Article Title: Evidence of Assimilation in Pavel Albieri’s *Nevěsta za padesát dollarů* (Bride For Fifty Dollars)

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Article Summary: Machann analyzes a best-selling Czech-language novel set in America. The novel, published in Prague in 1897, reveals problems and expectations of Czech-American society that are typical of “ethnic literature.”

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Photographs / Images: fig 61: cast of *Ukradený kontysíc*, produced in Wilber in 1931; fig 62: page from an 1885 volume of the Omaha literary magazine *Květy Americké*; fig 63: Pavel Albieri (pen name of Jan Mucek); fig 64: cover from an undated edition of *Nevěsta za padesát dollarů*; fig 65: the gate to a Czech-American cemetery at Abie, Nebraska; fig 66: prominent freethinker and Omaha journalist F B Zdrůbek; fig 67: Tomáš Čapek
EVIDENCE of ASSIMILATION
in Pavel Albieri's
NEVĚSTA ZA PADESÁT DOLLARŮ
(BRIDE FOR FIFTY DOLLARS)

By Clinton Machann

Czech-American fiction has the potential of eliciting serious and rewarding criticism even though no major critical study of this large body of literature has ever been published. Esther Jefábek's bibliography of Czechs and Slovaks in North America (1976) lists over 700 volumes of Czech-American fiction, poetry, and drama. Slightly more than ten percent of the nearly 6,000 Czech-American publications she lists, excluding biography, can be classified as literature. 

Short fiction and poetry are the most popular genres, followed by the novel and the drama (fig. 61). Although in the recent past Czech immigrant writers living in the United States and Canada have published important fiction, its primary focus was on European, rather than American, concerns. The high point of literary production by Czech-American writers on Czech-American subjects, written mostly in the Czech language, came in the four decades from 1880 to 1920 (fig. 62).

Among notable Czech-American writers of fiction were John Havlasa (pen name of Jan Klenanda, Jr.), J. R. Psenka, Otakar Charvat, and Hugo Chotek; but perhaps the most prolific and popular writer of this time was Pavel Albieri (1861-1901) (pen name of Jan Mucek) (fig. 63). He published in the Czech language at least fifteen volumes of fiction, including both novels and collections of povídky, or short stories. Most of his works were published in Prague, but a few were published in Chicago and New York, and one even in Stockholm. Place of publication as well as subject matter attests that he wrote for audiences on both sides of the Atlantic.

Albieri lived in the United States for...
ten years and died in a train accident in Texas. He was typical of Czech-American writers of this period in having worked through much of his career as a journalist. At that time, the Czech-American press was thriving. Since the weekly Slowan amerikánský (American Slav) had begun publication in Racine, Wisconsin, on January 1, 1860, over 300 Czech-language periodicals had come into circulation in the United States by 1910.4

Although many of them were short-lived, others were quite successful. In

Amerikán, which functioned as a national newspaper for Czech-Americans, had a circulation of about 5,000 in the 1880s and by 1913 had attained a circulation of over 40,000, a figure which remained fairly steady until the early 1940s. Subsequently, the circulation declined and stood at just under 15,000 when both Svornost and Amerikán ceased publication in 1957.

Once a year, Geringer published the Amerikán národní kalendář (literally, “The American: a National Almanac”), which, in addition to advertisements, travelogues, recipes, cartoons, and information on current events, published the fiction of over eighty writers during its relatively long life. Naturally the Amerikán national almanacs are a rich source of information concerning Czech culture as it existed in late nineteenth and early and middle twentieth-century America. Albieri contributed to them eight stories of novella length and two short stories during the years 1891 to 1903.

Albieri, then, was at the center of Czech-American literary and cultural activity in the turn of the century Chicago milieu, with strong ties to the Czech homeland. This article aims to discuss briefly one of the novels in order to illustrate his work in the context of American “ethnic literature,” with particular attention to the central theme of assimilation.

Nevěsta za padesát dollarů (Bride for Fifty Dollars) was published in Prague by J. R. Vilímek in 1897 (fig. 64). It is the story of Mary, a twenty-year-old woman who arrives in Chicago at the end of a long voyage which has brought her from her native Bohemian village. As the story begins, a Chicago grocer named Picha is driving his buggy to the train station, carrying his friend Vávrovský to meet Mary. Vávrovský, a thirty-year-old, recent immigrant employed at the stockyard of Armour and Company, is Mary’s fiancé. He had courted her in a routine, formal sort of way back home, and later from Chicago he had paid fifty dollars for her passage to America.

It becomes apparent, even in the description of their drive to the train station, that Picha, a middle-aged man who has lived in Chicago for twelve years and considers himself an expert on the subject of America, is a domineering personality. Vávrovský, a quiet, unassuming sort of man, allows Picha to guide his attitudes and direct his plans. For example, he insists that Vávrovský plan to take his future bride to the annual Czech-American picnic at the National Cemetery on the next Sunday (fig. 65). When the two men meet Mary at the station, Picha does all the talking, despite Vávrovský’s special relationship with the woman. On the drive back to “Pízeň,” the Czech quarter on the West Side of Chicago where Picha and his neighbor reside, Vávrovský hardly says a word to her.

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The three are joined by a young tailor named Navratil, a fellow Czech immigrant who has accompanied Mary on the trans-Atlantic voyage. Vávrošky feels intimidated by the presence of Navratil—as it turns out, for a good reason. Mary, who has lived a relatively poor, deprived, and sheltered life, with Vávrošky as her only suitor, has become infatuated with her travelling companion, whom she has found to be witty, attentive, polite, and handsome. As we later discover, Navratil has actually proposed to her during the journey, and she is tempted to accept him, despite the commitment to Vávrošky.

Tension within the group builds as they join Mrs. Pícha at the Pícha home, behind Pícha's grocery, for a typical "American" meal. Navratil leaves afterwards to find the address of a friend with whom he has been corresponding, but because he has left his trunk at Pícha's store, he has an excellent excuse for returning later that evening. He does return with his friend Čermák, an immigrant who has established himself as a tailor in Chicago and who has already succeeded in finding his newly-arrived friend a good job.

Clearly Mary is favorably impressed with Navratil's seemingly instant success in the city, while her further impressions of Vávrošky—his inordinate shyness and apparent lack of intelligence, the unpleasant nature of his work at the stockyards—all are negative. She is as pleased as Pícha and Vávrošky are disgusted when Navratil promises to visit them the next day. As they retire for the night, Mary is left to her tortured thoughts. She is more than ever enamored with Navratil; but, of course, recognizes her moral commitment and financial debt to Vávrošky.

Pícha, sensing Mary's dilemma, develops a rather devious plan to thwart Navratil and goads the somewhat reluctant Vávrošky into going along with it. The next day, he takes Vávrošky and Mary on a "sightseeing" buggy ride to important Chicago landmarks. At the city hall, Pícha, with his rudimentary knowledge of English, is able to obtain a marriage license for the couple without Mary's knowledge. Afterwards, he guides them to the publishing house of August Geringer, home of the newspapers Svornost and Amerikán, where one of the editors, Mr. Zdříbek, has the legal authority to
Fig. 66. Prominent freethinker and Omaha journalist, F.B. Zdrůbek. (NSHS C998-177)

perform the marriage ceremony and is much used by Czech-American freethinkers, who do not opt for a religious ceremony (fig. 66). Picha believes that Mary, when she finally realizes what is happening, will resign herself to the inevitable.

Such is not to be the case. When Mary somewhat belatedly comes to understand that she is to marry Vávrovský right then and there, she becomes furious and declares that she will never marry the man, to the astonishment of Zdrůbek and the assembled Svornost editors and the anger of Picha and Vávrovský, who storm out of the office, leaving Mary stranded. The journalists, including the publisher Geringer himself, befriend her; and her dilemma is solved when a young journalist named Čáli Šrámek offers to take her home to stay with his widowed mother. Šrámek and his mother are kind to her, and she, in turn, is favorably impressed with their home and mode of living, which is far more dignified, comfortable, and sensible than that of the Píchas. Her mostly unfavorable impression of America and Americans begins to change.

In the meantime, Navrátil is being initiated into the American way of life by his friend and mentor Čermák. Čermák’s advice includes a recommendation to avoid rushing into a confining relationship with Mary, to look over some of the other young women (Czech-American, of course) around town. Navrátil is swayed by his friend’s arguments.

The climax of the novel comes with the events of the next day at the National Cemetery picnic. Šrámek and his mother assure Mary that she should go to this important ethnic event with them. While there, Mary observes a drunken brawl in which Picha, Vávrovský, and Navrátil are involved. The sight of Navrátil’s dissipated state is enough to dispel her attraction to him.

The novel ends that evening with Šrámek’s decision—announced to his mother—to propose to Mary. He finds everything about her—her looks, her manners, her industry (shown in helping around the house)—to offer a favorable contrast to the lazy, spoiled, and, by implication, “Americanized” girls in his neighborhood. (In advising Vávrovský, Picha had pointed out that young American women by no means are willing to stay at home and work like their Czech counterparts—instead, they expect to be treated like “princesses.”) Mother agrees and declares that she is ready to send fifty dollars to the man who has paid for Mary’s passage. Mary is, of course, enthralled by the young Šrámek, who is handsome, kind, and industrious. Along with the mother, they are to move to Milwaukee, where the Šrámek family had previously lived. A great deal has happened to
Mary in the three days since she has arrived, but, as the narrator assures us, "Zde v Americi jde všecko rychle!" — "Everything goes quickly in America!" We are told that the young couple never regretted their decision. It is difficult to evaluate as literature a novel such as *Nevěsta za padesát dollarů*. Certainly Albieri is no Henry James in tracing the subtleties of Mary's evolving consciousness of her new environment and her new identity. Also, there are structural problems in that Albieri's long passages which describe late nineteenth-century Chicago as Picha drives his passengers throughout the city are not always balanced or integrated with the psychological states of his characters. On the other hand, taken on its own terms as "a Czech-American picture of Chicago" ("Českoamerický obrázek z Chicago"), as it is described on the title page, it is a fascinating work.

This novel, published in Prague, apparently was intended primarily for a Czech audience which was eager to read about life among the emigrant community in faraway, exotic America. It is rich in references to prominent Czech-Americans of the day and Czech-American landmarks in Chicago, unique social customs, and linguistic borrowings from English.

As mentioned earlier, August Geringer, at whose publishing house *Nevěsta za padesát dollarů*, before coming back once again to America. Albieri also surely knew fellow editor F. B. Zdrůbek, a prolific and fiery freethinking writer, translator, and one-time liberal Protestant clergyman, who like Albieri and other Czech-American writers and journalists in the nineteenth century, had an itinerant career, drifting as far south as Texas. It is possible that an absurd scene similar to the fictional one actually occurred at the Geringer publishing house and suggested the novel to Albieri.

Although Albieri bases his writing style on standard, literary Czech, he fills his narrative with linguistic borrowings from English—often American English slang—to an extent that must have amazed his original Czech readers. The novel begins with the following description of Picha driving his "express" wagon or van, which is hitched to a mare named Katy:

"Kidapi!" pobídl "grór" z Osmnácté "pleš" na "Westsajdu" v "Čigágu," "mistr" Picha, svou hube­noou "Kejedy," zapřázenou do "ekspresu..."

After the first long sentence, the narrator pauses to offer definitions and explanations "so that no one will be shocked by such strange foreign words." For example, he declares that "Kejedy" is "the name of at least every second mare in America." The reader gets several paragraphs more of such description and explanation in this initial section.

Czech-American borrowings from English, spelled phonetically, recur throughout the novel. We recall the name of Čádi (Charlie) Šrámek, the eventual mate for Mary. No doubt Americanisms, from the Czech point of view, were an integral part of the American "local color" which made the novel of interest to European Czech readers. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this work, considered today as an American "immigrant novel," is its explicit and implicit assumptions about America and the "immigrant experience," making it easy to draw parallels between novels such as Albieri's and the immigrant belles lettres more fully studied, like Jewish-American and Italian-American literature.

Implied attitudes toward America are ambivalent. Picha, who celebrates America as the promised land, is seen as something of a buffoon. In his description of Chicago, the narrator emphasizes the squalor, the poverty, the shoddy architecture, the dirty river,
the uncouth habits of the people, and so forth. He satirizes Picha's aping of American customs. A good deal of the novel's humor comes from this source. For example, Picha feels he must offer "ostrous" (oyster soup), an American delicacy, to his immigrant guests, although no one really enjoys the concoction (which to them resembles a soup made of chicken livers and hearts): the beefsteak that follows is much too raw.

In various ways, Albieri shows Czech-Americans to have been corrupted by assimilation. Picha has become too Americanized in his habits; Vávrošký, the son of a miller, has been degraded in his work; Navrátil follows his friend Čermák into an unattractive life of fast and loose living. Conversely, Cálí Šrámek values Mary's "Old Country" qualities, and considers her ignorance of the English language to be no disadvantage. After all, his mother, after living many years in America, has not found it necessary to learn English. Šrámek's close relationship with his mother is traditionally Czech, as is the central "bartered bride" motif of the novel itself.

On the other hand, Šrámek—the suitor found worthy of Mary—is Americanized in many ways. His journalistic work is done mostly in English, which he speaks fluently. Despite his Old World ethical values, he is an ambitious and energetic young man, capable of thriving in the exciting, fast pace of American life. And if Mary, as a Czech-American wife, is expected to conserve "Czechness" in the household, she nevertheless has demonstrated an independent spirit (especially in resisting the "arranged marriage") that is clearly associated with American values.

Obviously, assimilation itself is not necessarily a negative process—its value depends on the specific attributes of American life which are embraced. The American political and economic systems are often idealized in Czech-American fiction, and to some extent the economic system is seen in a positive way in Albieri's novel. Some of the old European customs were quite dispensable. Still, there was an indispensable ethnic core to be preserved. Strong family and ethnic ties would be maintained in America. In novels such as Nevěsta za padesát dolarů we see a movement toward the reconciliation between Czech ethnicity and American identity, and even a tentative synthesis of the two.

Czech-American fiction at the turn of the century is best not appreciated as belles lettres, although Czech-American poetry of that time may be another matter. But, given the considerable historical value of Czech-American "popular fiction," it is surely a worthwhile—but hitherto neglected—subject for students and critics of American ethnic literature.

Notes


2 Jěfábek describes 7,609 publications, of which approximately 1,000 are written in Slovak and almost 500 in English or German. The majority of works of Czech-American literature are listed on pages 128-69.

3 See Jěfábek, items 2345-60, 3987-96.

4 See Tomáš Čapek's Padesát let českého tisku v Americe (Fifty Years of the Czech Press in America) (New York: Bank of Europe, 1911) as well as the ample chapters devoted to journalism and literature in his books The Czechs (Bohemians) in America (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1920) and Naše Amerika (Our America) (Prague: Nár. rady čsl., 1926).


6 See note 4.