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FROM THE MEMORIES OF OLD CZECH SETTLERS IN AMERICA

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"The Sentimental Story of a Forgotten Immigrant.
From the Life of Antonín Wíša. For Kalendář Amerikán written by Antonín Klobása."

Antonín Wíša.

In the revolutionary year 1848 the Czech nation was given a constitution. It was welcomed by the people with great excitement. The nation experienced a taste of freedom, however, it was a pity that such freedom, so long-awaited, did not last long, since already in 1851 it was completely retracted. In their yearning for freedom many people in my birthplace Choceň wanted to move to free America. Small groups of people were gathering in the house of my father to offer each other advice. My father ordered the "Declaration of Independence of the United States" in German as well as the Constitution, which he would read to them, and several of them then departed to the promised America at the first occasion. Those were the families, Bureš, Houdek, Kutina and others. My father obtained passports, ship passage, etc., for them.

These immigrants sometimes wrote about how big the farms in America were and how blissfully they lived there. But in reality these people did not know very much about America.

The letters, however, were attractive and they lured over there other immigrants, among whom was also Antonín Wíša, the brother of a known Chicago watchmaker, Václav Wíša who came about 15 years later, and settled in Chicago on 18th Street. My father also got a passport for this young man and strongly approved of his undertaking, since he had a feeling that such a gifted and especially able young man would find his happiness in America. When he was saying

farewell to him, he wished him the very best and a happy voyage across the ocean. That was more or less in the year 1854.

During that time the immigrants were traveling on wooden sailing ships and often in great storms, they were driven back by the adverse winds, or in different directions and sometimes their journey would take up to 3 months. The same fate was also encountered by our friend Antonin Wiša who heroically attempted the unpleasant journey during which, however, he began to consider whether the ship could not be altered somehow so that it would be pushed forward even by an adverse wind. He promised that when he would be settled in America, he would take an interest in the realization of this project.

When, finally, after a long journey they stepped out onto the American shores he took a step onto the ground of freedom with a joyful heart. He was filled with indescribable yearning to reach his goals for those beautiful and boundless farms about which he had read at home. Having reached Racine he sent word to Caledonia to the farm of his former neighbor Bureš that he should come and meet him. In response to the message two sons came to pick him up, not with a coach as he expected, but in a lumber jack cart that was pulled by two horned oxen.

After two hours of riding along an impassable path through an old growth forest they arrived in front of a small log cabin that had one room and one kitchen. At that point, young Antonin's heart probably fell into his shoes. Wherever he looked he saw nothing except for trees, tree stumps and clouds. –It took his breath away. So this is the famous farm of 80 acres? Nevertheless, he did not have an opportunity to think any further. The whole family came out to welcome him, embracing him happily, and the old lady Burešová kissed him with indescribable happiness to be reunited with a former Choceň neighbor. Of course he had to step inside, where there was already a rich table prepared.

During the happy conversation, our guest forgot his earlier surprise. He was now welcome in a merry company and it was indicated to him that he could stay as long as he might wish. What else could he do? He therefore accepted their hospitality temporarily, and took up the work with the others; and very shortly he learned how to fell trees and prepare fields.

His company was pleasant and was composed of parents, three sons and one daughter.

The only decoration in the hut was several handguns that were hanging on the walls. The crawl space under the roof was accessible through an opening in the ceiling to which was affixed a ladder. Beside the latter was Christ's picture under which the old Bureš would pray on his knees. About 50 steps beyond the kitchen there was a small shack for cattle and beside it, there was a small haystack.

The deer hunting here was very easy. When, in the winter, a lot of snow fell and the deer did not have pasture, they came to the haystack and the old Bureš would shoot them from the window. There was always an abundant supply of meat. During the summer, squirrels were shot and there was an abundance of them, and because Bureš was a practical tanner he used all the pelts for winter clothing, so that during the winter the boys looked like Robinson Crusoe.

At that time there was no Czech reading material in America. They did not know English, so they knew very little about America. Caledonia and Racine were their America. Their knowledge did not reach any further, this is evidenced by the fact that when my father was preparing them for the journey to America a certain Mr. Mazánek from Caledonia wrote to him to have them bring with them shoe nails and other smaller things because they supposedly could not be bought in America.

However, let us return to our Antonín Wíša who got caught at the Bureš's and was industriously advancing in farming knowledge. However, besides the sharp axe there was another attraction for him—the beautiful eyes of the shapely Nanynka Burešová with whom he fell very much in love and by whom his love was returned. After a longer time they expressed their reciprocal true love to the parents and they asked for their permission to get married. However, that was like a fire on the roof. Old Bureš got very angry and running throughout the room he was constantly screaming: "No, no. The good lord would have to punish me for this if I permitted my child to marry such a godless person who never gets onto his knees to pray. That would be a sin calling up to the heavens!" All the begging of the young people was in vain and the old Bureš would not budge.

The loving couple had a hard mission to say goodbye forever. Their hearts, full of love, were crushed. Their goodbyes were hard and Wíša finally left disappointed and nobody knew where he had gone.

Shortly before the civil war in the year 1861, my father, who was living in St. Louis, learned that a person named Wíša was living in the German suburb on the north side of the town. My father wanted to make sure that it was our Choceň friend. We set off for a reconnaissance journey to the suburb and then we were shown the house in which the "bachelor" Wíša was living. It was a great and pleasant surprise for my father to find a friend for whom five years ago he had requested a passport for America, and to whom he had wished good luck at the railroad station. He took us to a great room that resembled a small museum. Several well-done oil paintings made by his brush were hanging on the walls. All around there were stands with stuffed birds and animals; above the door was a big deer head with wide antlers and similar decorations. In the middle there stood a great table and on it was an unfinished big model of an ocean ship, which he hoped to improve. Meanwhile my father spoke to him and I examined those things that interested me very much. The friendly conversation of my father with Wíša took a long time; however, at the end we had to set off on the return journey back home, which took several hours. My father gave him his address and invited him to visit us sometime. He promised, but for a long time we waited for him in vain.

Shortly after, the Civil War erupted and President Lincoln called up 75,000 volunteers into armed service for 6 months, since he thought that the war would be finished within that period. The war, however, lasted 5 years.

As a consequence of the cruel panic that had already lasted a considerable time, the vast amount of unemployed people suffered hunger—(at that time there were no helpful associations)—and therefore young people in mass were joining the Army so that they could at least satisfy their stomachs.

General John C. Fremont, who four years before that was a presidential candidate of the newly founded Republican Party, was named the commander of the Western Region Army of which the state of Missouri was a part. With his own money he formed a cavalry under the title "Freemont's Body Guards", and because there were enough people, he chose the tallest, most beautifully built men placed on tall beautiful horses and he ordered beautiful body hugging uniforms for them. That unit offered a beautiful view, one man resembling another. They dwelled in a small church on 13th Street and Park Avenue, in the southern part of the town, about 6 blocks from our dwelling. At that time the town was teeming with army men.
One day we were visited by a soldier in a dress uniform in whom we recognized with absolute surprise our friend Antonin Wíša, a member of "Freemont's Body Guards." – Just then a small dog looking for food came into the company tent. When he was fed he became very friendly and later became the favorite of the whole company with which he went everywhere. We will mention later the role he played later on.

During those times there was no railroad transportation in Missouri. The rails went only 80 miles to Rolla, Missouri. The whole transportation of foodstuffs and ammunition for the soldiers was done by wagons drawn by 6 mules and it often happened that insidious revolutionary groups would attack these supply wagons, would kill off the guards and steal everything. To stop that, Fremont sent his unit to the middle of the state to drive away the robber groups. One day the unit received news that about seven miles south of its camp there was a revolutionary group that was preparing to raid St. Louis and attack the local weapons arsenal. Our brave young men did not hesitate. They mounted their energetic horses and they galloped to the town. The uneven fight of merely a hundred men against a regiment of rebels began. The fight lasted about half an hour and the rebels were dispersed. Our boys collected their wounded and several dead people and returned to their camp. They found out, however, that one of theirs was still missing. Then the little dog ran in and was barking fiercely. When the dog realized that they were paying attention to him he ran back to the forest and returned, continuing his barking: "That dog is trying to say something, "they told themselves, and several of them mounted their horses and followed the dog up to the battlefield. The dog ran into a thicket where our friend Wíša was lying, already half dead. They took him to the nearest hospital and then it was found that he was hit by seven rebel bullets. Two went through his hat. One took off the heel of his boot and four hit his body. After the examination of the wounds the doctor said that there was hope that he could still recover because his narrowly tight coat had stopped the blood flow that clotted under the coat and stopped further flow—we read the news about it in the English papers later on. The wife of General Fremont took the little dog to a gold smith shop, Jacord Co., where she had made for him a gold collar as a reward for his good deed. We did not learn then, however, where they took Wíša, whether he was alive or dead.

Later, when his older brother Václav emigrated from Bohemia to Chicago, where later he had a watch shop on 18th Street, he wrote to us to ask whether we knew anything about his brother Antonin. I wrote to him that the latter had joined the war, and that we had not seen him since that time, but that I would try to find him, if possible. (I did not want to reveal the sad story.) I was able to find him once again in his former settlement, but he was already a different person, and I was scared just looking at him. The previously, beautiful, big strong man was paralyzed in his body and his spirit.—He had one leg much shorter than the other one, and there

were other marks of the cruel fight on his body. His eyes, however, still showed a quick intelligence. He did not invite me into his home. (What happened to his home from before the war, and to his "museum", I never learned.) In the yard where I met him he had "a paint shop" to paint carriages, which was his employment at that time. I conveyed to his brother that I had found Antonin and what he was doing and that, however, he did not live in the best of conditions. He himself did not mention his personal life in a single word, and I did not ask because I could read it from his face.

I noticed that in the courtyard, there was a little boy playing, and I got the feeling that it was probably his offspring. The little boy was very frisky, probably like Antonin used to be himself when he was little.

Sometime later several countrymen from Chicago came to St. Louis, and among them was also Mr. Václav J. Wíša who was yearning to visit his younger brother whom he had not seen since he said goodbye last time at home at the railroad station when that vivacious youth was going to America to seek his fortune. We took him to his brother. A newly painted carriage was standing in the courtyard. There were two men who were circling and looking at it. One of them was beautifully dressed and had a tall hat on his head, which at that time everybody was wearing, except for the working class. The second one was wearing an outfit stained with colors and a squashed hat on his head. We remained standing on the side, and we were waiting for the men to depart. Then Mr. Wíša from Chicago asked me: "Which one among them is my brother, the one in the tall hat?" Oh how bitter for me it was to say the truth, and nevertheless I had to say: "No, it's the second one." It was a sad surprise.

When the owner of the carriage left, I introduced the two brothers who fell into each other's embrace and both were weeping bitterly. The scene also made my eyes shed tears. We stayed for about an hour and we asked him to come to visit us next Thursday to make the acquaintance of several guests from Chicago. When we were taking our leave, the older brother said: "'Antonin, if you are poor tell me: I am in a position to help you. Just tell me and it will be a pleasure for me to help you.'"

The brother, however, turned his head away and said: "No." We both understood how his heart was rebelling with pain. We never saw him again. When later I went to visit him, I was told by his wife, who I had not seen before, that he had died just a short time before, and that she herself would take her family to go to stay with her friends in the east.

How it all could have turned out differently, if religious fanaticism would not have torn apart two loving hearts that could have been happy in the world.

When several years ago the daughters of Mr. J. W. Wíša, the son of Václav J. Wíša from Chicago went on an excursion to Europe in New York they met Mr. Louis Wíša, the descendant of the late Antonin Wíša. They saw in him a very intelligent person who had already been working as an illustrator for the journal "Evening News" for a long time, and who was a very gifted designer.

Not long ago he painted a very well done portrait of President Roosevelt for the above-mentioned periodical and he sent its print to the Wíša Chicago family. The meeting of the so-far unacquainted female cousins with their male cousin was very happy and created new friendships among them. Also their aunt, Mrs. Marie Behrensová, who is living not far away from the family of Louis Wíša in New York, is visiting them and is keeping up the friendly contacts. Mr. Louis Wíša, we are told, is worthy of the name of his unfortunate father.