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## Chapter 17

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# From Maso Pust to Cesky Den: Czech and Slovak Music in Wisconsin

### *Program 17 Performances*

1. Yuba Bohemian Band, "Wedding Tune." 2. She and He Haugh Band, "City of Yuba Polka." 3. Joe and John Tomesh, "Louka zelena." 4. Vera Dvorak Schultz, "Ivanek naš." 5. Jerry Novak, "Šli panenki." 6. Moquah Slovak Singers, "Bodaj by vas." 7. Albert Wachuta, "Koline, Koline." 8. Straight Eight Bohemian Band, Chorus (Charles Pelnar, John Pelnar, Bill Slatky, Louis Kasal), "Svestkova alej." 9. Straight Eight Bohemian Band, "V zahrade." 10. Mayme Doser and Mrs. Frank Stevens, "Kdyr jsem šel čestíčkou surkou." 11. Victor Kuchera and Dolly Petruzalek, "Do lestička na cekanou." 12. Phillips Czech Singers, "Čočovička."

### Ceska America

Czech immigrants settled Wisconsin in the 1860s, establishing homesteads along the lower Wisconsin River and, subsequently, on the western shore of Lake Michigan in the Manitowoc vicinity. The early twentieth century saw a second wave of Czech Americans—Pennsylvania miners, Chicago factory hands, Cedar Rapids packing house workers, Nebraska sandhill farmers—seek logged-off land in such northern Wisconsin communities as Haugen, Moquah, and Phillips. Sometimes called Bohemians, after the German name for the western province of present-day Czech Republic, Wisconsin's Czechs were joined by smaller numbers of Slovaks, some of whom found their way to northern Wisconsin, though more came to Milwaukee's industrial valley.

The Czechs of the greater Manitowoc area have contributed a remarkable number of dance bands to the Upper Midwest's musical mix (see the related essay in chapter 18, "The Manitowoc Bohemian Sound"). Although such bands—led by Romy Gosz, Joe Karman, Rudy Plocar, and others—created Wisconsin's Bohemian polka sound in ballrooms and on radio, less renowned but still significant musicians and singers carried on the ethnic traditions that have led to a proliferation of late-twentieth-century Czech and Slovak festivals throughout rural Wisconsin.

The Czechs who settled within reach of the lower Wisconsin River extended old-world sociability through house parties, community bands, and the celebration of life cycle and seasonal events. As a young farm boy, Prairie du Chien's Albert Wachuta (b. 1875) learned songs "mostly from my mother, but some from other



people too because in them days there was a lot of Bohemian singing" (Leary 1987b:48). When Helene Stratman-Thomas recorded Wachuta, Mayme Doser, and Mrs. Frank Stevens in 1941, they were still singing, but they lamented the loss of many old-timers.

## Brass Bands and Burnt Cork

Stratman-Thomas also found a Bohemian brass band in Yuba, Richland County, in 1946. It had been organized in 1868 by Martin Rott Sr., a Czech immigrant. Besides his own bass horn, the band included Martin's brothers, Wencil and Frank, on clarinet and baritone horn, as well as Frank Novy Sr. on violin, Mathew Picha on cornet, and Michael Dedrick and Wencil Pilner on clarinets. Eventually peopled by many more Rotts, a large contingent of Staneks, and others, the Yuba Bohemian Band persisted until at least 1954 (Levy 1987). The band provided solemn marches for funeral processions, but specialized in playing for weekend dances, weddings, Fourth of July celebrations, and that two-day pre-Lenten gala, *maso pust*.

Literally translated "without meat," Maso Pust is the Czech equivalent of Mardi Gras. As a young boy, Martin Rott's great-grandson Raymond Liska (b. 1913) celebrated Maso Pust much in the manner of his ancestor. When farmers finished their chores on the Monday prior to Ash Wednesday, they changed into costumes and took their teams to Robert Novy's Yuba Opera House. Just before midnight the maskers would parade around so that judges could pick the best costumes. Those with cows returned the next night after barn chores; those without might celebrate all day. House-to-house visiting was common as well, with crowds feasting on pastries, sweet-and-sour cabbage, and pork. At midnight Tuesday, however, the music would cease and revelers would blacken one another's faces with burnt cork in parodic anticipation of the ashen crosses priests would make on foreheads in the morning, Ash Wednesday (Liska 1991 I; Barden 1982).

The old way of celebrating Maso Pust went into decline with Robert Novy's death in 1956, although the celebration has been carried on in turn by his son-in-law and daughter (Adolph and Marcella Novy Levy), and by their son-in-law and daughter (David Moen and Darlene Levy Moen). The Yuba Opera House is known nowadays as the D&D Pub. Burnt corks at midnight are abandoned, the dance has shifted from weekdays to the weekend prior to Lent, the numbers in costume have diminished, and the band comes from out of town (Kallio 1987). Maso Pust persists, but it is much transformed and is no longer the focal point for Czech ethnicity in the community.

In 1983, the Richland County Czechs of Yuba and nearby Hillsboro initiated *česky den* (Czech day). Held on a Saturday in mid-June, Cesky Den is typical of festivals that emerged out of the ethnic revival coinciding with America's bicentennial. Unlike Maso Pust, which in its heyday was an event by and for locals, Cesky Den is widely advertised so as to attract a substantial crowd of outsiders—some of them Czech, most of them not. Part generic community festival, the event has involved performances by the high school swing choir, the building of a "100-foot banana split" by the Fire Department Auxiliary, arts and crafts, and a king and queen contest. Its chief focus, however, is on aspects of Czech culture. Local participants wear Czech costumes and prepare Czech food. They also sing, dance, and play music, thereby reenacting the old-world traditions sustained by Prairie du Chien's Czechs and by Yuba's Martin Rott and Robert Novy.

The 1986 event included three musical elements that harken to the events favored by earlier generations. They are also elements that have become standard in festivals inspired by the ethnic revival: (1) an open microphone for musi-





*Joe and John Tomesh playing a Czech tune while their brothers and sisters—(L–R) Tony Tomesh, Lilian Dvorak, Dorothy Schwab, Albert Tomesh—look on, Haugen, 1990 Photo: Jim Leary*

cians, (2) a performance by costumed singers and dancers, and (3) a dance/concert with a band that emphasizes an old-world repertoire.

More specifically, Hillsboro's Czech Music Jamboree, with its open microphone and three-song limit, echoed the informal give-and-take of the old-time house party. Old-timers who had kept up their skills on the accordion or concertina played Czech dance tunes, while an occasional youngster sang a song learned from grandma or from a class in Czech heritage. The more formal presentations of the Hillsboro and Yuba Czech Singers—with their ethnic garb, songbooks, and squeezebox accompaniment—recalled both the musical programs of Czech fraternal halls and the costumed Maso Pust gala. Finally the She and He Haugh Band—a full brass and reed band consisting mostly of high school band veterans—invoked the old Yuba Bohemian Band with its conscious articulation of an "authentic" old-world sound.

Czech and Slovak Americans, their neighbors, and thousands of tourists can share such musical evocations of ethnicity by attending the Hillsboro festival each summer, or by traveling to Haugen, Moquah, and Phillips, where similar festivals occur. Although clearly modern departures from the more localized and private traditions of immigrants and their offspring, these regionally promoted public events nonetheless refer to the ethnic musical past while displaying its present.