

LETTERS TO BOHEMIA: *A Czech Settler* *Writes from Owatonna, 1856-1858*

Translated and Edited by Esther Jerabek

A PICTURE OF LIFE among Czech settlers in territorial Minnesota before the railroad arrived and the Civil War broke out is provided by a series of letters written in 1856–1858 by Josef Kaplan, a farmer living near Owatonna. Herewith translated and published in English for the first time, the letters probably were written to Kaplan's brother in Nabočany, near Chrudím, Bohemia. The latter, in turn, had them published in their original Czech in *Hospodářské noviny*,¹ an agricultural paper in Kodym, Bohemia, but there was no indication of the emigrant author's identity. (The addressee had signed himself merely "K—n.")

Recently the letters were reprinted in the appendix² to *Začiatky českej a slovenskej emigrácie do USA (Beginnings of Czech and Slovak Emigration to the U.S.A.)*, edited by Joseph Polišínský (Bratislava, Czechoslovakia, Slovenská Akadémie Vied, 1970). Included with this publication are a few comments about the Bohemian emigrants' practice of sending one of their number to a previously selected site in America to look over the situation before a group of families actually settled there.

The writer of the letters was identified through an autobiographical sketch he wrote for the 1911 volume of *Amerikán, národní kalendář*, almanac published in Chicago, in which he corroborated many of the details given in the letters and told about his later life as a prosperous farmer near Owatonna.

Josef Kaplan was born November 13, 1829, in Dlouhá Třebová, Bohemia, a village about fifty miles southwest of Prague in what is now Czechoslovakia. He was the second of ten children in a family of apparently moderate means. His father owned land in both Dlouhá Třebová and in Nabočany, where the

family moved in 1838. Kaplan went to the elementary school of Dlouhá Třebová and ended his formal education in 1843 with a year in a German school in Moravská Třebová, Bohemia.

After that he helped his father farm both his holdings, but the elder Kaplan died in 1848. A railroad then took over part of their farm, and the rest was divided between Josef and his eleven-year-old brother František. In 1853 an arsonist set a fire that destroyed all the family's buildings and crops. This apparently prompted Josef to sell the land and to emigrate to America. He first was married to Barbora Zedníková of Dlouhá Třebová in 1855 and left with her for the United States in May, 1856. Traveling by sailboat, they took six weeks to reach Quebec, Canada.

In his letters, Kaplan gives numerous details of his trip to Minnesota, with brief stops in Freeport, Illinois, and Iowa among compatriots. Although Owatonna was a new village when Josef and his group arrived, they were not the first Czechs to settle there. They had been preceded in the fall of 1855 by Antonín, Josef, and Rosalie Šimek, but all shared the hardships of a pioneer community. Owatonna had been founded in 1854, acquired its name and post office in 1855, and suffered through the depression of

¹ The letters appeared in vol. 10, nos. 3–6, p. 23–24, 30–31, 39–40, and 47–48.

² The appendix is on p. 298–306.

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1857 along with much of the rest of the country.³

More than once Kaplan indicates he expected a railroad to reach Owatonna in the foreseeable future, but his hopes were not realized until 1866, when the Minnesota Central and the Winona and St. Peter lines both built extensions to the Owatonna community.⁴ Even without a railroad, however, Kaplan prospered as a farmer and bought more and more land, some of which he gave to his sons. He and his first wife raised a family of ten children. She died in 1881, and about a year later he visited his brothers in Bohemia and on that occasion married Anna Rypková of his native village. They also had ten children. Kaplan lived until April 17, 1918. Many of his descendants still reside in the Owatonna area. For readability in the following letters, minor changes have been made in punctuation and paragraphing, and a few insertions have been included.

In the first letter to his brother, written from Freeport, Illinois, August 23, 1856, Kaplan describes the voyage across the ocean to Quebec and the trip from there to Freeport en route to Owatonna.

ON MAY 31, [1856], we left Hamburg, [Germany], on a boat named "Emma," and on the next day we sailed from Hamburg harbor. The ship was towed by another boat through the mouth of the Elbe River to the open sea, twenty-two miles from Hamburg. There were about 300 persons on the boat in all, not counting the ship's personnel and the captain. Everyone without exception must obey him.

Our crossing was smooth, without great storms. I can compare a storm at sea to a field of rye in bloom and wind playing in it: It makes such waves, only much larger, the trough being from ten to twenty yards lower than the crest of the wave (that's in a big storm), and the ship must sail through it, so it is now in a trough and immediately after on a crest. It's a most beautiful spectacle when one wave breaks against another and soars upward; if it strikes the ship and someone is on deck, it wets him thoroughly, as happened to me. Ocean water is bitter and salty; I washed with it several times—afterward the joints grow stiff as it penetrates the body.

Only a week later did seasickness appear on our ship. Everyone breakfasted in the morning. Then came



JOSEF KAPLAN

unwelcome nausea, and everyone was as though intoxicated. However, I was well, with no ill effects, at which the rest marveled, and I even more.

On June 14 we sailed past a Scottish island . . . inhabited by poor fishermen. They approached our ship with fish, for which we gave them biscuit.

On the 23rd we finally reached the open sea, for until then we could still see shores of dry land, although they appeared like dark stripes. Here we saw huge schools of fish playing; they were porpoises. On July 5 we spied icebergs, which a storm had probably blown here from the north polar sea. They were of various sizes up to that of a hut. Fog usually spread over the surface of the sea, so foghorns had to be blown in order that our ship, if meeting another, might not collide with it. However, on our whole voyage

³ For background on Owatonna, see Edgar Bruce Wesley, *Owatonna: The Social Development of a Minnesota Community* (Minneapolis, 1938) and *Owatonna Centennial, 1854-1954* (Owatonna, Photo News, Inc., 1954).

⁴ Minnesota Railroad and Warehouse Commission, *Index of the Common Carrier Railroads . . . in the State of Minnesota, 1862-1936*, p. 7, 11 (St. Paul, 1936).

from Hamburg to Quebec we met only three ships.

On the 11th we again saw many fish near the ship—also whales in the distance, spouting water . . . like rising columns of smoke. On July 16th we reached an island not far from Quebec, where we anchored for medical inspection. Those who were ill had to land on the island. After three days we sailed on. Finally—and you know, dear friends, the immigrant to America after endless hardship on the ocean longs exceedingly for sight of the promised land for which he has yearned for so long and thought of constantly, so to speak—finally we on board the ship heard the cry: “Land! land!” You can imagine how we felt. Even though one felt quite ill, at this he became at least half well.

On the 26th we landed in Quebec . . . a beautiful, large city. From there we sailed the St. Lawrence River by steamboat to Montreal, where we arrived on the 29th. It was a huge steamboat: 100 feet long, more than 20 wide, [and] three stories high, the third very magnificent. It carried 1,150 persons [and] sailed almost as fast as the steam engine on a railroad.

From Montreal we sailed on another, smaller steamboat to Kingston, [Ontario], thence by canal to Toronto. Here we took the train to Lake Huron. I must remind you that in America railroads ride much faster than at home. Cars are longer, swinging in the middle on springs.

When we went farther we saw a virgin forest burning. They cut it down partially to dry it, then set it on fire, so the whole forest is destroyed. How it burns! How you could use that wood! In short, it's a fascinating spectacle!

After that we took a steamboat and sailed on Lake Huron—that is still in Canada [and] belongs to the British empire. We reached the first United States territory at Mackinaw, [Michigan]. From there [we crossed] Lake Michigan; then we stopped in Milwaukee and continued by train to Chicago. Reaching that city, we met by chance our acquaintances, the brothers F——r. It was a happy coincidence for a man in a foreign country and especially here. In the inns here prices are established at a fixed rate: You pay one-quarter of a dollar for each meal and each lodging.

From Chicago we rode by train to Freeport. Here we stayed fourteen days with Czech settler acquaintances and bought equipment for farming: viz., wagons, oxen, cows; 2 wagons for \$160, 4 oxen for \$200, 2 cows for \$50 and many other things such as stoves, plows, saws, axes, hoes, etc.

The towns here are growing surprisingly, and also the railroads. The town of Freeport, for example, was founded fifteen years ago and is already large, with railroads leaving it in five directions. But there are

still no railroads going northwest. As we intend to go northwest to Minnesota, we have to ride from here by wagon. There are ten families of us preparing for the trip from Freeport to Minnesota over prairies and [through] forests. With this I end my letter till we reach our destination. Then I will write again. Goodbye!

Kaplan's first letter from Owatonna, written January 1, 1857, describes the last leg of his trip there, tells a little about the village's beginnings, and gives a brief description of Indians.

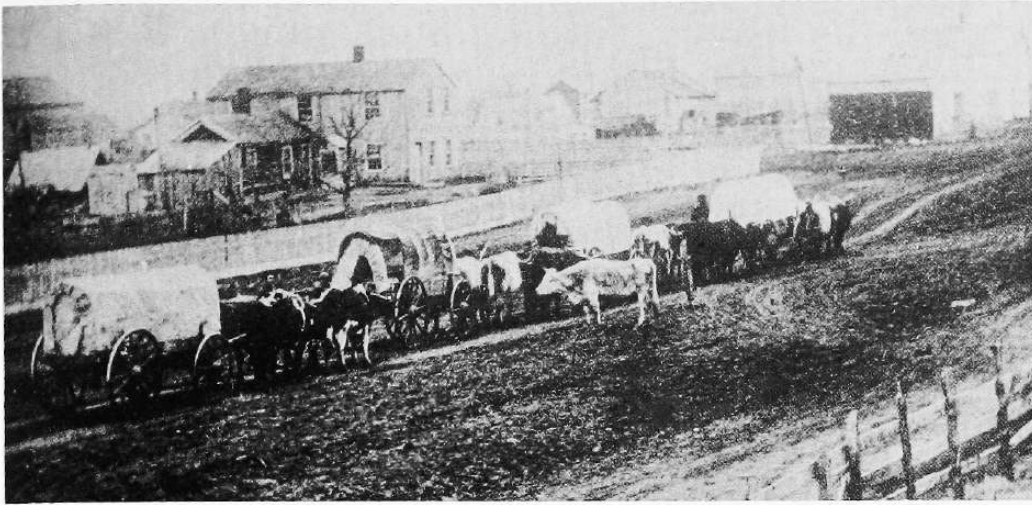
YOU ARE no doubt surprised, dear friends, at the address: Owatonna. That is our nearest town, about three-quarters of an hour's journey distant and founded two years ago.

In my previous letter I promised to tell you about our journey from Freeport to Minnesota across parts of Iowa and Wisconsin to the northwest. It was quite a hard trip, but there's no help for it. When you come to America “roasted birds do not fly into your mouth.” It was not travel of a kind you are accustomed to—over a well-kept highway. Quite the contrary.

Our daily routine was as follows: Every morning at eight o'clock we started out and rode till three or four o'clock in the afternoon. Then we made camp somewhere near a brook, let the stock out to pasture on grass which on the American prairies grows hip high, and then proceeded to cook our food thus: A couple of posts were pounded into the ground, [and] from them hung a kettle in which something was cooked with milk, for we had our cows along. They pasture on good grass and give plentiful milk. After that the cattle were tied to the wagons for the night, and we went to sleep in the wagons. And so the daily routine went until we reached our destination.

You are probably thinking about the discomfort and perhaps the danger incurred. As for the first, dear friends, even a millionaire must endure it here if he wants to travel where there are no railroads. As for the second, one shouldn't apprehend it too much; for a small company doesn't usually undertake such a journey, and we were ten families—i.e., three Czech and the rest German and French. Thus we made three or four miles a day. On the way we had to cross the great Mississippi; the river is a good half hour's journey wide. And so we finally reached the place I mentioned above. Here we selected a section of government land, which is an area an English mile square.

Government land is secured thus: The government buys a piece of land from the Indians and has it surveyed into townships. One such township comprises thirty-six English square miles. Each one is divided



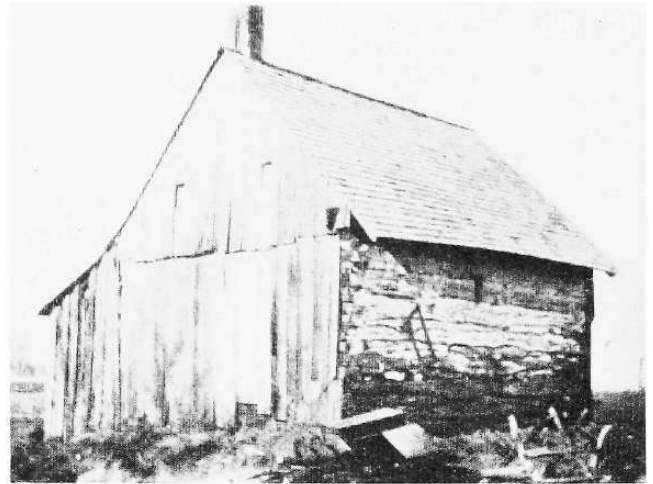
OWATONNA in 1864, a few years after Kaplan arrived.

into sections, and these again into quarters. Everyone at least twenty-one years old is allowed to buy one such quarter section. Each is 160 acres (an acre is 1,125 Austrian square fathoms), and thus each section consists of 640 acres.

The first task when a settler takes up a quarter section is to erect a building on it as quickly as possible, no matter how, and to make hay for the cattle. After building, he notifies the land office which quarter section he has taken and pays \$1.50 per acre. The office records it, and the owner gets a certificate. He pays no taxes for five years.

The towns here are still very small: If there are thirty to fifty wooden houses, that is all. Owatonna has fifty small homes. However, within a year they will surely grow to 100. There are two sawmills, one steam and the other water-powered, [and] about four inns, one with a beautiful dance hall. When anyone gives an entertainment, the host pays three to four dollars for music and food (depending on whether or not he provides it). However, he gets no liquor — they drink water and dance to it. There are also four stores and a pharmacy, [where] one can get brandy if he has a doctor's prescription that he needs it for medicinal purposes; otherwise he cannot get it. Consequently, we have not seen an intoxicated person yet. There is a post office, too, and they are talking about a railroad. In the spring they expect to build a mill and another sawmill. So it will be livelier here.

Quite often we see Indians, about whom you read various reports in Bohemia. They are people with tough constitutions, red streaks around the eyes, brown skin, [and] good dispositions. They can walk long distances, and their only work is hunting. Their clothing [consists of] white woolen breeches and a sort of outer cloak. [They carry] a long rifle over the shoulder. The poorer ones walk, and the more prosperous ride horses.



KAPLAN BUILT this log cabin for his family.

In winter they put up canvas tents in the woods, leaving an opening at the top for smoke; in the center they build a fire, around which they lie in a circle, feet toward the fire. Once a year they have a festival. Then they shoot game and boil it in a kettle, unsalted. When they eat, no one may throw away a bone, but after the feast they give them all to the dogs. After that they form in a circle and hop from one foot to the other to the accompaniment of various rattles and tinkles. They are good-humored, and when you read about battles between whites and Indians, it's the whites who are to blame.

Our winter work now is to cart wood for fences, for whatever land is plowed here is also fenced in. In the spring we will plow. For that we have a sturdy plow, all cast-iron except the plowshare. To it are harnessed up to four pair of oxen, [as] one must plow through good-sized roots. There is mostly hazel brush where there aren't woods. Those who are older settlers here do almost everything by machinery. For thresh-

ing, for instance, there is a machine at which four horses and eight people work, and they thresh from 100 to 150 bushels of grain daily (a bushel holds nearly as much as your bushel). For a mower there are also four horses and eight men, and they cut and bind ten acres per day.

There are few wild animals here.

At your request I asked if they also had potato rot here. But everyone answered that they knew nothing about it. Goodbye!

In his third letter, sent from Owatonna on November 1, 1857, Kaplan describes how houses were put up. He also discusses such subjects as haying and his mother-in-law's encounter with a rattlesnake.

THIS TOWN of ours is still built almost entirely of wood, although there are two houses of masonry. The building of a frame house that is, for example, thirty-eight feet long, twenty feet wide, and one story tall is accomplished thus: Posts are first pounded in each corner and some more between — also crosswise. These are encased with oak boards two inches thick; these boards are placed upright. Inside them are nailed basswood boards half an inch thick. These are planed and nailed crosswise, beginning at the bottom and overlapping one inch. At the same time numerous windows are cut through. Then the building is painted white, green, or some other color. The roof is first covered with boards, then with shingles. These are one and a half feet long, four to six inches wide, and made by special machinery. Here in America they do not consider durability — only looks.

Winters are as cold here as in Bohemia, with plenty of snow. However, this country is healthy. We also have a cemetery here, but so far only three dead are buried in it. You can drink water wherever you wish without fear of fever. In Iowa, however, as I have been informed by acquaintances from there, it is a different story. Dysentery has been prevalent there among the settlers and has killed a number of them.

However, I must tell you also about a mishap which my mother-in-law met last month. One day she was walking barefoot about 100 steps from the barn to get the cattle pasturing there, and she stepped on a rattlesnake which bit her. That was very dangerous — comparable to the bite of a mad dog. Without immediate treatment, death is certain within twenty-four hours. Her foot was greatly swollen; we treated it with fresh milk boiled with snakeroot, and that was applied to the foot until the doctor arrived. He first made her drunk with brandy, then rubbed the wound with some sort of oil. So she lay in bed for five weeks. Now she is more careful about wearing shoes. Also we all guard

against these snakes by wearing shoes of heavier leather to prevent a bite when one steps on them. She is now incensed at these snakes: Whenever she sees one she kills it. These are our only enemies here. This snake has sort of steel scales on its tail which he whirs and rattles so that it may be heard as far as thirty steps away. A close neighbor, a Czech, has a boy about seven years old who goes out purposely to kill them. We also have a good dog who knows how to destroy them. He seizes one quickly and shakes it until it flies to pieces.

We made large quantities of hay this year — at least 8,000 pounds. Here it takes little work: Grass is cut and left in rows, then turned into small cocks. A few days later it is hauled and made into stacks. Who would work as hard at it as they do in Bohemia? It also seems to us that it dries more quickly here. Yes, in places that grass is as tall as your rye after blooming, but it is mixed with shrubs — that is, wherever human hands have not yet worked it. Yet, if perchance someone were to cut forty acres of it for us, how we would thank him for it! We wouldn't have to swim in it up to the waist while plowing. However, there is help for that, too — burning. I would like you to see the show when a piece of open land (or prairie, as they call it here) is set afire. How the grass burns in the fall when it is dry! But it can also be fairly risky — for the settler's cabin. We have our buildings partly thatched, but not with straw. Where would we get straw? Our thatches are of grass and perhaps longer than those on your roofs.

The enemy in the field, as with your mice and sparrows, is also here. Instead of sparrows we have certain blackbirds; they fly in huge flocks, are very bold, and attack field crops. Worse than these, however, are animals called gophers which are the size of rats, with pouches near the mouth in which they carry their booty into holes. These cause a lot of damage.

For the first lucrative crop on newly plowed land, one sows corn here, buckwheat, beans, cabbage, and potatoes. Only the second year does one sow winter wheat. That is when the turf is rotted and the earth is loosened.

In his fourth letter, sent from Owatonna April 24, 1858, less than a month before Minnesota became a state, Kaplan deals with such topics as the coming of the railroad and the arrival of new families. Then he philosophizes on the importance of hard work for an immigrant to America.

THE RAILROAD, which I mentioned to you in a previous letter, will now be built. On April 15 of this year the matter was brought to a vote, and it passed

by a 1,500 majority. It is to be built and money for building it is to be borrowed on state credit. Here (in Owatonna) it will be built within a year and will pass right across our section. A railroad is the most important matter for today's settler. Wherever it goes, there in a short time a marked vitality appears; or, contrarily, where there is no railroad everything lies moribund. It is difficult to sell part of one's crop when one's farm is up to forty English miles away from a town. So here we have the firm expectation of being twice as well-to-do—that is, our lands will be worth that much more when the railroad comes through.

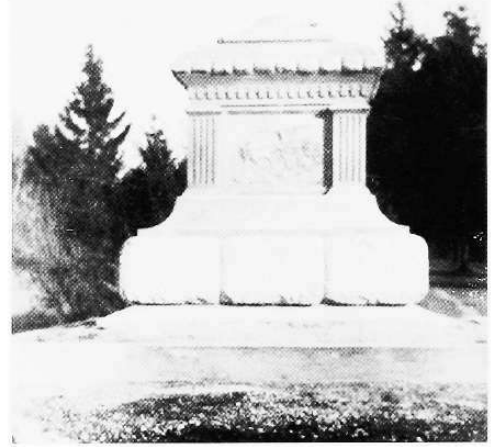
Many families are moving here from Wisconsin, but they are "greenhorns" (newly arrived Europeans are so called here). There they have no one to sell to except new, more recent, immigrants. Yet from here many of them also move to Missouri [where] they plant vineyards and prosper. Americans (born here) do not care for this; they do not relish the harder, more lucrative work. It is true there are teetotalers—that is, those who abjure intoxicating liquor—but still they drink considerably and commit all sorts of villainy. For this reason, as I just read in the *Minnesota Deutsche Zeitung*,⁵ the government has made a ruling that no grapevines should be planted in Missouri. . . .

We lack nothing now and are looking for a better future. But, my friends, to bring virgin soil, for ages untouched, to its first harvest gives one hard callouses, and much perspiration flows over one's brow before he can enjoy its produce. Indeed, it was a bitter moment when I arrived at this, my purchased corner, with

⁵ This was a German-language weekly newspaper published in St. Paul. Its first issue was November 19, 1855. See George S. Hage, *Newspapers on the Minnesota Frontier 1849-1860*, p. 140 (St. Paul, 1967).

THE PHOTOGRAPH of Kaplan's cabin is from *Owatonna Centennial, 1854-1954* [p. 7]. The other photographs are in the society's picture collection.

my whole family and there was nothing here but grass, shrubbery, and woods burned by Indians. That was our property, and that was the first calamity. As for the women, they have it worse—almost unbearable—in such a situation. They like their comforts and enjoy gossiping at coffee, but when they must bear any misfortune here, they do it without lamentation. And so we also endured before we put up our buildings. We acknowledge, and you also must acknowledge,



THIS MONUMENT in the Czech cemetery at Owatonna honors early Czech settlers.

that in these circumstances the immigrant who lacks enough industrious hands, a firm will, and intrepid determination will come to no good end. We have such examples aplenty; so it is and not otherwise. Besides, it could never happen that everyone who comes here will be fortunate. Do you ask why? Because, well, is everyone in Bohemia lucky? It is that way everywhere. There is much truth in the saying that whoever immigrates to America makes his lot worse, for he sacrifices himself that his descendants may fare better. For these most of all, as you know, we immigrated here.



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