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**Process of Assimilation and Integration of Central European
Immigrants as reflected in the work of Willa Cather**

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VEDOUcí PRÁCE:

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ZÁSADY PRO VYPRACOVÁNÍ:

This diploma thesis deals with the topic of assimilation and integration as reflected in the work of Willa Cather. In my thesis I will focus on Cather's short stories and novels featuring Central European immigrant characters. I will outline the situation of immigrants settling a new territory and based on socio-historical context I will assess the accomplishments of assimilation and integration of individual characters. I will discuss Cather's treatment of the clash and blending of cultures and examine the development of immigrant family.

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*Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci na téma Proces asimilace a integrace
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1 Introduction

The first manifestations of some interest of Czechs for the New World reach the colonial period but it was no sooner than in the mid-19th century when Czechs in America started to play an important role in settling and cultivating of the prairies. American writer Willa Cather spent her childhood surrounded by European immigrants including Czechs who inspired her in her literary work. Cather faithfully portrayed Czech immigrant experience in America mainly in her novels *My Ántonia* and *O Pioneers!*, in her novella “Neighbour Rosicky” and in a short story “The Bohemian Girl.” This diploma thesis will deal with Cather’s treatment of the central European immigrants in America. It aims to examine the process of integration and assimilation and the development of immigrant family, put the characters of Cather’s work into socio-historical context and assess the achievements in settling of a new territory as well as the clash and blending of cultures.

1.1 Czech immigration to America

The initial impulse for emigration from Czech lands was triggered by religious oppression of non-Catholics as a result of the Protestant rebellion and its aftermath in 1620’s. Most of the refugees left for the adjacent countries but some of them managed to get across the Atlantic to the United States. The first Czech-American of whom there is a historical record was Augustin Herman. He left his homeland during the Thirty Years’ War and as a cartographer he mapped the border between Maryland and Virginia. Another way Czechs entered the shores of America was as members of Jesuit order. From 1678 to 1767, 140 - 180 young men left to work in Spanish and Portuguese overseas domains. Besides their missionary role they worked as physicians, economists or craftsmen of arts.¹

Apart from the Catholic missionaries there were also Czech Protestants who sought their place in the New World. The Moravian brethren were fleeing from Fulnek and its vicinity, the place of activities of the prominent Czech protestant pastor Jan Ámos Komenský. The first group entered the United States in 1735. At South they were

¹ Josef Polišenský, *Úvod do studia dějin vystěhovalectví do Ameriky. [Sv.] 2, Češi a Amerika*. Praha: Karolinum, 1996, 12-13.

in constant conflict with the white farmers. The brethren criticized slavery, they were baptizing African Americans and rejecting to fight in the civil war. From the United States the Moravian Brethren started to spread to places all over the world including Nicaragua, Tibet, Nepal, or Greenland.²

It was not until the mid-nineteenth century when the Czech immigration to America started to increase. Until 1848 the immigration to USA was rather an issue of individuals or small groups. Poor transportation conditions together with the Imperial Court in Czech lands controlling the large-scale travels did not allow for massive migration.³ Moreover, many Czechs disapproved the fact of leaving one's homeland for a better place. Czech dramatist Josef Kajetán Tyl in his play *Lesní panna aneb Cesta do Ameriky* from 1850 reflected the opposing attitudes of contemporary Czechs towards emigration. Many people considered their only homeland the one they were born in, and believed in the need to battle for it. The other group advocated the possibility to move and create another homeland if they cannot live in the original one.⁴ "Filip Stanislav Kodým, editor of *Hospodářské noviny* and Tyl's contemporary, was discouraging peasants from emigration and also criticized the state government and its policy that led to migration."⁵

Towards the end of the nineteenth century more Czechs were moving to America as the general view of emigrants became less denouncing. The number of Czechs leaving to America considerably increased, for in Central Europe they were suffering under hungry years and absolutist tendencies. Enticed by the promise of democratic freedom in the New World, both German-speaking and Czech-speaking newsmen and politicians were coming to America. In addition, lower prices of the journey in the 1850s increased the number of passengers, too.⁶

² Polišíenský, *Češi a Amerika*, 1996. 14-15.

³ Ibid. 20.

⁴ Jana Fischerová. *Cizina a domov v dramatech J. K. Tyla*. Plzeň: Pedagogická fakulta, Západočeská univerzita v Plzni, 2012. Bakalářská práce. (Accessed 16 August 2017 <https://otik.uk.zcu.cz/bitstream/11025/4461/1/bakalarska%20prace.pdf>).

⁵ František Kutnar, *Počátky hromadného vystěhovalectví z Čech v období Bachova absolutismu*. Praha: ČSAV, 1964, 54.

⁶ Polišíenský, *Češi a Amerika*, 1996, 25.

1.1.1 Settling the Midwest

Texas and Midwest were the areas that were sought-after mainly by those who pursued farming in the New World. Immigration to Texas was however affected by inhospitable climate conditions. Moravians, who were coming to Texas in large groups, had to deal with great temperature differences between seasons and devastating tornados.⁷ Wisconsin was a popular agricultural area as well, for according to the census of 1860 one third of all Czechs immigrants found their home there.⁸ Newcomers entered still a true frontier area, and after overcoming initial failures they earned reputation of skilled farmers among their neighbours.⁹ Around 1860 most of Czech immigrants were still scattered among farming areas in Texas and Midwest, resisting the appeal of big cities. Thanks to them small towns in Wisconsin and Iowa such as Milwaukee, Manitowoc, Racine, and Cedar Rapids gained their significance.¹⁰

Both urban and rural areas were beginning to be populated by central European immigrants in the mid-nineteenth century. Most of the arriving immigrants were Catholics, some of them were Protestants. Unlike Polish or Slovaks, Czechs tended to form split groups of urban and rural immigrants, catholic and protestant and those joining American Free-Thought movement. St. Louis, Chicago and New York were the cities with the largest urban Czech communities.¹¹

In 1860's increased number of Czech immigrants headed to Midwest especially to Nebraska and Kansas. The account of the Czech immigrants in Nebraska was gathered by Frank Mareš who explored 45 counties and published in the Czech-American magazine "Hospodář." According to his findings Czechs in the Saline County came almost entirely from southern Bohemia whereas those settled in Saunders County were from southern Moravia. In Nebraska as well as in other American states Czechs named their settlements after Bohemian and Moravian cities even though they did not originate from them such as Praha, Brno and Plzeň. As for the social status Mareš classified Czech immigrants as members of working or middle classes. Nebraska as well as Texas, a state largely populated by Moravians, formed the centre of Czech Catholics in

⁷ Polišíenský, *Češi a Amerika*, 1996, 32.

⁸ Ibid, 33.

⁹ Ibid, 44-47.

¹⁰ Ibid, 40.

¹¹ Ibid, 28.

America.¹² Czechs were known for their family-supporting culture. The earlier settled family used to pay for the travel costs of the younger family that decided to return back to homeland.¹³

A great share in the Czech settlement of Kansas had a railway company agent Josef Novinský living in St. Beard. Novinský in the 1870s negotiating settlement of empty areas along the railroads by Czechs was under control of Austrian authorities due to a suspicion of political motivation of his activities. According to surviving leaflets and brochures his mission was to populate the areas along the Kansas's railways that were to be a route for transporting slaughterhouse livestock from southwest to Omaha. The newcomers attracted by the offer of free land included mostly German-speaking farmers or misfits living in areas around Uničov or Litovel in central Moravia. The awareness of their Moravian origin is manifested by the name of the immigrant district Olmitz.¹⁴

From the middle of the nineteenth century Czech immigrants were also trying their fortunes in the West, the first of them were attracted by the gold rush. However, the most famous Czech western explorers were the Korbel brothers who came later and rose to fame thanks to their discovery of unforeseen forest wealth called "Redwoods" in California. They found their lumber mill "Bohemian Grover" in California and "Bohemian grover club" in San Francisco where is also a library with wooden statue of St. Jan Nepomucký. The Korbel brothers also established viniculture with a well-known wine brand.¹⁵

In the years following the mass immigration of the turn of the century, Czechs together with other Slavic and Jewish immigrants mainly from Austria-Hungary and Russia met with unwelcoming attitudes by the general American public. Corresponding with the official policy of President Roosevelt the common view of the immigrants saw them, as professor Jařab put it, "uneducated, unskilled, and not mature enough for life in democracy." The moods proceeded into legislation with laws restricting immigration came into force in 1920s, immigration almost stopped.

¹² Poliřenský, *Čeři a Amerika*, 1996, 74.

¹³ Ibid, 48-50.

¹⁴ Ibid, 51-52.

¹⁵ Ibid, 68.

1.2 Willa Cather and Czechs

The life of immigrants on the frontier is most thoroughly depicted in one of Cather's most acclaimed novels *My Ántonia*. The inspiration for the novel Cather drew from her childhood in Red Cloud where she was growing up surrounded by immigrants from the Old World who presented unknown traditions and languages to her. The character of Antonia Shimerda is based on her childhood friend, Czech immigrant, Anna Sadílek. Her father, whose name was probably Antonín Sadílek,¹⁶ did indeed settle near Red Cloud (called Black Hawk in the novel) in that time. Cather met Anna when, following her father's death, Anna moved to Red Cloud where she was working for the Miner family.¹⁷

As a young woman, Anna had returned quietly to Webster County unwed and deserted by the railroad man Murphy and there raised her daughter herself until she met and married John Pavelka and became mistress of her own establishment. Cather's trip to the Pavelka farm in 1916 may well have been the basis for the visit Jim Burden makes in the final book of the novel when he sees Ántonia, now middle-aged, "battered but not diminished," surrounded by her large brood of children.¹⁸

Cather's strong relationship with her Czech friend Anna and her influence on author's life is reflected in her largely autobiographical novel:

"Do you know, Ántonia, since I've been away, I think of you more often than of any one else in this part of the world. ... The idea of you is a part of my mind; you influence my likes and dislikes, all my tastes, hundreds of times when I don't realize it. You really are a part of me."¹⁹

Cather introduced the novel as a compilation of childhood memories. However nostalgic the description of the past life in Nebraska and its nature can be, memories might be incomplete and might tend to establish idealistic picture of the reality. That is why in my opinion Cather included the line: "'Read it as soon as you can,'" he said, rising, "but don't let it influence your own story."²⁰ On the other hand the close relationship between the narrator and the protagonist "makes the narrative trustworthy and illustrative." As Otakar Vočadlo put it:

¹⁶ The name *Sadílek* was highly respected among American Czechs. F. J. Sadílek was a Pioneer and political authority in Wilber, Nebraska, his daughter was the first Czech doctor in Nebraska (Otakar Vočadlo, afterword to Cather, *Moje Antonie*, Mladá fronta, Praha 1966).

¹⁷ "The book is dedicated to Carrie and Irene Miner, who are Frances and Nina Harling in *My Ántonia*." (Charles Mignon, *My Ántonia, The Willa Cather Scholarly edition*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska

Press, 1994, accessed September 12, 2017, <http://cather.unl.edu/0003.html#r5>).

¹⁸ Charles Mignon, *My Ántonia, The Willa Cather Scholarly edition*, 1994.

¹⁹ Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*. New York: Dover publications, Inc., 1994, 152.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 3.

The story is narrated through the point of view of young American man who knew and loved *Ántonia* from his childhood. This point of view makes the narrative trustworthy and illustrative. Having mastered the technique of indirect narration, Cather, within the scope of retrospective realism, created a novel that stands beyond her other works.²¹

In one of her letters to President Masaryk, Cather “wishes he could meet the family of the real *Antonia*.”²² Czech immigrants appear also in her highly praised novel *O Pioneers!* and in her collection *Obscure Destinies* published in the 1930s.²³ Along with the Czech immigrants there are also settlers of other European nationalities that were coming to America. Cather depicts the fates of Swedish, Norwegian, German, Austrian, Polish and Russian immigrants.

Her work, especially the novel *My Ántonia* does not only show her warm relationship with her childhood friends but also expresses her great admiration for the achievements of the pioneers and mainly the heroic immigrant women. “*Ántonia*, in this account, is an ennobling and civilizing metaphor, dignifying the transition from wild land to fertile farm as perhaps the most distinctively “American” story.”²⁴

1.2.1 Cather and President T. G. Masaryk

Cather’s childhood friends were not the only Czechs who the author kept a close relationship with. Her writings gained a great admiration of the first Czechoslovakian president Thomas Garrigue Masaryk with whom she was exchanging lengthy letters during the interwar years. In one of her letters from 1935 she wrote: “Your friendly interest in my books has grown the more precious to me as the times have grown stranger.”²⁵ Cather seldom commented the political situation in her letters to Masaryk. She did though in 1935, which Halac called as “a rare political reflection by the inward-looking and conservative novelist.” Their respect for each other’s undertakings was mutual. According to Cather, countries as America or Switzerland „have benefited from the flight of scholars because there is nowhere else for them to go.”²⁶

²¹ Otakar Vočadlo, afterword to Cather, *Moje Antonie*. Mladá fronta, Praha 1966, 243.

²² Dennis Halac. “Ever so true: Willa Cather & T.G. Masaryk.” 1993. *New Criterion* 12, no. 3: 36, accessed July 3, 2017.

²³ Czech characters briefly appear also in her novels *One of Ours* (1922) and *A Lost Lady* (1923).

²⁴ Goldman, Anne E. *Rereading My Ántonia. The Cambridge Companion to Willa Cather*. Lindemann, Marilee (ed.) [Cambridge; New York], p. 159-174.

²⁵ Cather, Willa, Andrew Jewell, and Janis P. Stout. *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013, accessed 13 September 2017, <http://theamericanreader.com/2-february-1925-willa-cather-to-president-tomas-masaryk/>.

²⁶ Halac, “Ever so true,” 1993.

Masaryk may have admired Cather's work even before any publication of her work in Czechoslovakia for he was interested in American literature and was fluent in English since the time he was invited to University of Chicago to give lectures in Slavic studies. His ties with America grew from professional to personal when he met his wife. During his stays he visited Czech immigrant centres and spoke on subjects like religion, socialism, Czech literature and history. "He clearly contributed to the dissemination of knowledge of basic Czech national aspirations."²⁷ In America Masaryk looked for the inspiration for dealing with the issue of Czechoslovakian independence. Masaryk was convinced "that Czech-Americans were an important part of the Czech nation and that America could be a source of inspiration for Czech political life."²⁸

The mutual understanding of the American author and the first Czechoslovakian president was supported also by the fact that they shared their admiration for the work of pioneers. They recognized them as founders of the republic. Masaryk in his treatise wrote his respect for the state founded on the ground of religiously organized towns, whose founders were mostly farmer pioneers. Pioneering remained its stable moral and political factor.²⁹ For Masaryk, American culture was a source of inspiration. He considered American democracy as a primary model for building the independent Czechoslovak state. In *Světová revoluce* Masaryk openly expressed his sympathies for the American culture and also believed that Czech immigrants, who represented considerable part of the nation as he put it, felt the same. Namely, he pointed out American engineering but most importantly he admired the love of freedom and individual autonomy that the European citizens were to be taught. According to Masaryk "America is in many ways producing splendid models of the future culture."³⁰ As Kovtun put it, Masaryk embodied "the zenith of the ties between the peoples of Czechoslovakia and America."³¹ In course of his four visits the leader of Czechoslovak liberation movement monitored "the American Czech and Slovaks campaigning for a program of self-determination and independence."³² He managed to accomplish what his preceding fellow countrymen had seeded:

²⁷ Jiří G. Kovtun, *Masaryk and America. Testimony of a relationship*. Washington 1988, ix.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Tomáš G. Masaryk, *Světová revoluce za války a ve válce 1914-1918*. Praha 1925, 251.

³⁰ Masaryk, *Světová revoluce*, 1925, 253. Own translation.

³¹ Kovtun, *Masaryk and America*, 1988. v.

³² Ibid. xii.

Although important pioneering work had been done by the American Czechs and Slovaks, who constituted an agile pressure group with influential connections in the press and government circles, much remained to be accomplished when Masaryk came to America.³³

As for Cather's depiction of Czechs in her work, Masaryk had the opportunity to assess the authentic voice of her works because he "as a young swain on his way to the Garrigue household in Brooklyn probably met characters very much like Antonia Shimerda and Anton Rosicky on the Atlantic crossing."³⁴ In his treatise *Světová revoluce* Masaryk discussed Cather's depiction of Czechs in America, too. According to Masaryk, Willa Cather describes Czech immigrants with an apparent personal affection but the account of Czech life in America remains truly realistic.³⁵ Masaryk's high acclaim of Cather can be inferred also from the fact that she is one of two American female authors that he mentioned in his work. Generally speaking, Masaryk observes that clear features of European influence are present in American literature. The trend proceeded though in both directions. American influence was noticeable in European literature as well.

Cather's popularity among Czechs and Slovaks was evident from several translations of *My Antonia* within a few years after the American publication. Cather's work was most greatly accepted during the democratic inter-war years.

³³ Kovtun, *Masaryk and America*, 1988, xi.

³⁴ Halac, "Ever so true," 1993.

³⁵ Masaryk, *Světová revoluce*, 1925, 258.

2 Czech Integration and Assimilation

2.1 Czechs settling western prairies

2.1.1 *Hunger for land*

Czech immigrants to Nebraska were entering the country with the intent of farming on their own land. Josef G. Svoboda, University of Nebraska archivist, in his article “Love of Liberty” wrote: “Czechs settled in Nebraska for the same reason they settled in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Kansas, and the Dakotas. They migrated for the most part from the villages of Bohemia and Moravia, and they hungered for land they could till and own, recognizing that American land was available in abundance.”³⁶ Rose Rosicky in 1929 stated that Czech immigration to Nebraska was induced by the lack of farming land in the homeland of Czechs and also because of the “Austro-Hungarian militarism and despotism, which the democratic and peace-loving Czechs detested.”³⁷ Both authors agree on the two most important factors which Kucera sums up as “lack of personal freedom and lack of land.”³⁸

The lack of land in their homeland and the vision of economic prosperity in America brought there also the Shimerdas³⁹ family, as Cather reflected it in her novel *My Ántonia*.⁴⁰ In the novel, Ántonia explained to Jim the reason of their emigration: “All the time she say: ‘America big country; much money, much land for my boys, much husband for my girls’ ... my mama, she want Ambrosch for be rich, with many cattle.”⁴¹

The actual year of the Shimerdas’ arrival is not mentioned in the novel. The Sadilek family arrived to America in 1880, and was among the many Czech families that came to Nebraska in the second half of the nineteenth century. The first reliable

³⁶ Joseph G. Svoboda. “Czech-Americans: The Love of Liberty,” *Nebraska History* 74 (1993): 109-119.

³⁷ Rose Rosicky, *A History of Czechs (Bohemians) in Nebraska*. Omaha: National Printing company 1929, 19-29.

³⁸ Vladimir Kucera, “Nebraska: My New Home,” from *Czech Contributions to the Progress of Nebraska*. Lincoln: Kucera and Novacek, 1976, 20.

³⁹ “The name Shimerda, as Cather has named the actual Sadilek family, was a common one in Saline County, Nebraska.” In order to name her characters, Cather visited Wilber in 1917, which was densely populated by Czech immigrants then. (Cather, Willa. *My Ántonia*, The Willa Cather Scholarly edition.) The Czech translation (Olga Fialová, Emanuela Tilschová, 1966) uses the name *Šimerdovi* and forms the feminine nouns.

⁴⁰ The acute accent marks the stress on the first syllable of the Czech name.

⁴¹ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 45.

records of Czech immigrants in Nebraska come from 1870 when their overall number was 1770. In 1890s the community reached 17000. As an aftermath of the Homestead Act, majority of the newcomers settled in agricultural regions and were scattered over the state.⁴²

2.1.2 Pioneers' arrival

The very arrival to Nebraska and the immediate reaction of the Czech pioneer immigrants to the circumstances in new environment Cather best illustrated in her novel *My Ántonia*. The Shimerda family most probably learnt about the possibility of migration to America from a distant relative, which was a common practice among immigrants. The Shimerda's relative cooperated with a fellow-countryman who was already in the place where they were to come:

Their agreement with him was made before they left the old country, through a cousin of his, who was also a relative of Mrs. Shimerda. The Shimerdas were the first Bohemian family to come to this part of the country. Krajiek was their only interpreter, and could tell them anything he chose. They could not speak enough English to ask for advice, or even to make their most pressing wants known.⁴³

They were distrustful to their new vicinity and for some time they remained rather isolated: "During those first months the Shimerdas never went to town. Krajiek⁴⁴ encouraged them in the belief that in Black Hawk they would somehow be mysteriously separated from their money."⁴⁵ The Shimerdas reserved reaction seems to be in accordance with a statement in *Harvard encyclopaedia of American ethnic groups* that says that "the Czechs did not assimilate rapidly."⁴⁶

The Czech immigrants to the Midwestern agricultural areas faced wild, intact land where there was nothing. Their habitations were built only by using primitive materials and elementary tools they brought. In so called "sod houses" or dugouts built halfway in the ground using sod and other material available they had to last out the early years.⁴⁷ For illustration I add an image that depicts the dugout of Kovářik brothers, who were among the first Czech pioneers in Nebraska. Rosicky's account of them states:

⁴² Polišíenský, *Češi a Amerika*, 1996. 49-51.

⁴³ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 13.

⁴⁴ Anna Pavelka recalled visiting a Charlie Krecek, who had written glowingly of Nebraska, when her family first arrived in Webster County. "Otakar Odložilik says Krajiek may well be Cather's phonetic transcription of the Czech pronunciation of Krecek." (Charles Mignon, *My Ántonia, The Willa Cather Scholarly edition*.) The Czech translation uses the name *Krajík*.

⁴⁵ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 18.

⁴⁶ Thernstrom, *Harvard encyclopedia*, 1980, 261.

⁴⁷ Polišíenský, *Češi a Amerika*, 1996. 32.

Joseph and Thomas Kovarik, born in Havlovice near Domazlice. They built the first saloon and dance hall on their farm, which burned down in 1879. Their dug-out for many years remained as a memento of pioneer days.⁴⁸



Kovářik brothers' dugout near Crete

Obrázek 1: Kovářik brothers' dugout

Cather depicted the Shimerdas' first dwelling as follows:

As we approached the Shimerdas' dwelling, I could still see nothing but rough red hillocks, and draws with shelving banks and long roots hanging out where the earth had crumbled away. Presently, against one of those banks, I saw a sort of shed, thatched with the same wine-colored grass that grew everywhere. Near it tilted a shattered windmill-frame, that had no wheel.⁴⁹

“There was nothing but land: not a country at all, but the material out of which countries are made.”⁵⁰

Poverty that suddenly struck the Shimerdas contrasted with their affluent status in their homeland. Only the well-off families were able to set out in the world and start a new life from the very beginning. In the following excerpt the narrator describes the financial situation of the Shimerdas as the father of the family recounted it:

[Mr. Shimerda] wanted us to know that they were not beggars in the old country; he made good wages, and his family were respected there. He left Bohemia with more than a thousand dollars in savings, after their passage money was paid. He had in some way lost on exchange in New York, and the railway fare to Nebraska was more than they expected. By the time they paid Krajiek for the land, and bought his horses and oxen and some old farm machinery, they had very little money left.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Rose Rosicky, *A History of Czechs in Nebraska*, 1929.

⁴⁹ Cather, *My Antonia*, 1994. 13-14

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 7.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 39.

Those immigrants who intended to pursue farming in the New World had to bring a sufficient amount of money with them. “The Czechs brought more money to the United States than most immigrants. In 1902 their average declaration per person of \$23.12 was considerably above the \$14.84 average for all entrants. Though hardly riches, this money facilitated further transportation and settlement in the western United States.”⁵² Moreover, after acquirement of the soil⁵³ they had to buy seeds, livestock, and farming tools that averaged at least \$400 and moved up to \$1000 for the following generations.⁵⁴

Unlike for example Scandinavians who came from a common parish or fjord, Czech immigrants constituted usually groups of families or friends, coming from different towns.⁵⁵ “Czech immigration was predominantly family immigration, especially in the earlier decades when the Czechs came primarily to farm; women and children accounted for over two-thirds of the immigrants at that time.”⁵⁶ For a farmer his family served as an essential economic unit: “children lived at home until marriage, working as “farm labor” in the countryside or contributing factory wages to the family income in the cities.”⁵⁷ The same applied for the Shimerda family: “Ambrosch and Antonia were both old enough to work in the fields, and they were willing to work.”⁵⁸

2.1.3 Hardship of Czech immigrants

Even before the immigrants settled in the New World they had to endure tough conditions of the sea travel. Cather mentions that Anton and Mary Rosicky “had been shipmates on a rough voyage and had stood by each other in trying times.”⁵⁹ In *My Antonia* she states that “after weeks on the ocean, the Shimerdas were famished for fruit.”⁶⁰

The first years in the new country were tough for the Shimerdas and their staying power was tested many times. The living conditions were so atrocious the children would rather stay outside shivering with cold, playing with Jim than going home. “But

⁵² Thernstrom, *Harvard encyclopedia*, 1980, 263.

⁵³ In 1871 one acre of soil in Nebraska cost \$1,3. In 1892 it was already \$25-30, in 1900 the prize went up to \$40 (Oldřich Kašpar. *Tam za mořem je Amerika*, Československý spisovatel Praha, 1986, 17).

⁵⁴ Polišínský, *Češi a Amerika*, 48-51.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 74.

⁵⁶ Thernstrom, *Harvard encyclopedia*, 263.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 270.

⁵⁸ Willa Cather, *My Antonia*, 1994. 39.

⁵⁹ Willa Cather, “Neighbour Rosicky.” *Obscure Destinies*. New York: Knopf, 1932, 7.

⁶⁰ Willa Cather, *My Antonia*, 1994. 18.

they were so glad to get away from their ugly cave and their mother's scolding that they begged me to go on and on, as far as Russian Peter's house."⁶¹ Their poverty made them experience extreme situations. "They ain't got but one overcoat among 'em over there, and they take turns wearing it."⁶²

Czechs in Nebraska naturally wanted to gain as fertile free soil offered as possible. However they could not choose, the soil was assigned to them by government and land agents instead. In many cases the locally convenient areas had to be yielded to the railway companies.⁶³ The Shimerdas in *My Ántonia* had to deal with rough soil that did not provide them with much food for it was hard to cultivate "the land of little value for farming."⁶⁴ In Cather's novella "Neighbour Rosicky," Anton Rosicky's "own place lay in a rougher territory, where there was some clay in the soil and it was not so productive. When he bought his land, he hadn't the money to buy on High Praire;..."⁶⁵ The scarcity of the Shimerdas made them eat even thrown-out food and prairie dogs, which seemed unimaginable for their neighbours. "Grandmother looked up in alarm and spoke to grandfather. "Josiah, you don't suppose Krajiek would let them poor creatures eat prairie dogs, do you?"⁶⁶

Czechs in Nebraska as well as in other states where "farming was the characteristic way of life" had to endure hardships that pursued them in the early years of their settlement. The problems included: "living in damp, infested dugouts until they could build a log cabin or a sod house; subsisting on corn mush or potatoes until they could afford a cow and some chickens; losing their crops to drought, blight, or grasshoppers; fighting loneliness in the woods or on the prairies."⁶⁷ All of these troubles Cather describes in her work as well. In "The Bohemian Girl" Clara says: "they haven't had anything so interesting to chatter about since the grasshopper year."⁶⁸ As far as extreme natural forces are concerned, Nebraska climate was distinguished by severe winters. "But the snow and the bitter weather had disheartened them all."⁶⁹ In the time of Mr. Shimerda's suicide there was a blizzard going on. "Next day our men had to

⁶¹ Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994. 34.

⁶² Ibid. 36.

⁶³ Polišíenský, *Češi a Amerika*, 1996, 49-51.

⁶⁴ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 13.

⁶⁵ Cather, "Neighbour Rosicky," 1932, 5.

⁶⁶ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994. 37.

⁶⁷ Thernstrom, *Harvard encyclopedia*, 265.

⁶⁸ Willa Cather, "The Bohemian Girl," *McClure's magazine*, 39, August 1912, (accessed July 8, 2017, <http://cather.unl.edu/ss004.html>).

⁶⁹ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 39.

shovel until noon to reach the barn - and the snow was still falling! There had not such a storm in the ten years my grandfather had lived in Nebraska.”⁷⁰ “No wagon could be got to the Shimerdas’ until a road was broken, and that would be a day’s job.”⁷¹

2.1.3.1 *Expectations vs. Reality*

*“What were we to do with the frail little creature we had lured back to life by false pretenses?”*⁷²

It was Mrs. Shimerda who decided that her family would leave Bohemia for The United States. She was well informed about the allegedly almost endless possibilities the country offers. However, the family was not ready for and perhaps did not admit the possibility of a failure. The following excerpt marks a dialogue between Jim and *Ántonia*. She confides to Jim with her father’s unhappiness. “My papa sad for the old country. ... He don’t like this kawn-tree.” Jim reacts meanly in reaction to Mrs. Shimerda’s blaming the Burdens of their poverty. “People who don’t like this country ought to stay at home,” I said severely. “We don’t make them come here.”⁷³ *Ántonia* explains her mother’s motive of their immigration to America was their economic advancement:

“He not want to come, nev-er!” she burst out “My mamenka make him come. All the time she say: “America big country; much money, much land for my boys, much husband for my girls.’ My papa, he cry for leave his old friends what make music with him. He love very much the man what play the long horn like this” - she indicated a slide trombone. “They go to school together and are friends from boys. But my mama, she want Ambrosch for be rich, with many cattle.”⁷⁴

The motivation of the Shimerdas’ family to leave their country does not differ from that of the majority of Czech immigrants to the United States from the mid-19th century to World War I which was the period of economic mass migration.⁷⁵ A significant moment in the history of immigration was the proclamation of Homestead Act in 1862 that caused growth of immigration to the agricultural Midwest, especially Nebraska and Kansas. The proposal of up to 160 acres of free uncultivated land for farming that

⁷⁰ Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994. 47.

⁷¹ Ibid. 50.

⁷² Ibid. 22.

⁷³ Ibid. 45.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Thernstorm, 1980, 262.

would become the possession of the owner after five years brought incomers from east shores of America as well as Czechs, Germans, Swedes and Norwegians from Europe.⁷⁶

Czechs as well as other nationalities were in their homeland informed about the possibilities of emigration through “personal letters and communications published in Czech papers, plus the attraction of cheap, good lands,” that as Rosicky put it “produced a veritable influx all through the seventies.”⁷⁷ Svoboda adds that “some midwestern states, anxious to increase their population, encouraged immigration from European countries, including Bohemia, by publishing pamphlets and newspaper advertisements about the wonderland on the American prairies.”⁷⁸ “Stories of the discovery of gold in California in 1849” were often “sensationally magnified” and therefore “lured some Czechs across the Atlantic.” “Thirteen years later, the 1862 Homestead Act provided a real inducement to peasants who had to eke out an existence on inadequate land holdings.”⁷⁹ Immigration to America was also supported by agents who were providing information about the conditions of the journey and about the life overseas.⁸⁰

2.1.3.2 *The language barrier*

One of the biggest obstacles Czechs had to deal with in the New World was the foreign language. That is why Czech immigrants used to settle in places either already inhabited by Czechs, or they aimed to places with German or Polish settlements for they could communicate with their Old World-neighbours better than with the English speaking Americans.⁸¹ The language barrier naturally slowed down the establishment of a network of Czech shopkeepers, drugstores, physicians or lawyers. The newcomers took the low-paid jobs as farm workers or housemaids.⁸² Those settling on the frontier had it even worse. Rose Rosicky noted that “pioneering is hard at any time, more than doubly so for people who do not speak the prevailing language.”⁸³

Language as a highly distinguishable feature immediately designated the newcomers, and the majority Americans often formed attitudes based on it. In *My*

⁷⁶ Polišínský, *Češi a Amerika*, 1996, 48.

⁷⁷ Rose Rosicky, *A history of Czechs*, 1929, 30.

⁷⁸ Svoboda, “Czech-Americans: The Love of Liberty,” 1993, 112.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 111.

⁸⁰ Polišínský, *Češi a Amerika*, 1996, 25.

⁸¹ *Ibid.* 28.

⁸² *Ibid.* 48-51.

⁸³ Rose Rosicky, *A history of Czechs*, 1929, 30.

Ántonia, most of the town's people' attitude was that "all foreigners were ignorant people who could n't speak English."⁸⁴ For the immigrants of the first generations language was a bearer of their culture and identity to be maintained. The town people of the novel represent those "English-speaking Americans who had long looked with misgivings or open hostility and prejudice on that community's efforts to preserve its language and Old World culture."⁸⁵

The language barrier played a significant role in the integration of the Shimerda family in Cather's novel *My Ántonia*. "They can't any of them speak English, except one little girl, and all she can say is 'We go Black Hawk, Nebraska.'"⁸⁶ The Shimerdas were the first Bohemian family in the region. Being unable to speak the language they were easily taken advantage of. From the beginning they were dependent on a fellow-countryman Peter Krajiek. "They hated Krajiek, but they clung to him because he was the only human being with whom they could talk or from whom they could get information."⁸⁷ He sold them his homestead overpriced. Jim's grandmother said on its account that "it's no better than a badger hole; no proper dugout at all."⁸⁸ Otto, the Austrian man who accompanied Jim on his way to Nebraska suggested he could help Shimerdas but dismissed the idea for the "distrust" of Bohemians to Austrians: "I'd have interfered about the horses - the old man can understand some German - if I'd 'a' thought it would do any good. But Bohemians has a natural distrust of Austrians." When he is asked to explain why it is that Otto says: "well, ma'm, it's politics. It would take me a long while to explain."⁸⁹

Cather mentions the political situation of the Old World and supposes rather hostile relationship among the Czechs and Austrians. Historians however speak about mutual sympathy when it comes to immigrant cohabitation. Since both nations faced similar challenges and troubles in the New World, they were willing to cooperate with each other. "Ironically, since more Czechs knew German than English, they tended to settle near their old enemies, the Germans."⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 98.

⁸⁵ Mila Šašková-Pierce "Czech-Language Maintenance in Nebraska," *Nebraska History* 74 (1993): 209-217, 211.

⁸⁶ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 6.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 18.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* 13.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 13.

⁹⁰ Thernstrom, *Harvard encyclopedia*, 1980, 264.

2.2 Assimilation through learning new language

Historians agree that Czech immigrants “found English difficult to learn.”⁹¹ In Cather’s work many of the Czech immigrants manage to learn English very well. There are also characters who do not manage to learn English well even after years living in America. Some Czechs also learn to speak English fluently but with years living in close Czech community they slowly forget the second language.

Mr. Shimerda put emphasis on teaching English his oldest daughter *Ántonia*. “He placed this book in my grandmother’s hands, looked at her entreatingly, and said with an earnestness which I shall never forget, “Te-e-ach, te-e-ach my *Ántonia!*”⁹² His words do not only reveal Mr. Shimerda’s close relation to *Ántonia* but also the fact that Mr. and Mrs. Shimerda as the older generation needed their children and counted on them for the future. *Ántonia* was indeed very early able to learn English and translate for her family “[Mr. Shimerda] spoke kindly and gravely, and *Ántonia* translated.”⁹³ In my reading, *Ántonia*’s approach to learning a new language reflects her attitude towards the new culture. Her enthusiasm for learning is part of her openness to a different culture. Jim reflected her learning ability as follows: “While we snuggled down there out of the wind she learned a score of words. She was quick, and very eager.”⁹⁴ Three years later, when she was seventeen, her English was fluent: “Tony learned English so quickly that by the time school began she could speak as well as any of us.”⁹⁵

Ántonia’s openness however was not infinite. Unlike her Norwegian friend Lena who assimilated totally, *Ántonia* remained foreign in some aspects. “*Ántonia* had never talked like the people about her. Even after she learned to speak English readily there was always something impulsive and foreign in her speech. But Lena had picked up all the conventional expressions she heard at Mrs. Thomas’s dressmaking shop.”⁹⁶ I think it was not because *Ántonia* was not able to catch the colloquial speech but rather her unwillingness to wholly assimilate which stemmed from patriotism with the old country.

⁹¹ Thernstrom, Harvard encyclopedia, 1980, 261.

⁹² Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 16.

⁹³ Ibid. 23.

⁹⁴ Ibid. 16.

⁹⁵ Ibid. 76.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 134.

Ántonia came to America at sensitive age of fourteen. She was no more a little child which is without any attitudes and ties to any places, nor a grown up whose identity formation is ended. The age she came in with enabled her to choose. She could still learn the language very well unlike older people whose ability to learn a foreign language passed the age when one learns easily. But taking into account her strong loving relationship to her father, her nationality feeling caused that she did not totally assimilated like Lena. Unlike Lena, who dismissed her past life in countryside, Ántonia married and raised a family with a fellow Czech in traditions of her parents.

Cather notes a mark of language assimilation of the Czechs in a scene where Ambrosch and Ántonia, while she was still living with the Shimerdas, naturally switch into English language after they have been speaking in Czech.

Ántonia and Ambrosch were talking in Bohemian; disputing about which of them had done more ploughing that day. Mrs. Shimerda egged them on, chuckling while she gobbled her food. Presently Ambrosch said sullenly in English: "You take them ox tomorrow and try the sod plough. Then you not be so smart." His sister laughed. "Don't be mad. I know it's awful hard work for break sod. I milk the cow for you to-morrow, if you want."⁹⁷

The reader does not know Ambrosch's true motivation for his sudden switch. He might have wanted Jim, who was also present, to hear Ambrosch challenging Ántonia about the hard work. However, Cather does not provide other clues that would explain that. In my reading he spoke English because he felt the challenge is a matter of importance and therefore should be pronounced in an official language which he considered to be English. I think the scene resembles a similar one from Cather's novella "Neighbor Rosicky" where Rosicky explains that he discusses important matters in his second language.

2.3 Czech language maintenance

As Šašková-Pierce put it, "American Czechs, like the Czechs in Austria-Hungary, perceived the maintenance of the Czech language to be a guarantee that the Czech nation would survive as a distinct entity."⁹⁸ Ántonia Shimerda Cuzak was therefore portrayed as an ideal immigrant in her for she managed to maintain the Czech language for the next generation.

⁹⁷ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 62.

⁹⁸ Míla Šašková-Pierce, "Czech-language Maintenance in Nebraska," 1993.

As *Ántonia* grew older the Czech language became for her more important than English: “I’ve forgot my English so. I don’t often talk it any more. I tell the children I used to speak real well.” She said they always spoke Bohemian at home. The little ones could not speak English at all - did n’t learn it until they went to school.”⁹⁹ The older children could speak English fluently when they talked to Jim: “Won’t you come in? Mother will be here in a minute.”¹⁰⁰ The past repeated itself. With passing years *Ántonia* became her parents and her children became *Ántonia*.

Similar development can be perceived in the short story “Neighbour Rosicky” for Anton Rosicky’s youngest child Josephine speaks better English than Rosicky: “Poor little Papa I don’t want him to be hungry!” Rosicky answered to her: “Da’s long ago, child. I ain’t never been hungry since I had your mudder to cook fur me.”¹⁰¹

In situations when Czechs were accompanied by an English speaker, they turned to English: “From politeness he spoke in English”¹⁰² When Cuzak wanted to tell *Ántonia* greetings from friends in front of Jim, he apologized first: “And very many send word to you, *Ántonia*. You will excuse” - turning to me - “if I tell her.” While we walked toward the house he related incidents and delivered messages in the tongue he spoke fluently.”¹⁰³ The same politeness is seen in “Neighbour Rosicky:” “he watched his wife’s face from his end of the table and spoke to her in Czech. Then, with the instinct of politeness which seldom failed him, he turned to the Doctor and said slyly; “I was just tellin’ her not to ask you no questions about Mrs. Marshall.”¹⁰⁴ In “Neighbour Rosicky” English became a language of negotiating important matters. “Rosicky asked her in Czech if she wasn’t going to have any coffee. She replied in English, as being somehow the right language for transacting business: “Now what did Doctor Ed say, Anton?”¹⁰⁵

Unlike the Shimerdas or the Vavrikas Anton Rosicky had already spent two years in London before arriving to America, therefore he probably could speak English already. In New York however he “went to night school and learned to read English.”¹⁰⁶ But nor for Anton Rosicky became English the preferred language. When he was older

⁹⁹ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994. 158.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.* 157.

¹⁰¹ Cather, “Neighbour Rosicky,” *Obscure Destinies*, 1932, 16.

¹⁰² Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 169.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Cather, “Neighbour Rosicky,” *Obscure Destinies*, 1932, 3.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 6.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.* 8.

“it was bothersome to tell a long story in English (he nearly always talked to the boys in Czech), but he wanted Polly to hear this one.”¹⁰⁷

In Cather’s work the first generation Czech immigrants (who came in their middle age) usually struggle with learning of the English language. For many of them it is not only about learning that is difficult but also their attitude and willingness to accept another language. *Ántonia*’s eagerness to learn the foreign language in her childhood differed significantly from her mother’s attitude. For some reason Mrs. Shimerda was not happy about *Ántonia* taking English lessons with Jim. “Almost every day she came running across the prairie to have her reading lesson with me. Mrs. Shimerda grumbled, but realized it was important that one member of the family should learn English.”¹⁰⁸ Mrs. Shimerda accepted the fact that for the life in a new country the knowledge of the language is necessary but did not take it as an advantage or must, rather was willing to do just what is necessary but nothing more. Her attitude showed unwillingness to assimilate, in insisting on using their own language, have only one family member to communicate. But her character favoured learning English sufficiently: “while *Ántonia* translated, [she] put in a word now and then on her own account. The woman had a quick ear, and caught up phrases whenever she heard English spoken.”¹⁰⁹ In “The Bohemian Girl”, Joe Vavrika „talked very rapidly and always tumbled over his English. He seldom spoke it to his customers, and had never learned much.”¹¹⁰

According to Opatrný, the immigrants from the central Europe identified themselves according to the territory of their origin. “Land patriotism” ... “persisted among Czechs as well as Germans throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, though with an increasing emphasis on nationality defined in a linguistic and cultural sense.”¹¹¹

Various attitudes to a preferred language in Cather’s work correspond to what Šaškova-Pierce noted about Czech-Americans, that many second-generation bilingual Czechs accepted English “as a language of higher culture” and spoke it exclusively, others were “unwilling to lose their uniqueness” and were using and improving their

¹⁰⁷ Cather, “Neighbour Rosicky,” *Obscure Destinies*, 1932, 15.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* 18.

¹⁰⁹ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 40.

¹¹⁰ Cather, “The bohemian girl.”

¹¹¹ Josef Opatrný, “Problems in the History of Czech Immigration to America in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century,” *Nebraska History* 74 (1993): 120-129. p. 122.

Czech language, at the same time feeling the necessity of integration into American society.¹¹²

2.3.1 Czech language and organization of public life

Míla Šašková-Pierce examined the Czech language maintenance. According to her, Czech intellectuals, affected by the inferior status of Czech language in the old country, “perceived the cultivation of the Czech language through educational, fraternal, and civic organizations to be a fundamental condition for the survival of their nation.”¹¹³ The organizations were emerging largely from the second half of the nineteenth century but in New York “in 1900 the press still reported on the existence of over fifty Czech societies.”¹¹⁴ Cather mentions the existence of these organizations too. “When he was thirty-five, there was a great meeting in New York of Bohemian athletic societies, and Rosicky left the tailor shop and went home with the Omaha delegates to try his fortune in another part of the world.”¹¹⁵

Czech language has been maintained also through numerous Czech-American newspapers and periodicals. “It is estimated that in 1900 about 150,000 Czechs subscribed to one Czech newspaper or another.”¹¹⁶ On one hand the newspapers written in Czech language were to support the continuation of Czech culture, on the other hand they became a mark of gradual Czech immigrant assimilation. Josef Opatrný noted that “reading some of these newspapers reveals the gradual identification of their editors and readers with the prevailing outlook and value system in their new homeland.”¹¹⁷ Opatrný adds that the attitude shift was for example noticeable in the coverage of the Spanish-American war.

In the novel and the short stories I have examined Cather mentions “Bohemian papers” several times. Anton Rosicky “subscribed for a Bohemian paper printed in Chicago, then for one printed in Omaha.”¹¹⁸ In Rosicky’s story, Czech newspapers were essential in deciding to move from city to countryside, which will be discussed in other

¹¹² Míla Šašková-Pierce, “Czech-Language maintenance in Nebraska,” *Nebraska history*, 1993, 211.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* 209.

¹¹⁴ Vlado Simko, “Evolution of our ethnic community in New York city,” in *Kosmas, Czechoslovak and Central European Journal*, 2012, Vol. 25, 103-114, (accessed September 5, 2017 <http://www.bohemianbenevolent.org/index.php/about/pastpresent>).

¹¹⁵ Cather, “Neighbour Rosicky,” *Obscure Destinies*, 1932, 10.

¹¹⁶ Míla Šašková-Pierce, “Czech-language maintenance in Nebraska,” *Nebraska history*, 1993, 209.

¹¹⁷ Opatrný, “Problems in the history of Czech immigration,” *Nebraska history*, 1993, 125.

¹¹⁸ Cather, “Neighbour Rosicky,” *Obscure Destinies*, 1932, 10.

part of the thesis. In other place of the short story the papers are listed among the things that belong to "Father's corner" which in my reading suggests Rosicky's pertaining Czech identity for he keeps his papers among things that he has some relation to, or things that identify himself as for example the needles and tailor's thimble. "This spot was called "Father's corner," though it was not a corner at all. He had a shelf there, where he kept his Bohemian papers and his pipes and tobacco, and his shears and needles and thread and tailor's thimble."¹¹⁹

In "The Bohemian Girl" Clara Vavrika regularly reads Czech papers to her father Joe: On Sunday afternoon Joe Vavrika, in his shirt sleeves and carpet slippers, was sitting in his garden, smoking a long-tasseled porcelain pipe with a hunting scene painted on the bowl. Clara sat under the cherry tree, reading aloud to him from the, weekly Bohemian papers.¹²⁰

As for the content of the Czech papers in Cather's work, the novel *My Ántonia* provides the most space which allows discussing the news. The readers talk about a famous Czech singer.

Cuzak had brought home with him a roll of illustrated Bohemian papers. He opened them and began to tell his wife the news, much of which seemed to relate to one person. I heard the name Vasakova, Vasakova, repeated several times with lively interest, and presently I asked him whether he were talking about the singer, Maria Vasak. ... he pointed out her picture and told me that Vasak had broken her leg, climbing in the Austrian Alps, and would not be able to fill her engagements. He seemed delighted to find that I had heard her sing in London and in Vienna; got out his pipe and lit it to enjoy our talk the better.¹²¹

Its illustrated form and celebrity-based information suggest a tabloid newspaper format. As for the Czech immigrants' shift of values that stated Opatrný, in my opinion Cather's work does not depict any clear marks of such tendency. On the other hand, what I find noteworthy is the fact that in each instance the Czech papers are mentioned the Czech immigrant is depicted with a pipe and the foremost readers of the news were men. It is perhaps also because at Cather's time the news were both written by and read more for men than women.

Josef Opatrný also criticized the credibility of Czech newspaper writers: "Highly distorted was their impression that these compatriots had preserved all features of traditional Czech society - a view propagated in Czech-language American publications

¹¹⁹ Cather, "Neighbour Rosicky," *Obscure Destinies*, 1932, 8.

¹²⁰ Cather, "The Bohemian Girl."

¹²¹ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 170.

by the most nationally conscious Czech immigrants and then duly cited in the Bohemian and Moravian press.”¹²² In my opinion neither the Czech newspapers present in her work, nor Cather herself, as a writer dealing with Czechs in Nebraska does not raise that distortion. Czech immigrants in her work do not belong to a large Czech community but they inhabit the frontier areas. Characters in her work have to adapt to the conditions of Nebraska prairie and ultimately not all of them succeed. Since most of the Czech and Slovak national associations and societies sprung up or were based in cities, I add an account of Czechs in New York.

2.3.2 Czechs in New York

Almost all the Czech immigrants went through New York for the city served as a gateway to the new world. Czech immigrants travelled by steamships which “dominated the favoured routes between Hamburg and Bremen to New York and Galveston.”¹²³ The Shimerda family also went through New York. The author suggests that life of the Czech immigrants who stayed in New York differed dramatically from the hard life on the farms on the Grait Plains. “If, instead of going to the end of the railroad, old Mr. Shimerda had stayed in New York and picked up a living with his fiddle, how different *Ántonia*’s life might have been!”¹²⁴ Instead of depressing isolation the Shimerdas would belong to a city community which according to Harvard encyclopedia “numbering 11,868 of both generations in 1890 - settled in the Lower East Side in the early years...”¹²⁵

Czech immigrants in New York who mastered some craft or conducted a business were usually successful. Newcomers called ‘Greeners’ who used to work at cigar factories in Bohemia and Moravia found the same employment in New York.¹²⁶ Industry based in New York which was dominated by Czech immigrants was the manufacture of pearl buttons: “by 1920 Czech workers produced almost half the pearl buttons made in the United States.”¹²⁷ There were also clockmakers, tailors or joiners. Unskilled workers accepted subordinate and occasional jobs. Nevertheless, according to

¹²² Opatrný, “Problems in the history of Czech immigration,” *Nebraska history*, 1993, 120.

¹²³ Thernstrom, *Harvard encyclopedia of American ethnic groups*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1980, 263.

¹²⁴ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 108.

¹²⁵ Thernstrom, *Harvard encyclopedia*, 1980, 264.

¹²⁶ Polišenský, *Češi a Amerika*, 1996, 60.

¹²⁷ Thernstrom, 1980, 264.

the biography of the best known Czech-American of early immigration Vojta Náprstek, it was very difficult to do well in New York.¹²⁸

Czech started to arrive to New York in bigger numbers in the beginning of the 1860s adding up to 1500 Czech immigrants in 1870.¹²⁹ Rosicky “was twenty when he landed at Castle Garden in New York, and he had a protector who got him work in a tailor shop in Vesey Street, down near the Washington Market.”¹³⁰

2.4 Czech ideals

In her article “Willa Cather’s “Neighbour Rosicky”: Painting a realistic portrait of immigrant life in Nebraska” Kendra Moore discussed the Czech immigrant ideals. Moore considers the story “one of Cather’s works which best commemorates the virtues of the Bohemian immigrants.” According to Moore, Cather is in the story “accurately presenting Czech immigrant ideals.”¹³¹ In “Neighbour Rosicky” she examined four ideals: “independence, hard work, family unity, and freedom.” I would like to elaborate on the idea of Czech immigrant ideals also in Cather’s novel *My Ántonia* and short story “The Bohemian Girl” and assess whether immigrants stick to the ideals or whether they abandon them and accept different values and ideals.

2.4.1 Freedom and independence

According to Moore, freedom, as a Czech ideal, is in “Neighbour Rosicky” presented through celebration. As Moore put it “Rosicky is very proud of the freedom that he possesses by living in the United States. He counts his blessings every Fourth of July ... even if times are tough.”¹³² It is not said whether they celebrated the Fourth of July every year, like American patriots, as Moore suggests. Nothing indicated that they were going to celebrate anything until Rosicky told his wife to “git up a nice supper for us tonight.” In my reading the picnic was arranged because Rosicky wanted to announce the crop failure that afflicted them on that hot July day which happened to be the fourth. Rosicky instead of breaking down decided to appreciate what they have. “Ain’t you

¹²⁸ Polišenský, *Češi a Amerika*, 1996, 38-39.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* 60.

¹³⁰ Cather, “Neighbour Rosicky,” *Obscure Destinies*, 8.

¹³¹ Kendra Moore, “Willa Cather’s “Neighbour Rosicky”: Painting a realistic portrait of immigrant life in Nebraska,” *Teaching Cather*, Spring 2002, Vol. 2, Issue 2, Department of English, Northwest Missouri State University, 15.

¹³² *Ibid.* 17.

near through? I want you should git up a nice supper for us tonight. It's Fourth of July."¹³³

What Moore does not mention but what I consider a better expression of the symbolic relation of the Fourth of July and the Czech ideal of freedom is present in a different place of the story. It is the first mention of the Fourth of July, when Rosicky realized the emptiness of the city life and began seriously considering taking a job on some farm in the countryside. The vision of the work was not one of material enhancement, but rather gaining freedom he missed in the city. "After that Fourth of July day in Park Place, the desire to return to the country never left him. To work on another man's farm would be all he asked."¹³⁴

As far as my study extends, there are not many accounts of Czech celebrations of the American Independence Day. Rose Rosicky for example in her *History of Czechs in Nebraska* does not mention one. That is why it is difficult to determine to what extent did Czech immigrants identify with the American celebration of the Fourth of July. Moore points to the memoir written by Marie Jelinek where she noted: "We celebrated our first Fourth of July in Nebraska in 1866. We all gathered on Vaclav Petracek's farm where we danced, sang and feasted. It was indeed a merry time."¹³⁵

Rather than ideal of freedom, I consider the Rosickys' picnic celebration expression of gratitude for what they have which rather agrees with the idea of other American holiday. Same view was stated also by David Murphy in his article "Jejich Antonie: Czechs, The Land, Cather, and The Pavelka Farmstead:" "This thanksgiving held in the face of economic disaster emphasizes Rosicky's enduring faith."¹³⁶

In my opinion, the very fact that Czech immigrants celebrated the American emancipation from the British Empire might show their sympathy for Americans, since Czechs in their homeland also felt oppressed and struggled to gain autonomy of the Austrian empire (to which the Czechs in America significantly contributed).

¹³³ Cather, "Neighbour Rosicky," *Obscure Destinies*, 14.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* 10.

¹³⁵ Vladimir Kucera, "Nebraska: My New Home," from *Czech Contributions to the Progress of Nebraska*. Lincoln: Kucera and Novacek, 1976, 244.

¹³⁶ David Murphy, "Jejich Antonie: Czechs, The Land, Cather, and The Pavelka Farmstead," 1994, *Great Plains Quarterly*, 812, 100-101.

2.4.1.1 *Desire for the land*

In “Neighbour Rosicky” Cather presents the life in a city unbearable for freedom-loving Czechs. The first five years he lived in New York “Rosicky thought he wanted to live like that forever.” But with the passing years he was depressed and sought relief in alcohol. “He drank too much; to get a temporary illusion of freedom and wide horizons.”¹³⁷ Rosicky felt that he misses something:

The emptiness was intense, like the stillness in a great factory when the machinery stops and the belts and bands cease running. ... those blank buildings, without the stream of life pouring through them, were like empty jails. It struck young Rosicky that this was the trouble with big cities; they built you in from the earth itself, cemented you away from any contact with the ground.¹³⁸

He realized “the desire to return to the country never left him.”¹³⁹ He longed for the freedom and independence that the life in the city could never provide him. Cather therefore connects land with freedom and independence. But it is not the case in every Cather’s work that deals with Czech immigrants. In “The Bohemian Girl,” Clara feels that “something seems to hold [her], ... it comes out of the ground,”¹⁴⁰ therefore the land is restricting her freedom as it ties her to the place.

The desire for freedom that made many Czechs immigrate to America remained an ideal which they stick to in their new home. In “Neighbour Rosicky” Cather portrays that the ideal of freedom remained present in Czech community, at least it is evident in first generation who best remembered it from homeland.

For Anton Rosicky the ideal of freedom was fulfilled when he moved from a city to country. In *My Ántonia* the ideals of freedom and independence merge. The Shimerdas decided to settle in frontier area in Nebraska because they believed they might prosper there. Taking into account the hardships, hard work, and little opportunity to enjoy life on the farm, of what was Jim well aware, he contemplates Ántonia’s alternative life in the city.

When you spun out into the floor with Tony, you did n’t return to anything. You set out every time upon a new adventure. I liked to schottische with her; she had so much spring and variety, and was always putting in new steps and slides. She taught me to dance against and around the hard-and-fast beat of the music. If, instead of going to the

¹³⁷ Cather, “Neighbour Rosicky,” *Obscure Destinies*, 9.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid. 10.

¹⁴⁰ Cather, “The Bohemian Girl.”

end of the railroad, old Mr. Shimerda had stayed in New York and picked up a living with his fiddle, how different *Ántonia*'s life might have been!¹⁴¹ Articulated in the language of dancing, Jim observed that unlike other girls Tony was so gay and original. He believed she was special and deserved much better life than what she had. On the other hand, had they settled in New York, they might have missed the freedom in a same way Rosicky missed it there. The ideal of freedom is represented through the contrast of the city and the country. Czech immigrants in both "Neighbour Rosicky" and *My Ántonia* prefer living in country.

On account of living in a city where her future husband was to work *Ántonia* said:

"I'm a country girl," she said, "and I doubt if I'll be able to manage so well for him in a city. I was counting on keeping on chickens, and maybe a cow."¹⁴²

"I'd always be miserable in a city. I'd die of lonesomeness. I like to be where I know every stack and tree, and where all the ground is friendly. I want to live and die here."¹⁴³

"I belong on a farm. I'm never lonesome here like I used to be in town."¹⁴⁴

In *My Ántonia* Cather mentions freedom in relation to the Czech immigrants also in a different way. For the narrator, the Shimerdas' farm itself meant freedom. The road to the Shimerda's place was bordered with the sunflower: "all along it, wherever it looped or ran, the sunflowers grew"¹⁴⁵ Few pages later Cather explains that for Jim the flower had special meaning "sunflower bordered roads always seem to me the roads to freedom."¹⁴⁶ On another place of the novel Jim admired "freedom of movement" of the immigrant girls, whose "out-of-door work had given them a vigor which, ... developed into a positive carriage and freedom of movement, and made them conspicuous among Black Hawk women."¹⁴⁷

2.4.2 Independence

Freedom closely relates to independence, an ideal through which Cather reflects the changing values in the immigrant family. For father, independence was essential. As for the son, the material security starts to be a significant factor that could prevail over the ideal of independence. Rosicky is afraid, worries that his son gives up the farming life for the easier, accessible, well-paid, and stable work in factory in the city. In past,

¹⁴¹ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 108.

¹⁴² Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 147.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.* 152.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 162.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 13.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 17.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 97.

Rosicky had to overcome tougher situations than his sons and that is why he values what he has. “You boys don’t know what hard time is. You don’t owe nobody, you got plenty to eat an’ keep warm, an’ plenty water to keep clean. When you got them, you can’t have it very hard.”¹⁴⁸ For Rudolph, “plenty to eat an’ keep warm, an’ plenty water to keep clean” is not enough. For him there are new opportunities available in the world, he wants more: “I’ve got to have a good deal more than that, Father, or I’ll quit this farming gamble.” He says “I can always make good wages railroading, or at the packing house, and be sure of my money.”¹⁴⁹

Moore considered the ideal of independence in relation to “Rosicky’s son Rudolph’s desire to be a factory worker in Omaha.”¹⁵⁰ Rosicky wanted to do everything to prevent his son abandoning the farm and the ideals he believed in. Rosicky believed the same emptiness he experienced once, would await his son in the city if he was to abandon the farm. For Rosicky, to own the land and the farm meant freedom and independence. “To be a landless man was to be a wage-earner, a slave, all your life; to have nothing, be nothing.”¹⁵¹ In spite of the hardship and uncertain prospects of the farm work involves he wanted his son to stay on the farm instead of being a city slave. To Rosicky’s worries contributes the fact that Rudolph married American wife: “I lay awake night, scared she’ll make Rudolph discontented with the farm.”¹⁵²

In my opinion, Cather aptly expressed the ideal of independence by naming the opposite, the situation when one is a landless man who owns nothing which equals being nobody. This concern brought many Czechs to Nebraska where they gained “land they could till and own”¹⁵³ which was scarcely possible in their homeland in Europe. “The majority of early immigrants were peasants who had owned very little land, usually not more than twenty-five acres, or were the younger sons of small land holders who could not be optimistic about obtaining land on which to farm.”¹⁵⁴ The same applies for the Rosicky’s family:

On that very day he began to think seriously about the articles he had read in the Bohemian papers, describing prosperous Czech farming communities in the West. He believed he would like to go out there as a farm hand; it was hardly possible that he

¹⁴⁸ Cather, “Neighbour Rosicky,” *Obscure Destinies*, 14.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ Moore, “Willa Cather’s Neighbour Rosicky,” *Teaching Cather*, 2002, 16.

¹⁵¹ Cather, “Neighbour Rosicky,” *Obscure Destinies*, 12.

¹⁵² *Ibid.* 11.

¹⁵³ Svoboda, “Czech-Americans: The Love of Liberty,” *Nebraska history*, 1993.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 112.

could ever have land of his own. ... His mother's parents had lived in the country, but they rented their farm and had a hard time to get along. Nobody in his family had ever owned any land,--that belonged to a different station of life altogether.¹⁵⁵

Rosicky therefore represented what Czech immigrants valued, as Moore put it: "the independence of the land over the slavery of the materialistic Word."¹⁵⁶

As for the independence in *My Ántonia* Cather explicitly speaks about independence only at one place in the novel, when she compares the nature of Ántonia and her mistress Mrs. Harling. "They had strong, independent natures, both of them. They knew what they liked, and were not always trying to imitate other people."¹⁵⁷ Elsewhere is her nature recognizable from her behaviour. When Tony is unjustly accused she does not let anyone manipulate her; make her do anything she does not want to, in this case stopping her going dancing. "I would n't think of it for a minute! My own father could n't make me stop! Mr. Harling ain't my boss outside my work. I won't give up my friend, either."¹⁵⁸

To sum up the ideal of freedom and independence, in *My Ántonia* Czechs immigrants of both the first and the second generation adhere to the ideal whereas in "Neighbour Rosicky" Cather exposes the changing values of the second generation.

2.4.3 Hard work

Protagonist of the short story "Neighbour Rosicky" is one of the Czech immigrant characters through whom Cather presents the Czech ideal of hard work. His sense of diligence was established already in his youth. While living in New York "he became a good workman, he was industrious."¹⁵⁹ Statements of people who were closest to him prove the true nature of his character. His friend, doctor Ed tells Rosicky: "You're sixty-five years old, and you've always worked hard, and your heart's tired."¹⁶⁰ His wife Mary, who is the closest observer of his life, responded to his announcement of crop failure: "'you mean you won't get no crop at all?' I asked him. I couldn't believe it, after he'd worked so hard."¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁵ Cather, "Neighbour Rosicky," *Obscure Destinies*, 1932.

¹⁵⁶ Moore, "Willa Cather's Neighbour Rosicky," *Teaching Cather*, 2002, 16.

¹⁵⁷ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 88.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 101.

¹⁵⁹ Cather, "Neighbour Rosicky," *Obscure Destinies*, 1932.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

The ideal of hard work goes together with the ideal of independence discussed above. Rosicky is thinking about future for his children, which he would like to stay on the farm. He is aware of the potential risks the life on the farm brings but believes that with hard work they will prosper.

They would have to work hard on the farm, and probably they would never do much more than make a living. But if he could think of them as staying here on the land, he wouldn't have to fear any great unkindness for them. Hardships, certainly; it was a hardship to have the wheat freeze in the ground when seed was so high; and to have to sell your stock because you had no feed. But there would be other years when everything came along right, and you caught up.¹⁶²

His hard-working nature ultimately brought Rosicky his death when he worked on the field and got a heart-attack. When Rosicky saw a work that needs to be done he could not let it wait. In spite of doctor's advice not to perform any hard work, the moment Rosicky saw "a work-team idle in his barn," he "went over to his son's place, put the horses to the buggy-rake, and set about quietly raking-up those thistles. He behaved with guilty caution,"¹⁶³

Rose Rosicky in her book *A history of Czechs in Nebraska* speaks a great deal about the hard work Czechs pioneers undertook.

Few had the means to pay even the moderate prices asked, but they were eager to brave severe hardships in a strange, unsettled country, and toiled and suffered to gain their heart's desire. Not all had been farmers by calling. A large percentage had previously had various trades, but they saw a better future on farms.¹⁶⁴

She appreciates their achievements in the country she already considers her own.

Pioneering is hard at any time, more than doubly so for people who do not speak the prevailing language. But they persevered and conquered. They helped to make our state a garden spot, they provided for their families and their old age, and today their children and children's children are found in all ranks of farming, business and professional life.¹⁶⁵

Rosicky included in her book also a poem praising Czech pioneers in Nebraska written by Czech-American writer Bartos Bittner, (translated by Libbie Breuer Scholten):

With empty hands you came to wilderness uncharted -
Lo, gaze upon it now, O pioneers brave-hearted,
From Father of Waters west to Rocky Mountains' base,

¹⁶² Cather, "Neighbour Rosicky," 18.

¹⁶³ Ibid. 19.

¹⁶⁴ Rose Rosicky, *A history of Czechs*, 1929, 30.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

Prosperity's sweet streams those prairies grace.

You triumphed over hardships, weary and heartbreaking,
None censures you today for joyful pride you are taking,
In your fair handiwork, which far and wide you view,
Instead, success we wish - success to you.

These accounts support the portrayal of hard work in Cather's work as the ideal of Czech immigrants.

The ideal of hard work had its origin also in the status from which Czech immigrants descended.

These cottagers, as they were called, represented the rural lower middle class, who had very little opportunity to improve their lot in a strictly stratified society. They could, however, sell their land and thereby afford transportation for themselves and their families to America.¹⁶⁶

David Murphy observed Cather's portrayal of Czech immigrants as "peasant immigration to a land of farmers." The difference between a peasant and a farmer:

The peasant was a landed agriculturalist who produced food primarily for subsistence, not for the market, who viewed the land and food principally as sustenance and not commodity. Farming, on the other hand, as it emerged in modern times following enclosure and perhaps foremost in the United States, became more tied to commercialism.¹⁶⁷

Moreover, "love of the land was fundamental to the peasant agriculturalist." In *My Ántonia* Cather portrays the process of adaptation of Czech immigrants to American farming conditions. The journey towards success was more complicated for the Shimerdas since when they arrived they did not have any experience with farming. Mr. Shimerda as a head of the family "was old and frail and knew nothing about farming. He was a weaver by trade."¹⁶⁸ With the help of their neighbours the Shimerdas built a new log house and started with farming. "They had four comfortable rooms to live in, a new windmill, - bought on credit, - a chicken house and poultry."¹⁶⁹ After her father's death Ántonia had to accept the hard field work. "She greeted me gaily, and began at once to tell me how much ploughing she had done that day." Ántonia never complained

¹⁶⁶ Svoboda, "Czech-Americans: The love of Liberty," *Nebraska history*, 1993, 112.

¹⁶⁷ Murphy, "Jejich Ántonie: Czechs, The Land, Cather, and The Pavelka Farmstead" 1994, *Great Pains Quarterly*, 96.

¹⁶⁸ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 13.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 60.

about the hard work, on the contrary, she was proud she can do the men's work and began to feel responsible for her family:

I ain't got time to learn. I can work like mans now. My mother can't say no more how Ambrosch do all and nobody to help him. I can work as much as him. School is all right for little boys. I help make this land one good farm."¹⁷⁰

Hard work had of course a substantial effect on the immigrants. For all of the hard work *Ántonia* was becoming rough. Cather used some men's characteristics to describe her. She prefers men's work and clothes and walks with heavy steps. The farm problems sometimes cause bad temper. In summer when *Ántonia* was working for Burdens, Jim asked her:

"Why are n't you always nice like this, Tony?"

"How nice?"

"Why, just like this; like yourself. Why do you all the time try to be like Ambrosch?"

"If I live here, like you, that is different. Things will be easy for you. But they will be hard for us."¹⁷¹

The life was easier for Jim who did not have to worry about his family's daily bread. Tony, on the other hand, a poor immigrant with no father explained to Jim the cause of her meanness. She had to grow rough to make their family prosper.

Ántonia in fact sacrificed her education for her family and her children. Cather presents early Czechs immigrants valuing pioneering over education. *Ántonia* was satisfied with the equality with which she was now perceived and her share of the future farm's success. She realized that she loses her childhood as well as her opportunity for education. *Ántonia* however held her father as well as education in high esteem:

I felt something tense in her silence, and glancing up I saw that she was crying... "Sometime you will tell me all those nice things you learn at the school, won't you, Jimmy?" She asked with a sudden rush of feeling in her voice. "My father, he went much to school. He know a great deal; how to make the fine cloth like what you not got here. He play horn and violin, and he read so many books that the priests in Bohemie come to talk to him. You won't forget my father, Jim?"¹⁷²

Ántonia's strength and hard-working nature was of a great advantage of her husband. She was still a child when Mr. Burden already predicted that 'She will help some fellow get ahead in the world.'¹⁷³ When she met Jim after the years she herself reflected what a strength woman she was and what a great support her husband Cuzak had in her. "We'd

¹⁷⁰ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 61.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.* 69.

¹⁷² *Ibid.* 61.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.* 62.

never have got through it if I had n't been so strong. I've always had good health, thank God, and I was able to help him in the fields until right up to the time before my babies came.”¹⁷⁴

2.4.4 Family unit and solidarity

Family unit and family solidarity were essential for Czechs immigrants. According to Poliřenský, for example, the earlier settled family used to pay for the travel costs of the younger family that decided to return back to homeland.¹⁷⁵ Cather faithfully depicted the Czech family solidarity in *My Ántonia*. The paragraph at the same time foreshadows the ending of the novel concerning Tony's future that illustrates Czech immigrant farmer achievement:

One result of this family solidarity was that the foreign farmers in our county were the first to become prosperous. After the fathers were out of debt, the daughters married the sons of neighbours, - usually of like nationality, - and the girls who once worked in Black Hawk kitchens are to-day managing big farms and fine families of their own; their children are better off than the children of the town women they used to serve.¹⁷⁶

Ántonia was by no means an exception in her decision to raise a large family for other Czech girls raised them too: “I was delighted to hear; the three Bohemian Marys and their large families.”¹⁷⁷

As an antecedent for Ántonia, Clara Vavrika also had a strong loving relationship with her father. She says “if I lost Father I'd lose everything”¹⁷⁸ Although she married into a Norwegian family, she prefers spending time with her aunt or her father whom she visits regularly. He is also the only person whom she misses after she flees away with Nils. “Clara rode up to see her father almost every day.”¹⁷⁹

Joe Vavrika heard often from his daughter. Clara had always been fond of her father, and happiness made her kinder. She wrote him long accounts of the voyage to Bergen, and of the trip she and Nils took through Bohemia to the little town where her father had grown up and where she herself was born. She visited all her kinsmen there, and sent her father news of his brother, who was a priest; of his sister, who had married a horse-breeder--of their big farm and their many children.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁴ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994.

¹⁷⁵ Poliřenský, *Čeři a Amerika*, 1996, 48-50.

¹⁷⁶ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 97-98.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁸ Cather, “The Bohemian Girl.”

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

Cather in her work also reflects that the family unity of Czech immigrants was not limited only for the family members living in America. Czechs kept in touch with their friends and families in Europe as well.¹⁸¹

The ideal of family unity as Moore put it is certainly present in the story “Neighbour Rosicky” in both love between Anton and Mary, love to their children and among each of them. I agree with Moore that “For Anton and Mary Rosicky, family is the most important part of their lives and the center of their social structure.”¹⁸² Between Anton and Mary there was a precious unity: They “had stood by each other in trying times.”¹⁸³ Rosicky wants the same unity for his son and his wife.

The protagonist’s love for his family is present for the most part. Rosicky loved his sons, wanted the best for them, but worried about his son Rudolph. Moreover, he teaches his sons for the same love and unselfishness when he explains to Rudolph’s brothers that they were to give up their Saturday amusement in favour of Rudolph’s marriage. He is very caring and unselfish for he considers the good for his son and his wife Polly individually:

I want to take de car down to Rudolph’s, and let him an’ Polly go in to de show. She don’t git into town enough, an’ I’m afraid she’s getting’ lonesome, an’ he can’t afford no car yet.¹⁸⁴ ... Polly ain’t lookin’ so good. I don’t like to see nobody lookin’ sad. It comes hard fur a town girl to be a farmer’s wife. I don’t want no trouble to start in Rudolph’s family. When it starts, it ain’t so easy to stop. An American girl don’t git used to our ways all at once.¹⁸⁵

Family unity is not present in the story only through the intentions and actions of the Czech family but also from the viewpoint of the surroundings. Doctor Burleigh once told Rosicky: “You are one of the few men I know who has a family he can get some comfort out of; happy dispositions, never quarrel among themselves, and they treat you right.”¹⁸⁶

The family unity is represented also in the relation between the first and the second generation of Rosicky’s family. Rudolph married an American wife, although the general attitude claimed that “marrying an American girl was certainly a risk. A Czech should marry a Czech.”¹⁸⁷ Anton and Mary did not object to it, but supported them.

¹⁸¹ Opatrný, “Problems in the History of Czech Immigration” *Nebraska history*, 1993, 120.

¹⁸² Moore, “Willa Cather’s Neighbour Rosicky,” *Teaching Cather*, 2002, 16.

¹⁸³ Cather, “Neighbour Rosicky,” 7.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 10.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 10-11.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.* 2.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 12.

2.4.5 Love of land

In my opinion, love of land might be regarded another Czech immigrant ideal for as David Murphy put it through Cather's work a strong relationship resonates "so profoundly that it assumes mystical and transcendental qualities."¹⁸⁸ The rootedness in land stemmed from Czech peasant origin: "Slavic peasants were *emotionally* attached to the soil, and perceived "a mystical connection between them[selves] and the Mother Earth with whom they labored."¹⁸⁹ Kucera in his book *Czech Contributions to progress of Nebraska* wrote:

"...the Czech farmer brought with him here a love for and dedication to the care and cultivation of the land. The Czech immigrant farmer, through hard struggle, fought his way to victory over Nature and brought the virgin soil to its present prosperity."¹⁹⁰

Cather portrays the strong Czech relationship to their place in many ways in her work. Rosicky's farm became his place of rest even after his death: "He was awful fond of his place, he admitted. He wasn't anxious to leave it. And it was a comfort to think that he would never have to go farther than the edge of his own hayfield."¹⁹¹ In *My Ántonia* the love of land manifests through the love of farming. Cather depicts Ántonia's love for everything she raises:

"I love them as if they were people," she said, rubbing her hand over the bark. "There was n't a tree here when we first came. We planted every one, and used to carry water for them, too - after we'd been working in the fields all day."¹⁹²

"Many a night after he was asleep I've got up and come out and carried water to the poor things. And now, you can see, we have the good of them. .. There ain't one of our neighbors has an orchard that bears like ours."¹⁹³

2.4.6 Resistance to materialistic world

As Moore put it, Czech immigrants valued "the independence of the land over the slavery of the materialistic Word."¹⁹⁴ Czech immigrants in Cather's work show not only their ideal of independence but they also do not accept the materialism as a measure of their success in the same way other immigrants did. In my opinion, Cather in her work suggests that for the early Czech immigrants the vision of the future of their nation in

¹⁸⁸ David Murphy, "Jejich Antonie: Czechs, The Land, Cather, And The Pavelka Farmstead," *Great Plains Quarterly* No. 2, 1994, 85.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.* 210-211.

¹⁹⁰ Kucera, *Czech Contributions to the progress of Nebraska*, 1976, 21.

¹⁹¹ Cather, "Neighbour Rosicky," 6.

¹⁹² Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 161.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ Moore, "Willa Cather's Neighbour Rosicky," *Teaching Cather*, 2002, 16.

America was more important than temporary wealth of an individual. The American citizens or other immigrants often did not understand that the Czech immigrants did not pursue richness as other immigrants. In *My Ántonia* for example, Tiny Soderball (who became rich) said that “Ántonia had not “done very well”; that her husband was not a man of much force, and she had had a hard life.”¹⁹⁵ So in the eye of other immigrants, success was connected with power and money and therefore the Czech farmers, although being considered exceptionally able and successful farmers, were not considered rich. For Tiny gaining a status and power meant success. She could hardly understand Ántonia’s happiness with her hard life on the farm. In “Neighbour Rosicky” Cather states:

Sometimes the Doctor heard the gossipers in the drug-store wondering why Rosicky didn’t get on faster. He was industrious, and so were his boys but they were rather free and easy, weren’t pushers, and they didn’t always show good judgment. They were comfortable, they were out of debt, but they didn’t get much ahead. Maybe, Doctor Burleigh reflected, people as generous and warm-hearted and affectionate as the Rosickys never got ahead much; maybe you couldn’t enjoy your life and put it into the bank, too.¹⁹⁶

Cather demonstrated an example of American materialist thinking already in the initial part of the novel, when Jake Marpole, Jim’s grandfather’s farm hand, described Ántonia to Jim as follows: “She’s not much older than you, twelve or thirteen, maybe, and she’s as bright as a new dollar.”¹⁹⁷

2.5 Religion

Despite the general tendency of the Czech immigrants to America to withdraw from Catholicism there were a lot of places where the work of active Czech priests and parishioners was flourishing. Saint Louis was a centre of the early Czech immigrant catholic community. The first Czech Catholic church in the United States consecrated to St. John of Nepomuk in 1855 was built there. The catholic newspaper “Hlas” was being published there as well. The city gained its significance also thanks to Czech priest Josef Hessoun who was instrumental in building the Czech catholic community in Saint Louis.¹⁹⁸ “In the 1860s and 1870s the Czechs established parishes in both rural and urban centres; Chicago’s first church, built in 1864, was named after the Czech patron

¹⁹⁵ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 155.

¹⁹⁶ Cather, “Neighbour Rosicky,” 4.

¹⁹⁷ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 6.

¹⁹⁸ Polišenský, *Češi a Amerika*, 1996, 61.

saint Václav.”¹⁹⁹ In 1885 the Czech Benedictines began their mission by founding Czech Benedictine press and the College of St. Procopius.²⁰⁰

In *My Ántonia* Cather depicts Czech immigrant Catholic practices. The issue of religious belief came to be present in the novel only after Mr. Shimerda’s death. Questions concerning laying and provision for the dead emerged. The belief in the afterlife according to the Roman Catholic creed was to be seen in the Shimerdas family’s care of Mr. Shimerda’s soul: “Ántonia, and Ambrosch and the mother took turns going down to pray beside him.”²⁰¹ Sudden, extraordinary piousness of some of the members of the family seemed very surprising to the Burdens family and proved their true faith in the power of prayer for the dead:

“[Ambrosch] was deeply, even slavishly, devout. He did not say a word all morning, but sat with his rosary in his hands, praying, now silently, now aloud. He never looked away from his beads, nor lifted his hands except to cross himself. Several times the poor boy fell asleep where he sat, wakened with a start, and began to pray again.”²⁰²

The cultural differences between Czech Catholics and American Protestants were made noticeable as well. While feeling sympathy to the Shimerdas for their loss, as Protestants the Burdens did not share the belief in Purgatory and the duty to pray for the dead with them:

“Ambrosch, Jake said, showed more human feeling than he would have supposed him capable of; but he was chiefly concerned about getting a priest, and about his father’s soul, which he believed was in a place of torment and would remain there until his family and the priest had prayed a great deal for him. “As I understand it, “Jake concluded, “it will be a matter of years to pray his soul out of Purgatory, and right now he’s in torment.”

“I don’t believe it,” [Jim] said stoutly.”²⁰³

Their belief was not manifested only through prayer. Even in their poverty they were willing to pay their money to a priest for prayers for their father’s soul tolerate. Mrs. Burden took a pragmatic stance whereas Mr. Burden showed more understanding and respect for the Shimerdas family’s faith:

When Ambrosch came back from Mr. Bushy’s we learned that he had given Marek’s wages to the priest at Black Hawk, for masses for their father’s soul. Grandmother thought Ántonia needed shoes more than Mr. Shimerda needed prayers, but grandfather

¹⁹⁹ Thernstrom, 1980, 266.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

²⁰¹ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994. 51.

²⁰² Ibid. 50.

²⁰³ Ibid. 52.

said tolerantly, “If he can spare six dollars, pinched as he is, it shows he believes what he professes.”²⁰⁴

Since the Shimerdas were living far from a town they were not in a direct contact with any catholic community. That is why Mr. Shimerda’s funeral was difficult to arrange for “the coroner would reach the Shimerdas’ sometime that afternoon, but the missionary priest was at the other end of his parish, a hundred miles away, and the train were not running.”²⁰⁵ The Shimerdas therefore did not regularly associate with any Czech priest because the pioneer Czech priests were not assigned to individual parishes but they worked on journeys.

The first resident priest in Nebraska was Rev. later Monsignor Francis Bobal, ... While in Nebraska he did missionary work among the scattered people, together with Rev. Francis Sulak, who was a missionary here altogether, not being connected with any parish.²⁰⁶

In the 1880’s the number of Czech priests in Nebraska was not very high. In 1877 three Czech or German priests came and about that time or later another five more did.²⁰⁷ Perhaps for the lack of Czech priests, the Shimerdas were in contact with an American priest. “I want to live and die here. Father Kelly says everybody’s put into this world for something, and I know what I’ve got to do.”²⁰⁸

Diane Prenatt in her essay concerning (Roman) Catholicism in Cather’s work states that in spite of “the accuracy of Cather’s depiction of Catholic culture” Willa Cather was not a catholic. She however states that Cather’s treatment “runs deeper than her observant depiction of the Catholic culture of immigrants and her familiarity with doctrine.”²⁰⁹ The issue of Cather’s religious belief is dealt with also in one of her letters to President Masaryk where “she denies Masaryk’s suggestion that she had become a Catholic, but she admits a long admiration of the early Catholic missionaries in North America.”²¹⁰

Unlike the Shimerdas whose religious belief became only apparent in a tough situation, Anton Jelinek, the Shimerdas’ fellow-countryman did not hesitate to speak openly about his faith. He explained to the Burdens: “Their father has done a great sin,”

²⁰⁴ Cather, *My Antonia*, 1994, 66.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.* 52.

²⁰⁶ Rosicky, *A history of Czechs in Nebraska*, 1929.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ Cather, *My Antonia*, 1994, 152.

²⁰⁹ Diane Prenatt, “What Is There about Us Always”: The Archbishop and Willa Cather’s [Roman] Catholic Imagination,” *Willa Cather Newsletter & Review* (Vol.58, No.2), Indianapolis: Marian University, 2015, 44.

²¹⁰ Halac, “Ever so true,” *New Criterion*, 1993.

he looked straight at grandfather. "Our Lord has said that."²¹¹ Jelinek spoke about his own experience of faith: "I believe in prayer for the dead. I have seen too much"²¹² and continued telling them about his war experience as he assisted the priest giving sacraments to many dying soldiers. Although they did not share his faith the Burdens were impressed by Jelinek talking about his belief. "We had listened attentively. It was impossible not to admire his frank, manly faith."²¹³

Because of the dispute over where to bury Mr. Shimerda, since he could not be buried at a catholic cemetery, and the Norwegian church did not agree neither, Mrs. Burden suggested "If these foreigners are so clannish, Mr. Bushy, we'll have to have an American graveyard that will be more liberal-minded."²¹⁴

Czechs immigrants who professed Catholicism in their homeland tended to withdraw from their faith in the new country. "Though the immigrants were often well educated and hence susceptible to secular influences, it is nevertheless striking that one-half to two thirds of the predominantly rural 19th-century Czech immigrants left the Catholic Church."²¹⁵ Their irreligion manifested itself also in "the high suicide rate among the Czechs."²¹⁶

Mr. Shimerda's suicide is one example of the decline of Czech Catholicism in The United States. It is ironic enough that the heightened religious awareness of the family came to be seen only after the suicide that marks the departure from the faith. Cather offers dual treatment. In the novel there are moments that establish the Shimerdas as a believing Catholic family, but also some instances that prove their withdrawal from the Catholic Church such as the dispute over the state of Mr. Shimerda's soul: whether according to the catholic faith is his soul going through the process of purification and needs his family's prayers, or whether according to the protestant belief his soul found his rest already. In my opinion was *Ántonia* later influenced by Jim's American protestant thinking who told her: "I said I felt sure then that he was on his way back to his own country..." *Ántonia* suddenly started to believe Jim as a representative of the protestant American rather than her catholic upbringing: "Why did n't you ever tell me that before? It makes me feel more sure for him." Her withdrawal from her faith is

²¹¹ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 53.

²¹² *Ibid.*

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ *Ibid.* 56.

²¹⁵ Thernstrom, 1980, 265.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.* 265.

noticeable, since after Jim told her that, she felt “more sure for him.” Whereas, few years ago, at her father’s funeral, the children including *Ántonia* were taking turns in praying for his father’s souls.

Many Czech immigrants entered the Free-thought movement that professed “faith in reason, science, and the individual conscience.”²¹⁷ “A split between Catholics and Freethinkers, both urban and rural, generated antagonism that pervaded Czech-American religious life, secular societies, the press, and schools until World War I.”²¹⁸ The Czech immigrants entered also the Protestant Churches. As a follow-up to their arrival in the 18th century, the most of Brethren was to be found in the South: “In Texas alone in 1920 the Unity of Bohemian-Moravian Brethren claimed 24 parishes with 1,500 members.”²¹⁹

Besides religious faith, Cather depicted “the constant interchange between the transcendent and the mundane.”²²⁰ In *My Ántonia* Jim reflects the equality regardless their place of birth. “Up there the stars grew magnificently bright. Though we had come from such different parts of the world, in both of us there was some dusky superstition that those shining groups have their influence upon what is and what is not to be.”²²¹

2.6 Czech social life

Czech saloons constituted inseparable part of Czech immigrant community life. The taverns were places where Czechs were gathering, merrymaking and playing music which served for cheering up from their homesickness and farm toil.²²² It might have been not only the advantage of easier communication but also their common penchant for beer that drew Czechs and Germans to settle in close proximity for number of breweries was established in places of Czech and German settlement. The renown of St. Louis and Milwaukee brewery centres continues until nowadays.²²³ In *My Ántonia* Cather depicts Czech immigrants socializing with their fellow-countrymen and Germans. There were two saloons in Black Hawk. One of them was a respectable public

²¹⁷ Thernstrom, 1980, 265.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid. 266.

²²⁰ Prenatt, “What is there about us always,” 2015.

²²¹ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 28.

²²² Thernstrom, 1980, 268.

²²³ Polišenský, *Češi a Amerika*, 1996, 28, 46.

house run by a Czech immigrant Anton Jelinek. “In his saloon there were long tables where the Czech and German farmers could eat the lunches they brought from home while they drank their beer.”²²⁴ Throughout her work Cather connects Czechs with beer: “ain’t you got no beer here? I told him he’d have to go to the Bohemians for beer; the Noreegians did n’t have none when they thrashed.”²²⁵

The importance of a possibility to distract the stress and loneliness of a frontier pioneer proved to be fatal for Mr. Shimerda who had little opportunity to ease his pain with a fellow-countryman. Joseph Svoboda noted in his essay “Their love of music, dance, and beer occasioned joyful celebration, and the release from monotony of day-to-day existence. Here, on the prairies of Nebraska, they were in the early years of their settlement denied this kind of escape.”²²⁶

2.6.1 Mr. Shimerda’s non-integration

Chiefly, Mr. Shimerda did not comply with the essential condition needed to successfully assimilate in the new country, for he did not want to leave his motherland. As it is stated in excerpt I illustrated on page 7, Mr. Shimerda agreed to go because of his wife who decided. From the very beginning Mr. Shimerda was not happy in the new country. “[Ántonia] was the only one of his family who could rouse the old man from the torpor in which he seemed to live.” ... “The old man’s smile, as he listened was so full of sadness, of pity for things, that I never afterward forgot it.”²²⁷ His unhappiness lessened a bit when he found Russian friends but increased again the more after one of them died and the other went away. “The loss of his two friends had a depressing effect upon old Mr. Shimerda.”

Mr. Shimerda probably decided to take his life as a result of their poverty and depressing winter for before that he still had plans for the future: “Ántonia explained that her father meant to build a new house for them in the spring; he and Ambrosch had already split the logs for it...”²²⁸ When he was out hunting, he used to go into the empty log house and sit there, brooding.²²⁹ His melancholic behaviour was foreshadowing his

²²⁴ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 106.

²²⁵ *Ibid.* 87.

²²⁶ Svoboda, “Czech-Americans: The Love of Liberty,” *Nebraska history*, 1993, 114.

²²⁷ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 23.

²²⁸ *Ibid.* 39.

²²⁹ *Ibid.* 32.

eventual suicide. Mr. Shimerda never reconciled with leaving his old country. “I knew it was homesickness that had killed Mr. Shimerda.”²³⁰

2.6.2 Cultural clash

The joyful feasting they brought from the Old World however did not meet with understanding by the earlier American settlers. Indeed the American Protestants were not fond of Czech entertainment: “Even though their Protestant neighbors could not find fault with the hardworking Czechs’ morality and deportment, they were aghast at the singing, dancing, and merrymaking in which the Czechs indulged on Sundays.”²³¹ In *My Ántonia* drinking and merrymaking were not considered proper behaviour by the neighbours of Czechs. Jelinek, the proprietor of the saloon, wanted to avoid any trouble with Mr. Burden, the churchman, so he told Jim not to come in the saloon: “Jim,” he said, “I am good friends with you and I always like to see you. But you know how the church people think about saloons. ... I don’t like to have you come into my place, because I know he don’t like it...”²³²

Sometimes disapproval turned into a stereotypical attitude towards the immigrants. Cather illustrates such attitude on the character of the novella *The Bohemian Girl* Mrs. Ericson who saw Czech immigrants as drunkards: “I never thought much of Bohemians; always drinking.”²³³ Cather, disapproving generalizations shows various examples. In the novel *O Pioneers!* Cather depicted a Czech character Frank Shabbata as an evident drunker. In *My Ántonia*, Cuzak on the other hand admits his weakness “Sometimes maybe I drink a little too much beer in town, and when I come home she don’t say nothing.”²³⁴

2.6.3 Feasting as a mark of Cultural diversity

Both food and drink plays a significant role in Cather’s portrayal of various immigrant groups of her time in Nebraska. “The ability to appreciate good food and wine was a mark of cultural sophistication for her, and the groups she endowed with this cultural sophistication.”²³⁵ Cather’s portrayal of Czech immigrants covers both the examples of

²³⁰ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 50.

²³¹ Thernstrom, 1980, 265.

²³² Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 106.

²³³ Cather, “The Bohemian Girl.”

²³⁴ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 173.

²³⁵ Jean C. Griffith, “Food to be absorbed and transformed,” *Willa Cather Newsletter and Review*, Vol. 54, issue 2, Fall 2010, 60.

drunkards as Frank Shabata in her novel *O Pioneers!*, and depiction of drinking as a mark of cultural sophistication. The appreciation of good wine is depicted in “The Bohemian Girl” where Cather pictures a situation Joe Vavrika “came back with a flask in one hand and three wine glasses caught by the stems between the fingers of the other.” Joe opens the bottle to honour his friend and emphasized the special qualities of the drink. The precious wine that costs “what it weigh in gold” and “nobody but de nobles drink him in Bohemie. Many, many years I save him up, dis Tokai.” The cultural sophistication might be perceived in the way Joe Vavrika treated it “with an air of ceremony, ... held the flask between him and the sun, squinting into in admiringly,” “delicately removed the cork” and “presented it with great gallantry.”²³⁶ Czech feasting as Cather reflected it includes also drinking coffee and pipe smoking. In “Neighbor Rosicky” Doctor Burleigh noted: “I’ve never yet been able to separate a Bohemian from his coffee or his pipe.”²³⁷

2.6.3.1 Czech hospitality

Hospitality is another aspect of culture that Cather points out in her work. In “Neighbour Rosicky” narrator describes the warm welcome doctor Ed receives every time he visits the Rosicky’s place. Cather attributes the conduct to the characteristic of the Czech woman:

“He didn’t know another farm-house where a man could get such a warm welcome, and such good strong coffee with rich cream.” ...

“With Mary, to feed creatures was the natural expression of affection,—her chickens, the calves, her big hungry boys. It was a rare pleasure to feed a young man whom she seldom saw and of whom she was as proud as if he belonged to her.”²³⁸

Hospitality of Marie Shabata: “I did n’t telephone her we were coming, because I did n’t want her to go to work and bake cake and freeze ice-cream. She’ll always make a party if you give her the least excuse.”²³⁹

My Ántonia depicts hospitality as well. There are examples on both the side of the Americans and the immigrants. The Burdens offer their help to the new settlers when they need it most. After they have settled in the Cuzak family shows their warm welcome to their Ántonia’s old friend Jim.

2.6.3.2 Respect for various cultural heritage

²³⁶ Cather, “The bohemian girl.”

²³⁷ Cather, “Neighbour Rosicky,” 1932.

²³⁸ Ibid. 3.

²³⁹ Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*, New York: Dover publications, Inc., 1993, 51.

Having grown up in a culturally diverse environment Cather acquired a respect for various cultures that she reflected in her writing. Jean Griffith reflected in his article how skilfully Cather combined diverse cultural aspects with her attitude towards the immigrants:

“Both biological necessities and important aspects of culture, food and drink mark the respect Cather evinced for specific European groups, on the one hand, and the diversity she celebrated, on the other, in contradiction to the melting-pot ideal.”²⁴⁰

Cather herself frequently attended sociables of her time, where she adopted the ability to spot all the details. Various people were meeting there: “Like all such socials of the time, this one is ecumenical, yet conscious of all sorts of distinctions.”²⁴¹ She was invited to recite her writings. After one of the early recitation she found that her performance was not mentioned in a review of the event. „Cather may have been disappointed, but an appetite had been formed. For the writer who once said, “my mind and my stomach are one,” it was a recipe for fiction.”²⁴²

„In “The Bohemian Girl,” Olaf Ericson’s barn-raising represents one version of this recipe. Olaf, as the narrator explains, is a “public man” who entertains for votes.”²⁴³ This time Cather therefore does not emphasize the hospitability of the Czech immigrants in the novella, nor any other nationality. Daryl Palmer, the author of the article, even states that “it would be tempting to hear satire in this account, but Cather’s narrator frames the montage by calling it “hilarious.”²⁴⁴ As far as the food is concerned, Hosmer pointed out that “It would be easy to dismiss all this activity as mere diversion.” Instead, he emphasized “the power of food in these settings.”²⁴⁵

²⁴⁰ Griffith, “Food to be absorbed and transformed,” in *Willa Cather Newsletter and Review* 54.2, 2010, 61.

²⁴¹ Daryl W. Palmer, ““Old Mrs. Harris,” and the Hospitalities of Red Cloud,” *Willa Cather Newsletter and Review*, Vol. 54, issue 2, Fall 2010, The Willa Cather foundation, 50.

²⁴² Brent L. Böhlke, *Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters*, University of Nebraska Press, 1986, 88.

²⁴³ Palmer, ““Old Mrs. Harris,” and the Hospitalities of Red Cloud,” 50.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 50.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 49.

3 Other nationalities in Cather's work

3.1 Austrians and Germans

Cather in her novel *My Ántonia* mentions the cohabitation of Austrians and Czechs and their different approach to assimilation. Although coming from politically single state in Europe, they represented different nations. Their national feelings and thinking differed when they moved to America as well. Unlike the Czechs, who were the inferior nation in the old country, “a spirit of nationalism never developed among Austrians as it did among other European groups. Austrian immigrants therefore have tended to deemphasize their national origin.”²⁴⁶

One of the Austrians Cather describes in her work is Otto Fuchs, who is in *My Ántonia* introduced as: “an Austrian who came to this country a young boy and had led an adventurous life in the Far West among mining-camps and cow outfits ... He had relatives in Bismarck, a German settlement to the north of us, but for a year now he had been working for grandfather.”²⁴⁷ The age of the immigrants constitutes a significant factor of assimilation. Otto came as a young boy. With the Austrian tendency “to deemphasize their national origin” Otto seems to be an ideal candidate for smooth adaptation to the new land.

Indeed he in many ways he was very American for he was a western cowboy and miner and resembled a desperate. For Jim Otto looked like “he might have stepped out of the pages of “Jesse James.” “He wore a sombrero hat,” “the ends of his mustache were twisted up stiffly, like little horns,” he looked “as if he had a history” and he had “a long scar.” He showed Jim his “silver spurs” and “cowboy boots.” Cather likens Otto to a literary and history character of American west.

Otto Fuchs spoke fluent English when he met Jim for the first time “Hello, are you Mr. Burden's folks? If you are, it's me you're looking for. I'm Otto Fuchs. I'm Mr. Burden's hired man, and I'm to drive you out.”²⁴⁸ Although he sometimes caught himself singing Austrian songs, Otto accepted English as his preferred language and was aware of the fact that he was rapidly losing his mother tongue. “He spoke and wrote

²⁴⁶ Thernstrom, 1980, 164-165.

²⁴⁷ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 9.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.* 6.

his own language so seldom that it came to him awkwardly. His effort to remember entirely absorbed him.”²⁴⁹ The awareness of losing his ability to speak German might be the reason of his yearly letter commitment: “Otto wrote a long letter home to his mother. He always wrote to her on Christmas day, he said, no matter where he was, and no matter how long it had been since his last letter.” Although according to his image he fitted in the American west, he felt he possess something unique in his mother tongue that he wanted to preserve.

In terms of belief and religious practice, Cather does not note any serious distinctions or conflict between Otto and the Burden’s family for whom he worked. Otto was considered a member of the family. He prayed with them, too.

3.1.1 Czech, Austrian and German interaction:

In Cather’s work Czech, Austrian and German immigrants interacted as they indeed did in the late-nineteenth-century years of the American settlement. For the advantage of Czechs, who struggled with English, their German-speaking former neighbours from the Old world often became their neighbours in America as well. I discussed the topic also in the section that deals with the language barrier.

In *My Ántonia* Cather reflects the close familiarity of the two nations in what Otto says on Czechs’ account: “You can’t tell me anything new about Czech; I’m an Austrian.”²⁵⁰ In cather’s work, relationships among the nations varied. In *My Ántonia* the relationship of hostility predominated: “Bohemians has a natural distrust of Austrians.”²⁵¹

Austrian and German immigrants appear also in the short story “Neighbour Rosicky.” Anton Rosicky recalls that in his earlier life he was accompanied by Germans or Austrians. In London, Rosicky was “working for a German tailor who was wretchedly poor.”²⁵² When he arrives to New York, he is employed by an Austrian. Rosicky befriends the Czech fellow-employee. The relationship with the older Austrian works on the terms of employment.

Very near the tailor shop was a small furniture factory, where an old Austrian, Loeffler, employed a few skilled men and made unusual furniture, most of it to order, for the rich German housewives up-town. The top floor of Loeffler’s five-storey factory was a loft, where he kept his choice lumber... One of the young workmen he employed was a

²⁴⁹ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 43.

²⁵⁰ Ibid. 65.

²⁵¹ Ibid. 13.

²⁵² Cather, “Neighbour Rosicky,” 8.

Czech, and he and Rosicky became fast friends. They persuaded Loeffler to let them have a sleeping-room in one corner of the loft.²⁵³

In “The Bohemian Girl” Joe Vavrika is a friend with a German. “One Sunday he drove out to see a German friend of his, and chanced to catch sight of Eric, sitting by the cattle pond in the big pasture. They went together into Fritz Oberlies' barn, and read the letters and talked things over.”²⁵⁴

Fritz Sweiheart, the German carpenter, won in the pickle contest, but he disappeared soon after supper and was not seen for the rest of the evening. Joe Vavrika said that Fritz could have managed the pickles all right, but he had sampled the demijohn in his buggy too often before sitting down to the table.²⁵⁵

In Cather’s work, Czechs associated with Germans and Austrians largely in the same way as they did with other nationalities. The factor was not just the formerly common language that would ease the settlement. Cather emphasized the human affection that does not discriminate among nations. Although being aware of the unsettled history of the two states, in her presentation the relationships of individuals are not formed by national stereotypes.

3.2 The Russians

Cather reflected a basic sympathy between Czechs and Russians immigrants. When Mr. Shimerda found a company of two Russian men the Shimerda family could experience some familiar environment in otherwise very strange new country. “My papa find friends up north, with Russian mans. ... I can understand very much talk. ... Everybody laugh. The first time I see my papa laugh in this kawn-tree.” The two nations could easily communicate for “they came from a part of Russia where the language was not very different from Bohemian.” Also, they shared their fondness of music for Peter was playing his “gaudily painted harmonica.”²⁵⁶

The feeling of being close by their culture was supported by the common status of foreigners in unknown country. “Up there the stars grew magnificently bright. Though we had come from such different parts of the world, in both of us there was some dusky superstition that those shining groups have their influence upon what is and what is not

²⁵³ Cather, “Neighbour Rosicky,” 9.

²⁵⁴ Cather, “The Bohemian girl.”

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 21.

to be.”²⁵⁷ When experiencing a tough life situation all of them felt closer. Pavel was dying. In spite of their different cultures they felt, they were all equal under the power of Providence.

3.2.1 *The Russians’ assimilation*

The Russians’ life in America was not happy, though the expectations of a wealthier life than in their motherland were met. “He told *Ántonia* that in his country only rich people had cows, but here any man could have one who would take care of her.”²⁵⁸ The two Russians, Peter and Pavel, were living near the Burden family but did not socialize much with their neighbours. Russians as well as Czechs had difficulties in communication with the English-speaking dwellers but unlike the Czechs they did not show any willingness in learning new language. “They went about making signs to people, and until the Shimerdas came they had no friends.”²⁵⁹ Their neighbours did not try to approach them because of their reputation of “the strangest and the most aloof” men “of all the strange, uprooted people among the first settlers.”²⁶⁰ In addition Russia seemed to them “more remote than any other country.” Jim avoided them for “one of them was a wild-looking fellow and I was a little afraid of him.” Thanks to the Czechs the Russians acquired new friends. Jim visited them with *Ántonia*.

Once, while he was looking at *Ántonia*, he sighed and told us that if he had stayed at home in Russia perhaps by this time he would have had a pretty daughter of his own to cook and keep house for him. He said he had left his country because of a “great trouble.”²⁶¹

Cather does not specify the Russians’ reason of emigration. However, the mention of the poor conditions in their homeland: “in his country only rich people had cows” might infer that Peter left to escape from poverty. At the same time he acknowledges with regret that his loneliness is the cost of the newly acquired abundant life. In America they could afford comfortable living. Cather describes their dwelling in detail:

The house I thought very comfortable for two men who were “batching.” Besides the kitchen, there was a living-room, with a wide double bed built against the wall, properly

²⁵⁷ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 28.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 20.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 19.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁶¹ *Ibid.* 21.

made up with blue gingham sheets and pillows. There was a little storeroom, too, with a window, where they kept guns and saddles and tools, and old coats and boots.²⁶²

²⁶² Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 21.

4 Interaction among cultures

4.1 Integration of immigrants

In my opinion the interaction between the people born in America and immigrants newly arrived from central Europe is best described in Cather's novel *My Ántonia*. There are representatives of various cultural groups as immigrants coming from various parts of Europe and their forerunners born in America interact among each other. Cather draws on her childhood memories when the same situation connected the re-settlers coming from a different part of the country and the foreign incomers. Therefore they could understand the hardship connected with resettlement.

In the novel, Mrs. Burden took a sympathetic stance towards the Czech newcomers: "There's no good reason why Mrs. Shimerda could n't have got hens from her neighbours last fall and had a henhouse going y now. I reckon she was confused and did n't know where to begin. I've come strange to a new country myself, but never forgot hens are a good thing to have, no matter what you don't have."²⁶³ Hearing about the Shimerdas' hardship and trying to be a good Christian Mrs. Burden gives them some food. She feels sorry for them but does not believe they can ever do any better stating that her grandson "Jimmy, here, is about as able to take over a homestead as they are."²⁶⁴ The Burdens' help was essential for the Shimerdas in the early years after their arrival. Burdens often visited the Czech family and helped them.

The Burden family visited the Shimerdas, making the first step in integrating their new Czech immigrant neighbours. Although Jim with Otto took the same train with the immigrants, Jim was not interested in meeting them. The Burden family initiated a proper meeting: "On Sunday morning Otto Fuchs was to drive us over to make the acquaintance of our new Bohemian neighbors. We were taking them some provisions, as they had come to live on a wild place where there was no garden or chicken-house, and very little broken land."²⁶⁵

Overall, the Burdens and their other closest neighbours accepted the Shimerdas family. Naturally, they made distinctions among them. Some of the people disliked Mrs.

²⁶³ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 37.

²⁶⁴ Ibid. 40.

²⁶⁵ Ibid. 12.

Shimerda for her boastful character, some blamed Ambrosch for exploiting *Ántonia*. Mr. Shimerda was held in respect or pitied. Perhaps everybody in the countryside however liked *Ántonia*: “Mrs. Steavens, who now lived on our farm, grew as fond of *Ántonia* as we had been, and always brought us news of her.” In other place in the novel Jim says: “grandmother save her from this by getting her a place to work with our neighbours, the Harlings.”²⁶⁶

On the other hand Cather presents also some of the unpleasant sides of the newcomers. Mrs. Shimerda shows her ungrateful behaviour towards her American neighbours. The encounter with poverty not only made her feel miserable but also gave rise to accusations of her neighbours for not helping them. The Shimerdas expected that their neighbours would help them as if it was a matter of course. When visiting the Burdens Mrs. Shimerda took one of Mrs. Burden’s pot excusing it by “You got many, Shimerdas no got.”²⁶⁷ As if their hardship gave her the right to take it. She abused her status of a poor immigrant. The Burdens expected the Shimerdas to be more humble when facing such a hardship. Jake concluded that some meanness is necessary when trying to get on in a new country but the behaviour of Mrs. Shimerda was not appropriate. “Folks can be mean enough to get on in this world; and then, ag’in, they can be too mean.”²⁶⁸

As for the ungrateful approach to Burdens’ help of her mother, *Ántonia* expected their help, too. But unlike her mother she was more fair-minded. “Your grandfather is rich,” she retorted fiercely. “Why he not help my papa? Ambrosch be rich, too, after while, and he pay back.”²⁶⁹

In her defence, Mrs. Shimerda was really crushed by their poverty: “Then the poor woman broke down. She dropped on the floor beside her crazy son, hid her face on her knees, and sat crying bitterly.”²⁷⁰ Even Mrs. Burden understood that and did not count it as her fault when witnessing the poor conditions of the family when telling Jim: “But, you see, a body never knows what traits poverty might bring out in ‘em. It makes a woman grasping to see her children want for things.”²⁷¹

²⁶⁶ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 73.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.* 45.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 40.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.* 46.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.* 38.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.* 46.

The mutual cohabitation of the early arrived and the later arrived immigrants brought to light the cultural distinctions. Cather described a situation when Mrs. Shimerda's European behaviour was manifested. When Mr. Burden announced to Mrs. Shimerda that she does not have to pay the rest of the debt she owed him, she sprang and kissed his hand. The narrator commented that scene as following: "I doubt if he had ever been so much embarrassed before. I was a little startled, too. Somehow, that seemed to bring the Old World very close."²⁷² For the Burdens her manner was very strange.

Unlike the Burdens who were described as a family of pious religious background mainly due to Mr. Burden who worked as a pastor, the religiousness of the Norwegians was not much discussed. They seemed to be more tolerant with extravagant behaviour than the Burdens. The Harlings were Norwegian immigrants who hired *Ántonia* thanks to Mrs. Burden's action: "Harlings' Danish cook had to leave them. Grandmother entreated them to try *Ántonia*."²⁷³ Their attitude towards the Bohemians was different than that of the Burdens. They liked *Ántonia* but when they met her mother and her brother and, they learnt the boastfulness of Mrs. Shimerda, and impulsiveness of Ambrosch. "[Ambrosch] kept jumping up and putting on his cap as if he were through with the whole business, and how his mother tweaked his coat-tail and prompted him in Bohemian."²⁷⁴ The Norwegians saw their childish manners but they did not find it as offending as the Burdens did. Unlike the Burdens, who were rather of puritan manners, the Harlings were less strict on the extravagant behaviour of the Shimerdas and find them merely amusing:

They had liked *Ántonia* from their first glimpse of her; felt they knew exactly what kind of girl she was. As for Mrs. Shimerda, they found her very amusing. Mrs. Harling chuckled whenever she spoke of her. "I expect I am more at home with that sort of bird than you are, Mrs. Burden. They're a pair, Ambrosch and that old woman!"²⁷⁵

4.1.1 Negative generalizations of immigrants

Jim's first hearing of foreigners was from Jake Marpole. Jake's attitude to immigrants was not very warm, for he said to Jim: "you were likely to get diseases from

²⁷² Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 67.

²⁷³ *Ibid.* 75.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

foreigners.”²⁷⁶ His concern stems from his ignorance for as we learn later “Jake’s experience of the world was not much wider than [that of Jim].” The same reason that led Jake to be prejudiced about foreign people led also the inhabitants of towns nearby the farms where the Burdens and the Shimerdas lived. Unlike in the countryside, people in the town were more hostile to the immigrants. As little as they knew them, they were very convinced about their attitude towards them. In the same vein the town people considered all the immigrants the same; they were prejudiced against the members of one nation. The town people despised all the Czech girls for a bad reputation of the three Marys who “were the heroines of a cycle of scandalous stories.”²⁷⁷ Jim comments on the most people’s prejudice towards the immigrants:

“I thought the attitude of the town people toward these girls very stupid. If I told my schoolmates that Lena Lingard’s grandfather was a clergyman, and much respected in Norway, they looked at me blankly. What did it matter? All foreigners were ignorant people who could n’t speak English. There was not a man in Black Hawk who had the intelligence or cultivation, much less the personal distinction, of *Ántonia*’s father. Yet people saw no difference between her and the three Marys; they were all Bohemians, all “hired girls.””²⁷⁸

Although Jim’s attitude towards immigrants was generally open-minded and friendly, he was also sometimes led in his opinions by generalizations. From Czechs the Burdens quite despised *Krajiek* and did not like *Ambrosch* or his mother much. The relationship between the Shimerdas and the Burdens was marked by an event that put an end to their visits for some time. After the fight between Jake and *Ambrosch*, for some time, Jim repudiated all of them: “I’ll never be friends with them again, Jake,” I declared hotly. “I believe they are all like *Krajiek* and *Ambrosch* underneath.”²⁷⁹

As for Jim’s view of *Ántonia*, her mother’s character had a bad effect on Jim’s perception of *Ántonia*. Although knowing she is not like her mother, Jim thought of *Ántonia* in a same way when he was disconcerted: “[Mrs. Shimerda] was a conceited, boastful old thing, and even misfortune could not humble her. I was so annoyed that I felt coldly even toward *Ántonia*...”²⁸⁰ Unlike her mother *Ántonia* came to the New World as a child whose character was partly yet to be formed. Jim wondered: “Was she going to grow up boastful like her mother?”²⁸¹

²⁷⁶ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 6.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.* 98.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 64.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.* 45.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.* 61.

On the whole Jim as well as the rest of his family (mainly Mr. Burden for Mrs. Burden was little judgemental sometimes) were not prejudiced/did not generalize about their Czech neighbours. On the contrary they defended the reputation of immigrants against the prejudiced town people.

Anton Jelinek established better reputation for the Czech immigrants by presenting more decent manners to the Burdens. He expressed a lot of gratitude and a much more humble behaviour than they saw by the Shimerdas. He was welcome for “he came to us like a miracle in the midst of that grim business.”²⁸²

At sight of grandmother, he snatched off his fur cap, greeting her in a deep, rolling voice which seemed older than he.

“I want to thank you very much, Mrs. Burden, for that you are so kind to poor strangers from my kawn-tree.” He did not hesitate like a farmer boy, but looked one eagerly in the eye when he spoke.”²⁸³

Jelinek represents an example of a fellow-countrymen help, for Anton Jelinek, unlike Krajiek, showed sympathy for the Shimerdas’ distress, as he “came on his only horse to help his fellow-countrymen in their trouble.”²⁸⁴

An instance of American preconception towards immigrants was mentioned also in Cather’s short story “Neighbor Rosicky.” Polly, Rosicky’s son’s American wife “observed to him that his brothers had nice manners, her tone implied that it was remarkable they should have.”²⁸⁵

4.2 Through perseverance into prosperity

Cather compared town people and the country immigrants and their children. She described the country girls’ role as it follows: “fine, well-set-up country girls who had come to town to earn a living, and, in nearly every case, to help the father struggle out of debt, or to make it possible for the younger children of the family to go to school.”

The author appreciates the perseverance of the older immigrant children whose role was to support their parents, and enable younger siblings acquire formal education. On *Antonia*’s example, the narrator admires their perseverance, vigour, achievements that stood out among other town women.

Those girls had grown up in the first bitter-hard times, and had got little schooling themselves. ... The older girls, who helped to break up the wild sod, learned so much

²⁸² Cather, *My Antonia*, 52.

²⁸³ Ibid.

²⁸⁴ Ibid.

²⁸⁵ Cather, “Neighbour Rosicky,” 15.

from life, from poverty, from their mothers and grandmothers; they had all, like *Ántonia* been early awakened and made observant by coming at a tender age from an old country to a new.²⁸⁶

Both the American and foreign settlers experienced similar hardship, tough conditions. Unlike the immigrants, the American farmers would not let their children be hired in town. The immigrants were able to do anything necessary because they had no other option.

The American farmers in our country were quite as hard-pressed as their neighbours from other countries. All alike had come to Nebraska with little capital and no knowledge of the soil they must subdue. All had borrowed money on their land. But no matter in what straits the Pennsylvanian or Virginian found himself, he would not let his daughters go out into service. Unless his girls could teach a country school, they sat at home in poverty. The Bohemian and Scandinavian girls could not get positions as teacher, because they had had no opportunity to learn the language. Determined to help in the struggle to clear the homestead from debt, they had no alternative but to go into service.²⁸⁷

Generally accepted belief of the time was that “physical exercise was thought rather inelegant for the daughters of well-to-do families.”²⁸⁸ The immigrant daughters grown on tough out-of-door work were their opposite “physically they were almost a race apart, and out-of-door work had given them a vigor...”²⁸⁹

Jim’s high regard for immigrant farmers resonated with his perception of life of the town people. He disregarded the emptiness and consumer life that most of the American town people he knew led. He thought of them

The people asleep in those houses, I thought, tried to live like the mice in their own kitchens; to make no noise, to leave no trace, to slip over the surface of things in the dark. The growing piles of ashes and cinders in the back yards were the only evidence that the wasteful, consuming process of life went on at all.²⁹⁰

On immigrants Jim on the other hand appreciated their hardiness through which they made efforts to build their life in a new country and many of them managed great achievements. Unlike the American town people who lived rather for the present moment, the immigrants wanted to leave a trace in the country for the future generations as they indeed did. They helped to build the country and to move the frontier.

²⁸⁶ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 96.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.* 97.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 107.

4.2.1 *Antonia's life in town*

As *Antonia* started working for the Harlings she learnt of the town life she did not know before. At Saturday winter nights there were parties and costume balls. In many ways it was the opposite of the hard farm life *Antonia* lived before. The farm life did not offer what she could experience in Black Hawk.

“Every Saturday night was like a party. The parlor, the back parlor, and the dining-room were warm and brightly lighted, with comfortable chairs and sofas, and gay pictures on the walls. ... After the long winter evenings on the prairie, with Ambrosch's sullen silences and her mother's complaints, the Harlings' house seemed, as she said, “like Heaven” to her.”²⁹¹

Antonia's farm ways were changing in the town, too. *Antonia* started to find attraction in boys: “[*Antonia*] seemed to think him a sort of prince. Nothing that Charley wanted was too much trouble for her.”²⁹² Taking interest in boys implies that she also concerned about her image: “*Antonia* brought her sewing and sat with us, she was already beginning to make pretty clothes for herself.”²⁹³ *Antonia* came to the town “barefoot and ragged”²⁹⁴ as Frances noticed but she was turning into a girl again: “Tony wore gloves now, and high-heeled shoes and feathered bonnets, and she went downtown nearly every afternoon with Tiny and Lena and the Marshalls' Norwegian Anna.”²⁹⁵

Antonia's teenage behaviour manifested itself when she started preferring going dancing with her friends than playing with Harling children. When she spoke with Mrs. Harling about a potential place to work she expressed her preference for having her time for herself:

“there's no children. The work is nothing; I can have every evening, and be out a lot in the afternoons.”

“I thought you liked children. Tony, what's come over you?”

“I don't know, something has.” *Antonia* tossed her head and set her jaw. “A girl like me has got to take her good times when she can.”²⁹⁶

Independence was decisive for her decision. She would not let anybody forbid her something: “Stop going to the tent?” she panted. “I would n't think of it for a minute!

²⁹¹ Cather, *My Antonia*, 1994, 86.

²⁹² *Ibid.* 77.

²⁹³ *Ibid.* 86.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 76.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 104.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 101.

My own father could n't make me stop! Mr. Harling ain't my boss outside my work. I won't give up my friends, either."²⁹⁷

4.2.1.1 *Pride, alienation and integration*

As for *Ántonia's* process of adaptation to the new country, during her service for the Norwegians she was taking part in the social events and was behaving like anyone else from the town. Her inner characteristics/identity however did not change. *Ántonia* still loved her old country as she often thought back to her origin with pride. She used to tell to the Harlings' children stories "about old Christmases and weddings in Bohemia."²⁹⁸ In one of the stories *Ántonia* told them that "Christ was born in Bohemia a short time before the Shimerdas left that country."²⁹⁹ Even stronger evidence for *Ántonia's* national feelings Cather provides in depiction of her homesickness by missing her father and the old times in their country: "It makes me homesick, Jimmy, this flower, this smell," she said softly. ... "When I was little I used to go down there to hear them talk - beautiful talk, like what I never hear in this country."³⁰⁰ Cather depicts Mr. Shimerda as a very intelligent man whom *Antonia* admired. In America, for its rather better economic conditions aiming, she misses the wit she related to the old world and which her father represented. *Ántonia* explains that she considers Bohemia her country: "If I was put down there in the middle of the night, I could find my way all over that little town" ... "I ain't never forgot my own country."³⁰¹

At the same time however, *Ántonia* became a little alienated from her family and her origin. In a story *Ántonia* told the Harling's children she met a tramp who asked her for beer whereupon "[*Ántonia*] told him he'd have to go to the Bohemians for beer; the Norwegians did n't have none when they thrashed."³⁰² She did not mention she was Bohemian herself, did not express any relation to the Bohemians she was speaking about. As if they were alienated to her, as if she did not belong to them for she belonged somewhere else now.

Social life in Black Hawk was very lively. The Saturday night dances were an important part of local young people's social life. *Ántonia* regularly attended the parties

²⁹⁷ Ibid. 101.

²⁹⁸ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 86.

²⁹⁹ Ibid.

³⁰⁰ Ibid. 114.

³⁰¹ Ibid. 115.

³⁰² Ibid. 87.

and socialized both with Americans and with other immigrant children. “The country boys came in from farms eight and ten miles away, and all the country girls were on the floor, - Ántonia and Lena and Tiny, and the Danish laundry girls and their friends.”³⁰³ Cather depicted a situation where Ántonia was dancing with an American boy: “Ántonia seemed frightened at first, and kept looking questioningly at Lena and Tiny over Willy O’Reilly’s shoulder.”³⁰⁴ Common social group where the immigrant people interacted with the Americans prove that the integration was taking place successfully.

Overall, Ántonia might have changed physically... image, behaviour.. but her inner values, ideals and believes remained the same. She retained her love for her old country, for the land, she did not adopt different values unlike Lena who did for example.

4.2.1.2 Ántonia’ strength against the odds

Ántonia is an example of a strong pioneer woman. She is not only able to bear hard farm work but more important is her inner strength.

“I’m not married, Mrs. Steavens,’ she says to me very quiet and natural-like, ‘and I ought to be.’” Tony realized that the situation was not appropriate. She was really not like the Ántonia everyone knew, she was really broken. “We never even saw any of Tony’s pretty dresses. She did n’t take them out of her trunks. She was quiet and steady.” “She liked to be alone.” The neighbourhood gave up on Ántonia. They thought she is ruined like other girls in such situation usually are. No one believed she would have a big family and run her own farm: “I’m afraid she’s settled down to be Ambrosch’s drudge for good.”³⁰⁵

“My Ántonia, that had so much good in her, had come home disgraced.”³⁰⁶

Other girls would break down and resign but tony overtook the tough situation and managed to help her nation grow. Ántonia was not broken for good. She managed to marry other man and have a family and a prosperous farm. Not only that she overcame the situation, when her baby was born she was not ashamed of it:

“Another girl would have kept her baby out of sight, but Tony, of course, must have its picture on exhibition at the town photographer’s, in a great gilt frame. How like her!”³⁰⁷

³⁰³ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 96.

³⁰⁴ Ibid. 93.

³⁰⁵ Ibid. 141.

³⁰⁶ Ibid. 148.

“She loved it from the first as dearly as if she’d had a ring on her finger, and was never ashamed of it... *Antonia* is a natural-born mother. I wish she could marry and raise a family, but I don’t know as there’s much chance now.”³⁰⁸

Jim saw she was changed, she gone through a life lesson and although she looked “worked down,” “there was a new kind of strength in the gravity of her face, and her color still gave her that look of deep-seated health and ardor.”³⁰⁹

³⁰⁷ Cather, 1994, 144.

³⁰⁸ Cather, *My Antonia*, 151.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

5 Czech immigrant family development and its cultural contribution

5.1.1 Czech women homemaking

Cather in most of her work emphasizes the ability of Czech women to run a household. *Ántonia* learnt a great deal about housekeeping from Mrs. Harling when she used to work for her. *Ántonia* was very dutiful even before, when she was going to be married to Larry. “I never saw a girl work harder to go to housekeeping right and well-prepared.”³¹⁰ When it comes to housekeeping Cather is generous with praise also of the three Czech Marys, of otherwise doubtful reputation: “The three Marys were considered as dangerous as high explosives to have about the kitchen, yet they were such good cooks and such admirable housekeepers that they never had to look for a place.”³¹¹ In her novel *O Pioneers!* Cather compares homemaking abilities of Czech and Norwegian women:

“The Bohemians,” said Alexandra, as they drew up to the table, “certainly know how to make more kinds of bread than any other people in the world. Old Mrs. Hiller told me once at the church super that she could make seven kinds of fancy bread, but Marie could make a dozen.”³¹²

5.1.2 Czech Pride

One of Mrs. Shimerda’s distinctive characteristic was pride. It was manifested when she was giving Mrs. Burden her dried mushrooms taken from the old country. She “presented it ceremoniously to grandmother”³¹³ and did not forget to add a proud commentary which turned into a little tension between the two women. The situation when each of them was defending her culture was calmed down by *Ántonia* who, although taking her mother’s side, is able to use a kind tone:

“Very good. You no have in this country. All things for eat better in my country.”
“Maybe so, Mrs. Shimerda,” grandmother said drily. “I can’t say but I prefer our bread to yours, myself.”
Ántonia undertook to explain. “This very good, Mrs. Burden,” - she clasped her hands

³¹⁰ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 146.

³¹¹ Ibid. 99.

³¹² Cather, “Neighbour Rosicky,” 1993, 76.

³¹³ Cather, *My Antonia*, 1994, 40.

as if she could not express how good, - “it make very much when you cook, like what my mama say. Cook with rabbit, cook with chicken, in the gravy, - oh, so good!”³¹⁴

5.1.3 Love and Jolly Czech nature

One of the distinct characteristics that Cather ascribes to Czech immigrants in her work is their loving nature: “That’s Ántonia’s failing, you know; if she likes people, she won’t hear anything against them.”³¹⁵ Marie Shabata was also a loving woman. Her husband was well aware of this trait and since they were no longer in love together “he knew that somewhere she must get a feeling to live upon, for she was not a woman who could live without loving.”³¹⁶ Cather contrasts the nature of Czech woman with that of the Swedish: Alexandra is a opposite of Marie. “She had never been in love, she had never indulged in sentimental reveries.”³¹⁷

Another trait that appears through Cather’s work is Czech cheerfulness. In *O Pioneers!* Cather compared boys from various immigrant groups. I find the example quite rare for she more often dealt with the woman representatives of a nation:

The French and Bohemian boys were spirited and jolly, liked variety, and were as much predisposed to favour anything new as the Scandinavian boys were to reject it. The Norwegian and Swedish lads were much more self-centered, apt to be egotistical and jealous.³¹⁸

Marie Shabata in Cather’s novel *O Pioneers!* is a nice example of the jolly character of Czechs that is so often present in her work:

Marie was incapable of being lukewarm about anything that pleased her. She simply did not know how to give a half-hearted response. When she was delighted, she was as likely as not to stand on her tip-toes and clap her hands. If people laugh at her, she laughed with them.³¹⁹

Antonia was “always singing them queer Bohemian songs, like she was the happiest thing in the world.”³²⁰

³¹⁴ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 40.

³¹⁵ Ibid. 128.

³¹⁶ Cather, “Neighbour Rosicky,” 1993, 87.

³¹⁷ Ibid. 80.

³¹⁸ Ibid. 84.

³¹⁹ Ibid. 85.

³²⁰ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 146.

5.1.4 Family values - Antonia as a “rich mine of life”

Unlike her Norwegian girlfriends who pursued rather material interests in life, *Antonia* decided to have a big family. “Tony has nice children - ten or eleven of them by this time, I guess.”³²¹ She was not an exception for in the novel it is said also about “the three Bohemian Marys and their large families.”³²² *Antonia*’s children were well raised for Cather records their good behaviour when Jim visited them, he noticed that “his brother met me with intelligent gray eyes... “Yes, sir” ... “we’ll open the gate for you.”³²³ They were also bred not to be selfish: “Our children were good about taking care of each other.”³²⁴ *Antonia* dedicated her life to the care of her family and managing their farm. For her to have children was her life goal: “And how many have you got, Jim?” When I told her I had no children she seemed embarrassed. “Oh, ain’t that too bad!”³²⁵ Her life goal is present also in the following quote “Father Kelly says everybody’s put into this world for something, and I know what I’ve got to do. I’m going to see that my little girl has a better chance than ever I had.” She aims to do the best she can for her children. The value of having a family *Antonia* passed on her children, too. Leo, one of *Antonia*’s children announced Jim that he was born on Easter day. “The children all looked at me, as if they expected me to exhibit astonishment or delight at this information. Clearly, they were proud of each other, and of being so many.”³²⁶

Antonia taught her children also to love the country of their origin and to treasure the culture of their nation. She passed on them the family heritage of the Shimerdas: “Leo, with a good deal of fussing, got out his violin. It was old Mr. Shimerda’s instrument, which *Antonia* had always kept, and it was too big for him.”³²⁷ Another example was illustrated in the scene where the children show Jim their fruit cave: “When we descended, they all came down after us and seemed quite as proud of the cave as the girls were.” They were especially proud of their mother’s Czech kolaches made with the use of the fruit:

‘Show him the spiced plumbs, mother. Americans don’t have those,’ said one of the older boys. ‘Mother uses them to make kolaches,’ he added.

³²¹ Cather, *My Antonia*, 1994, 156.

³²² *Ibid.* 165.

³²³ *Ibid.* 156.

³²⁴ *Ibid.* 162.

³²⁵ *Ibid.* 159.

³²⁶ *Ibid.* 158.

³²⁷ *Ibid.* 164.

Leo, in a low voice, tossed off some scornful remark in Bohemian.

I turned to him. ‘You think I don’t know what kolaches are, eh? You’re mistaken, young man. I’ve eaten your mother’s kolaches long before that Easter Day when you were born.’

‘Always too fresh, Leo,’ Ambrosch remarked with a shrug.

Leo dived behind his mother and grinned out at me.³²⁸

The children took certain characteristics after their grandparents, too. Sometimes the healthy pride changed into disdain towards anyone else. In that aspect was Leo proud as Mrs. Shimerda and Ambrosch: “He was n’t any Rockefeller,” put in Master Leo, in a very low tone, which reminded me of the way in which Mrs. Shimerda had once said that my grandfather “was n’t Jesus.”³²⁹ In many ways the children were similar to *Ántonia*, though. During Jim’s visit they were trying to persuade their mother to stay in the kitchen: “Well, you’re here, now, mother, and if you talk here, Yulka and I can listen, too,”³³⁰ which notably resembles what *Ántonia* said to Jim once: that when she was a small child she used to listen to “beautiful talk, like what I never hear in this country.”

5.1.5 Building of the country and of the nation

By having big families, immigrants contributed to the growth of the nation, in cultivating the land they helped to build the country. Cather notices *Ántonia*’s deal of contribution in many places of the novel. One of these scenes is the moment where her children are going out of the cave. The immigrant achievement is symbolized as a development from darkness of hard times to the light of a happy, fulfilled life. The explosion of life includes variety of groups corresponding to various immigrant nations:

We were standing outside talking, when they all came running up the steps together, big and little, tow heads and gold heads and brown, and flashing little naked legs; a veritable explosion of life out of the dark cave into the sunlight. It made me dizzy for a moment.³³¹

Antonia is presented as a founder: “She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races.”³³² She contributed to the growth of her nation and by that she contributed to the growth of the country that the nation inhabits. Cather admires that, for she draws her inspiration from the time when the states were still being formed.

³²⁸ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 160.

³²⁹ *Ibid.* 166.

³³⁰ *Ibid.* 158.

³³¹ *Ibid.* 160.

³³² *Ibid.* 167.

Cultivation of land was another thing Cather admired about pioneers. For all of them the early years were very difficult. As Cather put it, for *Ántonia* and Cuzak “the first ten years were a hard struggle”³³³ On their farm there was a lot to do. Their farm consisted of “a wide farmhouse, with a red barn and an ash grove, and cattle yards in front that sloped down to the high road.”³³⁴ They kept many animals that needed to be taken care of:

Ducks and geese ran quacking across my path. White cats were sunning themselves among yellow pumpkins on the porch steps. I looked through the wire screen into a big, light kitchen with a white floor. I saw a long table, rows of wooden chairs against the wall, and a shining range in one corner.³³⁵

As for some special Czech habits Cather mentions that “the Bohemians, I remembered, always planted hollyhocks.”³³⁶ What is more, *Ántonia* however gave meaning to those simple things, she put a piece of her into everything she did, and people around her could perceive that:

She still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one’s breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things. She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last. All the strong things of her heart came out in her body, that had been so tireless in serving generous emotions.³³⁷

After all that she achieved, Cather admires *Ántonia*’s strength. After twenty years of inexhaustible work was *Ántonia* “a stalwart, brown woman, flat-chested, her curly brown hair a little grizzled.”³³⁸ She lost some teeth but did not lose her *élan*: “I know so many women who have kept all the things that she had lost, but whose inner glow has faded. Whatever else was gone, *Ántonia* had not lost the fire of life.”³³⁹

In her memories Cather went back to the divide. The place epitomized her relationship with her immigrant friends and their pioneer accomplishments. In the novel she depicts Jim and *Ántonia* talking after a long time: “we walked toward that unploughed patch at the crossing of the roads as the fittest place to talk to each other.” ... “We sat down outside the sagging wire fence that shut Mr. Shimerda’s plot off from

³³³ Cather, *My Ántonia*, 1994, 162.

³³⁴ *Ibid.* 156.

³³⁵ *Ibid.* 156-157.

³³⁶ *Ibid.* 160.

³³⁷ *Ibid.* 167.

³³⁸ *Ibid.* 157.

³³⁹ *Ibid.* 159.

the rest of the world.”³⁴⁰ The tall red grass that “had never been cut there” symbolized the frontier, past and present, the living and the dead and their irreplaceable part in the story.

5.1.6 Decline of Czech immigrant culture

Cather in her work depicted the lives of pioneers who were arriving to the USA in late decades of the nineteenth century and who tried to retain their original culture. This was however not true for all the immigrants. Some of them were easier to be assimilated than others. Cather, on the contrast of *Antonia* and her Norwegian friends, shows Czech resistance against assimilation.³⁴¹ Further generations of immigrants were more and more assimilating with the culture of the newly formed grouping of multiple cultures. Svoboda wrote that “eventual dissipation of that culture was inevitable, however, and perhaps even desirable.”³⁴²

In the 1920’s the Czech culture life of the previous decades went to decline in part due to the effect of the Americanization movement. The Czech language began to disappear as a result of “strict language laws in Nebraska, which further discouraged the younger generation from improving their basic knowledge of the language and culture of their parents.”³⁴³ In fact the Czech language was surviving mainly due to the inflow of Czech immigrants which however declined rapidly with the outbreak of the WWI and the establishment of immigration quotas in 1920’s.³⁴⁴

Another factor accounting for the “declining interest in retention of Czech culture in the United States” was the establishment of the independent Republic of Czechoslovakia in 1918 which for many older Czechs represented “the climax of their sentimental involvement with their native country.” “Czech-Americans felt their role in the Czech struggle for freedom had come to an end.”³⁴⁵

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.* 151.

³⁴¹ Jim said about Lena that she was “conventionalized by city clothes that I might have passed her on the street without seeing her.” (127) I think he would not say this about *Antonia*.

³⁴² Svoboda, “Czech-Americans: The Love of Liberty,” 1993, 117.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.* 118.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

6 Conclusion

However inevitable the decline of Czech immigrant culture was the Czech footprint in the USA is still noticeable today. At the turn of the twentieth century the Czech immigrant group in America formed a significant part of the Czech nation. At the time of the fight for regaining the state independence Czech emigrants helped to negotiate the terms for the establishment of Czechoslovakia. The Czech footprint is still living in the work of Willa Cather. Cather in her work depicted the life of pioneers at the time of the largest immigration when millions of Europeans were entering the shores of America. Her narratives possess the voice of authenticity for her inspiration is drawn from her youth spent among the European immigrants. Cather in her work celebrates the diversity of various ethnic groups and their contribution to the American culture.

As for the Czech immigrants, Willa Cather is not alone to praise Czech contribution to the culture of America, especially Nebraska. Kucera dedicated his book “to the first Czech pioneers who contributed so much to the political, cultural, religious, economical, agricultural and social progress of this state.”³⁴⁶ Czech immigrants to America were indeed active members of the society. They were establishing their national centres, associations, parishes and schools. Cather’s work depicts Czechs and their tough lives on the divide. Their staying power is best illustrated on the character of *Ántonia Shimerda* who came as a child of poor immigrants struggling on the edge of survival but managed to build out of nothing a place overflowing with life without losing her goodness and her “fire of life.”

Czechs in Cather’s work did not hurry to assimilate. They preferred using Czech language, were reading Czech newspapers and visiting national events. Not everyone integrated successfully. For some of the Czech immigrants the separation from their home country was too hard. Mr. Shimerda, who loved music and merrymaking, could not overcome the isolation and homesickness he suffered from on the prairie. Those who integrated well into the society did not try to renounce their past customs, traditions and values they brought from the Old World. They came to Nebraska with desire and love for the land, hunger for freedom and independence, and their love of family. All of these Cather saw in “Neighbour Rosicky.” On the example of Scandinavian immigrants

³⁴⁶ Kucera, *Czech contributions to the Progress of Nebraska*, 1929.

Cather showed that for some immigrants it was easier to forget their past than for others. *Ántonia*, on the other hand, wanted to retain the heritage of her nation but was open to other cultures as well. *Ántonia* integrated well into the Nebraska society and she partly assimilated as she learned the foreign language. But she did not adopt everything. As for the Czechs, Czech pride sometimes served them well not to renounce part of their identity. In one of her interviews Cather said: “Americanization worker who persuades an old Bohemian housewife that it is better for her to feed her family out of tin cans instead of cooking them a steaming goose for dinner is committing a crime against art.”³⁴⁷ Cather clearly did not advocate the melting pot theory but advocated the various European heritages. Cather depicted the habits, customs and traditions of individual immigrant groups. She recorded their cohabitation with other nations and cultures. Her work illustrates both instances of mutual affection and of some cultural clashes.

Otakar Vočadlo in his afterword to the Czech edition of *My Ántonia* called our attention to the importance of Cather’s testimony of the Czech immigrant life in America. According to Vočadlo, her work incites to think about Czechs’ national character. The national identity remains relevant. Moreover, nowadays, to understand its identity is becoming for a nation’s existence more and more essential.

³⁴⁷ Murphy, 1994. Quote from L. Brent Bohlke, 1986, 147.

Resumé

Tato práce pojednává o integraci a asimilaci středoevropských vystěhovalců do Ameriky jak je ve svém díle popsala americká spisovatelka Willa Catherová. Práce se zaměřuje především na životy českých vystěhovalců do Nebrasky, ale hodnotí také počínání ostatních středoevropských i skandinávských národů. Catherová prožila část svého života na hranici prémie, kterou postupně osidlovali evropští imigranti a vyrůstala tak v prostředí, ve kterém se střetávaly kultury starého kontinentu, jejichž tradice a zvyky popisuje ve své tvorbě.

V úvodu práce shrnuje historii českého vystěhovalectví do Ameriky. Kromě činnosti misionářů často první čeští osidlovatelé prchali do Ameriky následkem náboženských a politických změn v českých zemích. Přestože vystěhovalectví bylo veřejností značně kritizováno, množství lidí odcházelo do ciziny s nadějí na lepší život. Počet vystěhovalců vrcholil v době, kdy se mnoho Čechů rozhodlo využít nabídky levné půdy v nově vznikajících státech amerického Středozápadu.

Catherová ve svém díle líčí šok z reality po příjezdu do nehostinné oblasti divoké prémie. České vystěhovalce trápil zejména stesk po domově a jazyková bariéra. Na příkladu jazyka také ilustruje odlišnou ochotu k asimilaci u různých skupin přistěhovalců. Starší generace měli obecně problém se naučit nový jazyk. Ačkoli mladší přistěhovalci byli otevřenější, např. Antonie Šimerdová, ani oni nechtěli svou mateřštinu zapomenout. Antonie své děti učila česky a na rozdíl od své norské kamarádky Leny, v její řeči zůstalo něco cizokrajného. V životě na farmě Antonie postupně zapomínala mluvit anglicky. Naopak Rakušan Otto Fuchs by zřejmě svůj mateřský jazyk úplně zapomněl, kdyby jednou ročně nepsal dopis své matce domů do Evropy. Antonia se dokázala úspěšně začlenit do života v nové zemi. Pan Šimerda ale v samotě prémie postrádal jakýkoli útěk od těžké práce a spáchal sebevraždu. Podobně jako on skončilo mnoho českých přistěhovalců.

Na příkladu farmáře Rosického i Antonie Šimerdové Catherová ukazuje českou lásku k půdě, touhu po nezávislosti a svobodě a jednotu rodiny, které přinášeli čeští přistěhovalci. Oba dali přednost životu na farmě, který představoval těžkou práci před jednodušším životem ve městě. Catherová ve svém díle vyzdvihuje pracovitost českých přistěhovalců - průkopníků, kteří si svou dobrosrdečností získali své okolí.

Výrazným rysem českých přistěhovalců byla také jejich obliba společného veselí, kterou se snažili překonat stesk po domově a kterou také občas budili pohoršení u svých puritánských sousedů. Vzájemné působení odlišných kultur často vedlo ke stereotypnímu posuzování. Catherová naopak svou tvorbou oslavovala kulturní rozmanitost různých skupin a menšin. U Čechů například vyzdvihovala jejich pohostinnost. Antonia, Marie Rosická i Marie Šabatová odrážely schopnost českých žen pečovat o domácnost. Svým rozhodnutím věnovat svůj život péči o rodinu tak tyto ženy přispěly k růstu svého národa i státu.

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Anotace

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Název práce: Proces asimilace a integrace středoevropských imigrantů v díle Willy Catherové

Vedoucí práce: Pro. PhDr. Josef Jařab, CSc.

Počet stran: 80

Klíčová slova: americká literatura, imigrace, integrace, asimilace, Willa Catherová

Tato diplomová práce se zabývá procesem integrace a asimilace středoevropských imigrantů v díle americké spisovatelky Willy Catherové. Práce se zaměřuje zejména na autorčino zpracování životů českých imigrantů v Nebrasce v románech *My Ántonia*, *O Pioneers!*, v novele "Neighbour Rosicky," a v povídce "The Bohemian Girl." Práce hodnotí střetávání a propojování rozdílných kultur, jejich přínos a úspěchy provázející osidlování nebraské prerie a popisuje vývoj rodiny imigrantů.

Annotation

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Department: Department of English and American Studies

Title of the thesis: Process of Assimilation and Integration of Central European Immigrants as reflected in the work of Willa Cather

Supervisor: Prof. PhDr. Josef Jařab, CSc.

Number of pages: 80

Key words: American literature, immigration, assimilation, integration, Willa Cather

This diploma thesis deals with assimilation and integration of central European immigrants as reflected in the work of Willa Cather. The thesis focuses on lives of Czech immigrants in Nebraska in her novels *My Ántonia*, *O Pioneers!*, in novella “Neighbour Rosicky” and short story “The Bohemian Girl.” The thesis examines the accomplishments of assimilation and integration of individual characters, reflects the moments of cultural clashes and blending and describes the development of immigrant family.