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CONTEMPORARY ETHNICITY, MAINTENANCE OF ETHNIC CULTURE AND ETHNIC CHANGE: THE CASE OF THE SLOVAK AMERICANS IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA[1]

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The western part of the state of Pennsylvania and the city of Pittsburgh as its industrial and administrative centre were the areas of an extensive influx of immigrants from the territory of Slovakia (formerly part of Austria-Hungary, and pre-WW II Czechoslovakia). The immigrants settled in this area created the basis of formation of Slovak ethnic communities, which have left their imprint on the lifestyle and cultural identification of the next generation of American-born descendants of the Slovak immigrants. According to the US federal censuses of 1980 and 1990 the area of Pittsburgh and adjacent counties is still, besides Cleveland, Oh. and Chicago, Ill. a territory with a significant portion of the population declaring Slovak ancestry.

Contemporary European Ethnicity in the USA

The majority of contemporary Slovak Americans are the descendants of Slovak immigrants from the end of the 19th century to the mid 1920s. In that period the Slovaks were a part of a huge wave of economic immigration, coming to the US from the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. At present, the American born descendants of the immigrants make up an inseparable part of the American nation, take pride in their American citizenship, values and way of life, yet simultaneously, many of them wish to retain some kind of "ethnic flavour", expressed in their self-definition on ethnic terms. Studies of the ethnic identification of contemporary Americans indicate that ethnicity still plays some role in the life of the American population of European origin.

As Mary C. Waters, an American sociologist dealing with contemporary US ethnicity puts it: "they work and reside within the mainstream of America middle-

[1] This paper is based on data collected during my field research in Western Pennsylvania in the Spring of 1995 and 1997. The research was conducted with funding from the Council for International Exchange of Scholars, Washington, D.C., within the frames of the IREX and Fulbright Fellowships.

class life, yet they retain the interesting benefits of the 'specialness' of ethnic allegiance" (Waters 1990, p. 152).

Their ethnic identification or maintenance of some elements of ethnic culture may charge their lives with feelings of uniqueness, enable them to single themselves out from the "plain crowd", and grant them some sense of their own historically defined identity.

Many of the present-day Americans of Slovak background have never experienced life in ethnic neighbourhoods, never spoken Slovak as their first language of everyday communication, and the term ethnic discrimination is to them only a part of the life-stories of their ancestors. In general, their way of life as well as their overall life experience is in many ways radically different from the life of the generation of the first immigrants and their direct descendants.

The contemporary ethnicity of Slovak Americans has been a result of the long-term ethnic experience of immigrants and their descendants in the complex, multi-ethnic society of the USA. It mirrors the process of economic and cultural adaptation of the original immigrants, their efforts to accommodate to new socio-economic conditions, going hand in with the overall re-construction of the Slovak ethnic communities under new life circumstances – especially by the encounter with (in opposition to as well as in correlation with) other ethnic groups on the one hand and the American society per se on the other.

Immigration and Cultural Adaptation

The first Slovak immigrants, coming to a new setting in many ways diametrically different from their European experience, had to face many unforeseen difficulties and adversities, connected with the process of transition and adjustment to new conditions. The mass character of immigration made possible, in a rather short time, the formation of ethnically homogeneous groups, providing for the basic social and emotional background of the first immigrants. The creation of ethnic communities was also affected by the concrete policies and efforts of particular industrial companies for the labour force concentration in worker's districts and colonies. Hence, the immigrant groups concentrated in particular areas, and certain parts of Greater Pittsburgh, for example, were composed of an "ethnic mosaic" of several ethnic groups, closely neighbouring, yet remaining more or less ethnically different and separated. Also, as a consequence of the "chain migration" people from the same regions, towns and villages, often related by kin ties, tended to cluster in certain areas.

"For the immigrant generation who arrived in America as adults, the chasm between the old world from which they came and the new one was at the root of the alienation and nostalgia they experienced. Without knowledge of English and without industrial skills the immigrants were confined, and confined themselves to the

realm of tightly knit communities of their peasant-immigrant countrymen" (Morawska 1985, p. 267).

Thus, the rise of ethic communities in the USA at the turn of the centuries sprung from the efforts of the immigrants to adapt to the new socio-economic, cultural, religious, and not least also political conditions which they confronted. The nature of immigration facilitated the creation of rather compact groups organized on the ethnic principle, serving as instruments of adjustment, the main mechanisms of group survival and continuity. Josef Barton maintains that not only was the ethnic community a representation of the continuity of traditional models of social order, but partly they were an accommodation to the "fragmented social order of the metropolis. It was in this accommodation that immigrants developed distinctive orientation towards the prospects of upward mobility and assimilation" (Barton 1975, p. 172).

Ethnic Change Over Generations

From the viewpoint of formation of ethnic identity, the encounter of the immigrant groups with the new social and cultural environment was one of the first preconditions for clearer understanding of ethnic group boundaries, and for further redefinition of basic patterns of social organization as well as of the meanings of many cultural patterns.

The process of cultural adaptation and adjustment of the group to changing economic and social conditions has led to a significant cultural, and ultimately also ethnic change. While for the generation of the foreign-born immigrants it was mainly the transition from the prevailingly rural environment of the Slovak countryside to an industrialized urban setting that marked their struggle for everyday economic survival and eventual penetration into American society, the efforts of the generation of their American-born offspring were aimed at overcoming the limitations of their own ethnicity by full social adjustment and incorporation into the mainstream society. Therefore, with occupational diversification, growing social stratification and the rise in the level of education, and also due to the overall bipolar lessening of the perceived socio-cultural distance between the immigrant groups and American society, the gradual ethnic change also occurred. Pressures towards assimilation from the part of American society were reflected in the in-group assimilation tendencies, discernible already during the life of the first generation (foreign-born), that became clearer and more frequent in the lives of the following generations.

Ethnicity and Social Class

The Slovak Americans as a group have undergone important changes in terms of their social status and class allegiance. Although the immigrant groups have never been homogenous or monolithic as far as their class allegiance was concerned, never-

theless the blue collar jobs highly prevailed in the occupational status of the first immigrants, and to a large extent also in the generation of their direct descendants. According to the immigration records, labour statistics and also according to oral testimonies of my respondents the majority of the first immigrants were of peasant background – prevailingly small farmers and agricultural labourers (viz. Bielik 1969, pp. 26-27), who furnished American industry with an unskilled cheap labour force.

For these reasons, in the lives of the first immigrants social class became one of the important ethnic markers. As numerous accounts testify: "ethnic" meant "working class status, low level of education, poverty and backwardness". As a matter of fact, the blue collar jobs of steelworkers, miners, railroad labourers for men and boarding-house keepers, maids and light industry factory workers for women, together with the life in industrial districts and workers' colonies was considered an important ethnic feature of the group, effecting the general perception and understanding of ethnicity from the part of social policies makers and even social analysts themselves.

Strategies of Coping and Ethnic Transformation

The life experience of the first generation of immigrants was marked not only by their working and living conditions, but also by a significant level of ethnic discrimination and hostility from the part of both Americans and socially better established ethnic groups. Not only were the immigrant groups assigned low social prestige, but they were often denied access to important economic resources and political power. The ethnic discrimination severely limited immigrants' possibilities to exercise control over the course of their own life options. Being well aware of their second class social status, the immigrants developed various strategies in order to overcome the social barriers and limitations by lessening the social distance between the immigrants and American society (e.g. from the establishment of various mutual aid societies, and financial institution substituting the non-existent social security to gradual rejection of the overt ethnic traits, among which the use of their native language was in the first place, to many individual strategies of coping, e.g. by Americanization of their Slav-sounding names.)

Since many ethnic traits were perceived as an impediment to improvement, the efforts to raise the status of the group resulted in ethnic transformation. The ethnic change was thus generated by both external pressures as well as centrifugal forces within the ethnic community itself. Therefore, during the life of the second generation (first American-born) the efforts for swift acculturation, even assimilation (often supported already by the generation of their parents) occurred. To them Americanization was the best way to change their unfavourable social standing – through deeper penetration into the mainstream society, which would on one the hand enable them to gain broader social acceptance, on the other hand help them reduce the social restrictions and negative connotations in the evaluation of the group.

"They did not want to be Slovak, they wanted to be American as much as possible", as one of my respondents characterized the relationship of her grandparents to their own ethnicity, is not an uncommon statement, just like other testimonies e.g. "my parents would never acknowledge their ethnicity in public", or "they were ashamed of their ethnic background".

In many cases, this process inevitably led to conscious rejection of those ethnocultural characteristics perceived as limiting – among which the most salient overt trait was the native language of the immigrants. Many scholars regard language, as a bearer of significant cultural meanings, one of the most important ethnic elements (viz. e.g. Alba 1990, p. 291). Contemporary studies indicate that the intergenerational language shift is not only a pertinent illustration of the processes of ethnic transformation, but also one of the strikingly universal phenomenon occurring generally over several generations in almost all immigrant groups of European origin (Waters 1990, p. 116). Thus the language transformation among the Slovak Americans is by far not exceptional.

The accounts of my respondents testify that good knowledge of English was the first step towards breaking the barriers of the "ethnic ghetto". For this reason the importance and need of using the Slovak language gradually diminished, and Slovak ultimately ceased to be used as a language of communication both within the family and society. Although the rejection of the Slovak language was not generally approved of by the generation of parents (the original immigrants), by and large the active knowledge of Slovak did not survive the second generation, and even among this generation a knowledge of Slovak is rather an exception than a rule.

Ethnic Transformation and Intermarriage

The frequency of intermarriage is considered an important indicator of ethnic change. Ethnic endogamy is regarded as a sign of the perceived importance of maintenance of ethnic boundaries, as well as an indicator of socially accepted and approved crossing of ethnic lines towards the world outside the ethnic group.

"Because of the intimacy of marriage and its implications for family networks and children, it [intermarriage] remains a sensitive device for detecting ethnic boundaries, or social boundaries of any sort. (...) Thus, the spread of intermarriage reveals the growing extent of social integration among persons with European ancestry in particular" (Alba 1990, p. 291).

For the first and to a large extent also for the second generation of the Slovak Americans the ethnic endogamy was a social norm, being considered an important factor maintaining the inner cohesion of the community. Together with the maintenance of religious faith (denomination) it served as a tool of confirmation of the cultural boundaries and re-generation of ethnic identity.

Over the generations the precondition of ethnic endogamy has abated, while religious relations have apparently retained higher stability as well as preference. As

a consequence, the probability of marrying outside one's religious group is nowadays lower than that of marrying outside one's ethnic group. In my sample, this holds true especially for the people of the Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic denomination.

However, the relationship between ethnicity and religion is rather complex and multi-faceted, and the religious allegiance is in many cases still closely inter-linked with ethnic membership. Therefore, in my sample of respondents the intermarriage was also likely to follow the ethnic line, with certain ethnic lines more than the others: e.g. Slovak-Polish, Slovak-Carpatho-Rusyn, Slovak-Italian or Slovak-Ukrainian marriages prevailed over some others. From this point of view, the occurrence of intermarriage between certain ethnic groups can be seen as an expression of cultural and social distance in relation to other ethnic groups.

Yet, in general, the frequency and trends in intermarriage, and the extent to which the ethnic endogamy is followed and observed indicate, that the group is gradually opening up towards American society as such, and the lines of the pertinent ethnic intermarriage are for the contemporary Slovak Americans of the third and following generations more or less limited by racial boundaries. In this point, my findings correspond with those of other scholars, e.g. Mary C. Waters shows that in her sample the racial boundaries were by far the most salient (viz. Waters 1990, pp. 104 – 105).

It becomes clear, that the absence of overt diversifying traits in terms of physical appearance facilitate group intermingling. These facts also indicate, that at present the racial boundaries in the USA still remain clearly perceived and maintained.

Ethnic Change and Maintenance of Ethnic Identity

For the first and partly also for the second generation the position of an individual within the broader society was defined by the kin and territorial ethnic social structures together with the correlation of ethnicity with work, education and place of residence. These coordinates created the main socio-cultural reference frame of an individual, and determined the relationship of an individual towards his or her own ethnicity as well.

As already mentioned above, the occupational diversification, growth in the upward social mobility, going hand in hand with the gradual territorial dispersion of the group have led to weaking and even disappearance of many ethnic social structures that had played an important role in the lives of the first immigrants.

Yet, despite many signs of ethnic social disintegration, the concept of the American "melting pot" has not come to its complete fulfilment. The tendencies in the current ethnic processes in the USA also point to the survival of ethnic identities in spite of and after the large-scale disintegration of ethnic territorial structures, leading to social diversification of the group. For many reasons, also in case of the Slo-

vak Americans, the cultural continuity of the group has not been entirely disrupted, and the group has retained some level of inner solidarity and coherence as well as feelings of common ethnic origin and group allegiance.

Due to the process of ethnic transformation, many overt ethnic traits have disappeared from the everyday life of the group. In this connection, the social psychologist Nimmi Hutnik maintains that in the second and following generations "the overt manifestation of life-style may be identical with the dominant group, but they may still maintain various degrees of identification with their ethnic groups" (Hutnik 1991, p. 19).

Her observation is by no means exceptional, when she continues that "ethnicity is not so much a product of common living, as a product of self-awareness of one's belonging in a particular group and one's distinctiveness with regard to other groups" (Hutnik 1991, p.19).

Some contemporary scholars even emphasize "the impressive degree of independence between ethnic social structures and ethnic identity" (Alba 1990, p. 302).

Especially, during the late 1960s and 1970s the USA "re-discovered" its ethnic heritage to such an extent that the social analysts, followed by the general public discourse, started to speak of the "ethnic revival" and "new ethnicity" (e.g. Glazer and Moynihan 1970, Novak 1972). However, the form, meaning, social significance and value of contemporary US ethnicity are different from those experienced by the generation of the first immigrants, and to some degree also by the generation of their direct offspring.

These facts reflect the overall social change and process of ethnic transformation. For instance, the still existing mutual aid organizations (fraternal insurance companies, clubs atc.) founded on ethnic principles have taken a different function and are being ascribed a different symbolic value. Some of the fraternals have retained their primary function of insurance companies, but by altering their by-laws they have opened up towards other nationalities or the broader public at large (National Slovak Society, Slovak Catholic Sokol, and the like).

Some of them continue their existence as predominantly social meeting places: the Jan Kollar Club on South Side Pittsburgh was originally founded as a literary and library society in 1913 "for the purpose of supporting, fostering and maintaining a society to cultivate (...) the moral standards and education among the Slovak youth and Americans of Slovak descent".[2] It was established not only with the view of upholding the Slovak literary tradition and language, but also to help the immigrants acquire the proficiency in English when opting for a better job, or applying for the US citizenship. Although there is no longer either a need or demand for the English language education, or an interest in maintenance of the Slovak language, the club still continues to exist as a social

[2] Viz. *Constitution and By-laws of the John Kollar Slovak Literary and Library Society of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.* Revised and accepted by the members at a special meeting held on November 25, 1945.

meeting place of its members (still recruited on the ethnic principle), their relatives and friends. Simultaneously, the club fulfils a rather important symbolic function – its very existence is "making the Slovaks visible", and it points to the existence of the Slovak ethnic group per se.

Transformation of Ethnicity and Ethnic Choice

In the dynamics of ethnicity under US conditions we could observe a broad field within which the ethnic relations and ethnic identity may and might not be expressed and manifested. As contemporary scholars have noticed, one of the most salient features of the maintenance of ethnicity is the factor of choice, and subjective inclination towards one's ethnicity, the possibility to emphasize or suppress one's ethnic backround. To many scholars ethnic choice is one of the prevailing common characteristics of contemporary ethnicity as well as the indicator of ongoing ethnic change (e.g. Gans 1979, Alba 1990, Waters 1990, Hutnik 1991, etc.).

In general, the possiblity to chose whether to identify on ethnic terms or not mirrors the diminishing influence of ethnicity in the everyday life of an individual, and the increment in the individual's life options and choices of social roles independent of his or her ethnic reference frames.

"Viewed in its totality, the transformation of ethnicity implies a new primacy for ethnic identity, the subjective orientation towards ethnic origins. It can no longer be assumed that ethnic solidarities within the white population are sustained by salient correspondence between ethnicity and labor-market situation or by extensive patterns of informal associations. Insofar as ethnicity has a role, then it is increasingly voluntary, dependent upon deliberate actions of individuals to maintain activities and relationships that have an ethnic character" (Alba 1990, p. 20).

Individualization of ethnic preferences also leads to diversification of ethnic choices and preferences, and creates a scale of individual variations in expression and manifestation of ethnicity. It also entails another important phenomenon – the intentionality of choice and conscious reflection upon one's ethnicity. As characterized by Richard Alba: "Since social differences among white ethnic categories are declining if not dissolving, and contact between persons of different ethnic origins is pervasive, ethnic solidarity in whatever form can be maintained only if there are critical masses of individuals who *consciously* [italics added] identify themselves in ethnic terms, are so identified by others and who act, at least some of the time, in terms of these identities" (Alba 1990, p. 23).

It is also important to state, that the process of development of either "involuntary" ethnic identity or deliberate conscious ethnic self-identification is rather complex, bearing significant generational traits and differences, and evolving over the life-cycle of an individual.

The subjective nature of choice of ethnic preferences is undoubtedly a result of lessening of the inner coherence of ethnic groups, and weakening of the social norms linked to ethnicity and ethnic traditions, that occurred already during the life of the second generation.

The extensive acculturation and even rejection of ethnicity occurring in the second generation made possible the integration of the immigrants into American society, while consequently endangering the future cultural continuity of the group. As a result of deeper penetration of the immigrants into the mainstream middle class for the following generations ethnicity ceased to be perceived as a limiting factor or an impediment of the individual success and growth.

In the perception of the following generations ethnicity has attained a positive social value, contrasting with the feelings of inferiority, shame and discrimination experienced by previous generations. While the second generation was born into a strange ethnic duality and ambivalent identity that they tried to get rid of (Novak 1972, p. 54), the next generations in many cases seeks this duality deliberately. They derive their personal satisfaction from the feelings of having their own unique cultural indentity and historical "rootedness".

From this viewpoint, the ethnic revival emerging on a large scale in the 1970s as a "return to ethnic roots", is also a part of the processes of ethnic transformation. It springs from feelings of cultural security of the descendants of the immigrants, expressing their stable social possition within the mainstream American society. The thesis first introduced by the historian Marcus Lee Hansen that "what the son wishes to forget the grandson wishes to remember" is frequently echoed in the testimonies of my respondents of the third and following generations; and, interestingly, also in the statements of some members of the second generation – reflecting changes in the perception of ethnicity over the life-cycle of an individual, as well as significant influence of the positive public "ethnic" discourse on peoples' attitudes and evaluation of their ethnicity. Undoubtedly, some role in this process is also played by the general feeling of contemporary Americans that "everybody is from somewhere", supported by the emotionally positive benefits of ethnic group allegiance, being no longer contradictory with American values, and the ideal of individual achievement.

"Having an ethnic identity is something that makes you both special and simultaneously a part of community. It is something that comes to you involuntarily through heredity, and at the same time it is a personal choice" (Waters 1990, p. 150).

Individualization of ethnic choice makes possible to maintain and perform just certain aspects of ethnicity, to observe only some ethnic customs, or to identify only with a certain ethnic tradition (perceivable especially in case of people of the mixed ancestry). Thus, the ethnic choice is often manifested via food preferences, active or passive participation in ethnic festivals or observance of ethnic forms of holidays.

Ethnicity and the Domain of the Family

Individualization of ethnicity is closely inter-linked with its "privatization", especially when we take into account a large-scale disintegration of many ethnic social structures. Therefore, the variety of channels of ethnic socialization has decreased and the core of transfer of ethnic information has increasingly shifted towards the private sphere of family and kinship.

Ethnicity has become a private "affair", a matter of family origins and traditions. In the past family and kin relations created an important network of social and emotional support for the first immigrants, which helped to facilitate the process of their cultural adaptation and re-creation of the "social order" of the group. Also, together with other social structures and immigrant institutions, they served as an instrument of ethnic socialization of an individual.

At present the importance of the family as the main locus of ethnic socialization has even increased, and the family plays a crucial role in inter-generational transmission of ethnic information. Simultaneously, the family is the main place of manifestation of many cultural elements and ethnic customs. The family of an individual plays a decisive role in maintenance of cultural continuity of ethnic tradition, and creates the foundations of the individual's inclination towards his or her ethnic origins.

Yet, again, as far as the ethnic preferences of individual family members are concerned, the choice is a key agent here – especially in the cases when one member shows a great interest in the family's ethnic bakground, whereas the others may be completely disinterested in any kind of ethnic information or activity.

Family reunions, holidays and other celebrations (e.g weddings, christenings or first communions) are a good place for sharing family stories as well as for manifestation of family ethnic traditions. The family and kinship remain the basis of maintenance of some broader ethnic ties as well as the main source of ethnic information – of what it means to be of a certain ethnic background.

Privatization of ethnicity diminishes the importance of being a member of a broader ethnic community. Feelings of belonging to an ethnic group have become less influential, and the comprehension of ethnicity is often identical with the family history (viz. Alba 1990, p. 300).

This process works in the opposite direction too: in some cases, the interest of an individual in his or her family history is the first reason for his or her identificiation with a certain ethnic group. The family is also an important agent in creation of positive emotional identification with the ethnic tradition, providing the feelings of emotional closeness leading to one's inclination towards one's ethnic background. The positive emotional affiliation with the individual's ethnic background may be decisive in the ethnic choice of self-identification with a certain family branch namely for the persons of mixed ancestry.

Mary C. Waters, on the basis of her research concludes that: "Ethnicity does have meaning for the individuals I interviewed (...) Increasingly, however, the sub-

stance attached to the label is constructed by the individual and the family. People have to construct the image of what it means to be Italian or Polish, or Irish from the characteristics of their family, what they believe to be ethnic, or from the cultural grab bag of Irish, Polish or Italian stereotypical traits. A consequence of this construction is that it is difficult for respondents to be sure what constitues ethnicity as opposed to idiosyncratic family values and practices. You can choose those aspects of being Irish that appeal to you and discard those that do not" (Waters 1990, p. 115, viz also Alba 1990, p. 298).

Similarly, during the interview, some of my respondents expressed uncertainty about the "Slovakness" of their family traditions (e.g. "I'm not sure if this [particular custom, meal etc.] is really Slovak, but that's the way we do it in our family").

These findings testify to the lack of a broader social "verification" of ethnicity from the part of ethnic community. Simultaneously, it calls the attention to relativity of the cultural contents labelled as ethnic (in this case Slovak).

Since the variety of channels of ethnic socialization has narrowed, it is predominantly the family and kinship that perform the most decisive role in transmission of ethnic tradition. Correspondingly, the kinship relations play an important part in maintenance of broader ethnic relations, stretching beyond the basic familial ties, and revealing the constant interplay between the family and society.

The process of construction of ethnic ascriptions via the knowledge of kin relations together with family history, customs and traditions, acts in favor of creating a notion of ethnic collectiveness. For instance, stories about the life and ethnic experience of the first immigrants passed on in the family may help to reconstruct the sense of a shared collective experience of the group. They emphasize the ability of the group to survive in spite of harsh conditions, creating the notion of collective strength and capacities to fight for a better life while retaining positive social qualities and cultural values. In many cases, as opposed to previous generations, today's young Slovak Americans derive their pride in having an ethnic background from the ability of the group to survive and carry on.

The knowledge of the group's struggle for survival, hardship and ethnic discrimination also help to give a better understanding of the contrast between the past and present social standing of the group – as one of my respondents characterized it in a nutshell: "It was not a pleasure to be Slovak."

Reconstruction of Ethnicity and Ethnic Boundaries

The awarness of a "common lot", in the past instrumental in maintaining the group coherence and solidarity is still present in the memory of the group. In some cases it may influence perception of proximity towards or distance from other ethnic groups.

It can be regarded as a part of the processes of continuous crystalization and reconstruction of the inner contents as well as the boundaries of the group.

Formation and reformulation of the group boundaries plays an important role in the process of ethnic definition, by the members of the group themselves as well as from the part of those outside the group. These processes are often conditioned by the group's self-definition and self-identification: e.g. some socio-cultural elements and characteristics may be charged with identifying ethnic symbolism, contributing to the self-image of the group – like the work ethics (hardworking), maintenance of kinship and family ties (family oriented), adherance to a religious faith (general perception of the Slovaks as Catholics) and intensity or demonstration of religious feelings (very devout, very religious).

It has become apparent that the ethnic cultural contents – ethnic traits and their meanings, are a dynamic conglomerate of elements and features that people themselves consider ethnically significant (ethno-identifying), rather than a stable sum of characteristics and cultural "givens".

As Frederik Barth put it, sharing of common culture is an implication or result rather than a primary definitional character of the ethnic group organization. Cultural differences are not the sum of objective differences, but only of those which the actors themselves regard as significant (Barth 1969, pp. 11-14).

Those traits considered ethnic, that are shared with other ethnic groups, then contribute to the creation of feelings of cultural/ethnic closeness towards or distance from the given groups.

Symbolic Ethnicity, Ethnic Consciousness and Maintenance of Ethnic Culture

Despite the apparently subjective and voluntary dimension in maintenance of ethnic cultures, the ethnic preferences of contemporary Americans of Slovak background are not entirely a result of their individual choice (based on intentionality of a conscious action of an individual). Ethnicity as a collective phenomenon presumes the existence of certain collectiveness, decisive in ensuring ethnic continuity. The current processes of ethnic identity maintenance reflect the complexity of relationship between the individual and collective in reconstruction and reproduction of ethnic identity and ethnic culture. It reveals the specificity of the construction and functioning of ethnicity as well as the mechanisms of formation of ethnic identity, as a dynamic process evolving throughout the life cycle of the group and individual.

The ethnic community still plays its role in maintaining the sense of "extended symbolic kinship", realized mainly but not exclusively via:

1. religious/denominational allegiance;
2. social and public events, media presentations (e.g radio programs), staged performances, festivals, ethnic days, picnics and other events organized and supported by both secular and religious bodies.

Firstly, it means that the ethnic life of the community is often closely interconnected with its religious life. The maintenance of religious ties also bears an important ethnic symbolism and meaning. As already mentioned above, religious denomination may serve as an instrument of demarcation of ethnic boundaries, thus taking part in the construction and reproduction of ethnic identity of an individual as well as the group.

Often, religious congregations and bodies play an active role in organization of ethnic events, which strengthens the interconnection between religion and ethnicity.

Secondly, the "public ways" of transmission of ethnic information, and manifestation of ethnic culture, have taken an institutional form. The above-mentioned ethnic events, as occasions of social communication and contact between people of the same ethnic background, represent a part of the mosaic of the efforts of maintenance of ethnic culture in the USA. By being usually closely inter-linked with other institutionalized forms of media, theatre and other staged presentations, they represent the process under which ethnicity is increasingly expressed by leisure-time activities, carried out by various interest groups, rather than being embeded in "authentic", "spontaneous" forms of everyday culture and life-style.

The ethnic representation of the group usually revolves around a certain cluster of ethnic elements, considered typical or representative for the given group. It is a process of narrowing of ethno-cultural diversity towards a certain set of elements which are then presented in public and, as a feedback from the part of public, expected to be displayed and shown at the ethnic presentations. This process also mirrors the efforts to reconstruct the ethnic contents of the groups by applying those elements of ethnic cultures, that are generally approved and accepted as representative, both from the part of the others and in the eyes of the members of the groups themselves.

Similar processes of ethnic cultural transformation were first described by the sociologist Herber Gans as "symbolic ethnicity". In his understanding, symbolic ethnicity expresses the desire to maintain the feelings of ethnic membership rather than actual social relations and cultural practices. Being predominantly a pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behaviour, symbolic ethnicity has taken on an expressive rather than an instrumental function (Gans 1979, pp. 1-20).

These ideas have been applied and developed by other contemporary social analysts, e.g.: "Symbolic ethnicity is concerned with the symbols of ethnic cultures rather than with the cultures themselves, and this seems true also for the cultural commitments of ethnic identity: the cultural stuff of ethnicity continues to wither, and thus ethnicity tends to latch onto a few symbolic commitments. Symbolic ethnicity (...) tends to be expressed in the private domain of leisure-time activities" (Alba 1990, p. 306).

Ethnic Consciousness and Ethnic Information

Hand in hand with the reduction or even disappearance of many overt, manifest ethnic traits and indicators, the core of ethnicity as well as the basis of its transmis-

sion lies within the sphere of the latent memory of the groups, reflected in the ethnic consciousness of both the community and individual, bearing the complex ethnic information on the group.

The ethnic information, as understood in terms of my research, comprises several layers of mutually inter-connected elements and phenomena, mainly:

– memories about immigration, settlement and adaptation to new conditions;

– memories about the life of community, often represented by stories about work, life in the ethnic neighborhood, and memories connected with ethnic-based experience (discrimination, ethnic shame or pride, and the like);

– complex language information;

– paradigm of cultural elements considered ethnically representative, e.g. cuisine, customs, folklore, and other traditions;

– complex phenomena connected with religious traditions;

– paradigm of cultural characteristics and group-identifying stereotypes about the Slovaks and "Slovakness".

Symbolic Ethnicity and Slovak Ethnic Culture

The concept of symbolic ethnicty encompasses its situational and more or less arbitrary aspects, as well as the principle of voluntary adherence to ethnicity, which to a large extent characterizes the ethnic experience of contemporary Americans.

In the case of Slovaks, their ethnic culture its presented mainly through elements of folk culture and folklore. Yet again, the example of "ethnic food" reveals, for instance, that the regional variety of Slovak traditional cuisine has shrunk into a handful of dishes regarded as typically Slovak, that are then frequently presented at numerous ethnic festivals and days. Similar processes have narrowed the scope of e.g. traditional arts and crafts demonstrations, or presentation of folk music and dancing.

Another example of "symbolic ethnicity" is the case of Slovak, as a language no more actively spoken by the group, yet still often remembered at various occasions of a religious as well as a secular nature.

The authentic language experience of my respondents has in many cases ceased to be associated with a larger group, and they perceive Slovak as e.g. the "secret language" of their parents, or the language of some age groups (elderly people). Since for most of my respondents the use of Slovak is associated with the generation of their parents and grandparents, to them the language represents a symbolic link with the past both at the group and family level.

The use of Slovak at various ethnic events recreates the notion of the original, native language of the group – as an impotrant cultural element worth being remembered and passed on at least in some reduced forms (e.g. religious hymns or prayers). Continuous use at or reintroduction of Slovak into religious services even strengthens its symbolic and ethno-identifying function.

Many of my respondents ascribed knowledge of the Slovak language certain importance, although more often than not their oppinions were conveyed by statements like: “It’s a shame, that my parents did not teach me more Slovak”, or “I wish I had been more interested in learning the language as a youngster”. It is also significant, that persons of the Slovak ethnic background create by far the majority of the students in Slovak studies programme at the University of Pittsburgh.

Conclusion

The findings of my field research among the Slovak Americans of Western Pennsylvania indicate that ethnic identity is maintained even after the large-scale disappearance of the “ethnic way of life”, connected to and determined by the nature of occupation, level of education, place of residence and many cultural characteristics.

The processes of ethnic transformation within the Slovak ethnic communuties in the USA reveal the multi-dimensional character of ethnicity, its situational as well as relational aspects. The contemporary ethnic phenomena encompass various inter-connected elements and factors, often heterogeneous in thier origin and nature. They contain social perception of the common ethnic origins of the group, memories about its history and development, information on cultural elements regarded as ethnic, and not least, also an important component of positive psychological and emotional identification with one’s own group or particular ethnic tradition.

The contemporary ethnicity of the Slovak Americans is a result of the ethnic experience of the immigrants and their descendants in the multi-ethnic and multi-cultural social setting. The dynamics of conteporary ethnicity reveals the nature of ethnicity as a cultural construct, as it is discernible in the processes of reconstruction and restructuring of elements of ethnic tradition, as well as in the selective nature and to an extent arbitrary and often ambivalent character of the “ethnic identificators”.

Ethnicity, in the life of the first immigrants and the following American-born second generation, manifested through occupation and class, place of residence, language and life-style has, over the generations, gained a new form, meaning and functionality. Contemporary scholars emphasize mainly the selective approach of the bearers to their own ethnicity, voluntarism of choice of ethnic identitification of an individual, conditioned by the conscious reflection upon ethnic identity and by intentionality of inclination towards one’s ethnic background.

The process of ethnic transformation is marked by reduction of ethnicity into several symbolic elements. Simultaneously, the variety of manifest ethnic elements has narrowed, and the core of reproduction and maintenance of ethnicity has shifted from the manifest everyday practices towards the latent sphere of social memory and ethnic consciousness.

The contemporary ethnicity of the Slovak Americans is to a large extent a matter of individual inclination and choice, and the overt manifestation of ethnic culture is based on conscious efforts to preserve the ethnic culture. The dynamics of contemporary ethnicity in the USA is largely diversified and determined by changes in time and space and it shows significant class, gender, age as well as broader generational characteristics and differences.

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