

# The Milwaukee Czechs

## Czech/Slovak history in Milwaukee

Czechs and Slovaks are often grouped together because they both once inhabited the nation of Czechoslovakia. However, today Czechs are people living in the Czech Republic (an area that was once part of the Austrian Empire) and Slovaks are people living in Slovakia (an area that was once part of the Kingdom of Hungary).

### *Sokol*

In 1868, T.J. Sokol Gymnastics Association was founded. Two years later the gymnastics club and another Czech organization, *Slovanska Lipa*, united under one title—Sokol. The organization still exists today under the name of Sokol Milwaukee, and sponsors a newsletter, scholarships, traditional dinners, picnics, a dance group, and gymnastic events.

*Meet one of your past Slovak families*



"Most of them were blue collar workers, bakers, factory workers, I would say a lot. Czechs are versatile and flexible; they can do many different things like my father who was a pastry maker and then came here and worked for a steel tool factory. When they came, many Czech were farmers, but they came to work in the city and worked in the sanitation department and city works jobs—anyplace that had an opening. Milwaukee was close to Chicago so there were a lot of industrial opportunities."

"We have churches here. I happen to go to the Slovak church. There were more Czech churches growing up, but they are Mexican now. We have a fraternal life association, which deals with not only insurance but it is also a way of keeping in touch with Czech and Bohemian people, ideas, and the teaching of our heritage. Milwaukee does not have a large Czech population. Chicago does. The cities had more to offer as far as work, like Milwaukee, and it was close to Chicago when my parents came in the early 1930s. All of my relatives came to Milwaukee, because there was already a family member here to live with."

*Quotes of Czech informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.*

## The Struhar family

Alois and Julia Struhar were Slovaks from Czechoslovakia. They had arrived in the United States in 1923—unfortunately just years before the onset of the American Great Depression. They moved into the King Park neighborhood on North 19th Street, where others from Czechoslovakia were settled. The National Slovak Western Union Hall (later American Sokol Hall) was located on Walnut Street, near 17th.

The couple began a family in 1925 when son Rudolph was born. According to the 1930 census, Alois was working as a concrete finisher for a private contractor. However, as the Great Depression loomed on, the Struhar family fared less well. Now with a second child (Luis), jobs were not as plentiful. By 1940, the family was renting a unit on North 7th Street for \$22 a month. Alois reported working only eight weeks in 1939 and earned \$120 for the entire year (the average for the time was over \$1,300). Although the family was only renting, the Struhars took in a lodger, Vincent Matuschka, who was also a recent immigrant from

Czechoslovakia. The roomer had a full-time job, which no doubt helped the Struhars.

Alois told the 1940 census taker that he was currently in a partnership with another person and was working on his own account. While records do not indicate what that enterprise was, sometime in the 1940s he opened up his own tavern—simply called Struhar's. It was at 1309 W. Walnut.

It is not known how long he remained in business. Later in life the Struhars moved to East Troy, Wisconsin.

## Czechs

Czechs began to settle in Milwaukee in the middle of the nineteenth century. They immigrated from areas that were then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, (today's Czech Republic). By World War One, their numbers in the city were between 7,000 to 8,000.

Isaac Neustadt, who arrived from Bohemia in 1844, was important to the city's early history. Neustadt was elected alderman of the Second Ward in 1852. He also was a founding member of the German-English Academy (now the University School of Milwaukee).

Vojta Naprstek, a Czech patriot, came to Milwaukee in 1848—the year Wisconsin became a state. He found a number of Czechs already living in the city. Six years after his arrival, the Czechs/Slovaks founded an ethnic organization, *Slovanska Lipa*.

In the early twentieth century, Edward Jan Stanek became a founding partner of the Stanek Tool & Die Company. Sausage-making drew a number of Czech immigrant meat cutters, including Frank Klement, whose sons followed in their father's footsteps to build the Klement Sausage Company.

Albeit in small numbers, the Czechs settled all over Milwaukee. While most worked as laborers, they were also very entrepreneurial, operating shops and taverns in the Capitol Heights, Marquette, Sherman Park, Midtown, King Park, Historic Mitchell, Forest Home Hill, Pigsville, Clayton Crest, Clarke Square, Harbor View, and Grover Heights neighborhoods.

Joseph C. Braunreiter, son of a Czech immigrant, operated a tavern in the Sherman Park area in the 1930s. See his profile below.

"In [the] extended family, we called everyone 'Aunt' and 'Uncle.' So, everyone who was an adult was an aunt and uncle. It was inappropriate for a child to call elders by their first names. I taught school, and there are children who call their parents by their first names. But not the Czech."

"We don't have organizations and clubs, like Polish and German groups. I think that Czech's are not too well organized, which is kind of a disadvantage for them. Then again, if you are really well organized maybe it's harder to break tradition. When I started school, I spoke no English. Because of this, I am very fluent in Czech, but this also created problems in school. There were no second language English teachers. I wasn't an unusual case. I was typical of the time."

"Most [Czechs] don't believe in doctors, but they believe in their herbal medicine. I think once I went to the doctor for tonsillitis, but I was eighteen before I went to the doctor."

*Quotes of Czech informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.*

## Joseph Braunreiter

Already an artisan brewer when he left his Czech homeland for the United States at age 25, the elder Joseph Braunreiter found his way to Milwaukee and took a job in a local brewery. Soon he met and married Anna Hornik, an immigrant from Germany. The couple settled in Wauwatosa and then on West 26th Street in Milwaukee where they began to raise a family. By 1930, the Braunreiters had purchased a home on Glendale Avenue and had 12 children.

One of his children was Joseph C. Braunreiter. Joseph C. followed his father's interest in the brewing industry. By the 1930s, he had opened a tavern at 3523 W. Burleigh in the Sherman Park area. Just up the street from the Braunreiter bar was another proprietor with a Czech connection. Joseph L. Vrstil, the butcher, was born in Czechoslovakia. He was an ethnic Bohemian.

Sherman Park had a relatively high population of Czechs at the time, as well as Germans. With a German mother and a Czech father, Joseph C. probably had little trouble drawing patrons to his bar. Now married to Leona Rose Lorenzen with at least one child, he also made his home in the Sherman Park neighborhood.

Joseph C. enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1943, after World War Two broke out. He rose to the rank of corporal and served in the Second Battalion, Twenty-Third Marines, Fourth Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force. He and Leona divorced in 1947, after his return from the service.

Joseph C. died in 1999.



"Well, we've had the Klement's Sausage Company. He [founder] came from an area that was very close [to the area] that my folks came from. There were manufacturing companies that were owned by Czechs. Wesley had a heat-treating business. Western Fraternal Life Association (an insurance program) had cultural ethnic activities and keeps Czech heritage strong. We used to have Czech restaurants on Bluemound, but they have all closed."

*Quotes of Czech informants from the 12-year Milwaukee ethnic study conducted by Urban Anthropology Inc.*

Today, many Czechs have moved to Milwaukee suburbs including Franklin and Cudahy.

### *Where to observe Czech/Slovak culture*

A great way to experience Czech/Slovak culture is to attend one of Sokol's annual gymnastics exhibitions. Here youth gymnasts demonstrate their physical fitness skills and compete for metals. Opening and closing ceremonies include ethnic anthems.

For dates and venues of exhibitions go to [www.sokolmilwaukee.org](http://www.sokolmilwaukee.org).





*Meet one of your current Czech neighbors*

### **Marilee Gloe Runge**

Like most Americans, Marilee Gloe Runge has a mixed ethnic background. She is approximately half Norwegian and half Czech. But unlike most Americans, Marilee takes pride in practicing both of her ethnic backgrounds. It starts with honoring her ancestors. “In



my immediate family, I carry on the food, home and table traditions of my elders. This begins with the time-honored holiday traditions of setting our dining table with the best linens, china, crystal and holiday centerpieces. Each generation of women and children in my family participated; it taught each of us the meaning contained within the china design or woven linen patterns; it taught us where to place the silverware, which told our guests what to expect; and each holiday had its associated colors which carried their own meaning. All this conveyed to our guests how much we valued their presence at our table.” Her

family customs also include the kinds of food served and seasonal variations. “A Norwegian tradition we always follow is on New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day. We eat several pieces of herring on crackers for good luck in the year to come.”

To say that Marilee Gloe Runge understands the value of ethnic traditions is a cosmic understatement. A professor of cultural anthropology at Wisconsin Lutheran College with a MA in Cultural Sustainability, she teaches courses in culture, anthropology, and food. And she lives what she teaches: “In the last few years, I have joined my sister as volunteers at Milwaukee’s International Folk Fest. For 76 years many different nationalities work weeks ahead of the November event preparing to share their ethnic identity through imported crafts, gifts, dance and food. The Czechoslovakian food booth is well-known for its entirely homemade pastries and baked goods. We devote intergenerational time together preparing the yeast bread loaves, the main dishes, and the decorative cookies like the famous ‘coffin cookies or kolaches. Volunteering at this event is such a wonderful experience to see every culture so proud of their own heritage, working to keep the traditions and languages alive for the next generation.”

Marilee has also worked beyond American soil by developing sustainability projects in Grenada. One example was an aquaponics training program.

In addition to her academic work, Marilee has a second career in the building/design field. She sees interior design as another component of culture: "Housing and how people live is a matter encompassing customs, climate, environmental materials, and culture." She has used her design skills in diverse contexts. "I was very blessed in my design work to have professionally developed community living spaces," she states. These have included a corporate museum, organic grocery, and designing and renovating churches.

Marilee's hobbies include avid reading, decorative painting, travel, and writing. She is married to a career Marine Corp veteran, who upon retirement became a special ed instructor. On evenings or weekends, hubby Chuck lives out his 20+ year passion as a baseball umpire and football ref. Marilee and Chuck have adult children living in four states and on one tropical island and seven grandchildren. "I feel my gift in life has been becoming a mother," she states, and then adds: "While getting those children out into the world as beautiful individuals that make a parent proud, I always found time to delve into volunteering along the way. Volunteering brings diversity, insight, friendships and humility to a person's soul. Being a member of a church community has graced my life."

## References

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