

Testimony For Assimilation

The success of the German-Bohemians

Book review
by **Joseph E. Fallon**

Germans from Bohemia were among the seven million-plus Germans who migrated to the United States between 1850 and 1900. No book ever chronicled their story — until now.

In *German-Bohemians: The Quiet Immigrants* LaVern J. Rippley and Robert J. Paulson make effective use of maps, tables, and, most especially, photographs to explain who the German-Bohemians are, why they emigrated to the United States, how they have done economically and socially, and why this community has been repeatedly overlooked by American historians.

After first describing the history of Bohemia — which today is part of the Czech Republic — the authors tell the story of those Catholic Germans from the Bohemian Forest in the counties of Bischofsteinitz,

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Mies, and Tachau (an area commonly known as the Sudetenland).

The reason for their migration to the United States was economic. With the decline of serfdom, peasants acquired the right to subdivide their lands. As the authors note, the subdividing soon resulted in the creation of parcels too small to support a family farm — similar to the situation in Ireland at this same

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time. The only escape from poverty for these displaced farmers was emigration.

While the right to emigrate was not officially conceded by the Austrian Empire (to which Bohemia belonged) until 1867, German-Bohemians began migrating to the United States during the 1850s. They first settled in Wisconsin, and from there pushed westward into Brown County in southern Minnesota where they found what they were seeking — land. Their letters home telling of the rich farm land available in America caused a chain migration feeding on the hunger for land of others back in

Bohemia.

As farmers they settled into rural areas, but it was the city of New Ulm which became the heart of the German-Bohemian colony of Brown County. The town served as a county seat, it served as a central market for farm products, and it became the religious seat for the rural population as well as a home for the fraternal and social organizations which played a vital role in the life of the community.

New Ulm was originally founded in 1855 as a utopian community by the Turners, a liberal German organization also called the Turnverein. The Turners had been established during the Napoleonic era. Suppressed in Europe, it was revived in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1848 by a group of refugees. The Turners espoused a mixture of German nationalism, physical fitness, anti-clericalism, and socialism. In the New Ulm they planned for, property would be held in common and religion would be forbidden.

The experiment failed, not because of the general failure of socialism, but essentially because of demographics. Originally German-Bohemians farmed the surrounding land and restricted their contacts with the city. But land was limited and as more and more arrived, the newer immigrants were compelled to settle and work in New Ulm. They lived at first

between Minnesota Street and the river, a part of New Ulm which the authors note became known as "Goosetown" because of the Bohemian tradition of herding geese in the district. The Turners to this day retain the status of a social elite due to the greater wealth and superior education of those in their community, though they were supplanted as the city's majority population around 1905 by Catholic German-Bohemians.

Whether as farmers on the countryside or as workers in the city, the Catholic German-Bohemian immigrants were successful. As they prospered economically, they advanced socially. Two dramatic signs of social mobility were a move from "Goosetown" up to the city center of New Ulm, and the admittance of selected German-Bohemian Americans to membership in the Turners.

As the authors observe, New Ulm, the most German city in the Midwest, has many ironies. Created as a socialist utopia, it is a thriving capitalist city. Founded by anti-clerics, it is the home of devout Catholics. Even the very "German-ness" of New Ulm is due not to immigrants from Germany, but to the German-Bohemian immigrants.

The authors describe in detail the German-Bohemian culture of New Ulm and how it has been transmitted from generation to generation. It can be seen in the dances: waltzes as well as polkas, Landlers and Ring dances; in the customs relating to birth, marriage and death; in liturgical processions, seasonal festivals and folk art. The most famous of the latter is Kloppelei

or lace making. This culture can be heard in the music of the Heritage Singers and the ever popular polka bands. The identity of German-Bohemian-Americans is inseparable from this culture.

Why then, until now, have German-Bohemians been overlooked by history books? As the authors note, a fundamental reason was the immigrants' own confusion over self-identification. In responding to federal census forms, German-

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Bohemians identified their place of birth as either Germany, Austria, or Bohemia. Some even changed their "place of birth" at the next census — i.e., from Bohemia to Austria. This unfortunately led historians to believe that there was not a true German-Bohemian community.

The economic and social success of the German-Bohemian immigrants is typical of the outstanding success achieved by the German-American community at large. As Catholics, however, German-American-Bohemians are not representative of the majority of

German-Americans. The "National Survey on Religious Identification, 1989-90" conducted by the City University of New York disclosed that most German-Americans are Protestant. Just 25 percent are Catholic.

Ironically, in this reviewer's opinion, Catholic German-Bohemians have prospered in a country whose principles of government have been repeatedly condemned by the Catholic Church. Freedom of worship, assembly and press were condemned by various popes: Gregory XVI in his 1832 encyclical *Mirari vos*, Pius IX in his 1864 encyclical *Quanta Cura* and *Syllabus of Errors*, Leo XIII in his 1885 encyclical *Immortale Dei*.

The success achieved by Catholic German-Bohemians was due foremost to their commitment to that belief in individual responsibility and initiative labeled the "Protestant work ethic." These immigrants relied on themselves, their families, their friends, or their churches, not the state. But all this changed in 1965 when Congress rewrote U.S. immigration law.

For the first time in American history the Third World, not Europe, is the primary source of immigration. Since 1968, 82 percent of all legal immigration has come from those areas. This figure does not include Third World immigrants who entered under quotas for Europe and Canada. Of 2.7 million illegal aliens amnestied between 1989 and 1994 by the Immigration Reform and Control Act, 98 to 99 percent came from

the Third World.

The effect of this post-1965 immigration has been to alter radically the demographic composition of the United States and to do so without the consent of its citizenry. In 1790, European-Americans were 81 percent of the total population. By 1910, they had increased to 89 percent, and by 1940 to 90 percent. Under the impact of the 1965 immigration law, European-Americans had been reduced by 1990 to 75 percent of the population, and are projected to become a numerical minority within sixty years.

comparable to those of most Americans.

This is not true today. America is an industrialized country, but most immigrants come from Third World societies with pre-modern economic systems. Their skills and education levels are noticeably lower than those of native-born Americans and are declining. Unlike earlier European immigrants, if today's Third World immigrants become public charges, instead of being deported they are subsidized at the taxpayers' expense.

For example, as Professor George Borjas points out, dependency on welfare cash benefits is, on average, higher among immigrants than among native-born Americans (9 percent versus 7 percent). For specific immigrant groups, it is dramatically higher: Cambodians and Laotians — nearly 50 per-cent, Dominicans — 28 percent, Vietnamese — 26 percent, pre-Marielito Cubans — 15 percent, and Mexicans — 11 percent.¹

But three-quarters of the cost of welfare is “non-cash transfers” — Medicaid, Food Stamps, WIC, Housing Assistance, and the Student Lunch Program. Taking these programs into consideration, Dr. Borjas has shown that the overall welfare dependency rate of immigrants is actually 21 percent compared to only 14 percent for native born Americans.

According to Rice University economist Donald Huddle, the annual net cost of immigration to the American taxpayer is \$51

billion and rising. In 1993 alone, immigrants received an estimated \$1.4 billion more in Social Security benefits than they had paid into the system. Furthermore, in the decade between 1982 and 1992, the number of elderly immigrants who use Supplementary Security Income (SSI) increased by 400 percent.²

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Two unprecedented and fissiparous phenomena have already been recorded by the Census Bureau. A third of all immigrants who entered this country between 1980 and 1990 and became U.S. citizens do not speak English “very well,” though naturalization requires English proficiency. And 2.3 percent of native-born Americans do not speak English “very well.”

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries German-Bohemian and other European immigrants came from primarily agricultural societies to an America which was also an agricultural society. Their skills and levels of education were

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¹ Brimelow, Peter, *Alien Nation*, Random House, 1995, pp.287-288.

² Huddle, Donald, “The National Net Costs of Immigration, 1993” (Washington, D.C.: Carrying Capacity Network).