Sokol and the Evolution of Nationalism in Culturally-Centered Groups

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Abstract

Sokol, a fitness organization started in Czechoslovakia in the mid-1800s, was founded in order to combat the absence of an identity in this country at the time. Using their rapidly spreading influence, they were able to produce a nationalistic movement that restored a sense of unity and shared culture. However, their nationalism led to them being banned by multiple regimes, including the Austro-Hungarian empire and the Nazis. The purpose of this study is to find whether the embedded aspect of nationalism has evolved over time, and in what ways it has changed as Sokol has expanded into other countries. To understand where Sokol is today, I conducted an ethnographic study by asking two longtime members of Sokol about their personal experiences in the organization, and how these align with its original purpose. One of these individuals has been involved in this group since childhood, and she now assumes a leadership position within Sokol Minnesota; the other is a Czech immigrant who had been a part of Sokol in Czechoslovakia before its split, and is currently an active member. I also included my own observations as a participant in this program for the last seven years. After fulfilling these
methods, I found that Sokol has changed over the years to be more centered on preserving Czech traditions rather than creating an all-encompassing identity or bringing about a nationalistic movement; this shift in purpose has occurred because it is not necessary to take that sort of action currently like it was deemed to be essential at the time of its founding.

Introduction

Nationalism as a recurring political and sociological tool has increased especially in recent years, but the methods through which its spread and cultivation is achieved have largely remained the same. Throughout history, cultural-centered groups have been able to subtly influence political ideologies, and they have even transformed hints of nationalism into mass movements. Because these types of coalitions were prominent in Europe, particularly during the 19th century, studying the origins of budding nationalistic organizations can offer insights into their appeal and messaging. One such group is Sokol, a gymnastics and community-based organization created in the former country of Czechoslovakia.

Sokol is widely considered to have been a nationalistic association from its beginning. At the time of its founding in 1862, Bohemia was under the control of the Austro-Hungarian empire with little acknowledgement of a separate Czech identity, but the existence of Sokol changed this. Based around gymnastics and physical fitness in general, this group grew to encompass a wide variety of values with an emphasis on Czech culture especially. Their beliefs about harmony extended beyond just the physical and mental connections as they translated the need for unity into their own communities. With the help of Sokol, members became empowered in their identities as Czech or Slovak individuals, and they began to be more and more involved in the political landscape.
While primarily a fitness organization, their ties to nationalism have led to multiple shutdowns by the government in the last two hundred years. The first was by the Austro-Hungarian empire because of their mounting fear of a Sokol-led protest or even a revolution. Although the empire’s control over Czechoslovakia waned and then ruptured, the next conquerors, the Nazis, quickly banned it as well to prevent any unwanted resistance. After seven years of Nazi occupation, Sokol was reinstated for a brief three years before again being prohibited by Communist leaders who took power for the next four decades. Finally, in 1994, the Czech Republic’s and Slovakia’s governments allowed Sokol to be reopened for the third time, and it has been functioning ever since. Each of these bans were the result of Sokol’s heavy affiliation with and support of Czech nationalism, which shows not only the deep impact of its political alignment but also the fear these governments had of how Sokol’s existence could threaten their rule.

Sokol was founded based on the principles of equality, wellness, and health of the body and mind, but have they stayed the same over the years? Examining how Sokol’s fundamental values have evolved can form a blueprint about how similar groups have changed as well. They were such an influential group in Czechoslovakia because of their nationalistic tendencies, so comparing this to how they are now in terms of values and power is interesting to observe and recognize. As Sokol spread throughout the world, its impact grew, and looking also at whether the nationalism aspect has shifted to the United States in the form of Czech nationalism or American nationalism or none at all is an intriguing lens additionally. Overall, Sokol has embodied broad and idealistic values for over one hundred years, and studying whether those values have shifted indicates a larger evolution in thought and behavior.
Literature Review

Cultural nationalism, in which the nation is defined by a shared culture rather than a specific country, has been embedded within cultural organizations throughout history, but especially in the last few hundred years. According to a *Britannica* article, nationalism in its current form did not begin until the end of the 18th century, with the 19th century in Europe particularly being known as the Age of Nationalism. The idea of nationalism as a nation-wide ideology did not exist beforehand because of a variety of factors, including the presence of the feudal system as well as the strong bonds of religion, but the progressing society in Europe pushed these ideas to become more universal (*Britannica*). This prompted the formation of many different organizations desiring to create a sense of identity along with appreciation for their own culture, and this use of customs and heritage to further a group of people is known as cultural nationalism.

Sokol, a Czech-Slovak organization, is a part of this cultural nationalism tradition. It was founded in Prague in 1862 by Miroslav Tyrš, a Czech art historian and philosophy enthusiast. Together with German Jindřich Fügner, Tyrš centered Sokol around the motto “sound mind in a sound body,” pairing physical fitness with mental and spiritual wellness. Programs within Sokol, including gymnastics, dancing, and language-learning, conjoin Czech traditions with this idea of harmony.

An extremely community-based organization, *Oxford Reference* translates the word “Sokol” as falcon, and mass gatherings by this group where they performed together were known as “Slets,” referring to a term that means “a flock of falcons”; the terms here demonstrate the importance of collectivity and unity, but also a hint of strength and perhaps violence with the
bird of prey imagery. Slets typically included extensive team-building segments, such as structured marching and calisthenics performances, that brought participants and onlookers alike together (*Oxford Reference*). Additionally, Čada, an author of numerous Czech-based articles, explains how Fügner introduced the method of calling fellow members “brother” or “sister” as a way to further emphasize the feeling of community. Sokol’s purpose was to bring people together as equals, and this is clearly reflected in the way this organization is structured.

In addition to promoting harmony between the body and the soul, Sokol perpetuated Czech nationalism through their words and actions. Claire Nolte, an esteemed professor at Manhattan College and publisher of several novels and articles on Sokol, claims that the existence of the Sokol movement helped to culminate nationalistic tendencies into a broader, more influential movement. Their meetings were filled with speeches about independence and freedom, and their activities began to represent the need for Czechs especially to come together. *Czech Gallery*, a website detailing the precise timeline and significant characteristics of this group, observes that Sokol members were present at patriotic assemblies and other public events from the very beginning, demonstrating the ever-present theme of Czech nationalism. The extremely conservative Austro-Hungarian empire who had the influence over then-Czechoslovakia paid close attention to Sokol’s political activities as its influence spread and more people joined the organization.

Beyond simply furthering nationalistic tendencies, Sokol had an impact on development within the country as well. The accomplished author and professor Marek Waic talks about the various positions Sokol members filled, including “ministries, courts, police directories, statistical, provincial, land, post offices” and even Senator Baxa of Prague. The level of
involvement in the community outlined here both shows the influence Sokol quickly obtained and their dedication to bettering their country’s situation, from a mental and physical standpoint.

As Sokol’s ideologies advanced, they began to be more bold in how they showed their nationalism, despite the obvious disapproval from the Austro-Hungarian empire; one of the most prominent examples of this behavior is the creation of militaristic uniforms that “combined Slavic and revolutionary elements,” and the members of Sokol who wore this uniform became known as the “Czech National Army” (Čada). The uniforms, worn during Slets and demonstrations, included a red shirt reminiscent of the Italian revolutionary leader Giuseppe Garibaldi as a symbol that they were ready to fight back (Oxford Reference). The reference to Garibaldi in particular was not an accident as the Austrian army had been easily beaten by his volunteer army in 1859 (Čada). Their actions proved to be too daring as they were soon forced by the empire to disband for years during World War I, only to be briefly reinstated after Austria-Hungary lost control of Czechoslovakia in 1918. This was far from the end of Sokol’s bans due to their nationalistic associations; Britannica notes that it was also prohibited during Nazi occupation from 1938 to 1945 and later on when communism took over Czechoslovakia.

Under communist rule starting in 1948, Sokol activities were restricted, and the government attempted to change Slets to mass exercises called Spartakiády, which was a way to spread communist propaganda (Čada). This latest ban was only recently lifted in the 1990s after Czechoslovakia became a brief democracy. A Chicago Tribune article, written in 1994 just as Sokol was revived after the end of communist rule, cites its ties to Czech nationalism as the reason for its outlaw. In the one hundred and fifty-nine years that Sokol has been around, it has
been barred in Czechoslovakia on three separate occasions by three different regimes for being nationalistic.

During the time periods where Sokol was banned in Czechoslovakia, its strength and influence was kept alive by various immigrants who spread the organization as they migrated to different parts of the world (Britannica). Sokol was brought to the United States by Bohemian immigrants who established the first chapter of the American Sokol Club in St. Louis in 1865, and its influence has grown over time to reach across the country (Čada). Currently, Sokol is still a prominent organization in countries all over the world, and the United States is of special interest as there are over thirty different sections across the country, including one right on West Seventh Avenue in Saint Paul. The American Sokol’s own website describes its patriotism as “deep, sincere and extends to commitment and action in our local and wider communities,” which displays the consistent importance of serving their country even today.

Over time, the ideals that Sokol is formed around have changed, and this means that their purpose has also likely shifted. It was originally intended to give Czechoslovakia a sense of cultural identity after decades of capture and recapture by various empires, but the situation for the Czech Republic and Slovakia is different now. The country grew together with the help of Sokol and other influences and established a stronger image of who they were, but the differences between Czechs and Slovaks proved to be too drastic, leading to the separation of Czechoslovakia. However, both groups stayed individually united through their culture and past, which shows the strength of the type of impact made by organizations like Sokol. Even as immigrants left these countries, they brought Sokol along, spreading the organization and its
beliefs throughout the world. Understanding this evolution is important to show both the effect of Sokol along with how the passage of time changed its fundamental values.

Sokol has a history of only allowing people with Czech ancestry to join and participate in their organization, which is a significant part of their expression of nationalism. The separation of Czechs and Slovaks historically increased after Czechoslovakia dissolved in 1993, but this is not necessarily true today. In the United States, this gap is seen in how there are two different sectors of Sokol: American Sokol (mostly Czech) and Sokol USA (mostly Slovak). It is worthwhile to glean whether units across the United States have kept up with this tradition, or whether it has simply fallen to the wayside as expansion continues into less Czech-populated areas.

Another aspect to examine is the militaristic side of Sokol. While this group was not especially prone to violence, the existence of the Czech National Army, complete with their own uniform and organization, proves that they did have some forceful tendencies even if they did not directly act upon them. Clearly, the army was meant to intimidate at the very least, which shows both commitment to their cause and potential extremist ideologies. It is also noteworthy that perhaps Sokol’s practices were aimed in a way that promoted nationalistic acts, like being a part of an army, not just beliefs. Exploring its significance at the time and whether it was able to fade over the years can show what the true purpose was and what it has changed to become.

While the initial goal of Sokol was to unify the nation and its Czech people under a shared feeling of community, nationalism is not a required element to complete this, and the fact that it is such a big part of Sokol’s practice is interesting. Something about this organization in
particular led to a mass nationalism movement, and discovering how this has changed could be instrumental.

Methods

Each of these aspects of Sokol prompt different questions about its evolution. Can cultural-centered organizations like Sokol who lean towards nationalism lose that part over time as they expand? How do they promote nationalism through their practices, and where is the line between acceptable action and extremist behaviors? Do their patriotic ties shift to the new country when the group crosses international boundaries? By understanding the answers, one can predict the fates of similar associations along with the reasoning behind these changes.

I used my own observations from being a part of the gymnastics program as both a participant and a coach for the last seven years to sum up the experience of being at Sokol Minnesota. Along with being a gymnast, I have volunteered at numerous events, such as
distributing goods at the annual flea market, and I traveled to Illinois, Iowa, and Nebraska for competitions and skill clinics. These experiences have allowed me to observe both the people involved in Sokol and how the organization operates as a whole.

Since these questions are largely based on individual experiences that build up to a holistic synopsis, I also conducted an ethnography and spoke to two members of the local Sokol chapter at the Czech-Slovak Hall in Saint Paul. One of these individuals, Mary Cahill, is on the Sokol MN Board of Directors and the American Sokol Board of Instructors after being involved in the organization for more than forty years. The other interviewee, Blanka Brichta, is a Czech immigrant who was a part of Sokol in Czechoslovakia and has since become immersed in the Minnesota chapter. Both of these members have been a part of Sokol for years, and they are credible sources to answer these questions.

Results

My observations of Sokol’s customs often mix the practical elements (usually gymnastics) and Czech traditions. Each meet begins with a march onto the floor mats where we end facing three different flags: American, Slovak, and Czech. After each national anthem is played, we “about face” and relocate to our starting event. At the end of the meets, we would often perform a select calisthenics routine that had been choreographed decades ago for the audience as a group. The skill clinics I attended at the Chicago chapter highlighted the development of not only gymnastics talent, but also discipline through student-led special numbers, calisthenics practices, and marching techniques. When I went to Instructor’s School in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, this pattern persisted: we learned cultural elements, like folk dancing and salutes, in addition to being taught how to spot and safely coach young children.
Volunteering at the flea market and road-side pick-up events and performing at the annual Czech-Slovak Festival were different experiences because there was not a concentration on a central event like the other gymnastics-focused gatherings. In selling Czech pastries (and eating some myself) and handing out educational kits for our makeshift COVID Culture Camp, I have been able to interact with other members who are an integral part of Minnesota’s chapter. The most profound observation I have had is seeing how deeply important this culture is to immigrants and their families who use Sokol as a way to reconnect with their heritage. One particular conversation I remember was with an older Czech woman who was wistfully recalling how our koláče tasted exactly like her grandmother’s baking back in Czechoslovakia, and other immigrants agreeing and continuing to talk about and compare their personal recipes. Being surrounded by people speaking their native languages and being able to communicate fluidly about their experiences is such a unique circumstance, and this moment and others show the significance of Sokol and how it is able to preserve Czech traditions and bring people together through this protection.

For the next section of my results, I interviewed the two individuals over email and in person, and their thoughts helped to sum up the experience of being a Sokol member.

Mary Cahill, a seventy-year-old woman from Saint Paul, has been a member of Sokol since kindergarten. With a Czech grandmother, she was surrounded by these traditions for her whole life, and being involved in Sokol led to an additional interest in the culture. Cahill’s participation in Sokol only grew as she aged, from engaging in dance class and attending a gymnastics instructor’s school to competing in national Slets. Now, she coaches boys’ gymnastics alongside her son-in-law and myself while serving on several Boards. I have
personally known Mary since I joined the program as a sixth grader, and she has often given me tips for both my gymnastics skills and life in general.

Blanka Brichta is an immigrant from the Czech Republic who joined Sokol in then-Czechoslovakia as a child, and is currently the language teacher as well as on the Board of Directors. At the time, Czechoslovakia was a communist-run country, and the government did not approve of Sokol’s nationalistic reputation; as such, Sokol was called Telovychovna Jednota (TJ), meaning “Physical Education Unit,” publicly to keep their activities discrete, but Brichta remarks that the group was still known as Sokol to “regular” people. After she immigrated to Minnesota, she “learned about the activities of Sokol here and started attending many of its events” before joining the organization. Brichta involved her children as well in Sokol through its annual Culture Camp to teach them more about Czech traditions, and her participation has been consistent for the last twenty years.

The distinction between pride for one’s culture and true nationalism is an essential point here. While both Brichta and Cahill agreed that there is loyalty to one’s country or nation of origin, whether it be Czechoslovakia or the United States in this case, patriotic feelings cultivated by Sokol do not dip into extremes. They believe that Sokol has evolved to be more about preserving traditions as it pushes into different countries rather than encouraging action, whether violent or nonviolent, like it had initially been formed around.

Brichta emphasizes the preservation of her and other immigrants’ customs as being one of Sokol’s central functions. From the traditional dance and baking lessons offered to language classes, Sokol provides a taste of home for Czech immigrants to have their culture openly celebrated and taught as a community. Cahill expands on this, explaining how Czech immigrants often use Sokol as a way to gather and connect with others who might have similar interests.
As for the traditional separation between Czechs and Slovaks in Sokol, Cahill maintains that, while American Sokol has a higher concentration of Czech members and Sokol USA is predominantly Slovak, these two nationalities are not treated as lesser in either group. Cahill points out that the difference in ethnicity concentrations was likely due to immigration patterns with Czech people moving close to other Czechs and the same happening with Slovaks; this shows that the separation between the two United States Sokols was not necessarily a deliberate choice, rather one brought about by chance.

Although Sokol originally allowed only Czech people to join, this restriction has been lifted and any person is now able to participate. Cahill believes that this had happened partially out of necessity: “while there is clearly a desire to preserve the essence of the organization’s history there is a recognition that it cannot limit itself to just people with Czech and Slovak heritage.” The nationalism aspect must be clearly different with Sokols in other countries having allegiance not only to Czechoslovakia, but also to their home nation. In this way, the sense of nationalism must have been diluted if not eradicated. Cahill recalls her experience in international Slets in Prague, saying that each chapter, whether it was France, Germany, or the United States, embodied “a sense of “brotherhood” within an international organization of shared values.” Rather than being limited to only Czech members even as Sokol expanded, not having this barrier allows for more diversity and also spread of culture to other ethnicities.

There is also a strong emphasis on attracting younger participants who might be interested in passing on these traditions through Sokol when they grow up. For instance, both Brichta and Cahill describe the additional physical activities Sokol has added over the years, such as volleyball, track and field, and, of course, gymnastics. Cahill hopes that the inclusion of these events and other changes will bring in youth who will “hopefully…carry on in preserving
the legacy and future of Sokol MN.’” This demonstrates just how important keeping Czech culture alive is to members of this community.

The more militaristic elements have faded into tradition rather than preparation for real action. Sokol reflects their values of discipline through structured programs such as marching drills, calisthenics practice, and formal introductions and dismissals, but there is no inclination towards physically protecting a certain group of people, like the original Czech Army had stood for. As a whole, Brichta says that Sokol promotes “togetherness, cooperation, collaboration and harmony” through their events, rather than superiority or violence.

Conclusion

The circumstances under which Sokol was formed were drastic. Austria-Hungary’s presence had taken away any semblance of cultural unity, and people needed to have a shared identity. Sokol was born out of that hunger for relation with other Czech individuals during a time when their culture was being crushed and dissolved, and the organization was able to accomplish this with its army and demonstrations. This need for unity continued throughout Nazi occupation and during communist rule as they stood together in solidarity and mutual protection. However, the purpose of Sokol has shifted: rather than being centered around fighting to keep Czech culture alive while they were being actively oppressed, it has become more about preserving important traditions as time goes on.

The spread of Sokol throughout the world heavily factors into the original nationalist element of this association. It is difficult for a group to remain solely loyal to one country as it expands into different countries, especially as people from the new countries began joining Sokol. Although many of Sokol’s members are Czech immigrants or have Czech ancestry, the fact that any person, regardless of their ethnicity, is welcomed shows that true nationalism no
longer has a part. Nationalism in this context involves people coming together to fight for the survival and flourishing of their culture, and it brought about actions that were specifically centered upon elevating Czech and Slovak culture. With people of all types of ethnicity being able to be a part of Sokol, nationalism is not as present or potent as it once was.

During the Austria-Hungary occupation, the absence of a national identity required some sort of unifying attribute, but that need has since significantly diminished. Without the immediate danger of losing cultural identity, groups like Sokol lose the urgent need to create change. Although the structure of the organization has remained largely the same, without the spark of fear of no longer having a united identity, Sokol evolved from being a purely Czech-promoting organization. Now, Sokol is more of a method of keeping Czech-Slovak traditions alive across the globe as the years go on.

Sokol is a prominent example of what happens to cultural groups who are formed in the midst of chaos and need after that time of anguish passes by. In 19th century Bohemia, the presence of the Austro-Hungarian empire disallowed the Czechs and Slovaks from promoting their traditions and culture. However, in today’s circumstances, it is possible for one to be proud of one’s culture and supportive of their country whether those two are different or not. While maintaining the importance of culture, these groups change from being defensive to the point of violence against the opposing force to existing to celebrate their beliefs. In these interviews, I have found that the all-encompassing nationalism aspect has faded over time to reveal a less threatening and more protective organization that simply wants to keep their traditions alive.

Although Sokol currently has no intent to take any kind of militaristic action, the option is not necessarily gone. There is the possibility that the need to come together and resume that nationalistic organization will reappear in the future, and this applies to other groups who have
experienced this same shift in purpose over time. For now, the urgent requirement to form a national identity lies dormant. So, while Sokol serves as a way to simply preserve Czech culture as the group spreads across the world, the original foundations of nationalism remain and could make a difference later on.

Appendix A

Mary Cahill Interview

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<th>Question</th>
<th>Response</th>
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<td>1. How and when did you first get involved in Sokol, and what is your role now?</td>
<td>I first remember being involved with Sokol in the children’s dance group. I was probably 6 or 7 years old. My grandmother brought me and made a kroj (folk costume) for me and it was a white blouse, red satin skirt, and red and black sparkly vest and white socks and black patent leather shoes. I danced with the group at festivals in Montgomery, Lonsdale and New Prague, MN and at the Festival of Nations in downtown St. Paul. When I was around 10 years old I joined the gym classes. I competed through high school and was a junior instructor (yes, I attended National Instructor School run by none other than Bud Benak). I maintained my membership starting at age 17 through current but was not active in college or graduate school years. In 1989 I was asked to restart the gym program which had not been operating due to a variety of reasons, I said I’d help, and I have been helping ever since. I am on the Czech and Slovak Sokol MN Board of Directors (BOD) and represent the gym programs (I have been recording secretary, treasurer, and Planning Committee Chair on BOD), I am the Recording Secretary for Western District, and Men’s Physical Director for Western District and in that capacity sit on the American Sokol Board of Instructors.</td>
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<td>2. When Sokol was founded in the 1860s, many of its attributes were centered around</td>
<td>Probably not in the same way it was likely exhibited over a hundred years ago. There is</td>
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promoting a united spirit as a nation. Do you see this behavior mirrored in Saint Paul’s or any other non-European chapter today?

still pride in country of origin apparent. What I see is a loyalty to the USA (we say the Pledge of Allegiance before every meeting at the local, district and national level, play the US, Czech and Slovak national anthems before every competition and Slet. I have participated in international Slets in Prague (twice) and while there I definitely felt that the various units from France, Canada, Czech and Slovak Republics, as well as those from various cities and states across the US were proud to represent their countries but it was much more a sense of “brotherhood” within an international organization of shared values. We were parts of a whole, and the ideals of Sokol in terms of sound mind and sound body were really front and center as demonstrated in special numbers and mass calisthenics performances.

3. Sokol had a militaristic element to their nationalism; for instance, they created a “Czech Army” during Austria-Hungary’s occupation, complete with uniforms and marches. Is this more active and potentially violent aspect ingrained or outwardly included into traditions now?

I had always heard that the various calisthenics, drills, and similar exercises were indeed a training for being armed (supposedly not obvious to the communists), but also to keep people in shape and promote physical fitness and promote a spirit of solidarity. Sokol does reflect some aspects of military organization in terms of its marching drills, formal class starts and dismissals (in line ups, spacing) the commands used, parade uniforms (which older ones did look kind of militaristic but have evolved to be more civilian looking over the years) but these are traditions steeped in discipline (sound mind) and preparation for peaceful civilian resistance, if necessary. I am unaware that Sokol was ever actually or perceived as violent and I don’t think of the organization as potentially violent.
4. Clearly, Sokol had a strong focus on nationalism and the importance of community. How is this shown in current chapters - has that aspect faded or is it just as strong as it was initially?

| I think the importance of community is still very strong, but it centers more now on the preservation and celebration of Czech and Slovak customs and physical fitness through a variety of activities like gymnastics, volleyball, track and field, folk dancing and local civic engagement as opposed to a focus on nationalism. I think this varies across units in the US, with some Units focused heavily on gymnastics (So Omaha and Southern Texas units) and others on culture and customs (Wilber, NE) and others like Sokol MN which promotes all areas but is limited in the gym program because of the building’s configuration. |

5. How are Czechs and Slovaks treated differently in Sokol, or are they? (American Sokol vs Sokol USA)

| The two organizations work together but are completely independent of each other. Historically American Sokol is predominantly Czech and Sokol USA predominantly Slovak. Sokol USA is still a fraternity based (insurance) organization and American Sokol severed its ties with fraternal organizations years ago, but there are still close ties with many AS members having insurance policies with Western Fraternal Life and the various Czech lodges that were local fraternal organizations. As far as when both AS and Sokol USA are together for a Slet – no difference in treatment – it is one giant happy family of people mingling and celebrating friendships. |
| 6. Saint Paul’s members have a relatively high concentration of immigrants. How do they react to their traditions being observed and celebrated by Sokol in the US? | Czech and Slovak Sokol MN (DBA Sokol MN) is fortunate to have a pretty healthy number of Czech (mostly) and Slovak (far fewer) expats living in MN. There are a number of reasons for this. MN was heavily settled by Czechs in the Montgomery New Prague area and Lower town St. Paul and Bohemian Flats in Mpls and many still have tie to the old country, the Czechs in MN were active in a number of smaller Sokol units that eventually merged over the years to become Sokol MN, there is an active Czech genealogy group, the U of MN regularly sponsors or hosts doctors from the Czech Republic and we do a lot of outreach to find Czechs and Slovaks and invite them to activities. I have found the Czechs and Slovaks to be overjoyed that their traditions are being preserved and celebrated here. They have embraced what we have been doing at Sokol MN and added to it and improved things like more authentic cooking, expanding language classes as native teachers, and more. The expats here do not identify with other Sokol units in the US (a few did, like Hannah Matusek, God rest her soul) or participate in the more universal Sokol things like gymnastics classes and other fitness activities. They use Sokol more for its building so they can gather as immigrants used to when they first arrived in the US from Czechoslovakia. |
7. Are any of these immigrants involved in Sokol in the Czech Republic or Slovakia? If yes, do they note any specific differences between them?

I am not sure. The impression I get is that Sokol was thought of as for “the old people” but I am not so sure that is uniformly the case with how Czechs in the Czech Republic see Sokol there now. I know the Czechs in MN know about Sokol but I have the impression very few, if any, were members while living in the Czech Republic. My daughter Carolyn met a Czech girl the same age when she participated in the Prague Slet in 202. She and Lucy communicated so Lucy could practice her English and they are best friends to this day and have been back and forth to see each other over the years and Carolyn and her husband went to Lucy’s wedding in Prague and Carolyn and her husband are going to stay with Lucy and her husband this summer. Carolyn undergoes a medical procedure in the Czech Republic. Lucy’s whole family belonged to Sokol and still does, I think. We sent Lucy and her husband Kola t-shirts (Sokol MN bike club) and they loved them.

8. Do you believe that members of Sokol have a stronger tie to Czechoslovakia or to their home country (United States in this case)? Why?

I think the tie is stronger to the US for our American born members because it is what we know. That said there is a very strong affection for Prague among many of our American born members and some have chosen to live abroad there for a period of time, study there, visit there, and have gone back a number of times. Many of our Sokol members are also members of the Czech Genealogy group and have traced their roots to distant family members living in the Czech Republic.
9. What do you perceive as Sokol’s primary focus in today’s world as an organization?

An organization that still promotes Czech and Slovak culture, but has expanded the tent to bring families in to participate in gymnastics (all levels) and participate in community. It is about friendships and common experiences via competitions, Slets that Sokol is a community and while there is clearly a desire to preserve the essence of the organization’s history there is a recognition that it cannot limit itself to just people with Czech and Slovak heritage, that we need and want to welcome all, but that we can share our rich heritage in songs, food, dance and other cultural experiences.

10. What do you perceive as Sokol MN’s primary message?

Mission: Providing fitness and community for individuals and families through physical, educational, cultural, and social programs. I also think we are trying to focus on developing leaders in our youth, to prepare them for living in a challenging world and also hopefully to carry on in preserving the legacy and future of Sokol MN. We want Sokol to remain a viable and vibrant community organization.

11. What do you believe are the biggest differences between Sokol when it was originally founded in Czechoslovakia and its chapters in Saint Paul/United States?

In the US we have many members who are not Czech, or have very little Czech heritage, and that is probably the biggest difference. I don’t know how ethnically diverse Units are in the Czech Republic. In the US we are not very racially diverse in our Units, but I suspect more so than in the Czech Republic.

Blanka Brichta Interview

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<td>1. How and when did you first get involved in Sokol, and what is your role now?</td>
<td>Being born and growing up in (then) Czechoslovakia, as a kid I attended exercise classes in Sokol, in Prague. Of course at that</td>
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time (during communism) officially it was called TJ - Telovychoyna Jednota (Union of Physical Education) but at home and among regular people everyone referred to it always as Sokol.

When I moved to Minnesota I learned about activities of Sokol here and started attending many of its events. When my sons were young I had them participate in the Cultural Camp, a wonderful week-long event for kids learning about their heritage and culture of Czech and Slovak Republics. In the early 2000's I started teaching evening Czech language classes for adults in Sokol MN and several years ago I joined the Board of Directors.

2. When Sokol was founded in the 1860s, many of its attributes were centered around promoting a united spirit as a nation. Do you see this behavior mirrored in Saint Paul’s or any other non-European chapter today?

I don't necessarily have knowledge of any other non-European chapter these days but I like to think that Sokol MN is promoting togetherness, cooperation, collaboration and harmony through its many events and operations.

3. Sokol had a militaristic element to their nationalism; for instance, they created a “Czech Army” during Austria-Hungary’s occupation, complete with uniforms and marches. Is this more active and potentially violent aspect ingrained or outwardly included into traditions now?

Not that I know of. Never experienced that.

4. Clearly, Sokol had a strong focus on nationalism and the importance of community. How is this shown in current chapters - has that aspect faded or is it just as strong as it was initially?

I would describe our Sokol MN operations focusing on the importance of community and being proud of our Czechs and Slovaks heritage and culture.

5. How are Czechs and Slovaks treated differently in Sokol, or are they? (American Sokol vs Sokol USA)

I can speak only about my experiences and I can say that I don't see any difference between Czechs and Slovaks being treated differently.
6. Saint Paul’s members have a relatively high concentration of immigrants. How do you react to your traditions being observed and celebrated by Sokol in the US?  

| As an immigrant I find it amazing that second, third generations etc. of Czech/Slovak-Americans are still observing traditions of their heritage. I admire that. I also have to say that many traditions celebrated here in Minnesota I recognize as traditions how my grandma would celebrate "turn-of-the-century style" rather than as they are celebrated in CZ/SK currently. |

7. Were you involved in Sokol in the Czech Republic or Slovakia? If yes, do you note any specific differences between them?  

| As I mentioned above, when growing up in CZ - it was not a true SOKOL organization. And since I immigrated to the USA in the mid-80's I didn't experience the new Sokol in the 'current' Czech Republic. But from my visits to CZ and also learning from relatives and friends - the current Sokol in CZ offers many sports to the community, from ping pong to volleyball to hiking and so on... |

8. Do you believe that members of Sokol have a stronger tie to Czechoslovakia or to their home country (United States in this case)? Why?  

| I don't think Sokol members are any different. |

9. What do you perceive as Sokol’s primary focus in today’s world as an organization?  

| Not sure actually. |

10. What do you perceive as Sokol MN’s primary message?  

| I think the Sokol MN is true to its message to provide community and fitness for individuals and families through cultural, educational, physical, and social programs. |

11. What do you believe are the biggest differences between Sokol when it was originally founded in Czechoslovakia and its chapters in Saint Paul/United States?  

| I think of Sokol in the late 1800's having the main mission promoting Czech nationalist cause. That is not relevant anymore and I think of Sokol MN as a cultural organization promoting Czech and Slovak heritage. |

**Bibliography**

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