

John Palka, *My Slovakia, My Family: One Family's Role in the Birth of a Nation*. Minneapolis: Kirk House Publishers, 2012. Paper, 424 pages, with illustrations, appendix, index. \$24.95. ISBN 978-1-933794-55-6.

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This book by a Slovak-American immigrant about his ancestors' homeland is remarkably different from others. It reflects life among the Slovak intelligentsia, rather than peasant roots. Both sides of John Palka's family not only belonged to the intelligentsia, but also played major roles in the literary, religious, economic, and political development of the Slovak nation and its people.

Palka's book is divided into three parts with a substantial Appendix. Part I recounts his family's two escapes to America, first fleeing Fascism and then Communism. Part II intertwines his family's history with that of Slovakia. Part III resembles a diary, reporting Palka's contemporary connections with his Slovak heritage. His Appendix contains historical information, maps, genealogical charts, a Slovak language pronunciation guide, and thirty pages of color plates—each one keyed to the text. The research is solid and well-documented.

In a way, John Palka is the unintentional chronicler of his forefathers. After retiring in 2002 as a distinguished Professor of Biology at the University of Washington, he benefitted from the Slovak government's belated recognition of grandfather Milan Hodža's contributions as Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia from 1935 to 1938. The Slovak government invited John as an honored guest to the reburial of his grandfather's remains from Chicago's Bohemian National Cemetery to the Slovak National Cemetery in Martin. Inspired by that experience, unintentional benefactor became intentional historian and author of this absorbing volume.

Part I begins in 1935-1938 Prague as Hitler exploited the Western powers' appeasement policies and dismembered and annexed the Czech part of Czechoslovakia. Palka recounts Prime Minister Hodža's helplessness as allies deserted his country. Drawing from family sources, Palka documents the family trauma that forced them to flee their homeland. They fled at midnight by train, despite his mother's advanced pregnancy. John was born in Paris in 1939, only two weeks after they escaped from Prague. After eluding the SS for nearly two years in occupied France, Palka's family made its way to neutral Portugal in 1941, using fake passports. In Lisbon, they managed to board a Pan Am Clipper making one of its last flights from warring Europe to New York.

Like the many thousands of Slovak immigrants before them, the Palkas found it hard to adjust to America. Unlike most other Slovaks, they were well-educated and upper class. In Chicago, his multilingual father (Slovak, French, German, Hungarian) and former business owner in the Slovak leather industry was not employable in the American leather industry because he did not speak English. His work on the assembly line of a Slovak-owned electrical parts manufacturing plant produced little income. As Palka tells it, the arrival of his famous grandfather later in 1941 complicated rather than improved the family situation.

Not only was Milan Hodža ill before he arrived, but Czechoslovakia's former Prime Minister clashed with its former President, Edvard Beneš. Palka said that they divided over three issues: Hodža's insistence on Slovak autonomy within Czechoslovakia, his opposition to Soviet influence in his country, and his support for a federation of Central Europe. Despite speaking often and widely to émigré groups, Hodža failed to win them over before dying in 1944. Obituaries in major world newspapers praised his life and his funeral in Chicago was widely attended.

Palka says his family's hopes soared with the end of World War II. By 1946 the family was back in Slovakia and optimistic. Two years later, Communists took over the government, and soon the family again fled Czechoslovakia, this time from Bratislava. Palka was old enough to remember their escape. He described crawling under barbed wire, dodging searchlights, and dashing across a field to freedom in Austria. By the end of the year, the Palkas again found themselves on their way to America, this time to New York.

By Palka's account, the family fared better in New York than in Chicago. His mother became a translator for Radio Free Europe, and Johnny quickly learned English. He obtained a scholarship at a small private school in Connecticut before entering Swarthmore College, where he met his future wife, Yvonne. Both went to India to do research, married there, and subsequently earned PhDs in neurosciences at UCLA. They eventually landed in Seattle—John at the University of Washington and Yvonne at Antioch University. During that time, Palka had little contact with Slovaks (other than his parents) except for a trip to Czechoslovakia in 1976, where he re-experienced communist oppression. His last chapter in Part I tells how Palka eventually learned of his father's clandestine activities against the Nazis in Slovakia before fleeing in 1941 to join his family in Paris.

Part II is primarily about Slovakia's history but also about the roles played by his maternal and paternal ancestors in that history. The first chapters outline his genealogical connections to the Hodžas and Palkas. Whereas most Slovak immigrants' ancestors were peasants, Palka's were also pastors and craftsmen in an emerging middle class. In three chapters, Palka links the personal lives of two special ancestors with the rise of Slovak nationalism in the mid-19th century. Through his successful leatherworks business, Palka's great-great grand uncle, Ondrej Pálka (1800-1877), financed the pastoral and cultural activities of Michal Miloslav Hodža (1811-1870), a great grand uncle who—along with Ľudovít Štúr and Josef Miloslav Hurban—helped codify Slovak as a literary language.

Michal Miloslav Hodža also became famous for his revolutionary activities in the 1848 uprising against Magyar rule. Although the Austrian emperor pardoned him for his political activities, Slovak *magyarones*—those who curried favor with the Hungarian government—stripped Hodža of his salary, his position, and drove him to the borderland. Long after his death, the Slovak government retrieved his remains for an honored burial in Liptovský Mikuláš, where he served as pastor. Ironically, one speaker at his funeral was his nephew, Milan Hodža—who later would also die in exile and also be returned to Slovakia for reburial with honor.

Palka's chapters about other distant relatives—Michael Miloslav's Hodža's daughter Marina and the Bella family, kin to Palka's great-grandmother—portray accomplished women, which differs sharply from most accounts of Slovaks living in Austria-Hungary.

His longest chapter is on grandfather Ján Pálka, labeled "the most captivating character" in his family. Inheriting his father's leather business, Ján Pálka employed modern manufacturing techniques, and amassed a fortune large enough to own a sumptuous villa with a Bösendorfer grand piano inside and a tennis court outside. Despite his wealth, he was a utopian socialist who instituted profit-sharing, worker participation in management, limited work hours, paid vacations, and children's scholarships. Ján Pálka's reforms cut into his company's profits, which also suffered from market losses in Austria-Hungary with the formation of Czechoslovakia. His grandfather lost virtually everything in the Great Depression.

Whereas Palka's distant paternal ancestors distinguished themselves in business (and in support of Slovak national causes), his maternal ancestors—the Hodžas—distinguished themselves in "the nation's service"—in Slovak literary, religious, and political activities. Palka ends his chapter, "Four Generations of National Service" sadly, by recounting the high prices the Hodžas paid in jail, persecution, and exile.

Palka concludes Part II by returning to grandfather Milan Hodža, Czechoslovakia's Prime Minister in the mid-1930s. He retraces Hodža's life from birth, through school, as journalist, during military service, and in politics. Palka's final paragraph says, "And so the story that we began when Milan Hodža's remains were finally transferred home to his beloved Slovakia, fifty-eight years after his death, is now complete."

Part III concludes the book with six chapters providing insight into the author's personal "Slovak awakening." Palka admits to "an emotional experience" each time he returns to the homeland "of a family that has a place in national history." Understandably sentimental, he revisits places and people that played roles in his family's drama, and thus in the nation's history. John Palka assumed the responsibility of documenting his family's life and accomplishments. Not only did he do his duty, but he did it with distinction.
reports

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