

THE MISSION EFFORTS OF THE SLOVAK EVANGELICAL
LUTHERAN SYNOD IN THE CHACO PROVINCE OF ARGENTINA:
1941-1953

Senior Church History
Prof. Frederich
4-30-91
Mark Aufdemberge

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W
Mequon, Wisconsin

PREFACE

When I originally began to explore the mission outreach efforts of the Slovak Evangelical Lutheran Synod, I had in mind to focus this paper specifically on their home missions here in America. Yet, as I began to search for information, it became apparent that there is a dearth of material on this particular subject. I wrote letters to Missouri Synod pastors who are serving Slovak churches and received little response. I combed the Milwaukee area public library system, our own library and those of Concordia with sparse results. All the data I was able to gather pointed to the fact that the Slovaks, like almost every other immigrating ethnic group, did mission work among their own people. Not a very startling revelation.

One event changed the focus of this paper. That was the unfortunate news that Dr. Samuel Boda, the main historian for the S.E.L.C, suffered a serious stroke in March and was too ill for an interview. It was then that I decided to focus my attention on the S.E.L.C.'s mission efforts in Argentina. The subject was broad enough to facilitate research but narrow enough to be a challenge. Most of the information came from Rev. Stephen Kostelny, the first missionary of the S.E.L.C. to do work in Argentina.

INTRODUCTION

In order to fully understand how and why Slovaks first came to South America and, more specifically, Argentina, one must first examine the events that transpired in 19th century Hungary. Most historians earmark the date, 1848, as the major turning point in the relations between the Hungarians, or Magyars, and the Slovak people. During this time, Hungary won independence and became Germany's equal in the region. Yet, unfortunately for the Slovaks and other groups living in Hungary, the Magyars used their new-found power to force these people into one nation using a "policy of denationalization of all non-Hungarian racial groups".¹

The Hungarian government went about this policy of creating one generic nation in several ways. First, the Hungarian language was made the official language. It was used exclusively in state administration and all educational systems. It was illegal to use any other language in the courts or in state-run institutions. Several schools and educational facilities were shut down and their property confiscated either because they refused to comply with the law or were too slow in doing so.

After 1848, the Hungarian government also began to stamp out any cultural events or religious festivals which were not native to Hungary. In 1882, the General Assembly of the Lutheran Church of Hungary declared that Panslavism was a canonical transgression.² Consequently, any congregation that refused the imposition of Hungarian forms of service ran the risk of being shut down or, at the very least, a visit from a group of policemen wielding clubs.

All this interference in the Slovak's social, religious and political life would have been reason enough for them to seek refuge in another country. Yet,

this Hungarianizing policy also effected the Slovaks economically. With Hungarian independence in 1848 also came the Edict abolishing serfdom. This meant that the serfs who formerly worked larger sections of land were forced onto tiny parcels created by the sub-division of land. In fact, most of the peasant holdings remained too small to support a family of four. Fifty-eight percent consisted of less than five acres, while only thirty-six percent had property holdings of five to thirty acres. Only 4,3 percent of all peasants had plots consisting of thirty-one to one hundred acres.³

As a result of this land crunch, thousands of peasants were forced off the land and into the larger cities looking for any kind of work. Land became so scarce that agricultural workers had to eke out an existence by traveling from farm to farm like our modern-day migrant workers. This vast army of unemployed peasants descending upon industrialized cities such as Budapest created even more unemployment as factory workers, cobblers and blacksmiths vied with farmers for work.

Add to all this hardship a burgeoning population (some say explosion) in Europe between the years 1720 and 1840 and it becomes clear why many wanted to find a new way of life. During this period, the sixteen Slovak counties of northern Hungary nearly double in size, increasing from 1,100,000 to 2,400,000.⁴ Marian Stolarik, in his book, Immigration and Urbanization: The Slovak Experience, makes the point that Hungary added to the Slovaks misery by inhibiting their industrial growth during this crucial time. He cites three factors that stifled the industrialization of Slovakia and "served to encourage emigration".

1. The government at Vienna promoted industrialization of only the Austrian half of the empire, especially Bohemia, and preferred Hungary to remain the chief supplier of agricultural products for the Empire.

- 2. Business tycoons of Austria and Hungary decided that industry in Slovakia must be confined to the initial processing of raw materials, leaving the finished products to be manufactured elsewhere.
- 3. The Hungarian government proved to be hostile to Slovak attempts at building their own industry because many business leaders were also their nation's political leaders.⁵

The Hungarian attempts at creating one country with no variety in religion, culture or language coupled with the increases in population and unemployment proved to be too much for thousands of Slovaks. From 1880-1890, a total of 470-089 left Hungary and emigrated to other countries.⁶ This exodus was, in no small way, aided by reports of high wages and the good life to be had in America. Agents from large mining companies in Pennsylvania and Illinois made trips periodically to eastern Slovakia, beckoning malcontented miners to become contract workers in the states. It was during this period that many Slovaks made their way to South America in search of better living conditions.

LIFE IN SOUTH AMERICA

It is not exactly clear when the first Slovaks moved into South America nor can we say with any certainty who the first man was who served a congregation there. Stephen Kostelny, however, was the first missionary from the Slovak Evangelical Lutheran Synod to serve Lutheran Slovaks in Argentina.⁷ In 1941, the Mission Board of the S.E.L.C. commissioned Kostelny to start mission outreach in the Chaco province of northern Argentina establishing his headquarters in the town of Saenz Pena.⁸

This particular group of Slovaks had immigrated to Argentina in the first half of the 1920's. They had gone through some tough times in their native Yugoslavia when they got word of the opportunity and abundant farm land that was available in Argentina. Apparently, a Yugoslavian tourist who had spent some time in South America, came back with news of how the Argentine government had

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
 11831 N. Seminary Drive. G6W
 Mequon, Wisconsin

opened up vast sections of wilderness to foreign farmers interested in homesteading. The government welcomed anyone who was willing to work vacant farmland and even gave land away free to those who were interested in clearing it off in order to grow cash crops.

When the Slovaks heard the potential for owning large quantities of land, many jumped at the chance. One hundred settlers and their families came over immediately and settled in the Chaco province around 1926. Naturally, it was difficult for them at first but they proved to be good workers, clearing land, building homes and planting cotton, which was the main crop. The pattern according to which they settled is not unlike that which occurred in the Midwest and western states in America. Individual owned many acres and houses were often miles apart. Eventually towns and villages sprang up in the vicinity but, for the most part, the Slovaks were isolated and spread out.

As this group began to experience financial success, word of this spread back to the homeland resulting in an increase of immigrants to the Chaco province. When a significant number of Slovaks were in the area, it soon became apparent that they were lacking a spiritual leader as well as a formal house of worship. As early as 1929, they were appealing to the church in Yugoslavia to send them a Lutheran pastor. At first, the church responded again and again by saying that an effort was being made to find one but that none were available. Finally, in the years leading up to the war, it wrote back saying that it could neither find one nor was there any money left to finance one. The church recommended looking to America for help.

Around 1940, the group of Slovaks in northern Argentina approached the Slovak Evangelical Lutheran Synod asking for a missionary to minister to them. The

S.E.L.C., in turn, responded by sending Stephen Kostelny. When he arrived, Kostelny found "an extensive" field in which to work. He set up base in the town of Presidentia Roque Saenz Pena and served 6 mission stations within a 100-mile radius. From 1941-1947 services in this main city were held in a building measuring 14'x 14'. The congregation borrowed \$1,000 and proceeded to build the first S.E.L.C. church in Argentina. It was dedicated on December 7, 1947.⁹

It is interesting to note that, when asked, Kostelny said that he ministered specifically to Slovaks. No attempts were made, initially, to reach out to native peoples in the region. Undoubtedly, one of the reasons for this has to be the severe time restraints facing one missionary serving 120 families. Travel time spent in reaching 6 mission stations across muddy roads would, alone, mitigate against further expansion.

Yet, there is another reason that could be given. That is, the deep cultural and religious heritage that kept the Slovaks together as a group. Very few, if any, of these immigrants could easily forget how Hungary had made efforts to stamp out their ethnic roots entirely. For years they had been taught to preserve whatever is distinctly Slovakian, especially the language and the forms which were used in worship. Perhaps, they were reluctant to reach out to people who spoke Spanish or different Indian dialects in the fear that their customs and heritage would soon be forgotten. Maybe a few of them wanted to insure that their community would remain strictly Slovakian. At any rate, very little evangelism work seems to have been done until years later.

HARDSHIPS AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

One of the most enjoyable aspects of talking to a person with missionary

experience is hearing all the adventure stories. Kostelny seems to have had his share of difficulties in his efforts to minister to his people. First, there was his only means of transportation to and from the mission stations: a delapidated bus. He said that once he got on the bus he never really knew when he would reach his destination. Very often, the bus would break down and he would be forced to sleep in the bus, outside on the ground or maybe in a nearby house. During the rainy season, the bus would often get stuck in the mud or slide into a ditch; forcing all the passengers to get off into ankle-deep mud and help push it out again.

Even though the missionary and his wife did live in the city of Saenz Pena, they still could not escape and excessive heat and dust that are constants in Argentina. Along with these came tiny little gnats known there as polverines. They were small enough to fit through screens but could inject a substance under the skin that left a severe burning sensation. One lady, who had been a missionary's wife in Africa, once commented to Kostelny that she had seen everything in Africa: snakes, rats, bugs and lizards. But all were more tolerable than those polverines. The only way to avoid them at night was to rig up a canopy of muslin over your cot and tuck the ends under the mattress.

A particularly awesome sight, according to the missionary Kostelny, was the arrival of the locusts which took place about every seven years. He writes about one such locust "plague" in the Lutheran Beacon :

The locusts have plagued Argentina for the second consecutive year. From the point of view of a first-time observer the appearance of these insects is quite interesting. In the distance the approaching locusts appear like clouds. They usually "sail"

with the wind, like snowflakes, passing by for days at a time. The locusts do not like to fly on dark nights. When such nights confront them they make their "landings" anywhere. If they come upon a forest they alight upon limbs of trees in such numbers that these often break off because of the excessive weight...The locusts are fast workers. Within minutes fifty or sixty acres of beautifully sprouted cotton disappear entirely from view.¹⁰

During his ten years of service in Argentina, Missionary Kostelny took those rickety buses to visit his six mission stations in the surrounding area. One hardship that remained constant throughout those years was the lack of a decent worship facility out there in the "bush". Once he got off the bus, Kostelny would often have to walk several miles to individual homes where services were being held. The Slovaks voluntarily gave up their homes periodically in order that the whole community could meet together as a group. By the time he left in 1952, however, there were two other church buildings erected in the mission stations of Bajo Hondo and San Bernardo.

CHANGES

Although Missionary Kostelny conducted services exclusively in the Slovak language and focused all his attention on this one ethnic group, circumstances forced a change in this policy. As the children of the original immigrants from Yugoslavia grew up in a foreign land, it was inevitable that they would learn the language and culture of their neighbors. By the time Kostelny left in 1952, most, if not all of the children below the age of 18 knew Spanish. In fact, it might be more accurate to say that they used Spanish in daily life more frequently than Slovak.

Therefore, it was a wise move on the part of the church in Argentina to heed Kostelny's advice and call one of their native sons for ministry, John Evin. Evin was born in Argentina but was also of Slovak descent. Kostelny had noticed him as a younger man who was capable of carrying out work in God's kingdom. The older missionary encouraged Evin to study for the ministry and arranged his year of vicar service in Argentina.

It was during Evin's vicar year that the Argentine field became self-supporting and that Kostelny returned to the United States on furlough. Shortly after his stay there, he took a call stateside. He left Evin, though, with a thriving church of 120 Slovak families, most of which lived in areas that still lacked modern sanitary facilities and adequate transportation.

It was not until 1962 that the Slovak group in northern Argentina made a serious attempt to reach out to another ethnic group with the good news of the Gospel. Missionary Michael Lavrovic, installed on January 1, 1960, wrote in the "Lutheran Beacon" that he had been doing some work among the "Mokobi" tribe. He writes:

When I visit these people I conduct a service in Spanish during which we sing only one hymn. (The Indians do not know any more.) As time and ability permit I teach them to cultivate the earth, raise cotton, corn, etc. The lamentable fact is that they have no tools with which to work; the few tools are ancient and good for nothing; whatever cattle they possessed died of some disease. In this respect they are very poor.¹¹

Lavrovic goes on to say that the Slovaks had made plans to finish a building that was to serve as a school for the Indian children. It was intended that the children learn handcrafts as well as mastering reading and writing along with their parents. Unfortunately, the mission met with little success and

eventually folded.

Reverend Kostelny went back to Saenz Pena in 1988 to help celebrate the 40th anniversary of the church building. It is now located in the "elite" part of the city, which boasts a population of over 36,000. The congregation now has over 700 members and services are conducted mostly in Spanish. The former missionary is also proud to say that there are now six pastors serving the field into which he was sent 50 years ago.

What is the future outlook for this group of Slovaks from the Slovak Evangelical Lutheran Synod? Only the Lord really knows. Yet, the more one learns about the S.E.L.C. the more one realizes that they are in danger of losing their identity. It is almost impossible to distinguish between current Missouri Synod work in Argentina and the efforts of the Slovaks. The whole field seems to be lumped together under the heading: Argentina District of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. The success experienced in this South American country is indeed cause for joy. Yet, at the same time, one gets the impression that a former church body with very distinct heritage and roots is in very real danger of losing both.

ENDNOTES

1. George Dolak, A History of the S.E.L.C. 1902-1927, Concordia Publishing House
St. Louis, 1955. pg. 1
2. Dolak, p. 8
3. Marian Mark Stolarik, Immigration and Urbanization: The Slovak Experience;
1870-1918, New York: AMS Press, Inc., 1989. pg. 3
4. Stolarik, p. 2
5. Ibid, p. 5
6. Dolak, p. 13
7. Rev. Stephen Kostelny, Interview on 4-13-91
8. "Lutheran Beacon" February 1953
9. Ibid
10. "Lutheran Beacon" January 1946
11. "Lutheran Beacon" February 1962

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dolak, George, A History of the S.E.L.C. 1902-1927, Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis, 1955.

Kostelny, Stephen D., Rev. Telephone Interview on 4-13-91

Stolarik, Marian Mark, Immigration and Urbanization: The Slovak Experience; 1870-1918, AMS Press, Inc., 1989.

"Lutheran Beacon", volumes I-X

Wolfe, J. W. J. Immigration
1870-1918
AMS Press, Inc.