

## ANTONIN JURKA, A PIONEER CZECH SCHOOLMASTER IN MINNESOTA

For nearly thirty years one of the outstanding personalities among the St. Paul Czechs was Antonín Jurka. He was born in 1840 at Kralovic, Bohemia, and completed his education at the Polytechnic Institute of Prague. For two years following his graduation he held positions as assistant to government inspectors in Hungary and Croatia, but he was forced to give up this work because of ill health.

The fifties and early sixties were troubled years in Bohemia. Jurka's father, wishing to escape the Austrian yoke, urged his son to emigrate, hoping thus to induce his wife to take the same step later. Shortly afterward Jan A. Oliverius, a friend of Jurka's, offered him the editorship of a St. Louis publication, the *Pozor Americky*, or, in translation, the "American Observer." Seizing this opportunity, Jurka sailed from Bremen in December, 1865, and arrived in New York early in January.

In Chicago he stopped to visit with relatives and met Oliverius and the publisher of the *Pozor Americky*, Karel Alis, who were there attending meetings of the first Slavic congress in America. No arrangements were made for Jurka's immediate removal to St. Louis, however, and he stayed on in Chicago, living in the Czech colony there. His time was largely devoted to amateur theatricals, for which he had a great fondness. He was able meanwhile to eke out some sort of living with his music. Not until 1867 did he remove to St. Louis to assume the editorship of the *Pozor Americky*. His stay in the Missouri city was brief, however, for the paper was discontinued in a few months and he returned to Chicago, where for a time he edited the political section of the *Katolicky noviny*, or the "Catholic News."

When Jurka was thirty years of age, he received an offer to teach in the Czech school at New Prague, one of the earliest Czech settlements in Minnesota. Feeling that journalism was not his field, he left for Minnesota in September, 1870. His plans were changed in St. Paul, where he stopped to visit with friends and acquaintances. The St. Paul board of education, under the leadership of William S. Combs, had decided to employ a Czech teacher to instruct the increasing number of children of that nationality attending the Jefferson School.<sup>1</sup> They were recent arrivals from Bohemia, and because of their language handicap it was felt that they were not making satisfactory progress under an American teacher. The *Annual Report* of the St. Paul public schools for 1870 contains the following brief note: "It was thought necessary to employ a Bohemian to instruct a class of about twenty children, in the English language." Vaclav Jelinek, a St. Paul tailor, had been appointed to the position, but after four weeks of teaching he had decided for some reason to give it up. Jurka suggests that Jelinek found tailoring more remunerative.<sup>2</sup> At any rate, the tailor used his influence to have Jurka appointed in his place. There seems to have been little difficulty about making the change, and on October 2 Jurka began his work at a salary of \$450 for nine months. He is not mentioned in the *Report* of the public schools for 1870, but "W. Gelinek" is listed as a "Teacher of Bohemian Children."

Accounts of the work of the Bohemian department appearing in the *Reports* of the St. Paul schools are very brief; for example, that for 1871 is as follows: "Instruc-

<sup>1</sup> The United States census for 1870 gives the number of Czechs in Ramsey County, where St. Paul is located, as 316. By 1880 their number had increased to 707.

<sup>2</sup> Antonín Jurka, "Vzpomínky starého Čecha" ("Reminiscences of an old Czech"), in *Amerikán: národní kalendár, 1907*, 286. An incomplete file of this Czech-American almanac, which is published at Chicago, is owned by the Minnesota Historical Society.

tion to Bohemian children in a department by themselves, has been continued through the past year. An average attendance through the year has been 30. They are instructed in the English language." According to Jurka's own account, however, both English and Czech were used in the classroom. He speaks of his department as the only Czech day school in the United States supported at public expense. He admits concentrating on his own English and reading pedagogical periodicals in order to improve his work.<sup>3</sup>

Jurka's teaching methods were unique. Since he was a musician of no mean ability, he began and ended his school sessions with music. He wrote the words of Czech and English songs on the blackboard, had the pupils copy them, and then read them aloud for the benefit of the younger boys and girls. Next he played the tunes on his violin; then he sang them. The pupils learned by imitation and repetition. Jurka's principal, Frederick A. Fogg, was so pleased with the progress in music of the Czech department that he arranged to have Jurka take over music instruction in the other rooms of the building. Thereafter he spent twenty minutes a day in each of the other rooms, thus becoming, according to his own statement, the first music teacher in the public schools of St. Paul.

Another of Jurka's hobbies was physical training. Whenever his pupils seemed restless he stopped all other work for a few minutes of setting-up exercises. The privilege of acting as leader of these exercises under his direction was given as a reward for good work and behavior. This honor usually went to the girls. Declamations in both English and Czech were given on special occasions. Fogg took particular pride in the Czech department, for the pupils made good progress in all their work. He delighted in taking visitors to inspect the "model primary room," known for

<sup>3</sup>Public School System of the City of Saint Paul, *Annual Reports*, 1871, p. 3; Jurka, in *Amerikán*, 1907, 286.

its gymnastics, singing, good discipline, and harmonious spirit.<sup>4</sup>

The Czech department was first located in a small upstairs room, measuring ten by twelve feet, in the old Jefferson School, where work was carried on under trying conditions because of lack of space and ventilation; but after Easter, 1871, it removed to quarters in the new school building. There conditions were far more satisfactory, and Jurka speaks of the next five years as the happiest of his life.<sup>5</sup> It is evident that he regarded his pupils with real affection. Forty-four years later, when writing of his experiences, he was still able to mention thirty-six of them by name and to tell which of them later won distinction in particular fields. Although the Czech department in the Jefferson School was initiated with a small group, by 1872 the number had increased to sixty-two. Most of the children were in the "Alphabetical and Lower Primary grade."<sup>6</sup> Jurka's name appears as "teacher of Bohemian in the Jefferson school" in all the *Reports* of the St. Paul public schools from 1871 to 1875.

In 1876 politics played a part in ousting Jurka from his position. Because of the opposition of his fellow Czechs, a movement had been set afoot soon after his arrival in St. Paul to put a woman in his place. The superintendent of schools, Brewer Mattocks, took his part, however, and refused to dismiss him. Until 1876 there was an armed truce between the two factions. In the spring school election of that year William S. Combs, Republican candidate for renomination as president of the school board, was defeated by Ion F. A. Studdart, who immediately abolished the Bohemian department.

Jurka's German friends in St. Paul came to his rescue. Since he had acquired proficiency in the German language

<sup>4</sup> Jurka, in *Amerikán*, 1907, 286.

<sup>5</sup> Jurka, in *Amerikán*, 1907, 286.

<sup>6</sup> Public School System of the City of Saint Paul, *Annual Reports*, 1872, p. 4.

during his school days and had kept up his interest in things German, he was advised to take the German teachers' examination. He passed with honors and obtained a position as teacher of German in the schools of New Ulm in the fall of 1876. He had been there but three days when, in response to a telegram from Henry Meyerding, a St. Paul school board member, he returned to St. Paul as teacher of German. He held this position for twenty-one years, dividing his time between the Jefferson, Madison, Monroe, Adams, Humboldt, Franklin, Webster, and Sibley schools. German was an elective subject throughout the grades of the St. Paul schools. After the course was discontinued in the grade schools, Jurka taught German at the Humboldt and Cleveland high schools. His contacts with the Germans of St. Paul were pleasant. He belonged to their dramatic and musical societies and met them socially. He also taught music privately to individuals and groups. Among his pupils were Samuel A. Baldwin, later organist at the College of the City of New York, and Mrs. Maurice Auerbach, a daughter of Senator Henry M. Rice. In addition for twelve years Jurka taught English to foreigners attending a night school, and he thus made many valued friends.

In spite of the jealousies of his countrymen, Jurka continued to live among them and to take part in their activities. From early youth his chief hobby had been the drama. His interest and ability in this field were characteristic of his family, as his brother and sister were talented amateur actors. His daughter, Blanche Yurka, and a niece, Adele Novak, have made names for themselves on the professional stage. During his early years in Chicago, Jurka devoted most of his time to staging amateur plays produced by members of the Czech colony and to acting in them. He speaks of cultivating his love for the theater even during his student days at Pilsen, Rakovnik, and Prague. His reputation as an actor was such that he was

invited to act in Czech plays produced in widely scattered cities, and he spent many of his holidays acting in response to such invitations.<sup>7</sup> In St. Paul his theatrical activities were by no means curtailed. He coached Czech children in play after play. The quarters that were first used for this stage work on the ground floor of Frank Broma's residence were rather primitive; nevertheless Jurka's troupes gave creditable performances and he discovered several actresses of more than average ability.

After the Czech department in the public schools was discontinued Jurka remained loyal to his people and taught their children Bohemian without a salary for two years. His nationalistic activities included the editing of a children's weekly periodical, *Besidka detska*, or the "Children's Bower," which was established by Antonín Novak in Milwaukee in March, 1884. The paper included contributions written by children, and it seemed to fill a genuine need in giving them an opportunity to express themselves in the Czech language. During the two years of Jurka's editorship the sum of seventy-two dollars was collected in small amounts from the readers of the paper toward a fund used in Bohemia to provide Czech schools for Czech children. In March, 1886, a few months after Jurka severed his connections with the periodical, it was combined with *Domacnosti*, or the "Domestic Circle."<sup>8</sup>

A sketch of Jurka's manifold activities would be incomplete without some mention of his religious life. He was born and brought up in the Roman Catholic faith. When he was thirteen years of age he was sent to school in Pilsen, and later he went to Prague, where he lived with relatives who were small tradespeople. Most of their customers were Catholic priests, whose conversations often indicated that they were dissatisfied with their status.

<sup>7</sup> Jurka, "Pameti" ("Recollections"), in *Amerikán*, 1918, 275.

<sup>8</sup> Tomáš Capek, *Padesát let českého tisku v Americe*, 129 (New York, 1911).

Their remarks caused Jurka to have religious doubts, and he began to perform his religious duties perfunctorily. He speaks of Prague as very irreligious in comparison with the outlying districts, and he blames the city for his change of belief.<sup>9</sup> During the years after he left school, while residing in Croatia and Hungary, he met many Protestants and Jews, whose simple religious rites failed to impress him. His religious "emancipation" was completed after he immigrated to America. The members of the staff of the *Katolicky noviny* in Chicago were known to be free-thinkers. While still in Chicago, Jurka met Ladimir Klacel, the leader of the Czech freethinkers or liberals, as they preferred to be known in America. The younger man was profoundly influenced by Klacel, whose atheistic philosophy Jurka retained to the end of his life. In 1872 Jurka and five other Czechs organized the "Svobodny Obec St. Paulsky," a society devoted to the discussion and cultivation of liberalism.

In 1897 Jurka lost his position as teacher of German in the St. Paul schools. He attributed his misfortune to the jealousy of his countrymen, who schemed against him.<sup>10</sup> For two years more he continued to live among them. In 1899, after being elected national secretary of a Czech lodge, the "Cecho-Slovansky Podporujici Spolek," he removed to New York, where its headquarters were located. He held this position for a number of years, but resigned when the offices of the organization were removed to St. Louis.

New York remained Jurka's home until his death on June 13, 1917. His last years were marred by ill health and finally by total blindness, but he continued to the end his efforts on behalf of the American Czechs. Although often deprecating the jealousies and religious controversies that kept his countrymen from attaining harmony in

<sup>9</sup> Jurka, "Episodky" ("Episodes"), in *Amerikán*, 1915, 215.

<sup>10</sup> Jurka, in *Amerikán*, 1907, 288.

their mutual relations, he continued to be intensely nationalistic himself. An obituary article published in 1918 lauds him as a journalist, teacher, philanthropist, musician, and zealous nationalist; and remarks that with him "passed from Czech-American national life an outstanding personality."<sup>11</sup> The throng of New York Czechs present at his funeral bore witness to the esteem with which they regarded him.

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*"Amerikán, 1918, 274.*





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