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Article Title: Evidence of Assimilation in Pavel Albieri's *Nevěsta za padesát dolarů* (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 dolarů*; 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

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# 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 Jeřábek's bibliography of *Czechs and Slovaks in North America*

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

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.<sup>3</sup> 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



Fig.61. Produced entirely in Wilber, Nebraska, September 26, 1931, *Ukradený kontyśic (Stolen Countyseat)* commemorated the removal of Saline County government from Pleasant Hill to Wilber in 1878. The play was written by Josef Jaeger and directed by Frank Mstiboj Dejml. (NSHS K90-279)

(1976) lists over 700 volumes of Czech-American fiction, poetry, and drama.<sup>1</sup> Slightly more than ten percent of the nearly 6,000 Czech-American publications she lists, excluding biography, can be classified as literature.<sup>2</sup>

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



Fig.62. Page from an 1885 volume of the Omaha literary magazine *Květy Americké*, with the poem "The Coming of May" by Omaha's Josef Dinebier. (Courtesy Czech Heritage Collection, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Archives & Special Collections; NSHS C998.1-58)

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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 americký* (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.<sup>4</sup>

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



Fig. 63. Pavel Albieri, pen name of author Jan Mucek. (Courtesy Czech Heritage Collection, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Archives & Special Collections; NSHS C998.1-561)

1875, *Svornost* (Concord), the Czech-language daily with which Albieri was later associated, was founded in Chicago, an American city which was fast becoming the center of Czech-American journalism and culture. Along with *Svornost*, the publisher, August Geringer, issued the weekly *Amerikán*.

*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 dolarů* (Bride for Fifty Dollars) was published in Prague by J. R. Vilfmek 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 Pícha is driving his buggy to the train station, carrying his friend Vávroský to meet Mary. Vávroský, 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,

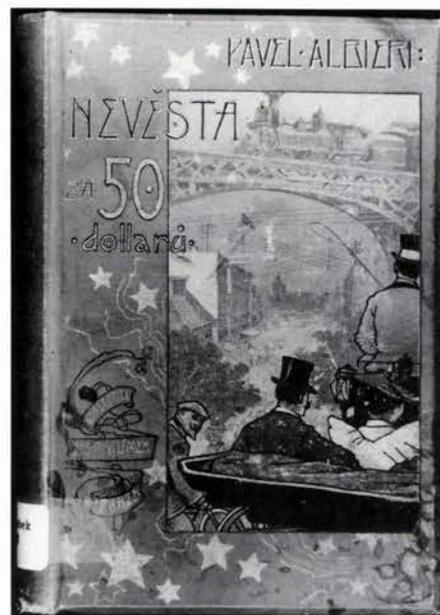


Fig. 64. Cover from an undated, early edition of the novel, *Nevěsta za padesát dolarů*, published in Prague. (Courtesy Czech Heritage Collection, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Archives & Special Collections; NSHS C998.1-579)

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 Pícha, 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. Vávroský, a quiet, unassuming sort of man, allows Pícha to guide his attitudes and direct his plans. For example, he insists that Vávroský 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, Pícha does all the talking, despite Vávroský's special relationship with the woman. On the drive back to "Plzeň," the Czech quarter on the West Side of Chicago where Pícha and his neighbor reside, Vávroský hardly says a word to her.

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

Tension within the group builds as they join Mrs. Pícha at the Pícha home, behind Pícha's grocery, for a typical "American" meal. Navrátil 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 Navrátil's seemingly instant success in the city, while her further impressions of Vávroský—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 Vávroský are disgusted when Navrátil 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 Navrátil; but, of course, recognizes her moral commitment and financial debt to Vávroský.

Pícha, sensing Mary's dilemma, develops a rather devious plan to thwart Navrátil and goads the somewhat reluctant Vávroský into going



Fig.65. National Cemeteries were established in freethought communities throughout Czech-America; the gate at Abie, Nebraska. (D. Murphy, NSHS H673.2-9008/4:1)

along with it. The next day, he takes Vávroský 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. Zdrůbek, 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).<sup>5</sup> Pícha 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 Vávroský 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 Pícha and Vávroský, 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 Pícha, Vávroský, 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 Vávroský, Pícha 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 Šrámeks 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 Americe 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 dolarů*. 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 Pícha 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 Chicaga*"), 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 the fateful marriage ceremony takes place in the novel, was an important Czech-American publisher, who published some of Albieri's stories. In fact, Albieri had edited Geringer's *Svornost* for a short time after arriving in America in 1889; he then returned to Prague, where he wrote *Nevěsta za padesát dolarů*, 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.



Fig.67. Tomáš Čapek. The portrait is from the front cover of *Květy Americké*, October 16, 1902. (Courtesy Czech Heritage Collection, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Archives & Special Collections; NSHS C998.1-81)

Other significant Chicago Czech landmarks appear in the book: the Sokol Hall, the immigrant community along Blue Island Avenue, and the National Cemetery where Albieri himself was to be buried in 1901 after a fatal train accident in Texas. The Czech-American banker and writer Tomáš Čapek, writing in the 1920s, has left an important historical record of this area,<sup>6</sup> and Albieri's fiction provides an interesting supplement (fig. 67). Even more important, Albieri's keen eye for social customs is apparent in his depiction of family meals, beer drinking rituals, and the picnic at the National Cemetery—the most important "ethnic event" at that time in Czech Chicago.

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 Pícha driving his "express" wagon or van, which is hitched to a mare named Katy:

"Kidap!" pobídl "grósr" z Osmnácté "plejs" na "Westsajdu" v "Čigágu," "mistr" Pícha, svou hubenou "Kejdy," zapřaženou 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 "Kejdy" "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 Čáli (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. Pícha, 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 Pícha's aping of American customs. A good deal of the novel's humor comes from this source. For example, Pícha feels he must offer "ojstrsup" (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. Pícha has become too Americanized in his habits; Vávroský, 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, Čáli 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

<sup>1</sup> Esther Jeřábek, *Czechs and Slovaks in North America: A Bibliography* (New York: Czechoslovak Society of Arts and Sciences in America; Chicago: Czechoslovak National Council of America, 1976).

<sup>2</sup> Jeřábek 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.

<sup>3</sup> See Jeřábek, items 2345-60, 3987-96.

<sup>4</sup> 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 Čechs (Bohemians) in America* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1920) and *Naše Amerika* (Our America) (Prague: Národní rada, 1926).

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion of Czech freethought in Chicago and elsewhere, see Karel Bicha, "Settling Accounts with an Old Adversary: The Decatholicization of Czech Immigrants in America," *Social History* 4 (Nov. 1972); Bruce Garver, "Czech-American Freethinkers on the Great Plains," in Frederick C. Luebke, ed., *Ethnicity on the Great Plains* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), 147-69;

and Joseph Svoboda's article "Czech-Americans: The Love of Liberty," in this issue of *Nebraska History*.

<sup>6</sup> See note 4.