

Research Paper for
Senior Church History
for Prof. Frédrich

WISCONSIN LUTHERAN--SLOVAK LUTHERAN RELATIONS
IN CUDAHY IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

--Gene Jahnke--

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One of the subjects in the field of Church History which has interested me most is that of the Slovak Lutherans. The reason for my interest in this subject is simple--I married a Slovak last summer. While her family's ties with Slovak Lutheranism are in the Detroit area, a study of our Wisconsin Synod's ties with the Slovaks in Cudahy has proved just as interesting. For Cudahy is one of the places in which our Synod had the most contact with the Slovaks. Unfortunately, there is not as much information available on this subject as I had hoped. However, there are several items of interest worth sharing.

4 { The city of Cudahy was born in 1893 when the Cudahy brothers decided to build a meat-packing plant there. They bought enough land around the plant so that they could surround it with a city. In this very year St. Paul's Lutheran Church was begun there by our Synod, and a building was begun on land donated by the Cudahy Bros. In 1896 they received their first pastor, Rev. John Brenner, who immediately started a school. At this same time there were some Slovak Lutherans who settled in Cudahy. They desired to be served spiritually, but they were not always careful about who served them. For they did not have deep confessional roots. There was a shortage of Slovak pastors in America at that time. The Slovaks could not, for the most part, understand our German preaching. So for a while they met in their homes and were served by a Bohemian Protestant preacher named Jelinek. This did not satisfy them, so they sent a plea to Chicago to Rev. Ladislav Beer, to ask if he would assist them with occasional visits. He consented.

It was at this time that we hear of the first known contact between St. Paul's and the Slovaks. Rev. Beer came up from Chicago on Aug. 11, 1902, and held a communion service for the Slovaks at St. Paul's Church, since the Slovaks had no meeting place as suitable. Rev. Brenner and his congregation seemed more than willing to help them in this way. They continued to make their facilities available to them for three dollars annually until the Slovaks had their own church in 1908

However, Rev. Brenner's help to the Slovaks went much farther than that. Occasional visits by Rev. Beer could not begin to fill the spiritual needs of the Slovaks, especially emergency situations. So Rev. Brenner, moved by a sincere desire for their spiritual well-being, attempted to fill some of these needs. Not that he had a lot of time on his hands, for he was both pastor and teacher at St. Paul's. But he managed to take the time to help these fellow Christians. It was not an easy task, for there was a definite language barrier. Although Rev. Brenner could speak very fluent English, very few Slovaks spoke much English. So Rev. Brenner was forced to learn Slovak as well as he could. He got a Slovak Bible, hymnal, and agenda, and gradually learned enough Slovak so that he could officiate at weddings, baptisms, and funerals. The early church records of St. Paul's show many Slovak names among these baptized. Rev. Brenner even tried preaching some sermons in Slovak. He endeared himself to the Slovaks to a degree that was not soon forgotten.

However, everyone involved knew that at best this was a temporary solution. A Slovak congregation had to be formed. So with encouragement from Rev. Brenner, the Slovaks met at St. Paul's Church on

3 { Oct. 7, 1906 for the purpose of founding a congregation. The meeting had officially been ordered by the local branch of the Slovak Ev. Union, of which most of those present were members. An earlier attempt to form a congregation had failed for lack of members. This time they succeeded and formed St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church of Cudahy. Eighteen members were listed as founders. They continued to meet at St. Paul's Church for the next year and a half. One of their first priorities was getting a church of their own. By January of 1908 their new church was completed, and was formally dedicated on Feb. 2. To show their close ties with the German Lutherans of St. Paul's, they formally asked the members of St. Paul's to join them on this happy occasion.

4 { However, the Slovaks still had no pastor of their own. Rev. Brenner continued to serve them faithfully until he accepted a call to St. John's in Milwaukee later in 1908. This accentuated their need for a pastor of their own, and they began calling pastors. Finally in the spring of 1910 they received the services of a Concordia Seminary graduate, Rev. Stefan Osusky. He served them until September of 1911. It so happened that the Slovak congregation in Racine was vacant at this same time also. So the two churches decided to issue a joint call for a pastor. This turned out to be very significant.

4 { For in October of 1911 St. Paul's pastor, Rev. Fred Zarling, accepted a call to Minnesota. St. Paul's was undergoing financial stress at the time, and tried to reunite with St. John's of New Coeln (now Oak Creek) as a dual parish, which they had originally been. When that proposal was turned down, St. Paul's turned to St. John's Slovak

Church, and tried to unite with them. But the Slovaks had to turn them down, for they had just issued a joint call with Racine. St. Paul's became desperate. On Nov. 28, 1911 they resolved to close the school and rent the parsonage to the Slovaks. Soon, however, they got some loans with the assistance of Rev. Brenner, as well as a pastor in the following year, and the crisis passed. Gone, too, was the unique opportunity to have a Slovak-German Lutheran Church.

Cooperation between the two churches continued for many years.

3 { The Slovaks seemed to have constant problems with finances, despite the fact that they had no expenditures for a school. For they sent their children to St. Paul's school. Meanwhile St. Paul's rebounded so well from their 1911-1912 crisis, that in January of 1917 they resolved to have an envelope collection for the Slovak Church. On March 12 of that year St. John's received 47 dollars from the generous people of St. Paul's.

This gift, however, still didn't put much of a dent in the deficit at St. John's. A loan was needed. With the help of Rev. Brenner a loan of \$500 was received by the Slovaks from our Wisconsin Synod, on May 17, 1918. It was completely repaid by July 28, 1924. We might think of this as being rather unusual for our Synod to do.

8 + 9 { However, we must remember that we were joined to St. John's by more than just proximity and friendship. They were in fellowship with us, and were united with us in the Synodical Conference. St. John's was a member of the Slovak Ev. Lutheran Church, which joined the Synodical Conference in 1908. We may think that their own Slovak Synod should have come to their aid. However, the Slovak Synod was having

1 (plenty of financial difficulties of their own at this time, and felt unable to come to their aid. So they turned to us, and got the help they needed to pull themselves through.

5 { Further evidence of cooperation between the two churches came in October of 1927 when St. Paul's once again became vacant. St. Paul's requested Rev. Ondov of St. John's to serve as their vacancy pastor. He willingly responded, and served them until the vacancy was filled in February of 1928. For this he received \$25. This cooperation was greatly aided at this time by the fact that many people in both congregations now could speak English.

5 { However, by this time there were also some signs of stress between the two congregations. The stress centered around St. Paul's school. St. John's had been sending children there for years without providing any kind of financial support. Meanwhile St. Paul's enrollment had swelled to the point that they needed larger facilities. They moved into their new building in February of 1927. Naturally they faced a large debt because of this building. They kept asking St. John's to help support their school, but they got no positive response. Finally in April of 1929 St. Paul's passed a resolution stating that St. John's could no longer send their children to St. Paul's school unless they would support a third teacher (the enrollment had reached about 130). St. John's again responded with nothing. So finally in July of 1929 St. Paul's was forced to pass a resolution setting up tuition fees for all non-members. Ten years later the resolution was amended to read that it was left to the discretion of the school board as to whether St. John's could even send children to St. Paul's

at all. It's sad that St. John's had so little interest in providing Christian education that they would not even support a school they had used for many years. I think that a general observation is in place here, that the Slovaks never had as strong a desire for Christian education as our Synod has. This is borne out by the fact that St. John's does not have a Christian Day School to this day, in spite of the fact that some of its pastors have favored one. I think that this also reflects on the monetary stewardship of St. John's, and of the Slovak Synod in general. They seemed to have an especially difficult time breaking away from the poor stewardship habits of the "old country", perhaps even more so than our Synod, though this has gradually changed through the years.

St. John's and St. Paul's continued to cooperate with one another for many years. In 1963 our Synod broke off ties with the Synodical Conference, and by this time cooperation had dwindled, partially because of the growing liberal tendencies of the Slovak pastor. However, the close ties between the two churches have not been forgotten, nor has the work of Rev. Brenner been forgotten by St. John's. Two examples will illustrate the close feelings that remained between Rev. Brenner and the Slovaks. In June of 1937 the Slovak Synod held their Synodical convention at St. John's, using St. Paul's facilities for some of the activities. St. John's wanted Rev. Brenner to come down and address a few words to the assembly. So they sent some people up to Milwaukee to get him. He gladly consented to come and say a few words. He addressed the assembly with a few words of Slovak which he had remembered from nearly thirty years before. The place

went wild! They loved him. That he also loved them was evident from something that happened several years later. In 1944 the Lutheran Beacon was first published, the first English publication of the Slovak Synod. Rev. Brenner, then President of our Synod, wrote a letter of welcome to the editor. This was especially fitting, since Rev. Brenner had been one of the pastors most interested in serving his people in English.

Germans and Slovaks have many cultural differences, as I can well attest to. For those two congregations to cooperate so well for so many years is a real fruit of the Spirit. I think it shows that our Synod was not as culturally narrow-minded in those days as many would have us believe. I think Rev. Brenner's example also shows how important it is for us to learn to speak the language of the people we serve. It's too bad that the Slovaks have deteriorated confessionally. However, we can still rejoice in the fact that the Lord used our Synod to help bring the Gospel to these Slovaks, and we can rejoice that they still have the Gospel today. For this, praise belongs first and foremost to our gracious Lord!

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