

ETHNIC HERITAGE
SOUND ARCHIVE & RESOURCE CENTER
NORTHLAND COLLEGE, ASHLAND, WI

81-003-F

Informant: Jerry Novak
Moquah, WI

October 10, 1980

Collector: Jim Leary

I arrived at Jerry Novak's at one p.m. The place was much easier to find the second time around, and the weather was cool and rainy. As I parked near the house, I could see in the barnyard beyond that Jerry had been busy the day before with his woodpile. Jerry met me at the door and we again settled in the dining room. Irene was reading in the living room.

As the beginnings of the taped interview explain, the purpose of this session was to go over the songs performed during our previous meeting. In some cases Jerry had played me the tune, but not sung the words. Occasionally, he knew more verses than he sang. Sometimes, he gave me only partial translations for the Bohemian and Slovak songs. In every case, I was uncertain about the spellings of the song titles. With his characteristic patience, Jerry went over all the details I needed. He was even reminded of five songs not included previously. Three of them were old and lengthy ballads which, apparently, his sister and other members of his family sang.

During a few of the songs Irene Novak came out and joined us, although she stood up all the time in the doorway of the living room - as if ready to slip away at a moment's notice. She got a big kick out of several of Jerry's songs, especially #11 Kdaz Jsem Sel V Praze (The Market Place at Prague) with its humorous enumeration of the differences between "proper" girls and those who aren't. Irene mentioned a few Christmas songs that her mother used to sing. Jerry didn't know the songs and Irene was too shy to sing them. Perhaps another time?

The interview proceeded quite smoothly for roughly two hours. Apart from filling out and adding to his repertoire, Jerry talked with me on several topics: the difficulty of translating a song from one language to another, the pleasure of local house parties, the one-time prevalence of Bohemian newspapers (JN still subscribes to one from Cedar Rapids, Iowa). Most interesting to me was JN's discussion of old farming techniques - particularly harvesting with a scythe and threshing with a flail. JN mentioned the importance of rhythm in the use of a flail, especially if two or more people were using the tool at once. After we had talked, we went out to the barn where JN had two old flails handmade by his father. I took pictures of them and of JN as he swung the instrument in the old-time way.

I'd better wedge in here some final comments on JN as a singer. He doesn't have a great voice, nor is he a particularly great singer. And often he doesn't

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recall all of the verses to a song. But, overall, his memory is remarkable. In the summer of 1979 he recorded roughly thirty songs in English for Sara Poynter and myself. This year he gave me nearly 50 songs in Bohemian. What's more, Jerry is willing to sing the songs to a stranger. Any material that I have recorded from him is more a testament to his amazing recall and friendly spirit than it is to my skills as a fieldworker.