of programs represented. (For more about these meetings, see the organizers' reports in this issue of CLN.)

At both conferences the point was made repeatedly that there's no truly international organization for Czech teachers, and many seemed to feel this is a gap that should be filled. In fact, NAATC is well positioned to fill such a gap, although at the moment its name and focus limit its appeal outside the U.S. and Canada. So there are changes afoot that we hope will "internationalize" NAATC both in appearance and content.

First, at the December meeting I'll be putting forward a motion to change our name to something more international in scope. "International Association of Teachers of Czech/Mezinárodní asociace bohemistů" has been mooted, but other suggestions and comments are welcome.

Second, we're increasing the international dimension of our activities and publications. Already some changes are visible. We've secured funding to bring a Czech member over for the December conference, and have put in bids for a larger grant for next year. Reports from the profession—including an announcement of a new Czech studies journal published in Poland, *Bohemistyka*—can be found in this issue and will play a larger role in future. Susan Kresin has come up with a number of exciting ideas for expanding the remit of *Czech Language News* in upcoming issues. More ambitiously, we hope to make use of our position as the preeminent Czech studies organization to obtain larger grants for conferences and for publications that will benefit our members, which will give them the feeling that they're getting something for their subscription beyond this newsletter.

The name is thus only the most obvious of the changes afoot at NAATC. We hope these developments will spark our members' interest and involvement, and we invite you to contact us with your thoughts, suggestions, objections, and, of course, your membership dues and contributions to this newsletter.

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## Czech Language Instruction at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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The University of Nebraska was one of the first universities in the United States to offer Czech Language instruction.<sup>1</sup> The Czech language and culture program was inaugurated in 1907, thanks to major political maneuvering, and has continued up to the present day except for a short interruption in the 1920s.<sup>2</sup> The program has been headed by a number of outstanding and dedicated professors, such as Šárka Hrbková, Orin Štěpánek and Vladimír Kučera. The program is self-supporting, through volunteer instruction provided by the author of this article, and the dedication of the team of Jim and Katya Koubek, lecturers since 1996.

The program has been a successful one, thanks to its instructors and a number of outstanding students who have also been engaged in the programs of the Czech Komenský Club. The history of Czech language instruction in Nebraska is closely tied to the history of the club (named for Jan Amos Komenský, the pioneer educator, 1592-1670) at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, and the involvement of its members. Conceived in December 1903, and officially established in 1904, it gave a start to many influential personalities in Nebraska political and cultural life, for example state and U.S. politicians Roman Hruska, Otto Kotouc, Joseph Vosoba, and Rudy Vrtiska; poets Ferdinand Musil, Jeffrey Hrbek, and Hrbek's sister, writer, politician, and educator, Dr. Šárka Hrbková.<sup>3</sup> According to the club constitution, its aim was to form a bond among Czech-Americans and to provide a model of cultural association to other university settings, where students could study Czech language, history and literature first informally, and later formally, in regular courses.<sup>4</sup>

The Komenský Club cultural program was quickly adopted by students and intellectuals in other towns and universities and resulted in the foundation of 28 other groups throughout the North American continent by the end of WWI.<sup>5</sup> Initially the club was founded to offer university and college students of Czech origin a chance to take part in

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Czech culture.<sup>6</sup> To achieve this goal the club organized poetry readings, musical performances, and other activities for university students and the Czech community in Lincoln. The Komenský Club activities became a model for other academic groups in other states. The resulting clubs joined in the Komenský Educational Clubs Association that was founded by Prof. Bohumil Šimek of the State University of Iowa, and F.J. Pípal, a student of Nebraska University, who later became a professor at Purdue University.<sup>7</sup>

By 1909, the club members started to publish the monthly magazine *Komenský*.<sup>8</sup> In it they announced the news from their club and other Komenský Clubs that continued to be founded in Nebraska (Lincoln, Omaha, Crete, and later other places) and in other states.<sup>9</sup>

Very quickly, however, the members realized that there was a need not only to cultivate their mother tongue, but also to educate the Anglo-Saxon community about the achievements of Czechs in the USA as well as in Europe. This was done in programs for the English-speaking community, such as public concerts and lectures in English. Ultimately the Komenský Clubs became a springboard for cultural and political personalities in many of the states of the Union.

From the beginning of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Komenský Club's existence, there was a plan to have Czech language and culture offered as a subject at the University in Lincoln and at Omaha Creighton University. The establishment of Czech as a legitimate field of study became a rallying cry for several reasons.

First of all, there was a genuine need for the children of Czech settlers to study the literary form of the Czech language, if the new generation was to take over the cultural work of their parents, the first and second generation of settlers. There were Czech newspapers and journals, the Rosický Publishing House in Omaha, and several amateur theatrical groups in the state of Nebraska. There were theater halls in the Western Fraternal Association, or Sokol Halls, in many small towns that would either host one of the traveling theater troupes, or periodically offer performances with local talents.<sup>10</sup> There were schools with Czech children who had a poor knowledge of English, if any, when they started instruction, and who needed Czech-speaking teachers. Churches needed priests and ministers who could perform

<sup>1</sup> "Potřeba pro české školy," no author, *Pokrok Západu* XXXVI, No 4 (Aug. 22, 1906): 5.

Prof. Bohumil Šimek, "O stolicí českého jazyka," *Pokrok Západu* XXXVI, No 20 (Dec. 15, 1906): 4.

<sup>2</sup> See the discussion on the pages of *Pokrok Západu* in 1905-1907, namely Jan. 30, 1907, XXXVI No 27; Feb. 2, 1907, No 29, articles by Václav Bureš (no title) and John Kreyčik ("Poslední slovo").

<sup>3</sup> The commemorative plaque in the UNL administration building states the year of the Komenský Club foundation as 1904.

<sup>4</sup> Rose Rosický, *Dějiny Čechů v Nebrasce* (Omaha: Rosický Publisher, 1934), 403.

<sup>5</sup> *Komenský*, vol. 21 (January 1919): back cover.

<sup>6</sup> *Komenský*, vol I (April 1, 190): 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Rosický, 402.

<sup>8</sup> Publication of *Komenský* ceased in 1919, when the Nebraska legislature declared all publications in languages other than English illegal.

<sup>9</sup> As mentioned above, the first Komenský Club was established in Lincoln, as Club No. 1. No. 2 was founded in South Omaha, June 1904, by Joseph V. Sterba (later a physician in Chicago) and Fr. Pípal. Club No. 3 was formed in 1904 in Iowa City, Iowa, by the poet Jeffrey D. Hrbek, who in 1907 became the first professor of the Czech language at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

<sup>10</sup> Vladimír Kučera, *Czech Dramas in Nebraska* (Lincoln, NE, 1979; mimeographed, deposited in UN Love Library archives).