

Letters sustaining cross-Atlantic migrations: From Frenštát, Moravia to Frenstat, Texas in the decades following the Civil War

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Abstract

Letter writing played a formative role in migration from Moravian villages to Texas settlements by being a channel of psychological support and emotional relief. The letters in the current study detail lives of brothers sharing news of events in Frenštát, Moravia, and adjustment to Texas, 1874 to 1876. The dialogue is framed by the historical situation in Moravia and Texas affecting migration, the grief that accompanied the brothers' parting and despair over difficulties of acculturation. It reveals uncertainty of migrating, intensity of material and personal difficulties, and ways in which letters became the platform to negotiate it all. Analysis of the correspondence provides answers to the questions, through what specific knowledge the letters enrich and modify our current representation of migration history to the U.S. in the era of mass migration and in what ways they once shaped the migration discourse maintained in economically deprived regions of Moravia.

Key words

letters, communication, migration, mass immigration, Czechs in Texas, the 1870s

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“Letters are what history sounds like when it is still part of everyday life.” (Grunwald – Adler 2005)

Letters and letter writing have played a formative role in the transfer of migrants from country to country and continent to continent. They represent a resource of knowledge and provide a channel for sharing it. They offer us the opportunity to get into the other person’s “shoes”: “We may think we’ve heard the whole story, but that story resonates more deeply when we read the century’s letters. Letters are what history sounds like when it is still part of everyday life” (Grunwald – Adler 2005). Above all else, they enable maintenance of communication and social networks as well as an alignment of minds. It is from this particular perspective that I suggest to investigate them, i.e., from the perspective of sustaining migration by sustaining the emotional intensity of personal attachment to individuals, families and social structures deemed extraordinarily important (cf. Blommaert – Varis 2015).

In *Letters Across the Borders* Elliott, Gerber and Sinke 2006 draw attention to the narrative of adventure as well as the interpretation of “new beginnings”, among others (2006: 1; cf. Struve 1996; Blegen 1955; Conway 1961; Erickson 1972; 1920; Norwegian immigrant letters. 1932; Stortroen – Stortroen 1932; Thomas – Znaniecki 1918). The migration from northeastern Moravia was set in motion in the 1850s and did not cease until enforcement of the U.S. immigration quota acts in 1921 and 1924. To Moravian immigrants, the beginnings implied independence and land ownership they hadn’t experienced before.¹ In letters, they described the adventure and attractions of the far away land of Texas where one can start over on his own land and in freedom, and escape oppression and unemployment. But they also described the pain of separation, loneliness and despair of abandoning the homeland.² The letters analyzed for the purpose of the current study detail lives of the Příbyl brothers sharing news generated by daily events of their hometown and neighbors in Frenštát, Moravia, and news of farming and get-

1 In the article I use the name Frenstat to symbolize the ideological connection between the homeland region and the tens of Texas settlements that bore names of homeland towns and villages. The Příbyls were born in Frenštát, Moravia and lived not far from Frenstat, Texas, which was settled by Czechs in 1884 and officially named in 1886 after the Moravian Frenštát from which hundreds emigrated to Texas.

2 The road to emigration opened up in the 1850s when seaports became accessible by rail and farming families were released from forced labor. They migrated to Racine in Wisconsin, Cedar Rapids in Iowa and Fayetteville in Texas, and as laborers to St. Louis, Chicago and New York.

ting adjusted to living in Texas. The letters were exchanged between the brothers and several family members and friends contributing comments and dispersing the letters. Thus, words and sentences, treasured by family descendants who archived the letters reveal patterns of thoughts and deeds and expose personal narratives offering a perspective onto immigrants' complex psychological situation and mechanisms that drew people abroad at the expense of severing precious family ties.

Information provided through letters illuminates what we've known about intercontinental migration in the nineteenth century documented by immigration scholarship (Daniels 1997; 2016; Dublin 1993; Hansen 1940; Higham 1955; Hoerder – Rossler 1993; Morawska 1993; Olson 1979; Overland 2000; Rippley 1994; Thistlethwaite 1991; Vecoli – Sinke 1991; et al.). Additionally, it contributes rare insights into negotiations between parties of the old and new worlds and into traditional representations of homeland poverty and immigration prosperity; it complicates what we think we know about our history and reveals it in unsuspected entanglements; it displays dilemmas and surprises the reader by their detail and complexity. In letters spanning the period of twenty-two years, Jan and Ferdinand Přebyl lay out their lives in planning their future, explain the steps in emigration and resettlement, and negotiate their goals and dreams. Their personal, intimate writing shows active minds handling daily lives in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and in Texas, and exploring opportunities to settle down, find employment or migrate as far as Texas, in the 1870s to 1890s. We see the writers making and altering their decisions, responding to the pressure of events, falling in despair and regaining optimism to fulfil their mission. The Přebyl brothers' migration is an expansive saga of detachment from one's homeland and attachment to the one sought-after. The saga is mediated through the letters providing evidence of historical and emotional turmoil of migration that can become a drama of our lives, too.

In this article, I use letter writing as both a source of historical data on the U.S. immigration in the 1870s and the 1880s (enhancing the scholarship on Czech migration to the U.S., see Křížová 2017; Opatrný 1993; Polišíenský 1992; 1996; Vlha 2016; et al.) and an access to personal information about how we, migrants, construct plans and reach decisions. The data drawn from the letters have a major advantage, despite difficulties involved in using letters as historical evidence that stem from the very nature of the genre, its protocol of written communication

and the personal rather than public nature of the communication.³ The Příbyl letters consist of a two-way continuous communication bonded by shared intentions and incentives, replies, suggestions and hesitations developing over the years into an ongoing dialogue interconnecting the brothers and the continents in which the information was questioned, repeated, restated and gradually clarified through additional data. This longterm ongoing dialogue renders the archive unique and worthy of a detailed investigation (cf. Elliott – Gerber – Sinke 2006: 3).

In contrast to memoirs that tend to glorify immigrants' deeds (such as those published in immigrant periodicals in various destinations late into the twentieth century, e.g. *Svoboda* in Texas, 1885–1962), letters catch the momentary interest of the reader by laying out events from a personal perspective. The memoirs function so as to render certain deeds and events memorable for the sake of sustaining a community while letters provide practical guidance and emotional support. While migrants' memoirs tend to be aligned as to the detail, focus and stories retold, the letters provide unpredictable facts and draw attention to certain aspects of the journey in order to warn, advise or supply unofficially shared information. Accounts of events rendered by memoirs become compressed, reshaped in the process of translation from survivors to descendants and mediated by a narrator or a newspaper editor. Those in letters offer an individual perspective and provide an intimate emotional bond rendering the facts and details trustworthy and personable.

Piecemeal information on Texas available in occasional letters and reports since the 1850s must have suggested to migrants considering the New World to avoid Texas. The unfortunate migration attempt of the Herrmann family in 1851 (that cost the lives of two of their children) got recorded not only through family correspondence but also the press, once the Herrmanns returned.⁴ Already at that time, Alois Kareš was active as a shipping

3 A research team of the Hekman library at the Calvin College in Michigan collected 4970 letters of Netherlands immigrants to the U.S. in 1976 to 1990 and pointed out that data in the letters were only marginally representative since the letters represented a small portion of the approximate total of 890,000 sent from the Netherlands to the U.S. between 1890 and 1930. The Immigration History Research Center Archives project in Minnesota, and the German Historical Institute conference in 2007 in Washington, D.C. collected and analyzed letters historically in the online database (<https://alexanderstreet.com/products/north-american-immigrant-letters-diaries-and-oral-histories>).

4 The letters sent back home to the family are housed in the Náprstek Museum archives in Prague (33/6). They were published in *Národní listy* (1851: no. 52, 66, 70, 86, 90 and 93; see also Kutnar 1970). The topic echoed also in the fiction of the Herrmanns' sons Ignát and Gustav. "Come and take as much prairie land as you like and as much forest as you can manage. You'll cut down the trees,

company agent in northern Bohemia seeking to recruit migrants (Kysilka 1999: 29; Polišíenský 1992: 14–17), despite a negative evaluation of Texas in a letter of Jan Bárta Letovský, a well-known activist among American Czechs. Letovský described Texas as totally unsuitable for Czechs, due to the hot climate and diseases such as yellow fever, and noted letters of pastor Ernst Bergmann enticing Czech families to Texas (Polišíenský 1970: 294). A rare entry in Minutes of the German Agricultural Society shows that immigrants themselves planned to inform people at home of the actual situation in Texas in 1858, as Jan did when writing to his friends and relatives some fifteen years later.⁵ Replies to his letters show that a positive representation of Texas continued to prevail and that his negative description of Texas (in particular in letters to his brother during the first two years after he arrived) could not change that. However, except in letters to Ferdinand, Jan sought to remain positive and to minimize the negative about Texas to avoid being pitied and shamed (cf. Konecny – Machann 2004 on the effect of letters in the Janča family, 144).

Research contribution and questions

I propose that the predictable stream of letters interconnecting individuals, families, villages and immigration settlements and saturating inquisitive minds of readers did wonders in shifting people's attention away from the homeland "misery" to the imagined prosperity, even if some of them could seem unimportant or negative in terms of content. Blommaert and Varis 2015 comment that, "Our vital social relationships are built on seemingly unimportant interactions" that enable "persistence of social structures, membership of which we find extraordinarily important" (2015: 6). The letters reveal vital importance of these "unimportant interactions" of correspondents who missed each other, and desired to reunite and undergo the difficulties together. The letters provided the essential psychological

burn out the rest and gain the richest soil for a grand farm, fields and garden, tobacco and cotton plantations...", Herrmann 1929: 73. See also *Kate's Wedding*, *ibid.* Gustav Herrmann described Texas in his stories *V pralese texanském* and *Texanská noc*, published as a series in the literary review *Poutník od Otavy* (1858–1862, Vojt. Vlastimil Janota ed., Písek), March and April 1859.

- 5 In 1858 the Society in Cat Springs released an article to several newspapers in Germany for the purpose of promoting immigration to Texas but was criticized by one of its members for tempting peasants to Texas in order to obtain relief from hard labor for themselves. He pointed out the unpredictable weather of Texas, due to which cattle perished and grass-hoppers destroyed crops, described Americans as worshipping money and politicians as reducing people to "voting cattle", *Century of Agricultural Progress* 1956: 19–22.

support and information sustaining the web of social relationships as well as continuous arrivals. Against this background, the gradually improving technology to cross the ocean and move inland (enabled by steamships and railroads or the sophisticated network of migration agents linked up with ports of departure and emigration regions) gained its full meaning.

In the present article, I focus on the dialogue that developed mostly between the Přebyl brothers during the transition years from 1874 to 1876 of Jan's settling down in Texas and withstanding the temptation to return. The writing is eloquent, detailed and engaging.⁶ Jan's letters from Texas to Ferdinand in Moravia were pitched to a different level of emotionality than to his friend Filip, his father or brothers-in-law Ježíšek and Dubovsky, and this intimacy was sustained in Ferdinand's letters as well. Neither refrained from news that were negative, difficult or upsetting. The distinction between the voice of intimate bond and that of information-providing reveals the different functions the letters had. Before mailing his letters, Jan drafted them in a diary archived along with family photographs, ship tickets, letters from relatives and neighbors, correspondence with the Kareš&Stocký agency and other documents (see Harris – Stockbauer 2010).⁷

The dialogue is framed by the historical situation in Moravia and Texas described in the letters from the family and friends considering migration and addressing their concerns to Jan Přebyl, who arrived in Texas in November 1873. Although Jan was never able to endorse directly migration plans of his close neighbors, he supported those of his brother and a nephew in the late 1880s. A sort of stability and predictability settled in for Jan after the two initial years but he was constantly confronted by intense troubles and illness accompanying the trying life of a Texas farmer. In contrast, after years of a stable income even at the time of economic crises of the 1870s in Moravia, the job situation and prospects for improvement began to fail Ferdinand in the early 1880s and led to his desperate downfall that culminated in the family's departure for Texas in 1885. Between 1873 and 1885, he moved from Frenštát to Moravská Ostrava, Vienna and Retz in search of accounting posts or entrepreneur opportunities that Frenštát did not offer.

6 Cf. letters of Anna Pavlová-Slaninová from Lichnov in Moravia written in a very different style who immigrated probably in 1885, in MUDr. Jan Šimiček's archive.

7 I am grateful to Bette Stockbauer who provided copies of all the letters, diary and documents in the Přebyl archive to me when she found the Přebyl obituary published in *Svoboda*, 12 March 1925 in Eckert 2006: 180. Mrs. Stockbauer, a fourth-generation descendant of Jan Přebyl evidently inherited the passion for writing and archiving from her great grand-father. In the diary, his letters are aligned chronologically but only some of them bear a date. In quotes I refer to them by dates when available, and by page when the dates are missing.

Unsuccessful business dealings exhausted his savings and presented Texas as the only way out. Ferdinand was not the sort of adventurer that Jan was and had claimed never to emigrate due to his feeble body and dislike of farming. His situation was also far better than that of other family members and friends, i.e., the Ježišeks and Dubovskys who were eager to emigrate. He left for Texas twelve years after his older brother Jan, nevertheless.

The brothers' dialogue reveals the uncertainty with which one approached migrating and settling down in the 19th century, the intensity of material difficulties that accompanied the process and burdened one's mind, and ways in which letters became the platform of negotiating all of that. Analysis of the correspondence provides answers to the following questions framing my research, i.e., with what specific knowledge narratives and descriptions in the letters enrich and modify our current representation of migration history, and in what ways they shaped the migration discourse maintained in economically deprived regions of Bohemia and Moravia. The value of studying the letters is twofold. First, they tell a story with which anyone who has ever considered whether to leave home and restart life in a new land easily identifies. The letters bring to the surface migrants' doubts, anticipation, insecurities, fears, disappointments and joys characteristic of struggles that we endure as humans, regardless of when we accomplish the transfer. Second, they make dilemmas of the others become one's own, and the process of reading the letters and empathizing with their writers engaging and perhaps uncomfortably familiar. They draw readers into the revelation of what Texas became to Jan when during the first two years there his plans and thoughts were obscured by ceaseless fevers and disease. During those months he held onto the image of Texas becoming his promised land and remained confident in complying with the character traits necessary to prosper there, as he wrote to his close ones. At that time, Ferdinand continuously tempted him to return with offers of ship ticket payment and job security back home.

Within three to four years after his immigration Jan accounted for the tens of immigrants from his hometown of Frenštát by names and proudly described the development of the Czech community and transformation of the area around Fayetteville into a Czech enclave where "Czech was spoken even by Blacks in the area" (1880: 41). The numbers and names of immigrants from Jan's hometown and its vicinity that the author provided in his correspondence in 1877 and later documents indicate that immigration from Frenštát was sustained. Apparently, the immigrants acted on decisions to leave Moravia and rejoin in Texas (or send someone from the family to be with those already there) made in advance of the information mediated by the letters. The letters sent from Moravia typically acknowledged the

negative in Jan's letters but, at the same time, resolutely stated that their situation was extraordinarily difficult at home and could only improve by migrating to Texas. Texas became the place where families would reunite and ties severed by departures mended. With the intention to go to Texas embedded in their minds, family members and neighbors inferred from the information contained in the letters mostly what they needed to support their intention. Konecny and Machann 2004 point out that, "Moravians relied on social systems of support... and on the slow but effective information network that drove 'chain migration'" (2004: 10). This chain depended on letters that ensured lasting personal ties.

The story of Příbyl migration is one hundred and fifty years old but as familiar as any contemporary migration drama. Many of its aspects have currency even today, for instance, the emotional dilemma, worries of parents seeing their children leave and the children worrying about the parents who could not have come along, unanswered questions about what the future holds, confrontation of one's imagination with reality, lack of material resources, the necessary medical care and physical endurance, grief about the far-away homeland and problematic acculturation. The correspondence is richly documented by over two hundred letters split between letters interconnecting the continents (from 1874 to 1885) and those discussing options to manage a living in Texas at a time when both brothers lived near each other there (until 1895).⁸

The historical background: Frenštát and the economic crisis and Texas immigration of the 1870s and 1880s

In the 1870s, domestic production of linen sharply declined throughout northeastern Moravia where industrialization eradicated small craftsmen and most craft shops closed down. The Frenštát region was hit particularly hard as the center of weaving industry in Moravia in the 1860 to the 1880s.⁹ Frenštát with the population of slightly over six thousand in 1880 had only 1,650 acres of fields and 600 acres of pastures to support its population (Šimíček 1996: 53; Šimíček 1999; see also Strnadel 1996). The crisis was exacerbated by the Austro-Prussian war that devastated the northern part of Bohemia wasting lives of its population on the battlegrounds and through the epidemics of cholera and smallpox spread by the armies. Devastating losses in Czech regiments at the Hradec battle made the extensive military

8 Some of these letters have been already published in English translation – see Stockbauer 2007.

9 See Kann and David 1984 for the effects of industrial revolution and an overview of agricultural development in Bohemia and Moravia, 312–317.

service feared and avoided at all costs.¹⁰ The crisis and unemployment became the reason why many families left the afflicted regions for diverse destinations in Europe (such as Volhynia or Slovakia), the Americas, Australia and New Zealand. The economic crisis caused large-scale bankruptcies, long-term economic depression and stagnation that was followed by a dynamic economic growth from the 1890s to World War One, which, however, did not slow down emigration to Texas from the Frenštát region (Thornstrom 1980: 241–263, 313–314; see also Jakubec and Jindra 2006; Janák 2007). Depopulation of Frenštát and Beskydy highlands and also the regions of Frýdlant, Nový Jičín, Frýdek-Místek and Jablůnkov peaked in the 1880s–1890s but continued until World War One (*Vlastivědný sborník okresu Nový Jičín*, 1987).

From the American perspective, the constant stream of European arrivals in the 1870s constituted an immigration fever (Fehrenbach 2000: 595–612). Nugent pinpoints factors that worked to promote migration at that time, i.e., steam-powered transportation, a relative absence of legal and political restraints, potential agricultural development on several New World frontiers, and industrialization (Nugent 1992: 3).

It appears that despite hardship immigrants fared better in Texas than at home. Following the turbulent transition into the post-bellum economy, Texas economy began to recover in the late 1860s when land value increased and Texas exhibited a relative prosperity in the 1870s. Since prosperity of the central Texas counties was based on cotton, corn and cattle, German and Czech immigrants easily found jobs there due to an increased demand for cotton and agricultural products, and departure of former slaves to Kansas (Jordan 1966; see also Konecny – Machann 1993: 136).

Immigration was welcomed through official policies and public discourse that found its way into booklets promoting the state of Texas, as supported by the state government and committees founded for that cause, i.e., that immigrants were needed to replenish the labor force and strengthen the “Indian riddled western frontier” (Fehrenbach 2000: 602). Although Texas population grew rapidly in the last quarter of the century, in particular, it maintained its rural and agrarian character with county seats and settlements rather than towns being the centers of business. A typical town had a courthouse, several general stores, a number of saloons, a drugstore that carried medicines to supposedly ward off cholera, typhus, malaria and yellow fever. Health conditions were poor.

10 Diary entries in the Polansky family archive contain a narrative of brothers walking from Frenštát to Bremen and migrating to Fayetteville, Texas in the 1870s, and thus escaping an army draft, Eckertová 2003: 85.

Growing Czech Texas

Fehrenbach 2000 ascribes prosperous development of the state in the 1870s to heavy immigration from the South and from Europe, and to several years of abundant rain. Yet, Texas was far behind central Europe in its infrastructure and was not ready to support the population through railroads, bridges, fresh water wells or roads when most of the Frenštát immigrants came.

Continued immigration benefitted not only the agents but the immigrants already in place. In the 1860s to 1880s when the Czech community was being constructed they had to manage all the farm work themselves since cooperation was limited due to low population density and immense distances among farms (for analyses of local conditions, see Machann – Mendl 1983; Skrabanek 1988). To purchase ship tickets the migrants typically contacted the company of Kareš&Stocký who had an office in Frenštát providing a direct transportation from Bremen to New York, Baltimore, New Orleans as well as Galveston. A Kareš&Stocký fold-out map of the American South advertized Texas as a state in need of strong immigrants who could earn high salaries by cultivating its land. It displayed Texas railroads and towns, and described its climate as springlike year-round where one does not have to spend money on coal to heat houses, and the land and agriculture as ideal for incoming farmers benefitting from its diversified agricultural production. Also, Texas supposedly had more “Christian” churches than any other state (*Kareš&Stocký USA 14*; see also Fehrenbach 2000: 599–600).

Fehrenbach 2000 notes that the church emerged in the post-Civil War period as a powerful institution and became the cultural and socializing agency in Texas. The church, mostly Methodist and Baptist, was “saturated with American frontier ethos... puritanical, sectarian and enormously democratic” (ibid. 600). Although the Czech Catholic church (to which 80 % of the immigrants belonged, Dongress 1924) fulfilled an identical function of a cultural and social institution it was, at the same time, austere traditional and thus estranged from the ethos of Americanism. Catholicism contradicted democracy and ideology by implication, which contributed to the immigrants’ estrangement and isolation.

With Texas ports opening after the Civil War, immigration grew by thousands and peaked in the 1870s and 1880s when Czech settlements expanded rapidly through immigration of extended families, immigrants’ relatives and friends from home villages, who were all joining the settlers (see also Konecny – Machann 2004: 141). Over 90 % Czechs lived in small settlements in contiguous counties in central Texas and spread into the neighboring

counties of Washington and Colorado.¹¹ Between 1849 and 1920 Czech immigrants established about forty new settlements in Austin and Fayette Counties (Janak 1995). In the 1850s Czechs lived at Cat Spring, New Ulm, Wesley, Dubina, Fayetteville, Hostyn, Praha and a few other locations, in particular in central Texas. In 1877 Fayette County alone had thirteen settlements with a total population of nearly 30,000, 50 churches and 98 schools, and Czech immigrants were settled in Fayetteville, Ellinger, Cistern, Ross Prairie, Praha, Hostyn and Ammansville (*Fayette County* 1996: 11). They lived also in the Lavaca County, in Cat Spring and Industry at Austin County, and about one hundred families at Wesley at the Washington County (Machann – Mendl 1983: 257–260). In 1880, 2700 Czechs lived in Texas (in comparison to 35,000 Germans), as counted by the 10th Population Census (*10th Census* 1: 847).

Jan Přebyl in Texas: The trying years

Jan's reasons to emigrate must have been obvious since neither did he restate them, nor did he explain why he decided to go to Texas in the available letters. He lost a job in the weaving industry and without any land to support his family he opted for going to Texas upon the invitation of his uncle who came in one of the very first Moravian immigrant groups twenty years earlier.¹² Frequent references to the brothers' father (who provided the boys with good education evident in the style, detail and content of the letters) indicate that the father had no income from the land and rented a room in a relative's household in a nearby village. Ferdinand who stayed at home was a businessman and a book-keeper with a secure income that allowed him to support Jan during his first two years in Texas, in particular.

Between 1874 and 1876 Ferdinand sent Jan fourteen letters to Texas to which he received close to as many answers. Some letters were compiled over several months into a single document and some got noted as lost. Jan first settled near Fayetteville in November 1873 where he stayed for two years before moving to Ross Prairie. At that time, Fayetteville was a German-Czech town with about one hundred families, twenty-two houses and the main square

11 The agricultural census of the late 19th century shows the number of Czech farms increasing from almost 1,500 in 1870 to over 5,000 in 1900, and the number of cultivated acres from over 76,000 to almost 300,000, *Fayette County in Handbook of Texas*.

12 Passengers of the groups that departed from the Frenštát region in 1856, 1859 and prior to 1890 are listed in Strnadel 1996: 28, 45. Lists were extracted from the Registry of Birth of the districts of Frenštát, Frýdek-Místek and Nový Jičín where departures for America are indicated, *ibid.*: 93–114. However, the birth registers and parochial archives are not an adequate source for statistics as they mention only few actual emigrants.

overgrown with grass, Jan wrote.¹³ By 1890 it expanded into two hundred families, two hotels, a general store and a doctor and became a meeting point for cotton growers, cattlemen and egg farmers from the nearby settlements of Industry, Ellinger, Columbus, Ammannsville, Ross Prairie and Nelsonville (Národní svaz 1939: 243–253). Although Jan described the hardship of getting settled, he sought not to deter his readers from proceeding with their plans to immigrate, as evident from reactions such as, *Dočtl jsem se z něho [Jan's letter] že poměry v Americe nejsou tak skvělé jako byvají líčené, nicméně nenechal jsem myšlenky padnouti, vystěhovati se taktéž úplně a navždy do Ameriky*.¹⁴ Relatives and neighbors inquired about the details of everyday life such as plants growing in Texas, the taste of milk, meals consumed, heat intensity and walks taken in free time: *Až nam zas psati budeš pověz nam tež co dělávate vneděli a co mate za vyraženi, chodíte-li do lesa či vam les neni vzacny*. (21 Aug. 1874)

Although Jan's letters covering the first months in Texas were not archived, Ferdinand and Filip's response letters, and occasional letters from Jan's former neighbors allow us to reconstruct Jan's situation. These secondary sources provide little indication about where and with whom the large family stayed but apparently could not move to a better location due to muddy roads and depleted finances until late 1875. Jan's uncle Alois Klimiček had lived in Hallettsville some thirty-five miles away from Fayetteville since 1856 but Jan could not get together with him due to the inadequate infrastructure of roads that kept far-distanced settlements isolated; to walk this distance could easily take two days. The first months in Texas were more difficult than Jan had expected, he wrote to Ferdinand but remained positive when writing to friends and relatives. Despair over loosing the first harvest and money invested in plantings can be inferred from letters addressed to Ferdinand in which he described the deplorable situation that the family found itself for many months after their arrival to Texas. Writers in Moravia, too, noted they heard "rumors" that the year 1874 was going badly in America. Ferdinand was deeply concerned about Jan's fate:

Leži mne hodně na srdci tvůj osůd, neb jak Ti již starodavně znamo jest, jsem vždicky toho míněni, že každý kdo do Ameriky přijde vidi se byti oklaman! Žda se mne vždicky že tveho podniknutí lituješ, možna že mne Tve příšti psani přesvětši o jinem... Ma žena Tebe a Tvu rodinu nepřestava litovat. (8 March 1874)

13 The area was settled in the 1820s while still part of Mexico when Stephen F. Austin legalized the first land grants. One of the first settlers was James J. Ross.

14 Machann and Mendl 1983 note that the letters were also publicly read at town and village squares: 20.

In the summer of 1874 Jan's letters to Ferdinand were replete with comments about endless fevers he and his wife suffered, admitting that the fevers made him homesick, have deep regrets and cause him almost loose his mind. At those times, he restrained himself from writing home. The children got acclimatized more easily and remained healthy (he mentioned in passing that a new child was born to the couple), and many of the neighbors who arrived along with them were in a better situation. In 1874, poor cotton harvest and its low market price brought the Příbyls to the point of starvation. The money saved was exhausted and there was no hope in sight during that year, Jan wrote. He expected nothing but difficulties:

Mily bratře! Psal jsem ti že vzdor dosti pohodlnemu počasi mnoho nemocmi navštiveni a take vzdor dosti urodnemu roku naše žne špatne vypadly, pak že mame male amerikanče atd. Obraz jest veskrz malo potěšitelný ale jinak to nejde... Je to velmi podivne že všichni ti lidi kteří z nama sem přišli sobě dosti pomohli a jen zřídka nemocni byli kdežto u nas je to pravy opak ...bavlna pozbyla mnoho jakosti a na trhu klesla cena... děti jsou zdrave a pracuji ochotně... Zminil jsem ti v posledním psaní že naše finance špatne stojí a na jejich zlepšení nemame letos žádnou naději. (7 August 1874)

In letters to Ferdinand from March 1874 to 1875, Jan continued to describe the chills and fevers they suffered, storms damaging local houses and locust attacks devastating the fields. He commented on Texas heat, poisonous snakes and insects, northerly winds, heavy rains as well as draught, poor variety of food and difficulties in preserving it. In one of the letters he described a locust attack damaging the field harvest as follows:

Neco neobyčejneho u Texasu se přihodilo. 24ho října přitahlo na miliardy kobytek malých (podobných loučnim koničkum) aby jsi měl o tom lepší pojem tož ti zdělím že na želez. drahach mnoho nesnazi pusobily, vlaky potrebovaly misto jednoho po dva stroje a to se ještě o kolik hodin zpožďovaly protože jim to po tych kobytkach šplihalo. Bavlně ani kukuřici nemohly moc uškodit za to vyžraly ve 14 dnech pokud jich většina neodletěla moc faše dobytčiho a podzimni zeleniny nam tež moc zničily a je se co obavat protože mnoho vajiček nasadily že nam na vesno škody nadělají. (diary: 6)

In another letter Jan described cold evenings spent reading around the stove and reminiscing about bonfires in the Beskid Mountains (20 June 1874). Ferdinand supposedly expected Jan's letters with trepidation since they predictably

contained bad news: *Vždyt jsem ja pokaždú když jsem od Tebe psani z Ameriky obdržel, byl připraven úslyšeti jen smútné noviny a nebyla ma příprava nikdy daremna* (24 Feb. 1875). He regretted not having attempted to talk Jan out of his plans while still at home because Jan's letters, he mentioned, contained only negative and troubling news month after month. Due to the unrestrained emotionality of Jan's news, Ferdinand allowed himself to reveal his own despair over the agony in which his wife died. A year and a half following Jan's emigration Ferdinand received supposedly the saddest letter of all, which made him conclude that,

Ještě žádné psani neprozradzovalo tak rozhodně Tvů nespokojenost jak to poslední co jsem od Tě obdržel. Stěch prvších jsem se jen dověděl o nemocich o nedostatku potravy pro důcha a jiných nemilych okolnostech, z toho posledního však vysvita že jsi nespokojeny a tuť i nešťastný! (21 May 1875)

Over the months that followed, Ferdinand attempted to provide convincing reasons for Jan's return and anticipated him to comply.

In the letters Jan and Ferdinand also continued debating theological and philosophical matters although they could not replicate the intensity of homeland discussions, Ferdinand remarked. In letters they dedicated many pages to sharing their thoughts on one's fate, future, responsibility and inevitability of dying. In this way, too, the letters enabled maintenance not only of mutual trust and a deep emotional bond but also an intricate intra-thinking and a progress in shaping opinions and attitudes. Almost two years into immigration Jan admitted that he deeply missed home: *Menime sve postaveni až se konečně ocitneme tam kde srdce hladem umirati musi*. Reading about Ferdinand's mountain hikes made him feel lonely and emotionally shaken (Sept. 1875).

Popis tveho dobrodružstvi ve Frenštate mne představil živý obraz minulosti a dojem jaky na mne učinil, vyjadríti nejsem sto, byla to jakasi smíšenina pocitu ktere jen chladný rozum opanovati může, výsledek ale je ten že když mne na tom všem podilu brati popřano nebylo aspoň tak učasten byti mohl. (Jan's diary: 6)

As an outcome, Jan temporarily considered Ferdinand and his friend Filip's suggestion to come back but stressed that he would need a job secured for himself and his eldest son Vilém in Moravia. Ferdinand and Filip arranged it through their neighbor Josef Parma in Tichá near Frenštát, and Filip, too, implored Jan to return emphasizing their emotional bond of friendship: *Dokládám ti že čím dal, tím je mi horši bez tebe, hladu nemam, ale stratil jsem co k nahrazení zde neni, a totiž tebe.* (7 Feb. 1874)

In Texas in need: Support from the old world

In the following year, the situation worsened still further and Jan hesitantly asked Ferdinand to wire him money to help him out of what he described as the most dreadful year of his life. This might seem unexpected since, after all, Jan was the American perceived as doing well and addressed with pleas for financial support from his family. In contrast to that, Ferdinand supported Jan for as long as his business prospered and comments of the sort, *Straniva těch peněz důfam že jsi těch 44 Doll. mezi tím obdržel* (6 Dec. 1874) occurred throughout their correspondence. At that time, his letters were focused on transferring money, worrying about Jan and negotiating his return. Ferdinand emphasized that he was constantly with Jan in spirit:

Že mne i Tvůj osud stejně na srdci leží o tom můžeš být přesvědčen a nepřejde přes den žádná hodina v kteréj by sobě na Tebe a Tvů rodinu nespomněl. Ve snach jsem již konal cestů do Ameriky ... nikdy se mne ale ještě nesnilo že by tam byl dojel. ... Jsem velmi dychtivy od Tebe odpovědi na me předchazející psaní a sice stran meho návrhů aby jsi se spatki navratil. Přiznavam se že jest to ovšem trochů směla idea, zvati Tě na spatek do Evropy a možna že Ti tato případa i trochů směšna. Ja ji ale nezavrhnů ba možna kdyby do tamnějších poměrů mohel lepe nahlednůti že by nadřčenů ideů ještě vic zastavati se úsiloval, tak ale Ti jen co věrný přítel radím abys jsi můj navrh dobře uvažil a jestli můj navrh nenacházíš ničemný tož se navrat dokavad není pozdě! (6 Dec. 1874)

Ferdinand dreamt of winning in a lottery, buying a ticket to America and bringing Jan back to Europe. Then they would build a house together near Frenštát at Paseky, nestle in and desire nothing else (7 April 1875). When providing reasons for Jan's return Ferdinand concluded that Jan should count the losses and return instead of hoping that he would be compensated eventually for living in Texas. Even if he was poorer now than before, he would live on among his own people rather than in a foreign land. Who knows whether the children would ever be grateful for Jan's sacrifice or be happier in Europe! (4 July 1875). As months went by, Ferdinand argued about the benefits of living among his own and enchanted Jan's imagination with descriptions of mountain hikes, nature sites and dreams of the future they might share:

Jsem skutečně dychtivy na to co mne odpišeš, ale se obavam úslyšet, že chceš radej svoje kosti zložit v Americe než se vratit do Evropy...

Bude mne ale ze srdce lito jestli se me hadani potvrdi. Lito za jedno, že tu píď života straviž v cizině tak osaměly majic to povědomi, že se nachazaji na světě ještě přatele v jichžto kruhu by se ti tíže břemena, jenž na nas hned od narození vložena, lehši nesla než na místě, kde jsi od nich na půl světa vzdalen... líto za druhé že mne ten tak zvaný osůd odklidil meho nejlepšího přitele ba mohů řícti jedineho člověka jehož příteli nazivam v rozsahem zmyslů, do takové dalky aby ho nikdy vic nespatriil! (1 Sept. 1875)

In the diary-recorded letters Jan described the hardship involved in living and farming in Texas but, at the same time, consistently claimed that he was willing to put up with it because of the value of freedom he gained, on the one hand, and the American experience he had always desired, on the other. Jan didn't provide any concrete examples of how he gained freedom or what this freedom was about. Although his 'American experience' was far from satisfactory day-by-day, it didn't block his pursuit of the American dream. He once could have been talked out of migration, he admitted, but it was too late now to reverse it and so he was not going to complain. He sought to get on par with Americans and believed in his capacity to do so, he wrote. This sort of positive message was intended not only for Ferdinand but a broader readership of relatives and neighbors. Less than two years after his arrival to Texas Jan gained the certainty of not returning, moved to a more suitable location and rooted down. He wished to explain to Ferdinand why he could not return to his "beloved motherland" but was not finding adequate words and lacked the courage to write openly because he would hurt his brother:

Lituji že tvuj samaritansky skutek ve svuj prospěch použití nemohu a obavam se že mne to za zle pokladati budeš že tvou pravou bratrskou obětavosti snad dle tveho zdani lehkovažne pohrdam. Ujišťuji tě a děkuji ti srdečně za takovou dobročinnost... Vnímam že při čtení těchto pro mne nemilych řadku sobě pomysliš otazku: V čem leží příčina že me příznive nabitnutí odmíta? A bylo by zapotřebi tobe na tuto otazku po předy odpověditi. K tomu ale nemam dosti odvahu a za druhé sobě netroufam tak vyjadřiti aby ti to vše dosti objasněno a srozumitelne byti mohlo... Když se již ale tak stalo a posud to změnití nelze chci aspon se trochu po americky nad mym osudem nestěžovat neboť se pravi o amerikanu: on se neleka i v poměrech nejhoršich, vezme osud jak přijde a to nejlepší z něho vybere, on cítí v sobě sílu aby věci nemožne přemohl, pokusi se o to a hned a vidi li pak že věci nezmuže odlehči na okamžik sve zlosti pak jde odhodlaně... nezoufa nenařika a bez rady sobě nikdy nezůstane. (Sept. 1875)

It is examples such as the one above that allow the reader to understand the relation between the brothers, add a level of empathy and an insight into the complexity of their relationship and the situation itself. As the year winded down, Texas appeared to finally show promise to Jan:

Texas ukazuje dobrou budoucnost v ohledu materiálním a nedostatky nepadají tak těžce na vahu kdyby jen ty nemoce nebyly na dením pořadku to by byla jedna z hlavních příčin Texasu sbohem dati, přidávám se úplně k tvému nahladu že člověk mezi svými mnohé obtíže lehčeji nese než v svete cizím. Nepočítám že by co se me osoby tyka zde jak značne meni vydobyl ale vidím že lidi mych vlastnosti zde dobře stojí zvláště ti ktere nepotkavaj takove nehody jako mne roku minuleho, jmenovany rok jest ten nejtrudnější ktere jsem přežil... Letošni rok jest jeden z tech lepších. (Sept. 1875)

Jan described the prospects for cattle and cotton plantings, in the subsequent letter expanded upon what made one happy in life and stressed that anything worth having must be preceded by difficulties and unhappiness. He ended 1875 on a positive note that set the tone for his future correspondence, i.e., determination to withstand the struggle and confront difficulties he identified with calculating rationality:

Noveho je to že jsem se již před 3mi tydni přestěhoval na nove místo as 1000 kroku od stareho. Mam naději na lepší krop protože mam zem mnohem lepší, takové jsem ještě neměl... Podzim i zimu mame pekne byva časem chladno i často... kdyby byl dobry rok a zůstali jsme zdravi tož to letos nahradime... Dnes je pravý štědrý večer a co toto piši slyset boučani z rozličných zbrani ze všech stran. My co pravi katolici jsme drželi naš štědry den již včera... (diary, 7)

Homeland discourse of America: "To my friends across the ocean"

News from the land of freedom, the title of Kamphoefner, Helbich and Sommer 1991, encapsulates the sense of being in Texas that resonated throughout the letters of freshly arrived immigrants in the 1850s as well as the 1870s, including Jan. These letters tended to mislead readers into embracing a Romanticized version of the distant lands and the prosperity they offered (see Ernst Bergmann's letters that circulated in northeastern Bohemia and northern Moravia in 1849 causing arrivals of tens of new settlers to Texas, among them the Šilar and Lešikar immigrant groups, described in Šilar 1967;

see also Konecny – Machann 2004: 106).¹⁵ They tended to deflate negative emotions and keep the grim facts of the actual hardship to a minimum. Jan's despair appeared only in the most intimate correspondence with his brother. Optimism about Texas continued to infuse the discourse of migration and people's plans. Freedom, land and independence were the buzz words that the friends were prepared to hear. The dreadful situation in Frenštát, Moravia prevented them to imagine anything worse. A flood of letters from anxious family members, relatives and friends followed Jan Přebyl to Texas after he emigrated. Many planned to follow him, were hungry for news and wondered whether they could fare well in immigration.

Already in the June 1874 letter intended to be shared among friends eager to be instructed about immigration, Jan claimed that nothing really surprised him about America because he premeditated the journey, expected the difficulties and troubles but based his decision on sound principles and sacrificed what remained out of his life for the sake of his children. Jan clearly maintained the façade of the American dream and financial pay-offs. His letter fits in the positive framework of immigration and America as an attractive destination that entuned with the prevalent discourse maintained among immigrants and in the homeland. Yet, in the mundane correspondence, immigrants' negotiations often remained unfinished and ongoing because much information remained withheld (cf. Elliott – Gerber – Sinke 2006: 17). In his letter Jan, too, avoided factual information and provided no warnings. He behaved as immigrants did before and after him with the intention of pulling in compatriots who would make possible the reconstruction of homeland villages and the infrastructure based in cooperation, an exchange of services, mutually shared ideologies and religious beliefs (see also Konecny – Machann 2004: 9).

Přatelum za oceanem. Plyne již osmy měsíc co jsme přes nesmírnou vodni poušť naši dosti obtížnou pouť ukončili a posud mne ještě zde nic tak dalece nepřekvapilo. Připisují to okolnosti že jsem vycestoval ne snad z nějaké lehkovažnosti nybrž z jistých zasad a po zdrave úvaze ne snad mne ale mým potomkům lepší budoucnost založiti, k vůli to jsem se odhodlal mojího kousek ještě zbyvajicího živobyti obětovati, byl jsem na mnoho horšího připraven než mne posud zkušenost poučila. Doufam že me vypravování poslouží za dobře měřitko neb nepišu z bazně aneb z prospěchu ale tak jak se věci samy o sobe mají, domnívam se

15 The letters were published in *Moravský národní list* (1851: 277, 278, 283, 289, 291 and 293). *List* also published the devastating letter about the tragedy of the first emigrant group from the Lanškroun region in 1851 on the ship *Maria* (*Moravský národní list* 1854: 8 and 12 April).

*že mne lidé znají co člověka který zbytních řečí a lži nenavidi a tedy
pravdivost meho údani popirati nebudou. (20 June 1874)*

Letters sent from the homeland to friends in emigration in the 1870s and 1880s indicate that America continued to be perceived as a land where immigrants prospered or at least did better than those who stayed at home. They also indicate that an immigrant was not freed of the responsibility of retaining contact with his acquaintances and supporting his family members not only by the news but also by money.

As Elliott, Gerber and Sinke 2006 write, wherever they settled the immigrants continued to draw on past personal connections and ethnic identifications based on shared origins to create networks and communities that eased their transition to new lives (Elliott – Gerber – Sinke 2006: 2). During this transition, letters became the emotional bond bridging the old and new homelands and enabling retention of contacts and cross-generational sustenance of the immigrant community. That these social networks spanning both continents were conducive to immigration is documented by names of individuals mentioned in the letters, immigrant press and cemetery tombstones that contained not only the prototypical data of names and dates but juxtaposed the places of birth and death in Moravia and Texas and thus contrasted the old and new homelands (see Eckertová 2003; Eckert 2007).

In conclusion

The Přebyl letters teach us a lesson about communication at the time pre-dating social media, illustrate an alternative to searching for data through the internet and offer an antithesis to all the different sources of knowledge to which we became accustomed in the era of mass communication. Ever since Thomas and Znaniecki 1918 and 1920 drew attention to letter writing in *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, personal letters have represented valuable historical data complementary to the contemporary fast-paced ad-hoc world of social media. An a priori value of the letters in the Přebyl collection is that they contribute information about the hidden aspect of immigration, i.e., their authors' dependence on the written word expressing compassion and love needed to withstand loneliness and losses. Ideas, opinions and resolutions of both communicating parties continually displayed on pages for two decades provide a rare opportunity not only to trace the development of mutual negotiations but also to reconstruct true identities of the individuals.

The letters confirm the general thesis about Texas Czech immigration being successful longterm. Applying that thesis to circumstances of a specific family provides a useful estrangement and complicates the story of migration. It draws attention to diversity within the Czech immigrant group by foregrounding Jan and Ferdinand as individuals with advanced education engaged in debating not only migration but complex philosophical issues. Although Jan was expected to fulfil the role of a benefactor supporting the less fortunate relatives in Moravia, he himself became dependent on the monetary support of his brother. Analyzing the letters shows that they sustained the migration chain by providing the psychological bond even when they contained little factual or even negative information; the bond enabled individuals and families to continue to plan and eventually migrate and overcome adverse conditions in Texas while being together. What did become of Jan and Ferdinand, and how did the fate they habitually questioned in their letters treat them? Throughout the 1870s, Ferdinand wrote of no intent to travel and sought to convince Jan to return. From his perspective, America had many problems that outweighed the positive:

Amerika však není v stavů vyhověti mne v žádném padů ani co se zdravotních ohledů tyka ani stranivá vydělků – anať ma ovšem nekteře dobre stranky které ale při považeni jejich velikých vad docela zmizi a mûsely by okolnosti tûze veliky převrat utrpět až by se mohl odhodlat' zakročiti k planů založiti živobyti v Americe. (1 March 1877)

Ten long years of negotiations ensued. As the years went by, Jan integrated not only into the Czech community, becoming one of its forerunners, but to Texas as well. His letters appeared in the immigrant weekly *Svoboda* (published since 1885) and his article memorializing the arrival across the Galveston bridge in the annual calendar *Amerikán* (1880). They retold humorous as well as serious events happening in the Czech community in an informal style of an accomplished farmer enamored by the written word. In contrast to Jan's success, Ferdinand at home was slowly approaching his professional downfall and engaging the thought of Texas migration, which he finally accomplished in 1885 along with his wife and a young son. Another story of acculturation and integration set in, at that point.

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