

## Synopsis

The article describes the origins of ethnic literature study in the United States and discusses how it was received between the 1960s and the 1980s.

According to the perspectives of many critics, it is difficult to apply aesthetic value as the primary factor in evaluating literary works when it comes to Czech and Polish literature. The results are also unsatisfactory when one considers the output of Slovak-American study in the fields of literary criticism and literary history. A select few publications offer insightful analyses of the Slovak diaspora's literary output.

## Literature of Ethnic Origins

There was relatively little critical or analytical writing about the aesthetic value of American ethnic literature when it first emerged in the second half of the 19th century, and even less in the decades that followed.

Since the establishment of specific ethnic studies programs in the 1960s, when ethnic awareness began to grow in the academic community, the study of ethnic literature has advanced significantly (Newman, 1980, p. 3). Many academics began focusing on the study of ethnicity in literary works at that point. After the Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States was established in 1973, things got simpler. Following this, Katharine Newman became the first editor of the magazine MELUS (Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, 1974), which began publication. It was a crucial step toward expanding critical-theoretical

studies on ethnic literature, including works by Euro-American, Asian and Pacific-American, African-American, Latino-American, and Native Americans. Then, it is appropriate to point out that ethnic literature was and is frequently closely associated with a "college trained readership" (Ostendorf, 1983, p. 157). The "new ethnicities," a resurgence of ethnicity in the 1970s that led to third- and fourth-generation immigrants beginning to doubt their identity and look into their ancestry in southern and eastern European nations, played a significant impact. The originator of the concept of a new ethnicity, American Catholic philosopher Michael Novak, reflects the following factors that led to this shift:

It seems that people's ethnic identities endure because they are subconsciously and tacitly passed down from their early upbringing. It seems that some families pass on some of the values and expectations that the mother or father internalized from the long line of human tradition, while other families pass on the

values and expectations from the father in potentially different ways. Although none of us is a representative of every human civilization, we are all endowed with social meanings and values that we have not independently created. Studying such sociality in each of our unique compositions is not intended to incite "ethnic pride," as not everything we preserve is entirely praiseworthy. To gain self-knowledge is the main motivation (Novak, 1996, p. 382).

According to a study by Werner Sollors, the Greek word *ethnikos*, which means "gentile" or "heathen," is the source of the English terms *ethnic* and *ethnicity*. However, the Greek word *ethnos* was also used to characterize individuals who were viewed as "others," in addition to referring to humans in general. As a result, the word's original meaning changed and it started to be used to describe "non-Christian" individuals. Ethnicity in America has evolved to mean being seen as different, unconventional, or not entirely American. (1995, pages 219-20)

This may have contributed to the works telling immigrant stories being labeled as "regional" literature—writing meant to reflect the ideals and concerns of a group that feels marginalized and even endangered by the disdain of the greater community (Fiedler, 1964, p. 74). Irving Howe continues, stating that the majority of this writing was of little literary merit and that the original impulses underlying it hardened into mere defensive, parochial return, and restricted scene focus (1976, p. 585). What was József Gellén.

However, according to Berndt Ostendorf, the first immigrant writers had to fight for their place in literature. When we consider the conditions they had to meet, it was much more difficult. "The traditionalists wanted a literature loyal to their vision of the home country (...in theme and form), and the progressives did not want to be held back from Americanization by uncomfortable truths," he discovered two distinct and contradicting examples.

(1983, page 150). Numerous works were adapted into different literary forms, such as the city novel, the radical novel, the rural novel, the pastoral novel, and so forth (Boelhower, 1981, p. 3).<sup>1</sup> In a simplified sense, it appears that early ethnic writing has contributed more to sociology than to literary history. Slavic and other immigrant writers appear more likely to depict life in industrial America realistically than to use distinctive creative devices like form or language.

#### Czech and Polish literary works: appraisals and critiques

It is also difficult to apply aesthetic value as the primary factor in evaluating literary works in the Czech and Polish situations, given the views of many critics that have already been highlighted. For instance, Rudolf Sturm describes most Czech-American fiction as being of low quality (1978, p. 165) in his

paper on Czech literature in America in the Proceedings of Comparative Literature Symposium at Texas Tech University, which was published in two parts under the title *Ethnic Literatures Since 1776: The Many Voices of America* in 1978. As a result, he concentrates on the poetry. Conversely, Hugo Chotek's novels *Galveston* and *Suffering* "have special value as one measure of the shifting dynamics of American society," according to a Clinton Machann essay on the author (Machann, 1979, p. 39). Hugo Chotek "translated and wrote a large number of short stories, but most of them are plagiarisms," according to Jan Habenicht's 1901 *History of Czechs in America* (1996, p. 517). Habenicht criticizes the creations of In general, Czech immigrants wrote a lot of novels, short stories, and other works that were well-received by readers. However, most of these works were actually compositions of plagiarism of old English or German stories, novels, etc., lacking characteristics of the Czech spirit, even though they were considered original works. These novels undoubtedly lack any literary merit (1996, p. 507).

However, Habenicht notes that "we would like to avoid forgetting those who did their best to bring some Czech reading material to the people and perhaps to express their emotions" (1996, p. 507) in the *Outline of Czech American Literature*, which he devotes nearly 30 pages.

When analyzing the poetry and prose of Polish immigrants, a very similar issue comes to light. In a 1985 piece, Franciszek Lyra makes the claim that Polish-American poetry "stopped at the 'rising genius' level." Furthermore, he asserts that the novels have not progressed past the stage of artistic infancy and that the output of three generations of poets has not transformed into excellence (Lyra, 1985, p. 63-64).

However, a number of essays on Polish-American women writers have appeared in the 1997 book *Something of My Very Own to Say*, which was compiled by Polish-American literary scholar Thomas Gladsky. His uplifting book *Princes, Peasants, and Other Polish Selves* was published in 1992, represented a turning point in the literary representation of Polish Americans. In his book, Gladsky focuses on prose writers who are seen as belonging to the Polish diaspora, even though they may not acknowledge it—as the "problematic" Czeslaw Milosz serves as an example of (Gladsky, 1992, p. 286). It is clear that even while Czech and Polish academics critique their own work, they also write books and articles praising their countrymen. By doing this, they invoke the resuscitation of the human spirit, which had inspired those writers to save their memories.

#### Slovakians in the New Globe

In the final ten years of the 1800s, Slovaks immigrated to the United States of America along with other Slavic people, including Poles, Croatians, Ukrainians, Russians, and others. Slovaks were

driven to travel to America by a number of circumstances in various ways. A small number of Slovaks left the

19th century as a result of the Magyarization process; nonetheless, economic factors accounted for the majority of the losses (Stolarik, 1981, 927). A large number of them died in the cholera and hunger that struck in 1873, leaving fractured houses without male breadwinners (ýulen, 2007, p. 29). The soil's fertility determined the living standards of the majority of people, who were illiterate peasants. Planting conditions were extremely bad in areas of the Austria-Hungarian Empire such as the Šariš, Zemplín, and Spiš districts where emigration rates were highest. Ján Puci provides us with an accurate depiction of these unfavorable circumstances. In the Slovak-populated areas of the country, he notes, "there was high unemployment since there was no or little industry" (2006, p. 120). Slovaks "owned no land at all, or if so, small patches only," according to Puci (ibid). Other uncommon causes of departure, as noted by Arne B. Mann, include "misbehavior towards authority, demonstrative defiance towards traders or representatives of the Hungarian aristocracy; well-known were also incidents of escape from military service"<sup>2</sup> (Mann, 1982, p. 163).

As a result of everything that was said above, they were forced to leave their houses and board a ship to travel to an unidentified nation abroad.

For them, America came to represent the ideal of a free and just existence, a promised land. Nonetheless, the Slovaks who were looking for work intended to make a living so they could provide a better life for their family and kids, not settle down there for eternity. Moreover, purchasing a little plot of land turned into a primary driving force behind returning home. The first immigrants were mostly males who traveled back and forth with money, agricultural tools, and tips on how to employ new technologies for construction projects or farming equipment (Mann, 1982, pp. 164-165).

Slovaks generally did not perceive much change or improvement in their home country, and young girls who were unable to find husbands left to migrate to the New World in the hopes of finding economic and marital stability.

Though not as simple as they had imagined, the circumstances in America were nonetheless better than those in Austria-Hungary. Slovaks and other emigrants settled in the northern states of America, such as Pennsylvania, New York, New Jersey, Ohio, and Illinois, because these areas were the closest to immigrants and offered plenty of employment opportunities. Men were generally employed as unskilled laborers for pitiful salaries in mines, steel mills, and sawmills. Deadly explosions in furnaces were not unusual, and working conditions were subpar. Slovaks also encountered a language challenge because most of them were

uneducated and spoke only Slovak. Consequently of this language barrier, Slovak immigrants were uneasy; as a result, they organized clubs or parishes to help people get over their sense of alienation (ýulen, 2007, p. 75). Moreover, they were subordinated to other countries, like the Irish, who knew English and had immigrated to America earlier. This led them to believe that the only thing that could improve their prospects of being accepted by other immigrants and native Americans, as well as the chances of their children, was education.

It should be acknowledged that the dreams and aspirations that the first generation of Slovak immigrants carried with them to America were not entirely realized. They faced the same issues that had plagued their home nation, such as disdain from previous immigrants, a lack of skills, inadequate language proficiency, and so forth.

In conclusion, the transition from fields to factories, to put it metaphorically, led to a consolidation of ties within the Slovak community. However, on the other hand, the descendants of the Slovak emigrants gradually distanced themselves from their heritage.

#### Studies of American Slovak literature

As of yet, Slovak-American-originated works have not received enough recognition. From the perspective of the Slovak literary milieu, the lack of interest in Slovak literature published in America is primarily due to the fact that the early immigrants were illiterate peasants who did not speak English; additionally, they did not express their experiences in literature; instead, they were depicted in novels. After attending American schools, second and third generations began writing in English; nevertheless, Slovakia has yet to translate and publish these works. An other explanation for the paucity of studies in this field is that in the former It was illegal in Czechoslovakia to distribute Slovak literature from capitalist America, and sometimes the experiences of immigrants were misconstrued and translated to benefit the socialist party in power.

The results are also unsatisfactory when one considers the output of American scholarship in the fields of literary criticism and literary history. There is very little literature available on Slovak writers and their ancestors. The works of our people are hardly even mentioned in European ethnic

Literary conferences held during the height of the quest for identity and "self-knowledge" in the 1970s and 1980s. It is extremely sad that there are interested researchers who methodically and actively explore this field among the Czechs, Slovenians, Hungarians, Ukrainians, Italians, and even Rusyns in the Proceedings of Comparative Literature Symposium at Texas Tech University, which was previously noted. R. Di Pietro and E. Ifkovic's 1983 book *Ethnic Perspectives in American Literature: Selected Essays on the European Contribution* is comparable. Greek,

Hungarian, and Polish contributions are found, but none in Slovene. The following provides some explanation for this unfattering situation: Association for Slovak Studies, established in 1977. Concise material from its Newsletter 3 (1977-2009) reveals that politics and history have long been important subjects for scholars who study Slovak issues in America. There aren't many dissertation theses<sup>4</sup> or articles about Slovaks in America; most discuss the situation in what was formerly Czechoslovakia and is now Slovakia. If any of them wrote books, it was because they were worried about immigration (Mark Stolarik), Slovak history in America in general (Konstantin Žulen), Joseph Stasko), or more frequently about the history and culture of a specific town or area, such as Yonkers (Daniel Tanzone), Cleveland (Jan Pankuch, Susi Megles, Martina Tybor, Mark Stolarik, Josef Barton, John Sabol), Florida (Andrew Hudak), etc. Books by Michael Novak, Robert Zecker, Alexander June Granatir, and others that discuss the Church and the religious practices of Slovak Catholics and Lutherans are also very important. Even while some authors have made announcements about their upcoming works, there aren't any academics who are interested in literary studies who also read the Newsletter and contribute to Slovakian publications published in the United States, such as Slovak Studies, Slovakia, Almanac-Kalendar, or Most.

However, two noteworthy studies that provide some insight into the subject have been published in MELUS. Marialina Salvatori's book *Women's Work in Novels of Immigrant Life* concentrates on a number of female characters, some of whom are found in Thomas Bell's best-known book, *Out of This Furnace*.

In addition, Patricia Ondek Lawrence's piece *The Garden in the Mill* illustrates the perspective of Slovak immigrants on labor. As the daughter of Slovak immigrants, she attempts to comprehend what work meant to her grandfather. When comparing it to other literary works, Ondek discovers that Slovak laborers are versatile and have a special thirst for work. *The Assimilation Experience of Five American White Ethnic Novelists of the Twentieth Century* (1990), a significant study by Betty Ann Burch, written as a dissertation that examines Bell's impact from an ethnic perspective. Burch highlights how ethnic characteristics including marginalization, identification, assimilation, and displacement are present in the book<sup>5</sup>.

Bell's book was actually the most studied work by a Slovak diaspora author. The concept of work and the characters' relationship to it is the most talked about aspect. Given the context, which mostly consists of the Braddock, Pennsylvania steel factory, we do not find it strange. Bell gives careful consideration to how Slovak immigrant workers are portrayed. Moreover, these assumptions are also foreshadowed by the "subtitle" that is put on the cover page of *A Novel of Immigrant Labor in America*. Interaction with various ethnic groups is facilitated by the mill's surroundings, although this frequently leads to a clash of cultures.

It is paradoxical that the Emmanuel S. Nelson-edited Greenwood Encyclopedia of Multiethnic American Literature (2005) contains the first attempt to define Slovak literature in America. Six Because there are a few entries on writers who claim Slovak background, such as Michael Novak, Mary Ann Malinchak Rishel, and Paul Wilkes, Slovak writing in America has been given its metaphorical voice. Gerald J. Sabo provided documentation for these entries. Additionally covered in Charles Sabatos' section on Slovak American Literature are Anton Bielik, Gustáv Maršall-Petrovský, Miloš K. Mlynarovič, Alvena Seckar, and Jozef Pauco. Although some of these authors' published works are written in Slovak, readers may not be familiar with them.

Since the field has few sources, it is helpful to look through bibliographies that offer a condensed viewpoint. In two Slovak Studies bibliography editions, Bibliographica: Slovak Bibliography Abroad 1945-1965 and Bibliographica 2: Slovak Bibliography Abroad 1966-1975, Michael Lacko offers such viewpoints. Both volumes are thorough and crucial for Slovak scholars around the globe. Regretfully, attempts to bring out a third edition have not been fruitful.

Czechs and Slovaks are also a key source in Compilation of North America by Esther Jerabek. She covers "Literature, Drama, Essays, Fiction, Poetry" in one chapter. Even if it can be challenging to distinguish between the Czech and Slovak entries at times, Jerabek's effort is definitely notable.<sup>7</sup>

In summary

The article's goal was to present the various perspectives that early ethnic literature had among reviewers between the 1960s and the 1980s. The majority of them acknowledge the inadequate artistic quality seen in the writings of immigrants. It is therefore not surprising that many writers prioritized a direct realism in their early creative contributions because of the desire to acknowledge one's ethnic and cultural identity, which is reinforced by the pursuit of "self-knowledge." The American academic community and general public are completely unaware of the works coming out of the Slovak diaspora. The cause is old research that hasn't been picked up again in over a century. Research between Slovak and American scholars ought to foster a more fruitful collaboration, paving the way for literary criticism and literary history to flourish.