Life Anew for Czech Immigrants: The Letters of Marie and Vavřín Střítecký, 1913-1934

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Introduction

Writing to her former neighbors in Šaratice, Czechoslovakia, South Dakota immigrant Marie Střítecký wondered if "perhaps it was . . . ordained by God that we should have to experience a foreign country, so that then our beautiful homeland should be all the dearer to us."[1] The experience of an immigrant family is nowhere better told than in just such words, preserved in letters written back to the homeland. In an attempt to explain their new

1. Marie Střítecký to "Dear friends," 9 Aug. 1913, trans. Michael Biggins, Harold Křižan Collection, Tustin, Calif. The original, Czech-language letters are in the possession of Jarmila Rozkydalová, Brno, Czechoslovakia. The country of Czechoslovakia did not actually come into existence until after World War I, when Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, and Slovakia were combined to form the new republic of Czechoslovakia. Because these letters span the time before and after the creation of the new country, I have used the modern designation in this article.

environment, customs, and living arrangements, immigrants share with their old countrymen the processes of adjustment and assimilation that gradually involve them more and more with their new country. These processes, sometimes painful and abrupt, sometimes subtle, can be seen in the letters of Marie and Vavrin Střítecký, who reluctantly left their native Czechoslovakia to settle on a farm in Tripp County, South Dakota. From 1913 to 1934, the Střítecký's remained in contact with their relatives and friends in Czechoslovakia. Through these letters, the differences in customs and life style that confronted the immigrant in a foreign country become apparent, and the process of assimilation shows its inevitable course.

Vavřín Střítecký, along with his brothers Jan, Josef, and Bohumil, came to the United States in 1912. From the available letters, the reasons that the Střítecký's and their families chose to uproot their lives and leave their homes are not apparent. Vavřín's daughter, Marie Kimball of Gregory, South Dakota, offers the suggestion that the cause was a desire on the part of the Střítecký brothers to avoid compulsory military service. This reason is plausible and is one of many given in the accounts of other Czechoslovakian emigrants. Political unrest and religious persecution were also contributing factors in Czech emigration patterns, but the overriding cause was economic, whether based on the burden of high taxes, overpopulation, or inequality in land distribution.[2]

A pre-World War I census shows that over 70 percent of all land owners in the Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia owned only 6.5 percent of the land area. Before and during the years of migration, Austrian nobles owned most of the land, and the Czech peasant class consisted of three distinct groups. The *sedlák*, or "farmer," owned from twenty-five to one hundred acres. The *chalupník*, or "cottager," owned from five to twenty-five acres. The *nadeníci*, or "day-laborer," owned no land and lived on that owned by the farmer or nobleman.[3] From the Střítecký letters, it appears that

2. Thomas Čapek, "Sociological Factors in Czech Immigration," *Slavonic and East European Review* 22 (Dec. 1944): 95; Kenneth D. Miller, *The Czecho-Slovaks in America* (New York: George H. Doran Co., 1922), pp. 44-45; Joseph A. Dvorak, comp., *Memorial Book: History of the Czechs in the State of South Dakota*, trans. Laddie E. Kostel (Tabor, S. Dak.: Czech Heritage Preservation Society, 1980), pp. 15-16. Dvorak's history of the Czech settlers in South Dakota was first published in the Czech language in 1920, under the title *Dějiny Čechův ve Státu South Dakota*.

3. Robert L. Skrabanek, "The Influence of Cultural Backgrounds on Farming Practices in a Czech-American Rural Community," *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 31 (Mar. 1951): 260-61; Miller, *Czecho-Slovaks in America*, p. 22.

A sedlák*'s house in Pásice, Czechoslovakia, included an enclosed courtyard and an attached barn. Most Czech peasants lived in small villages like Pásice or Šaratice and went out from the villages to farm their small parcels of land scattered about the surrounding countryside.*

they belonged to the cottager, or perhaps even the farmer, class of Czech society because of their frequent references to the selling of property in the old country.

Most of the emigrants from Czechoslovakia to the United States came from the cottager group. The more wealthy peasants, the *sedlák*, had little economic reason to leave the homeland, and the day-laborer had no means with which to make emigration a reality. The emigrant Czech saw a move to the United States as an economic step upward. There is little doubt that he would have preferred to stay in the homeland had it been possible to improve his economic situation, but the opportunities that beckoned in the United States were strong drawing cards to a people steeped in the tradition that land ownership was the criteria for success, both personal and material.[4] The reluctance to leave is aptly expressed in Marie Střítecký's letters. "I cannot even imagine us staying here forever," she says in 1913, "and Vavřín also doesn't intend to stay here, if only God will give us health. But if we were to leave right away, we would lose everything, because all the money we have spent so far would be for naught."[5] While this hope of return

4. Miller, *Czecho-Slovaks in America*, pp. 22-23, 45.
5. Střítecký to "Dear friends," 9 Aug. 1913.

was being voiced by Marie Střítecký, statistics show that most Czechs migrated to the United States with the belief that they would stay. Between the years 1899 and 1909, the ratio of Czech immigrant males to females was 56.9 to 43.1, a good indication that these people came as families with the idea of settling permanently.[6]

The greatest number of Czechs came to the United States between 1900 and 1919, when almost ninety-eight thousand made new lives here. The greatest single migration came in 1907, when 13,554 Czechs entered the country. Many of these immigrants settled in cities like Chicago, New York, Cleveland, and Saint Louis, where relatively high paying jobs in industry were available.[7] Within cities, enclaves of Czechs created atmospheres compatible to the newly arriving immigrants. Inspite of this closeness of fellow countrymen, however, the conditions that existed in many of these ethnic ghetto areas were often less than satisfactory.

Perhaps the hardest adjustment for the urban immigrant was the change in living space. Although they came from a life that had been lived on a small scale, with small land holdings, short distances between villages, compact housing, and walking as a general mode of transportation, the immigrant's life in the bigger cities of the United States was not so much reduced in scope as crowded into smaller areas. The most extreme examples of these dense living conditions were the tenement houses that could be found in New York, Boston, and other Atlantic seaboard cities. These six- to eight-story buildings covered city blocks on both sides with ten-foot alleys to separate them. A moderate count of families in just one building of such a tenement block was anywhere from one hundred fifty to two hundred people. In inland cities, two-story cottages or three- to four-story structures contained anywhere from six to twelve families. Beyond the crowded conditions was the more subtly disturbing need to adjust to inconveniences that had never been encountered before. The disposal of garbage and trash when living in a sixth-floor flat confronted the urban immigrant with the necessity of making frequent trips to a poorly serviced garbage can. The lack of sunlight, fresh air, and privacy, which had been taken for granted in the rural areas of the old country, was a further trial, especially to the women who spent more time in the home. Primitive sewage provi-

6. Čapek, "Sociological Factors in Czech Immigration," p. 98.
7. Ibid.; Miller, *Czecho-Slovaks in America*, p. 43.

sions were often burdensome when living many floors away from any semblance of bathroom facilities.[8] Most of these problems were not encountered by those immigrants who settled in rural communities and farming situations. Yet most, if not all, immigrants were touched by them.

Vavřín Střítecký, like many others, spent time working in Chicago before his wife and daughter joined him in America. Together with his brothers and their families, the Střítecký̊s then journeyed to South Dakota to make a new home. The families acquired land in the south central part of the state and set about making their livings. Their move reflected the intense respect and desire for land ownership among Czech immigrants, which had its origins in the social structure of the old Czech society. There, political rights and prestige were invested in property holders, and the average Czech, confined to a small parcel of land, learned from the old country what he never forgot in the new: substantial land ownership was the mark of success, security, and wealth.[9]

Because of this background, a great share of Czech immigrants were destined to settle in the midsection of the United States that bordered the Mississippi and Missouri flood plains. Here, the climate and soil conditions approximated those they had left in Bohemia. Czechs formed a large ethnic group in many farming states, settling primarily in Nebraska, Texas, Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, Kansas, South Dakota, North Dakota, and Oklahoma. By 1930, the Czechs in South Dakota alone numbered 10,650. The Twelfth United States Census (1900) showed that 32 percent of all first generation Czechs engaged in agriculture, and estimates suggest that at least one-half of those who settled in the Great Plains states were involved in some aspect of farming or ranching.[10]

8. Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted*, 2d ed. (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1973), pp. 133-37.

9. Miller, *Czecho-Slovaks in America*, pp. 22-23, 45.

10. Francis J. Brown and Joseph S. Roucek, eds., *One America: The History, Contributions, and Present Problems of Our Racial and National Minorities*, rev. ed. (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945), p. 148; Thomas Čapek, *The Čechs (Bohemians) in America: A Study of Their National, Cultural, Political, Social, Economic, and Religious Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1920), pp. 69-70; John P. Johansen, *Immigrant Settlements and Social Organization in South Dakota*, South Dakota Agricultural Experiment Station Bulletin, no. 313 (Brookings: South Dakota State College, 1937), p. 25; Frederick C. Luebke, "Ethnic Group Settlement on the Great Plains," *Western Historical Quarterly* 8 (Oct. 1977): 418; Bruce M. Garver, "Czech-American Freethinkers on the Great Plains, 1871-1914," in *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, ed. Frederick C. Luebke (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press for Center for Great Plains Studies, 1980), p. 147.

In these farming states, Czech settlers again found compatible environments, for their countrymen tended to settle areas in recognizable ethnic groups. In South Dakota, the first Czech settlers had come to Yankton County in 1869, when a group of Chicago-based Czechs formed a Czech Agricultural Society to scout land for western settlements. The first settlers established a base at Lakeport near Yankton, and immigrants in later years moved west and north from there into Bon Homme, Brule, and Buffalo counties. Later still, Czechs settled further west in Charles Mix, Gregory, Tripp, Mellette, Todd, and Bennett counties as homesteading lands opened up on the Indian reservations. Towns and settlements named Tabor, Zizkov, Blaha, Vodnany, and Janousek welcomed the later Czechs as they continued to settle in close proximity to their earlier countrymen.[11] Following this pattern, the Střítecký́s first rented a farm in Tripp County and then purchased their farm near Colome, where a number of Czechs had already settled. By 1913, most homesteading lands were gone, but references in the Střítecký́ letters indicate that some "free land" was still available.

These hardy people were among those who helped break the sod of the prairie, survived the added difficulties of severe winters, crop failures, and insect infestations, and did so on land that was not always of the most productive quality. These newly arrived immigrants quickly availed themselves of the new ideas that abounded in this land where farming was done so differently. The Střítecký́ letters home show their wonder and amazement at the size of the land and differences in farming practices:

> I have to tell you something about how grazing is managed here, you can't imagine how it's done. First of all consider that that one 160 acre tract is comparable in size to all those claypits including the pasture land up to the cross near the road to Zbejsov. Now about 20 to 30 acres are used for grazing, and there the livestock grazes all summer, and it is surrounded by barbed wire so they can't go any farther. The hayfield is separate; the livestock can't go there. When the corn comes in, the livestock will graze there and they spend all summer and all winter outside, here that is the custom, so they aren't cold.[12]

In Czechoslovakia, livestock shared the family accommodations in connected barns, or even more closely in a partitioned section of

11. Dvorak, *Czechs in the State of South Dakota*, pp. 20-25; Johansen, *Immigrant Settlements*, pp. 23-25.
12. Střítecký́ to "Dear ones," n.d.

the peasant's cottage, and remained indoors all winter and a large part of the summer.[13]

Confronted with such changes and differences on every side, the immigrant attempted to maintain ties with the old country through letter exchanges, as did the Střítecký, and by other means. One method of keeping in touch with their cultural heritage was subscription to various types of journals, magazines, and newspapers that were published in their ethnic language. In the first three decades of the twentieth century, several Czech-language newspapers flourished. Most of them were published in Chicago, the hub of Czech life in the United States, and most professed a liberal stand, reflecting the freedom-loving attitude of the Czech people and underscoring the reasons why some Czechs had left the politically repressive mother country. In South Dakota, the *Tabor Independent*, started in 1904, kept the South Dakota immigrant in contact with fellow Czechs throughout the state and the neighboring state of Nebraska. As time passed, however, the English-language papers became more important to Czech-Americans, and circulation of national Czech-language papers in rural communities declined. The local *Tabor Independent*, which was published in both Czech and English, had a longer life in South Dakota, but it, too, had ceased publication by 1952. The foreign-language press served the useful purpose of providing the immigrant with a familiar language in which he could understand events taking place in the United States and abroad during a time when he was bombarded from all sides with new things to learn.[14]

Another important source of cultural familiarity and contact with fellow countrymen was the fraternal organization. The Czech fraternal societies that developed in the United States were often multi-purpose organizations that tried to cover all aspects of the immigrants' lives. The bylaws of the major midwestern fraternal organization, the Západní Česko-Bratrská Jednota (ZČBJ), or Western Bohemian Fraternal Association, which was organized in Omaha in 1897, outlined an ambitious program: "to unite fraternally all worthy citizens of both sexes, of the white race and

13. Miller, *Czecho-Slovaks in America*, pp. 25-27.

14. Robert I. Kutak, *The Story of a Bohemian-American Village: A Study of Social Persistence and Change* (Louisville, Ky.: Standard Printing Co., 1933), pp. 113-15; Mrs. F. F. Chladek et al., comps., *History of Bon Homme County from Early Settlement until 1921* (n.p., n.d.), p. 41; Paul F. Vondracek, "History of the Early Czech Settlements in South Dakota" (M.A. thesis, University of South Dakota, 1963), pp. 63-64.

Czechoslovak or mixed extraction, and to provide mutual opportunity for improvement, to furnish members relief in sickness and accident, to insure lives of members and children, to support Czech patriotic undertakings, especially schools and Sokol organizations, and to establish Czech libraries for the education of the members and their families."[15] By the mid-1930s, twenty lodges of this association were functioning in South Dakota as well as four lodges of another society, the Czecho-Slovak Society of America. In 1936, the ZČBJ lodges cooperated in sponsoring a statewide Czechoslovak Day Festival at Gregory, South Dakota, that featured an impressive array of folk dances, Sokol drills, Czech-language plays, and band concerts. In South Dakota, the ZČBJ was a successful vehicle for uniting its immigrant members and providing mutual aid, and some aspects of its program are still viable today.[16]

Closely related to such fraternal organizations were the Sokols. Transplanted from Czechoslovakia, the Tel. Jed. Sokol organization, established in Prague in 1862, had a two-fold purpose: to im-

15. *Památník Ceskoslovenského Dne v Jižní Dakotě: Souvenir of Czechoslovak Day Festival in the State of South Dakota* (Gregory, S. Dak.: Western Bohemian Fraternal Association, 1936), p. 5. This publication was written in both Czech and English.

16. Ibid.; Johansen, *Immigrant Settlements*, p. 26.

Even today, Czech youngsters and adults in South Dakota perform the Beseda, the Czech national dance, and celebrate their heritage at the annual Czech Days celebration in Tabor.

prove the body and provide patriotic training for the mind. Sokols concentrated on gymnastic events and provided state and national tournaments for members, which included both men and women. Some units also formed dramatic branches, in which young adults concentrated on the performance of Czech-language plays. The Sokol units in South Dakota were of two types, the nonsectarian Sokols and the Catholic Sokols (Catholic Sokol Association of America), although their purposes and functions were basically identical. Much of the direction for these state groups came from the large Czech communities of Nebraska, which provided athletic directors and regional competitions. World War I directed the activities of these young people elsewhere, and the Sokols disbanded during the war. Afterwards, the units revived for a brief period, and in 1936, five units of Sokols existed in South Dakota, located in Winner, Gregory, Wagner, Tyndall, and Tabor. The emphasis after the war focused on the dramatic aspects of the society, but even that gradually lost its appeal. By 1963, the only active Sokol unit was the Catholic Sokol at Tabor.[17]

The initial impact of these associations, as well as the letter exchanges and publications, diminished as the second and third generations of the ethnic community became more involved in mainstream American life. Marie Střítecký's references to her children show the beginning of this process when she remarks: "All of our children can speak Czech well, the older ones know how to read and write, I taught them how, but when they speak together, then it's only in English, they have been educated that way, so I am not surprized, it's easier for them. But they will never lose their heritage, it is already in the blood, they both act out Czech plays . . ."[18] The education of the children of Czech immigrant parents was handled primarily through the public school system, but Catholic-supported elementary and secondary schools were also located in midwestern states. Hand in hand with this general education were Czech-language classes that were offered in highly concentrated areas of Czech population. The Czechs were proud of their heritage and did not wish the language and their customs to die out among their children.[19]

17. Kutak, *Bohemian-American Village*, p. 102; Vondracek, "Early Czech Settlements in South Dakota," pp. 45, 53-54; Johansen, *Immigrant Settlements*, pp. 26-27; Dvorak, *Czechs in the State of South Dakota*, pp. 137, 143. Tabor's Sokol unit retains its original charter and is still active today.

18. Střítecký to "Dear friends," 13 Jan. 1932.

19. Brown and Roucek, *One America*, pp. 152-53.

For those educated in the United States, the acquisition of English was an easy task, but for the first generation immigrant it was a painful reality that each individual had to deal with. A small legal matter, for instance, caused the Střítecký's a great deal of trouble. "We had the authorization drawn up just as soon as we got the letter from you," Marie explains to an impatient friend in Czechoslovakia. "We had to go to another town, 10 miles from here, where there is a lawyer who knows a little Czech. His scribe knows Czech quite well, but they wrote the authorization in English. They said it has to go to the consulate, and *there* it will be drawn up in Czech, otherwise you wouldn't understand any of it. And now we don't know whether they have sent it to you or not."[20] Acquiring English was a natural course for the immigrant, for it more readily gave expression to his new wants and his reactions to the new environment in which he found himself. In "Experiences of a Bohemian Emigrant Family," Ferdinand F. Doubrava writes that while living in an English-speaking community in Wisconsin during the 1860s, his ignorance of English proved to be such an embarrassment that he went about finding his own way of learning the language through self-instruction from books and by attending church and practicing what he heard.[21]

The Czechs came from a country where universal compulsory education was strictly enforced. A sense of literacy was thus ingrained in the Czech immigrant, and it was not unusual for parents to aspire toward a college education for their children in the United States.[22] Illustrating the point is the final sentence in the *History of the Czechs in the State of South Dakota*, written in 1920, which admonishes readers to "Remember, that in todays time [*sic*], every Nationality is also measured according to its distinguished people, its scholars and artists, and from this standpoint it is very necessary that the Czech parents provide their children with a higher education, especially those whose material conditions allow it."[23] Before such a monumental step, however, the process of formal instruction for many adult immigrants in English and civics had to be undertaken in order for them to qualify for citizenship. Marie Střítecký explains the complexity of this problem for the immigrant: "If he [a friend] were to put in for

20. Střítecký to "Dear friends," 9 Aug. 1913.
21. Ferdinand F. Doubrava, "Experiences of a Bohemian Emigrant Family," *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 8 (June 1925): 402.
22. Kutak, *Bohemian-American Village*, pp. 65-66.
23. Dvorak, *Czechs in the State of South Dakota*, p. 178.

citizenship right away, he could get it after five years and at that it is questionable whether he would get it. Now the authorities are very strict, a person has to know English and answer such questions as people born here don't even know the answers to."[24] To help immigrants, language and civics programs were instituted by both private and public agencies, and the Czech immigrant's literacy in his own language and his respect for learning aided him in making good use of such programs.

In other respects as well, the acquisition of English was a natural progression for the Czech. Because of Czechoslovakia's location in central Europe, the Czech language had been influenced by many neighboring languages, such as German, Polish, Russian, and Hungarian. After World War I, the American English language began to exert a strong influence on the Czech people both here and in Czechoslovakia. When it came to pronunciation, many English words were pronounced according to Czech language practices.[25] "The grass is also growing," Marie Střítecký writes from South Dakota, "but they don't worry themselves about that in America. The corn has good soil, in a short time it will outgrow the grass and it's "olrajt," that is to say, it's okay; I'm already writing like an American."[26] Such corruption of the mother tongue was a pervasive condition with the immigrants. English words given Czech or Slovak pronunciation, such as all right—*olrajt*, and street—*štrita*, were examples of the preferential treatment the immigrant gave English over the mother tongue.[27]

Social pressures and an attempt to fit better into the environment played a major role in the related practice of name-changing. Czech proper names, which underwent the same transformation as other parts of the language, showed the Americanization that existed among the immigrants. Some changes were attempts at English spelling of Czech pronunciation. Thus, Kučera became Goodsheller and Kočí became Cutshaw. In other instances, Vančura became Van Cura and Lapáček, La Pache, hiding origins entirely. Attempts at translation rendered Jablečník as Appleton

24. Střítecký to "Dear auntie," 25 Apr. [1928?].

25. Jirina Meixner, "The Influence of American English on Czech," *American Speech* (Fall-Winter 1971): 301-2.

26. Střítecký to "Dear ones," n.d. According to Skrabanek in "Influence of Cultural Backgrounds on Farming Practices," p. 265, Czech peasants considered the letting of grass grow in one's fields an inexcusable negligence.

27. Čapek, *Čechs (Bohemians) in America*, p. 116.

and Studnička as Wells. Given names also underwent similar changes. The Střítecký's instructed their friends in Czechoslovakia to address their letters to Lawrence, rather than to Vavřín, his Czech given name. Other frequent alterations changed old country names like Jiří into George, Ludmila into Lillian, Matouš into Matthew, and Růžena into Rose.[28]

While there existed no formal official involvement in the practice of name-changing, legal recognition of a surname when matters of real property were involved was necessary. Such recognition was possible during the process of naturalization, when the court could decree the legitimacy of the new name at the same time that it issued citizenship. Without official barriers, the practice of name-changing continued throughout the years of immigration. The urban environments that drew many of the immigrants preferred the simple, more common names over the nationalistic surnames that the immigrants had arrived with, and the movement of the population within the country facilitated the process.[29] The Americanization of immigrant names was but one step in the many-faceted process of assimilation that the immigrant encountered once he had settled in the United States.

Assimilation was further assured by intermarriage between Czechs and people of other ethnic groups. While this practice was not strongly opposed, it was likewise not strongly encouraged. Marie Střítecký showed a definite bias against intermarriage, but she was enough of a realist to accept that the ways practiced in the old country were changing in America. "Josef's boy Toník enlisted in the service for four years," she relates, adding, "he got married, . . . but she is English. That's how it is, once you go abroad you lose your ties. . . . And it's only a matter of time, because our children's children will already be Englishmen [*sic*]."[30] The greatest number of intermarriages were between Czechs and Germans because of the Czech familiarity with that language. Nevertheless, marriages between Czechs were more likely to take place in the early years of a community as a result of association and proximity in work or social life rather than a definite ethnic consideration.[31]

28. Ibid., pp. 117-18; Střítecký to "Dear friends," 3 May 1922; Dvorak, *Czechs in the State of South Dakota*, p. 179.

29. Maurice R. Davie, *World Immigration, with Special Reference to the United States* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1936), pp. 505-9.

30. Střítecký to "Dear ones," 22 Mar. 1933.

31. Miller, *Czecho-Slovaks in America*, p. 76.

While most changes were the result of the immigrant's reaction to new environment and customs, in at least one instance, the Czechs themselves made a deliberate break from their background. In Czechoslovakia during the reign of the Hapsburgs, most Czechs were nominally Roman Catholic. The Catholic church was closely aligned with the monarchy and its oppressive policies, and as a consequence of persecutions heaped upon them for independent political or religious beliefs, many Czechs became "Freethinkers." They brought this opposition to the Catholic and all organized churches with them to the United States. Unaffiliated with any church, these immigrants zealously promoted the separation of church and state and retained a liberal and cultural fervor that flowed into their established lives in this country.[32] Although the Střítecký, and many others, remained Roman Catholic, their thinking was also influenced by the liberal philosophy of the Freethinkers. "I have to tell you," Marie writes to Czechoslovakia, "that Mařenka had a civil wedding. You know, that is fairly common here, especially when only one is a Catholic. . . . We believe they can be just as happy this way; you know, aunt, although you are an ardent Catholic you look upon everything reasonably."[33] The importance of cultural heritage over strict adherence to a particular church affiliation can also be seen in her pride in the prominent Freethinker Anton Cermak: "Have you perhaps read about how they killed our great Czech, the mayor of Chicago, Čermák? It's a great pity about him, he could have done a lot of good here still. . . . We are proud, we American Czechs, that that was our man who was never ashamed to proclaim his Czech background."[34]

32. Brown and Roucek, *One America*, pp. 151-52; Garver, "Czech-American Freethinkers," pp. 148-49. Garver estimates that 40 to 45 percent of Czech immigrants remained Catholic; as many as 55 percent became Freethinkers; and roughly 5 percent were divided among various Protestant or other churches (p. 148).

33. Střítecký to "Dear ones," 13 Feb. 1934.

34. Ibid., 22 Mar. 1933. Mayor Anton J. Cermak became a spokesman for many ethnic peoples when he silenced heckling nativists with the remark that "It's true I didn't come over on the Mayflower, but I came over as soon as I could" (quoted in John D. Buenker, "Dynamics of Chicago Ethnic Politics, 1900-1930, *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 67 [Apr. 1974]: 179). While Cermak was a Freethinker, he maintained close ties with Catholics, Jews, and others, and Buenker relates that his funeral was conducted by a priest, a rabbi, and a minister (p. 179). Cermak died on 6 March 1933 as a result of gunshot wounds he received on 15 February when Guiseppe Zangara tried to assassinate President-elect Franklin Roosevelt. Cermak had accompanied Roosevelt to Miami, Florida, and was with Roosevelt in his touring car when the assassin began shooting. Richard B. Morris, ed., *Encyclopedia of American History* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1953), p. 341.

Such pride and respect for cultural heritage among immigrants frightened many people during the period of the First World War. A growing attitude in the United States that the country was not succeeding in assimilating its aliens produced pressure to stop immigration. The many immigrants who could not yet read, write, or speak English, the thousands who had not acquired citizenship, the proliferation of foreign societies and foreign-language newspapers, and the concentration of ethnic groups in cities all contributed to the belief that the "melting pot" theory was not working. Other political and social arguments entered into the scheme of things as well, such as fear of lowered wages and standards of living, overpopulation, and eventual loss of Anglo-Saxon "purity." The culmination of these economic and social factors was a growing sentiment in favor of restrictions that finally found expression in the Quota System Act of 1921. This act provided that the number of immigrants of any nationality be limited in each year to 3 percent of the total number of that nationality listed as United States residents in the 1910 census. The areas affected by this quota act were Europe, the Near East, Africa, and Australasia.[35] Later immigration acts curtailed immigration further, but to the Střítecký's' friends, the Act of 1921 had an immediate impact. "I am warning you now," Marie Střítecký writes, "and tell or read this letter to Horáks, so that they know how strict conditions are here now. Perhaps you know that now only 3½% are admitted, so he couldn't come now, not until June, because Czechoslovakia has already used up its percentage—I think it was as early as September—so they won't start coming again until June."[36]

Through implementation of the various quota acts, the days of vast population movements came to an end. To those people who came to the United States before the gates began to close, the new country provided opportunities not available in their homelands. Most immigrants invested all their money and time into these opportunities and realized that their was nothing left for them in the old country. They were, perforce, becoming Americans. For families like the Střítecký's, who were twentieth-century immigrants, the assimilation process, while still gradual and often unrhythmic, was hastened by two world wars and the Great Depression.

Living with the economic conditions of the Great Depression caused Marie Střítecký to become a political observer, binding her

35. Davie, *World Immigration*, pp. 370-73, 375.
36. Střítecký to "Dear ones," 4 Mar. 1923.

more tightly to the American way of life. In 1933, she confessed her interest in politics, saying, "we have a new government and all of America is waiting anxiously to see what it will do for the people." She indicated her opinion of former president Herbert Hoover, who "was a millionaire who didn't take any pains about the people, he only saw to it that he filled up his own pocket," and expressed the plight of farmers, who "are all without exception on the verge of ruin and the workers are starving."[37] She was pleased with the policies of the Franklin Roosevelt administration and later added: "Our current president is, as I have said, blessed. In the entire United States all the unemployed have gotten work, and in the areas affected by drought and grasshoppers, people have been given work for the entire winter."[38] By 1934, the reluctant immigrant Marie Střítecký had become a proud "American Czech," who retained much fondness for her native culture, but who no longer saw herself as a resident of a foreign country.

The story of immigrant assimilation is, of course, bigger than the Střítecký's, but many parts of the process can be seen in the following letters written to their neighbors in Šaratice, Czechoslovakia. Often in these letters, the topics of family, health, and security come through, things that differ little from the concerns of all people everywhere, whether they be native or immigrant. Certain values of life transcend cultural or racial background and require no assimilation, only humanness.

37. Ibid., 22 Mar. 1933.
38. Ibid., 13 Feb. 1934.

Letters of Marie and Vavřín Střítecký, 1913-1934

Presentation Letter by Jan Rozprim[39]

Before the First World War, the four brothers Jan, Josef, Vavřín, and Bohumil Střítecký (among a number of others), sons of the farmer Vincenc Střítecký and his wife Petromila née Svoboda, emigrated from Šaratice, Czechoslovakia, by way of Sladká near Brno to the United States. Vincenc Střítecký was the brother of our grandfather Zachariáš and so his sons were the cousins of our mother Marie Střítecký.[40]

Bohumil Střítecký returned with his entire family to Šaratice after the First World War where with his savings he built up a modern farm. However he did not farm there long, because in February of 1929, he, his wife Klementina née Kyselek and their eleven year old son Vitezxlav died tragically, poisoned by coal gas. The émigré brothers Střítecký, together with their families, farmed in South Dakota. Vavřín and his wife Marie née Spačil maintained contacts with their native Šaratice for years and corresponded especially with their former neighbors [*sic*], Mr. Jan Pouchlý of Šaratice. This correspondence has been preserved (most of it, apparently) and was lent to me by the daughter of Bohumil Střítecký, Jarmila Rozkydalová of Brno.

In the summer of 1978 I had the opportunity to personally meet the daughter of Mr. Vavřín Střítecký, Mrs. Marie Křižan [later,

39. As this letter indicates, Jan Rozprim presented copies of Marie and Vavřín Střítecký's letters to their grandson, Harold Křižan, in 1979. I received a copy of the letters from Harold Křižan, who is my brother, and arranged to have them translated by Kansas State University professor Michael Biggins. These letters are presented here. Vavřín and Marie Střítecký's four daughters, Rose Pravicek, Marie Kimball, Mildred Střítecký, and Sedonia Wagner, as well as Harold Křižan, have kindly given permission for the publication of the translated letters in *South Dakota History*.

40. This Marie Střítecký is Vavřín's cousin and the mother of Jan Rozprim. Vavřín's wife, the Marie Střítecký who wrote most of the letters, is identified in this letter as Marie née Spačil.

after being widowed, remarried Kimball], her son Mr. Harold Křižan, and his daughter Miss Kim Křižan. I decided to transcribe the letters lent to me and present them as a family keepsake to:

Mr. Harold Křižan
Tustin, California

with my greetings,

Jan Rozprim
Brno, Czechoslovakia

Brno, 10 March 1979

* * *

Aug. 9, 1913

Dear friends,

First of all, accept heartfelt greetings from all of us. To start with, both of us thank all of you so much for the work and effort you have taken to keep our house in such good order. I also thank the girls, they have enough work as it is, but still you all sacrifice yourselves for us. God will repay you all for what you have done for us and what you will do. You know that I would gladly take care of all of this, but that is impossible. God guides our fortunes, and perhaps it was also ordained by God that we should have to experience a foreign country, so that then our beautiful homeland should be all the dearer to us. I cannot even imagine us staying here forever, and Vavřín doesn't intend to stay here, if only God will give us health. But if we were to leave right away, we would lose everything, because all the money we have spent so far would be for naught. And then, farming is done differently here, in this country stockraising pays off, and when we get the money, we're going to raise a lot of livestock.

We had the authorization drawn up just as soon as we got the letter from you [to permit neighbor to sell Střítecký's land]. We had to go to another town, 10 miles from here, where there is a lawyer who knows a little Czech. His scribe knows Czech quite well, but they wrote the authorization in English. They said it has to go to the consulate, and *there* it will be drawn up in Czech, otherwise you wouldn't understand any of it. And now we still don't know whether they have sent it to you or not. Vavřín has to go and check up on that, but we think that you'll get it before any buyers show up. So Florián has offered 11 thousand? That seems pretty low to us. We think he'll be hard pressed when he sees that you want to

sell it and that you're sticking to a higher price. Anyway, uncle, you'll see if there will be more buyers. Raimund Piša wrote Josef that they would buy the house for 7 thousand crowns, but we think it would be better all around for you to sell it as you see best. We can't set the price for you, because we don't know what would work, but we do know that you will look to get the highest possible offer. I don't remember if I wrote you that we're going to give Grandma Střítecký 3 thousand crowns, she will keep 2000 for herself and will give 1000 to the boys. Also, concerning that oven, if the house sells for less, then it (the oven) should rather stay there so that the memory of the cutlets will be accurate, so please settle that account.

Just now we're mowing hay here. It's some work. One mows and the other rakes it into piles, and when the piles get big, they move them. They have a machine that carries the hay up to the stack, then it is put onto another machine that throws the hay onto the stack; it's really a joy to do, we have altogether 110 acres of meadow, so we'll have plenty of haystacks. What are you all up to? Are you already through with harvesting and threshing? How are the Nováks and Hlaváčes? Give our regards to everyone, and again, we send all our very best to you.

Marie and Vavřín Střítecký

Greetings to the Pouchlýs.
I'm writing this on the Saturday before Křenovický holiday, so I've been crying all day because I can't go.

October 6

Dear friends,

We can't wait for a letter from you, you probably don't have time to write. I can believe that, because I myself constantly have something to do, and today I'm writing you in pencil because we don't have any ink in the house. Once again we have a request to make of you. Uncle, please try to sell our fields, because we won't be coming back that soon, and even if we did return, then who knows what we would buy and where, and we've also read that whoever doesn't return in five years has his property confiscated. We don't know how much truth there is to that; but we would like to sell (the fields) and set the money aside there until the exchange rate is good enough to send it here. So we ask you, uncle, put them up for sale, we don't even know if land draws a very good price

One of the Střítecký brothers shocking grain

now, but do write us what offers there are and whether the fields could be sold at all. What's the news from Bohumil? We haven't been getting any news at all from them. And what are you doing, dear ones? You haven't written in such a long time! We got a letter from Stalařes, but nothing from you. Write us what you think about those fields and give us some advice in this matter. Is it raining there? We also have had a lot of snow here, but only since the harvest and now again it's really been raining quite a bit. The harvest was good enough, but the prices are really low! And big taxes, so we need help. But it can't be helped, everyone has his problems.

Did you go to the fair in Brno? It must have really been nice! What's new there? Write us all the news, pass on my most sincere congratulations to my god-daughter Anna Martinášek on her wed-

ding—I don't know if she's already married or not. And what are your girls and Jeník doing? Greet the Novaks and Hlaváčes for us, and you, our dear ones, accept all our very best.

Sincerely,

Your former neighbors,

Marie and Vavřín Střítecký

October 20, 1913

Dear friends,

We have been waiting a long time in vain for a letter from you, we don't know anything about how the sale of our property is going. I think, uncle, that you will sell it, because you assured me before I left that as soon as we wrote you, you would put it up for sale. But a week ago we got a letter from Mama in Křenovický, where she wrote among other things that she was at your place during the fair, that you had spoken about selling but that you were against it. That was not good news for us, because we thought that any day we would be getting news from you that it had been sold. We need money now urgently, for as you know, I sent Vavřín 2500 crowns [while she was still in Czechoslovakia], that's 500 dollars. Out of that amount we had to buy livestock, machinery, some things for the household, and we have to live off of that for a full year until the first harvest is ready. So you can well imagine what kind of position we're in now and that we need the money. We could sell some grain, but in the spring it's always 25% more expensive, so that if we did we would be ruined. Also, livestock is cheap now, so we could buy some and let it graze in the cornfield, but without money we can't do anything. We beg you not to listen to people who haven't been here and can't know a thing, but do listen to us. Why should we want to squander it or lose it? After all, our future is at stake here and the future of our children, so this is no trifle. We are not even thinking of returning soon. And there it would bring in nothing, whereas here we can do something with the money. I'm also going to write mother to tell her that if she really is so concerned about this, that Vavřín said that he would leave some money there for me, but we definitely want to sell the house and fields. For farming you have to have money, just imagine if someone wanted to start farming in the homeland with 500 zl., what could he get done? Nothing. He'd buy

one horse, one cow, and he wouldn't have anything left to feed himself on, but here, even though things are much better, still there aren't any roast pigs set out on the streets with knives and forks so everyone can help himself, like Grandpa Pouchlý used to say. I don't have to tell you that things are good here, because I've already written you that several times, but judging from mother's letter, no one seems to believe us. How else can we prove that to you? When we come back, then you'll see, because it must be a very special misfortune for a person to lose everything when in the beginning he had money. Even without money a person can help himself here, but that would mean a long period of hardship and we don't need to experience that. We're now remembering all that work with harvesting beets, but just now we're doing the corn here, and that is a different kind of work. We wear special leather sleeves for that, and have a special hook which we use to peel off the husk and break off the ear and send it flying into the wagon. We also have a rented farm in town, so that should be nice, the fields are spread out around the town and the house is on the edge of the town of Colome. We only lack money for livestock, because there are 260 acres of cultivated land and 60 acres of pasture, and another whole quarter could be used as pasture, i. e., we have another 160 acres of meadowland. Also, all the boys were in Nebraska on October 13 to register, i.e., to annex the new land. We'd have to have money if Vavřín were to win, but we still don't know if he will. Next year there will be more annexations here in Dakota, so he will go there again. People here can still help themselves to tracts of land. Everyone personally has himself registered and then a little boy or girl draws one lot after another and gives them to those appointed people. They open the tickets and the one whose name is written there wins. So once again we ask you not to listen to people in this matter, not even Mama Krenovska, and as soon as you get this letter tell us how it stands with selling the property—we did have news from you that some buyers were showing interest even before we sent off the authorization. Don't be too concerned about the money, uncle, that's not the deciding factor here, because as I already pointed out we are losing through the purchase of that cattle. We figure that we should have some definite news from you within a month, because then it will be high time, I don't know what we would do then, because now livestock is being sold so that it's very cheap and that will last into the New Year. Then we would have to pay so much again to get it back. I hope that you will meet our requests.

Vavřín and Marie Střítecký's farm, northwest of Colome, South Dakota

Greetings to Grandpa Pouchlý and family, the Nováks, the Hlaváčes and especially to all of you from your former neighbor.

Marie Střítecká

Also greetings from Růže to Mařenka, Staníček, František, Jeník, Žofinka, Lojzinka and she sends everyone many kisses. She is very happy. We go visiting and she is happy that she has a nice horse. I'm already learning to ride, for the time being I'm riding a mule — I'm still afraid of the horse, but that will come later.

Dear ones,

Heartfelt greetings to all of you; please don't be angry that I write so little — I leave all the writing to my wife, and she has already written you how we think, so it's just a matter of whether you'll be able to comply with that soon. So far we are doing well, and if God will give us (continued) good health, the Lord of all the earth, but so far we have been doing better here than in Europe. It was very difficult for me 10 months ago when I parted with my dear homeland, but in that short time a person forgets, as they say — out of sight, out of mind — and we are growing accustomed to this wild America and we want to make a new homeland for ourselves here. So, uncle, I ask you, take care of that (business) as

best you can and quickly, so that you won't have troubles with it and we either. Heartfelt greetings to Novák, Hlaváč; to Valdimír Ludvík, Robeš Janek, Jan Přerovský and those cousins of mine as well. Give my best to Grandpa Pouchlý, and to Přikrý. More this winter.

[Vavřín Střítecký]

Dear ones,

I am sending this letter to you with heartfelt greetings. I always look forward to Saturday, because we ride into town to see if we don't have any letters waiting for us there. And someone always remembers us and I am very glad of that. We believe what you say about the sale of our property, because I know myself how that goes; that the sale will not be made until the harvest, that we know, because I think you are constantly going to have to be concerned with the crops. But it can be sold after harvest, but we cannot determine the price for you; however, you have heard what they were offering me for it, so judge by that—the more it brings, the better for us. We are leaving it completely up to you, uncle, because we know that you understand these things and that you will want to get the highest price. Vavřín said that if you get a buyer other than Florián, you should sell it for a hundred less. But if there isn't any other buyer, Vavřín says Florián should add some to the sum he had proposed to me. We will also send you an authorization either with this letter or directly after it. And then, when and if it sells, should you want or need a witness, tell uncle Horáček from Křenovice, I have already written to him about it. We don't want to push you, but we would be glad if it could be done by winter, so we could buy something here. And then too, here there are sales on everything, livestock and farming machinery, where we can get everything and much more cheaply, because the farmers are moving someplace else and are selling everything. We want to buy about six to eight cows, because that pays off, you can make your livelihood from that.

Now we have two cows, both of which have calved. We have a centrifuge and so I churn butter, this week I made six and a half kilograms, but here it is cheap, one pound for twenty cents. (One pound is just shy of a half-kilogram.) But back home the cows don't have so much cream. Whenever I churn butter, I am amazed at what kind of butter comes out, if I had had such butter back home, what money I could have earned! But then there it costs less to sup-

port yourself, so it comes out about the same. I have to tell you something about how grazing is managed here, you can't imagine how it's done. First of all consider that that one 160 acre tract is comparable in size to all those claypits including the pasture land up to the cross near the road to Zbejsov. Now about 20 to 30 acres are used for grazing, and there the livestock grazes all summer, and it is surrounded by barbed wire so they can't go any farther. The hayfield is separate; the livestock can't go there. When the corn comes in, the livestock will graze there and they spend all summer and all winter outside, here that is the custom, so they aren't cold. The cows are with calf as at home and usually calve in the spring, so the calves usually are full-grown by winter. Here calves are not sold and young heifers cannot even be sold for slaughter. I wish you could see how it is here. I was afraid before we got our first calf and wanted Vavřín to go to the cow and help her. But he didn't want to, so that the cow would not be frightened. So she calved outside, and it didn't even last an hour, the cow was already leading the calf out to the pasture, it was still wet, got up on its two front legs and was already drinking. It is really peculiar how resilient the livestock is here. But here a calf drinks from its mother for only one or two days and then it is led off to the stable, where it is given as much milk as it wants. That's because it would otherwise suck on its mother constantly, even when it should already be weaned, and the cow would kick it when it approached her. I thought I had already written you about the corn. The grass is also growing, but they don't worry themselves about that in America. The corn has good soil, in a short time it will outgrow the grass and it's "olrajt" [Czech rendering of "all right"—Trans.], that is to say, it's okay; I'm already writing like an American. It's ploughed over one or two times and then it's left until the crop is harvested. When it is cut, then it is so dry that only the ears are harvested, without the stalks, that is left completely. And then it is either sold immediately or hauled off to be stored in piles. For this we have bought a round sort of wire that is very tall, into which the ears of corn are thrown. These piles are then covered with hay on top and then the corn stays good all winter. They don't shuck corn here before it's sold; the whole ear is sold as is. A lot of corn is raised here. They make flour and spirits out of it and any number of other things. But it is completely different from the corn back home; it is similar to Hungarian corn.

Harvest time has already come here, they are already cutting rye and wheat, there isn't any barley here and the oats are still green. On Saturday we drove into town, where they were cutting

rye, so we watched them do it. They cut it with a machine that also bound the barley, it would turn out about five sheaves at a time, one person put these into piles and then all that was left was a field full of stubble. That's the American way of doing things. Vavřín said that you have to uproot some apple trees in the garden and give them to Grandpa Pouchlý. And I wrote to mother in Křenovice that she should go there and take for herself whatever is there. Also, in case Mr. Přerovský wants that oven, sell it to him, and if not, then let mama take it back to Křenovice. We are giving mother Střítecká 3,000 crowns. She will keep 2,000 and give 1,000 to the boys. Vavřín and I just agreed that the property could bring in 500 crowns measure for measure and the house 8,000. I am writing that it *could*, whether it will or not we don't know; this, uncle, you alone will know. You know better than we what debts we may have and where, and you also will understand how to carry out the sale. You will have plenty of difficulty with it, but I think that you won't be offended when I tell you that we don't want to give it away. We will gladly compensate you for everything, only when I didn't have to sell it until now, when I have tried to [*sic*]. I am already getting used to life here, I am happy and very pleased with this farm of ours. Our sows now have nine piglets and two of them are about to farrow. Also, we have one new horse. We are doing well and hope that God will give us continued good health. I still have to tell you about the biggest American holiday. It's the fourth of July, that is Freedom day, on the calendar it's called Independence day. On that day no one is allowed to do anything, and everywhere there is singing and merrymaking. Things are pretty merry here, too, but, I think, different than back home. When we come back sometime I will tell you about everything. Here, these farmers are not so overworked as back home, and particularly their wives. Whether it's a Sunday or a weekday, they always ride around dressed like ladies, on excursions or into town. We are already getting used to going on visits, too. Nobody goes anywhere on foot here at all, everybody drives or is driven. Our farm is near the road, and there are always buggies driving on it, I haven't seen anyone *walking* by yet. So what are you all up to? Are you all healthy? Greet the Nováks and the Hlaváčes for us, Grandpa Pouchlý's family, Mr. Přikrý's family; all of us and Jeník send our best.

the Střítecký s

P.S. — A big kiss from Růženka for the children. Auntie, I could tell you so many things, but that can't be, so sometime else. Greet my

aunt U. for me and write me whether that neighbor of yours is healthy.

May 3, 1922

Dear friends,

You are probably wondering what has happened to us, since we haven't written you in such a long time. I keep putting off writing, and there's so much commotion with the children, and in the evening often I just don't have any motivation to write. For me to write you what is new here wouldn't interest you, because you don't know the people here and nothing in particular has happened, only that we have had another little girl, Zdenička, who is seven months old. Jeník also has three girls, but Josef has no children. Thank God we all have our health and that's probably the main thing, because if a person had everything except health, what good would everything be to him? Of course, we're not swimming in wealth, but we're not ruined, either; we farmers have taken a jolt, because the price of everything has fallen horribly, but only of our produce. What we have bought has maintained its value; the capitalists are afraid to let the farmers get too rich. Plenty of farmers have lost everything they had worked for for many years, because here peo-

The Fourth of July celebration was a big event in the prairie towns of South Dakota in the early twentieth century. In 1916, Winner, which is eleven miles northwest of Colome, drew a big crowd for its Independence Day festivities.

ple move from place to place and for example in one state a farmer will sell and in another he'll buy pretty expensively and in that way will bring heavy debts on himself. And then everything that he has cultivated turns out to be cheap and he has had a lot of interest to pay, and he is close to the end. I say that this is a country where the people only chase after that almighty dollar and anyone who comes here sees that right away. We have already gotten somewhat used to it, but in the beginning it was repulsive. You understand, we are not insulting America, because here, more often than not, each person can help himself. But when Bohaš had brought back enough money from there [America] for himself and then complained that he didn't like it here, it is just possible that he wouldn't have done as well there during those years as here. Aunt, write us how everyone is getting along, they don't write us, for no reason they got angry with us and don't write anymore. I don't think I have written you since the time you received that package, have I? In fact I wrote you a letter at the same time as we sent the package, but you probably didn't get it. It's really a shame that that silk was lost. I was in Omaha, and so I chose some really nice heavy silk and included about five spools of silk thread and packed it all in the middle of that package but even so they found it there. Well, that's gone for good.

And what are you doing, dear ones? I don't think we would even recognize those children of yours. After all, we have been here nine years already and in that time things change a lot. For example, our Růže, she was 2½ years old (when we left) and soon she'll be as big as I am. What's the news from Nováks and Hlaváčes? Greet them for us, we think of everyone very often. What is Francka Prerovská doing these days? When you write us, tell us how many children they have and whether she is still so prudent? Any news interests us all tremendously, if only you will write us, because we know these people and then our memories fly over there to you and we can imagine everything as vividly as if we lived next door to you. How are your neighbors? Haven't they sold that yet? It's annoying when neighbors have to quarrel! Why didn't Bohaš buy it? Will they build themselves a bigger one? We don't know at all whether they are already building, and whether the inn has been sold. They probably were counting on leaving it to Josef, but they will wait in vain, because Josef is never coming back. We might be there earlier, but they won't be back so soon, because we aren't going to sell the farm now, because farms are cheap now. So we will wait for a while, and also let conditions back home improve. Now people are always going back home and then,

when they find they don't like it there because they can't get used to the conditions there again, they come back to America and completely forget about Czechoslovakia. But I'm telling the truth when I write that anyone who spends an extended period of time here has trouble getting used to Czechoslovakia, because every immigrant has it much better here, many of them are even prosperous, as opposed to the homeland. But we haven't been estranged from the homeland here, on the contrary, we keep reminiscing about it more and more, because social life here is not very lively, but even so we can't just come back without a second thought until we know how things will be in the future. Not everyone has the good fortune that Bohaš has, but we don't envy him, on the contrary we wish them all the best. So our dear ones, write us again and send lots of news from Šaratice. I am also writing to carpenter Pouchlý's family, if the letter doesn't get lost again. So, many greetings to your whole family from all of us.

Your former neighbors,

Vavřín and Marie Střítecký

Our address is: Lawrence Střítecký
Colome, Tripp County
Box 80, R. 4
S. Dakota USA or North America

Dear friends,

We have already gotten the second letter from you, so we must write you back right away. Thank you, Aunt, for the news from Šaratice. That all interests us very much, but you haven't written anything about Bohumil for a long time. But we would really like to know how he is doing, don't say anything about this, I don't like to make things public. You know that he bought a farm here together with Josef. Bohumil put in 9 thousand dollars and Josef put in 2 thousand and owes the rest. The debt is in Josef's name. Now Bohumil keep writing Josef for money and here we have had bad harvests the last three years, especially last year it was so dry that some people didn't harvest a thing. So Josef even in best faith can't send him anything. Bohumil probably got into debt and then the buildings have cost him money and now he is thinking that he has money in America and he wants it. But he won't get the money so soon, because it looks like it's going to be another bad year, it hasn't snowed or rained all winter, so we're afraid that there will

be another drought. Bohumil shouldn't have bought that. He thought he would make some money off of it, and as soon as they left the price of land fell and now because of the drought he couldn't even sell it. You just can't imagine how it is here, but you know, this is a migratory people, when there is a drought in one state or someone is doing badly,—so what, he'll say, I'll move on, he'll just leave it and go, we often hear someone say—"I have a farm at such and such a place." We don't care to migrate, however, we'll probably wait for better times. Last year we did harvest

Vavřín and Marie Střítecký and their four daughters: Růži (Rose) is standing behind her parents; Mařenka (Marie) is left of her father; Zdeničcka (Sedonia) stands between her parents; and Mildred is on the right.

something, we have a field that has been worked, it is sandy so it holds the moisture, so we had grain and corn. The other day we slaughtered a pig, so Grandpa Kyselka was here with Josef. Grandpa is still a jolly fellow, he still likes horses, he carries them oats so that Josef doesn't see him and only says that neither Josef nor his boys are horsemen, that they don't appreciate horses. You see, the boys like the car more than the horses and grandpa gets angry. He is 78 years old, but everyone takes him for much younger. In time

Josef is going to look older than he. Josef has lost almost all of his hair. After all, we are getting older, we all have a gray hair here and there and so does Vavřín. So what are you doing, dear ones? Uncle, how soon will you be inviting us to Jeník's wedding? And what about Žofi, is she still single and is Jenofka still at home? And the Novák's children? Are they already grown up, too? Our Růže is studying and I don't know about Marie, whether she will go, too, or not, they all want to go to college, and father and I only want to work. Jeník has three girls and one boy. Aunt, about that Horačka, that son of theirs could give you that money, but if in fact they didn't want to, I am not going to write them, it's not all that much money. We gave 3 dollars, that is 90 Czech crowns. I myself got mad at that Horák, when for a long time I didn't write him back and then he wrote us to send an affadavit to Canada; well, do *we* live up there? I wrote him that the one he had should be sufficient because I asked about it and he didn't even answer. We did what we could, no one could do more, because when the quota is filled, no more are permitted to enter, and he is probably very angry. Greetings to you all from our entire family. Also to Nováks and Růže and her family. Your former neighbor,

Marie Střítecká

Dear friends,

First of all, greetings from all of us and best wishes for the New Year. Once again I must inform you that we are still on earth, although sometimes it seems to me to be somewhere on the very edge. Why don't you write us? You are already forgetting, only I do remember and at least from time to time write something. I am sending you likenesses of our children which Růže took with her camera. And in the picture that has the cattle you will find Vavřín on the hay and I am standing there, this is how livestock is fed here and also pigs, but we have already sold a wagonful of cattle and 40 hogs, though we still have upwards of 30 left.

And what are you all up to, dear ones? How are your children? Write us soon, we are interested in everything, but hardly anyone writes us, everyone is forgetting about us, only I still remember my homeland and all the dear ones there. I am writing nine letters today, so this must be brief.

Greetings to you all, to Nováks, to Růže and her husband from

Vavřín and Marie Střítecký

The children also say hello!

As described in the letter, this picture shows Vavřín on the hay and Marie by the cattle on their farm in South Dakota.

March 4, 1923

Dear ones,

We have received your letter, Auntie, and I am answering it right away. I really don't know how best to advise you on this matter with Horák. We can't pay his way for him, even if he sent the money here, because in the event that he was not permitted to enter the country the money would be lost. I am warning you now, and tell or read this letter to Horáks, so that they know how strict conditions are here now. Perhaps you know that now only 3½% are admitted, so he couldn't come now, not until June, because Czechoslovakia has already used up its percentage—I think it was as early as September—so they won't start coming again until June. And now no one can leave secretly, as for example our husbands did. You have to have all your papers in order and you must personally apply for a passport from the consulate in Prague But you probably already know all of that better than we do. But we *could* send him a document in which we made a guarantee for him that he won't be a burden to the United States government, but again we don't know if it might not be a detriment that he is not living with his wife and that he wants to leave her, because Jeník sent that same document here to a certain Rolek from Němčany, that is their proprietor, and there everything was written out, even where he had been married. So you should write us whether he's going to make himself out to be single or married and is coming to America alone. Won't his wife want to prosecute him for

leaving? So write us about everything and in case he is going to claim to be married, write us what his wife's maiden name was and where they were married, and then whether he wants to come for sure, so that we don't send these things for nothing. If he wanted to come to us, we would take him in as an acquaintance and would also advise him. If it seemed too far for him to come to us and he went together with someone, then he could probably get along in a big city, perhaps New York or Chicago. Then he could do as he pleased, but if he doesn't have anyone here and if he wanted to come to us, I think that would be fine, because anyone who wants to earn money and is not afraid of work won't perish here and could save more money than in a big city. So tell them that and they must take care of the rest. Also, everyone has to have permission from the military offices, I think, because Hugo Hrozdira had to go to the recruitment office and since he was unfit for service he could leave the country. But uncle will probably know about that better than we here. I just remembered that I read that they want workers to be admitted to the country even now, I'll have to ask about that, and if that's true, and he could come, then we should let him know, so I will write you. How is your winter there? We've hardly had any snow, only the wind blows and soon we will sow grain. I am also sending you [a picture of] our farm, only it's a photograph taken when the trees had already lost their leaves, so it's rather sad. And it was cold that day, even the pigs aren't outside and the cattle grazed somewhere else, so they aren't visible. So, greetings from all of us and I will let you know what we can do for him, when we get an answer from you.

Greetings,

Vavřín and Marie Střítecký

—In the picture, the little girl standing in front of Hedvika is theirs and the rest are ours. Vavřín wasn't at home, so he isn't in the picture.

December 10, 1923

Dear ones,

First of all we wish you a happy and merry Christmas and New Year; may you spend the holidays in good health. I have to write you about that field. Bohumil hasn't answered us at all, so don't rely on him, and Monek Kupelka writes that he thinks that that marl is only three measures, and it seems that would be too much

[money — Trans.] for it so he isn't going to buy. It's necessary to sell it now, in the winter. Maybe Honzík Novák would take it, at least he wouldn't have problems with it, on account of all the fertilizer. Again, we would sell it for less, just to have it sold. You must determine the price yourselves, because we don't know what conditions are like there. We also need the money, and the taxes are high there, so anyway nothing will be left over and we won't be coming back. Believe me, we have already lost the habit of working on such small parcels of land. Not that we *wouldn't* work on them here, but it's done otherwise here, with large fields. Please write, uncle, whether you have sent the money or not, so that neither the letter nor the money-order gets lost. Maybe it will already be on the way before you get this letter, in which case forgive me for writing about it.

What are you all up to, dear ones? It's probably already winter there; we have just wound up the work here, we had quite a bit of corn, about 125 acres of it, so the hired-hands have been harvesting it, and today we crumbled [*sic*] it (how should I write that — well, shucked it, but with a machine). And then six or seven wagons are used to carry it away. I think, dear ones, that it would really be interesting for you to come here for a while. At least send Jeník over so he can travel and get some experience, I think he would really like it here. But maybe he had just better not even get acquainted with this promised land, because then he wouldn't be at peace anywhere. We often think that ourselves and we remember the homeland, but we know that everything there would seem strange to us if we were to come back now. But sometimes we think that our only true motherland is there, and that this here is only our step-mother. But for the sake of the children one must get used to things, because when you consider things on the whole, it's really better here for us and the children especially. I think that Bohumil won't be able to get America out of his head. But I'm just chattering away, possibly this doesn't even interest you. There is nothing new here that would interest you, only that Josef has had a little boy, he makes jokes about bringing up children in his old age; he already has a nicely bald pate and what few hairs are left are gray. Well, you, we are all growing old, the children are growing up and we are turning gray. When we come back to take a look at things, we'll tell you all about everything.

Lots of greetings to your entire family and all of your children.

Yours,

Marie Střítecká

Greetings from Vavřín, I can't get him to write, so I have to write myself.

January 16, 1925

Dear friends,

Today we received a letter from you and I am writing back immediately, because it takes a long time for these letters to be exchanged. Uncle, you put the blame for everything only on Mařka [Marie Střítecký's sister], as though I were angry, but I really don't have any bad intentions. But you know, at times there is a need for money, too, so perhaps I remembered that if only that money from home were already here, but even so that won't amount to much when it comes, but we are not holding anything against you, uncle, since that's the way it had to be. I have just been writing Bohumil that if he wants to do it for that debt that Jeník is supposed to give him, he wouldn't write anymore but go ahead and purchase it right away [?]. He will come see you, but if there will be any expenses with that, he should also take care of them, because we are not going to send any more money there. That should come to more than 4,000 crowns for that debt and the expenses. But if he tells you that he doesn't want it, then please, sell it to someone who will pay well for it. Understand, things aren't bad here, but those dollars are hard to get sometimes. The situation has already improved here a little bit, the prices are a little higher, but they really could be even better. Corn is a dollar a bushel, that is, 60 pounds (30 kg.), so it's quite a bit more expensive than at home. We have sold about 800 bushels of it and are feeding more than 70 hogs and 9 head of cattle. In the fall we put out a wagon-load of about 25-30 bushels for them everyday. Now [Vavřín] has sold 30 hogs already, but there are still a lot left to fatten up. So auntie is feeding the ducks day and night? Ha, ha, ha, that already seems strange to me, before Christmas I killed some ducks, turkey-hens, and chickens, hadn't force-fed them at all, and they brought a fine price. They don't force-feed poultry here (it's not allowed, they say, it's a kind of tyranny!), but the birds help themselves to piles of corn, so they fatten up. So, uncle, why don't you just fly on over on an airplane, we'll be able to talk and we'll drive you all around in the car, because in the summer we drive more than 30 miles to go to the society.[41]

Grandpa Kyselka is healthy and has a good appetite, so good it's amazing. Josef made some sausages and put up several entire

41. The "society" is probably one of the Czech fraternal organizations.

cows, and grandpa eats his sausages all day. "Oh, vats de use, I'm not gut for anysink any more, but death, giff me at least four or two more years here!" That's what he says, but he used to say the same thing right after we came here, too, and now each time he adds two years, he's chubby and in a short time he'll be younger than even Josef. Well, I've written you enough about that, thank you for the letter and news, all of it is interesting to us, and secondly, auntie, you write too, you're probably not going to be feeding the ducks *all* the time. This week I preserved some meat and a side of beef and next week we're going to slaughter some more of the bigger hogs, so again there will be plenty of work. Greetings to all of you and to your children,

from your former neighbor,

Marie Střítecká

April 25, [1928?]

Dear auntie,

Finally I'm getting around to writing back to you. I kept putting it off, and now I'm ashamed that I haven't written for so long. And you always write us at length about everything that happens there, for which we really are very thankful. Klensi wrote the Lojsi Pouchlý got married, but she didn't say to whom. What about your Žofi, does she still not want to get married? And what about Janda? I'm waiting for the time to come (soon!) when you'll invite us back for the wedding. Uncle promised us that, but now it seems that he is angry with us, so that we have to send your letter care of Anna Novák. Be that as it may, I always have the very best memories of you, and Vavřín does too. You were always good neighbors to us and you did more for us than our own family. Auntie, write me about Mařenka and Benynka. I never wanted to mention it, I know that it would have rent your heart but when you write of it yourself, then I can mention it, too. You are right, Mařenka was too good for this world, she was the nicest girl I ever knew. Even now I can see her before my very eyes, the way she always would greet me in the morning when I came outside: "God grant you a good day, ma'am!", and I would laugh and Beny would too. That fellow didn't deserve her at all and didn't know what a treasure he had, she cried so much the morning of her wedding day, as if she sensed what she would have to endure, and then she had to leave two children here and depart. God grant them peace. Hlaváč doesn't have any feelings at all, you know he always was

and is an egotist. I'm so sorry for you, auntie, only mother suffers the most on account of the children and will never forget them. But you have other children and you must comfort yourself with that fact. Vavřín sends his best to H. Novák and hopes that he gets well soon. I also send my greetings.

You asked about our children. Růži still isn't thinking of marriage, she won't be 18 until August, then she'll graduate from high school and could go somewhere, maybe to work in a store, or to work as a teacher, or to work in the post office or someplace else. But we would prefer to have her at home. So I don't know what she will do. I'm sending you a picture of her. The second, Mařenka, also is already bigger than me, and is already into her first year of high school. We are doing fine, there is plenty of work and cares, but we are also all healthy and that's the most important thing. That fellow Horák is here, he got all the way here and we didn't even know about it. I don't know if you know him well or not, but we don't think that there is much to him. He didn't even tell us that he got married again; he was out somewhere with Vavřín and a letter came with our address. Well, I opened it and did that ever open my eyes! It was from his wife, who blamed him for having left her and us for having taken a husband away from his wife and a son away from his parents and she certainly read us off. I gave the letter to him and was angry, because we didn't lure him here, and then he told us the whole story, about what he had done in Brno, that he had been in jail for five or seven months and was so angry with his wife that he could not be with her, and that he also had a [restriction of some kind—Trans.] so that there was nowhere he could go and nothing he could do, and so he came here. We don't know what is between them, but if he left his young wife without any hope of getting her over here quickly, then what will become of them both? If he were to put in for citizenship right away, he could get it after five years and at that it is questionable whether he would get it. Now the authorities are very strict, a person has to know English and answer such questions as people born here don't even know the answers to. And what will become of the two of them if they are separated. Now she is constantly writing to him, asking him to return home, saying that everything will be all right, but he probably won't go back and she won't be able to come here very soon. Jaroslav Matula has settled in Colome, if you remember him. He is now running a butcher's trade. But how long he'll be there, I don't know. He doesn't know awfully much about the butcher business, although he boasts quite a bit. And as you know, they had a factory in Brno, so he got unused to working and here is learning how to

work again. Perhaps he was discontent with something back home, now he thinks most highly of America. Some people wrongly imagine what America is like, they think that you can gather up dollars with shovels, but such people will be disappointed. It's no longer as it used to be, America doesn't want any immigrants, and well knows why not. Land isn't going to be for free as it was before. We have been here 15 years and haven't yet gotten anything for nothing. We paid 12 thousand dollars for the farm and everything we have beyond that we have had to work for. Bohumil was unusually lucky to be able to bring so much money back home. He bought cheaply and then right away earned twice as much. And that woman who bought it from him has it to this day and can't sell it, because land is never again going to bring the same price that it did after the war. In town there are a lot of people without jobs and especially if they don't know the language they'll never get a footing. We wrote to Hrazdir right away, but they couldn't find anything for Horák. So, auntie, please don't say anything to Mrs. Horák, but it's possible that Horák is already sorry he came here; however, he won't admit it, but you can see it in him. Whoever is earning a decent living in Czechoslovakia should not even consider coming to America. We are quite satisfied here, especially Vavřín and the children; only I sometimes feel very sad that I will never see Mama again. And you know how much I liked her. When I was in Šaratice, I had to go there when I felt lonely and in no time at all I went back home and felt much happier. What to do? That's fate, but Vavřín is so good and the children, too, so I have to accept things as they are. Grandpa Kyselka is still alive. He *is* quite deaf and you can see the signs of age on him, but he has a good appetite, better than the youngsters. I haven't seen him in a long time. We don't go there, but I will write you why another time. Write again, auntie, and greet everyone for us, especially uncle, I hope he is not angry that I have asked him.

Greetings to the whole family,

Marie Střítecká

Congratulations to the Martinůs on their boy.

September 14, 1931

Dear friends,

I am still waiting for news from you. After all, I know that I wrote last, although that was a year ago. It will soon be a year since

our dear mother's death, yet I still wait and wait for a letter from her. It just seems to me that it can't be true that she is no longer and that I won't be getting those letters that meant everything to me. It is very hard for me, but I must reconcile myself to it; I think of you, especially you, aunt, because a mother's heart feels most deeply what pain you must have felt after having lost two daughters. But life goes on, nothing can be done, even if one's heart would like to break. Yesterday Grandpa was here, Hedvik's father. He is already senile, but even so he came to look at the horses and his memory is still there, he remembers everything about the fairs he has been to and how much he paid for horses there. Often he has a good appetite, but sometimes he fares poorly, I don't think he will live much longer, but he reads and trots down the road a piece to see if the horses have enough water. How are you doing, dear one, on the reserved portion? I hope you will be able to use it for a long time to come. Auntie, please write to me, now that I have lost my mother and I always liked you so much, so at least sometimes let us hear something from you. Now we don't know anything about Saratice. Mojmír wrote to us, but about what? All he wanted was money from Josef. And what does that have to do with us? And so I had to write him more or less just that and he stopped writing. He won't understand that Bohumil didn't lend anything to Josef, that they bought that in partnership, that property has fallen, that it's "not worth a dime" (has no value), that even that money is gone. And even worse times have come here. As they probably have back home, too, everything is cheap, and if only something were left, but perhaps you have read about this in the newspapers, the grasshoppers have destroyed everything here, everything is lost. You've never seen such havoc as they've wrought here, they have devoured everything to the roots, in places there isn't even a single blade of grass left, and this is already the second year of it and they are predicting a third. People are on the edge of ruin, because there had been a drought for several years before this and now such a calamity. In one way or another things are bad in the whole world. In the cities people are out of work, hunger and famine are predicted—in the rural areas it won't be so bad, but even so it's serious. Well, I won't keep on about it, everyone has heard plenty about that. What are your children doing? And uncle, how are you? Write, I am always glad to hear from you, it makes me sad when no one writes us from our old homeland. My sisters write to me, but they have also had some misunderstandings there about the inheritance and I don't like that. Everyone is chasing after that ill-fated money, then their time will come and they won't

be able to take it with them. I like them all equally well and just today am writing them about how I have fared with my dowry. You know, uncle, that I returned it to mother, and I don't want anything from them [from the inheritance — Trans.]. Well, everyone is different, I'm not the one to judge that, I don't know what has happened between them or how they get along now. They sent me a photograph of mother's grave, and that's enough for me, in that I have a prized remembrance of our unforgettable mother.

So do write, and aunt, send some news from Šaratice, and about your family. Greetings from all of us to all of you,

Marie Střítecká

This is the fourth long letter I have written now, my hand is starting to ache.

January 13, 1932

Dear friends,

So, I must write you back immediately. Auntie, we got your nice letter and the pictures. You have no idea how nice it is for us to see after so many years the beloved faces of people we know, but if you hadn't written whose faces those are, auntie, then we wouldn't have recognized them. You and uncle are still the same, true, somewhat older, but the appearance is the same. But these young folk, who could recognize them after so many years? We were most surprized at Petromila Florián. She was always so weak and now she had become a stately woman. I could have recognized your girls immediately, except for Žofinka. Jenofka is also stronger. Růži has fine looking children. We would not have recognized the Nováks, but of course they were just children when we left. I had thought that we would come back some time, but as long as the children were little we couldn't and now, believe me, aunt, nothing draws me back there now that my dear mother is gone. I kept waiting for a letter from her, I couldn't bring myself to believe it. As late as that last spring she wrote me that she didn't have any worries, that she didn't have any debts, but that she still wasn't ready to die, that she was doing well. True, we have friends there, I have sisters, but surely you do know how they got angry because of the inheritance. That hurts me a great deal, I voluntarily forfeited my share of it, but if Malča had any feeling she would have offered me something herself. You both know how I fared with my dowry. When we came here I returned nearly the whole

trousseau to mother, and you yourselves know what money mother borrowed from you. I am not reproaching mother, the poor woman struggled all her life in order to leave us at least a little, but Malča, I don't know, I don't want to wrong her, but her, I don't like her behavior. My sisters wrote me about that and finally she did, too, and you know, each one defended her own case. However, after some consideration I wrote Malča that she should be ashamed. Now they are quarreling over that little clod of land that mother saved from that entire unhappy property. I wrote her that nicely, but since then she hasn't written me. You know, aunt, I wanted some kind of remembrance of my mother, if only a woolen shawl, well, she was willing to give me something, but she said the better ones had already long since been taken by the girls, and so I wrote that I didn't want anything, that I had my best memory of mother in my heart. The girls sent me a picture of the grave and that is enough for me. I don't want to quarrel with them. I am sorry enough that they can't get along with each other. That sort of thing had never happened in our family before, but I think that mother just always evened things out and took them on herself. I don't know Maca, so I don't want to wrong him, he's done nothing against me. Aunt, we got your letter then and I thought that I had written you back and thanked you for it. But I have a lot of writing and maybe forgot. So now something about us: If I were to write you about our worries, then that would be a whole letter of lamentations. But things are like that in America, there's no money, no work, in the cities people are hungry and we, if we have something to sell, sell it for next to nothing. But we're not starving and so far we are still healthy, so I won't complain anymore. According to the newspapers it's the same way in the whole world. Our Růži is still single, she is 21 years old. She is going with a boy, he is a farmer, very nice, but you know, she has finished school, takes care of accounts in the store, so she doesn't want to get married yet and he probably still wants to stay home, too. His mother is a widow, they have several farms, there are three boys, but their farm is doing well, and he is also 21 years old, so they still have plenty of time. Mařenka is 18 years old, this year she is staying at home but in a year she will leave for college. As soon as possible we will send pictures.

Josef's family: they are healthy, grandfather is already going downhill fast, he is 84 years old, but he still putters around outside and has to at least go and check whether the horses have been given their oats. Stáňa is also going with a girl, but I don't know when the wedding will be. Toník was in the service, he volunteered

and this year he will return. Then there is Boženka (14 years old) and Josífek (4 years old). Josef is bald, but quite active, he goes around to do people's slaughtering in order to pass the time.

Jeník has five children, 4 girls and one boy. He is doing well, he's fat, his farm is nicely set up and he is satisfied. The oldest girl is 14 years old and the youngest is 4 years old. That Honzík Robeš has finally finished it. She is probably the one who managed it. So will they take from them that villa that they had built? What is Mr. Přikrý doing? And Růža? We heard that she got married, is that true?

Write us again, everything interests us, that is our native country and here, although there are a lot of Czechs here and Czech get-togethers, even so it always seems to us that things were better there. Our children probably would not get used to things there again. They like it here, they couldn't be without a car and the pastimes and language here appeal to them more. All of our children can speak Czech well, the older ones know how to read and write, I taught them how, but when they speak together, then it's only in English, they have been educated that way, so I am not surprised, it's easier for them. But they will never lose their heritage, it is already in their blood, they both act out Czech plays, and if they get married, then it will have to be to Czechs. So, I have scribbled this all out to you. I nag at Vavřín to write you, but what's the use, he reads and reads, but won't write, and he says that I can write you. We have a fellow here who helps him tend to and milk the cows (here the men do most of the milking, but we help them a little) and then when they have been taken care of, they sit and listen to the radio. We have a big radio, and we get stations from a long way off.

Well, now I'll finish this letter. Greetings to all of your family and to Jenofka and to both of you from

Marie and Vavřín Střítecký

March 22, 1933

Dear ones,

We got your nice letter and thank you for it. We went to see Josef, so I took the letter along and read it to them and they also thank you and send their best. And Grandfather specially instructed me to send you his greetings. He is not doing so well, he is also deaf, so I had to shout into his ear – the others nearly died, but he immediately knew who was how old. I think he is 83 years old,

but he still gets around. You know, he is afraid to lie down, he thinks he might die and that is probably how it will be, that when he lies down sometime, he just won't get back up. He did well here, he has his own sitting room now in his old age, but you know, even that doesn't suit him. As you know, Josef's boy Toník enlisted in the service for four years, and now he was supposed to come back home; but he wrote that he enlisted for another two years and now they have gotten news from him that he got married, he is in California and his wife is a nurse, but she is English. That's how it is, once you go abroad you lose your ties, perhaps she is a fine woman. And it's only a matter of time, because our children's children will already be Englishmen [*sic*]. Our girls have Czech fiances, so I don't know what will happen later. Stáňa is also seeing a Czech girl. Like our girls, he is waiting for the new president to set conditions aright until he gets married, too. Have you perhaps read about how they killed our great Czech, the mayor of Chicago, Čermák? It's a great pity about him, he could have done a lot of good here still. He had a funeral such as America will not forget. I am sending you a newspaper clipping, but that is only about the graveside services. The procession was 7 kilometers long, up to 50 thousand people took part in it and 1½ million people looked on from the sidewalks. We are proud, we American Czechs, that that was our man who was never ashamed to proclaim his Czech background.

So we have a new government and all of America is waiting anxiously to see what it will do for the people. The former president was a millionaire who didn't take any pains about the people, he only saw to it that he filled up his own pocket. The farmers are all without exception on the verge of ruin and the workers are starving. Things are already starting to take a turn, so we have hopes for better times. So I have gotten involved in politics and maybe that doesn't even interest you. But I don't even know what to write about us. We are all healthy except for an occasional cold. The girls are growing up, the two oldest ones will probably leave us soon. The youngest, Zdenička, is 11½ years old. We still have to send you pictures this year, so that you can see us. Spring is already coming here, people already have something again, but here it comes later than back home. I have already been setting the hens to hatch. In the incubator and with the hens I have 500 eggs, so I don't know what luck I will have with that. The chickens stood the winter nicely, now we collect 100 to 130 eggs daily. But they are cheap—a dozen eggs for eight cents, that is 2 crowns 30 hellers.

We are milking 13 cows, but we are going to milk even more. We have 43 piglets and will get one more hog. So we have plenty of work at home. You know, cows are put inside here in the winter only for the night, in the summer they graze and in the winter we feed them in their enclosures. So we couldn't feed them as they do back home, but cows are milked quite a lot here. Now we have two old ones that have calved and each one gives about 12 liters in the morning and in the evening also (here we milk twice a day). Well, so now I have again written you something about our farming, but I don't know if you'll find it interesting. After so many years here I have forgotten how it is done there. So just remember to write us, aunt, and write us all the news, you have no idea how interesting we find all of it. Grandfather would like to know whether a certain Prerovský is still alive, because that is one of his contemporaries. I would like to know if Hlaváč is still with his wife. Somehow it seems to us that someone wrote us that he had left her, but we don't know that for certain. And what about your goddaughter, Francka Přerovský, has she already married off her daughters? And how is she and what is she doing? So I am bothering you with all of this, but it will be nice if you write to us about it. My sister from Ostrava writes us all the news from Křenovice, she is best able to. I don't know why they don't like Maca, I don't know him and can't say anything about him. Malča hadn't written for some time until I wrote her asking how things were with her and whether she was angry, and she wrote back saying she had no reason to be angry. You know, aunt, I scolded her a bit about our mother having to work so hard on account of those fields that were in hock and being able to save only the one and the fact that they are quarreling over it. It seems somehow strange to me that they can't reconcile themselves over that little bit of land, here they would have hundreds of acres either rented or cheaply purchased. Of course there things are different, but we never used to argue and Malča probably has that from him. Well, I can get along with all of them, because the big pond is separating us. So, to all of you (that goes for uncle, too) from all of us heartfelt greetings and write us again. When we don't hear from you for very long I keep wondering why you aren't writing, because believe me, I liked both of you most of all from among everybody in Šaratice. You have always stayed by me and I will never forget that.

Yours gratefully,

Marie Střítecká

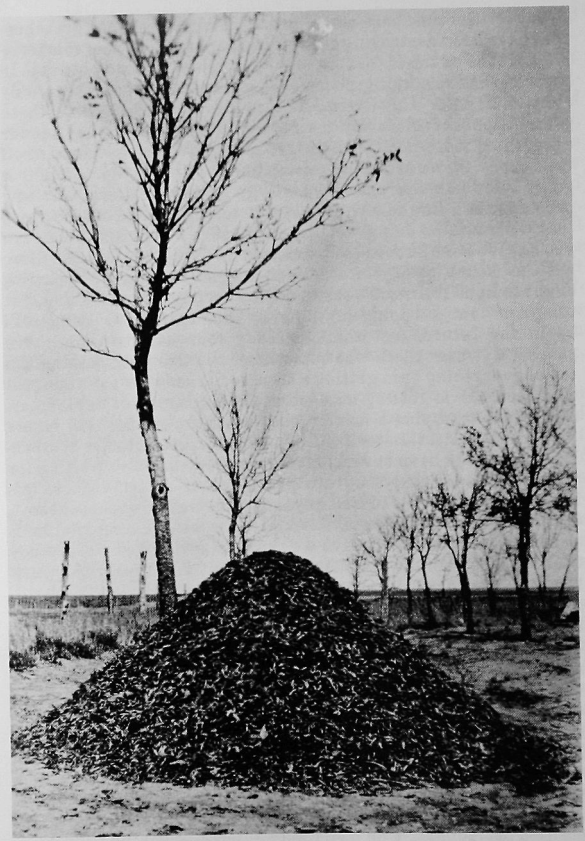
July 31, 1933

Dear ones,

We got your kind letter, aunt, and thank you for it very much. You send us all the news from Saratice and it all interests us greatly. And (each time) we have to tell Josef about everything. And what you wrote for Grandfather Kyselka I wasn't able to tell him, because he too has left to join that great army from which there is no return. He died in June and was 84 years old. He was already quite senile and death was a redemption for him, towards the end he lost his memory, but he was always preparing to return home, he didn't get used to living here, but he was content here until towards the end, when it struck him that this wasn't really his home. He had been ailing since spring, but wasn't confined to bed until the last 14 days, and then he got worse. He had quite a difficult end, he couldn't breathe, but he had a fairly easy death. He breathed his last breath, they didn't even know it until after a while they went back to him and found him no longer breathing. May he rest in peace.

I know, aunt, that I already asked you once about Hlaváč and you wrote back that they weren't living together anymore, but I had thought that then she went back to him and since then had died at such a young age, like Benynka, to this day I can't convince myself that she isn't alive. So young and now dead for such a long time, it's a shame about her, and then again I have to say that she is fortunate to already be spared all earthly cares and sorrows. As our mother! I still have her healthy before my eyes as she was when we parted. But since they wrote that she had died I have sometimes been sorrowful almost to death, she was, believe me, aunt, a dear, good mother. I know that she had plenty of problems with that boy of ours, Jaroslav, as well as with the girls, but she never let a word about it slip to us and she always wrote us pleasant letters. Poor woman, all her life she struggled with want and debts. Until about two years before her death, then she had finally put everything in order, she had no more debts, but she did not want to die yet, not until then was she doing well and then ———, she did not enjoy life for long, death was already lying in wait for her. So Betka is already deceased and Francka is still the same as ever, you know, aunt, that is a woman without any feelings, she didn't have any feelings for her children or for anyone else. Uncle Přerovský was a very good person and I must praise him for remembering Zehnals. When you write, tell me how many children Francka has. What is new with your Jeník? Do they have any little ones yet? Now for something else about us. Dear aunt and uncle, we are experiencing

a very critical time here now. For the last four years the grasshoppers have been destroying everything here and this year it is terrible, because on top of that there is a drought and a bad hot spell. In a word, we have nothing, no harvest, not even a kernel of corn, only a little hay for the livestock. You have no idea what these grasshoppers can do. They destroy everything, trees, they devour everything so it's level with the ground, they even eat the paint off the houses. So we are going to stay here one more year and if it is going to be like this again, we will go somewhere else. Our new president is a fine fellow, he's really taking charge of things, so that we *would* be doing well, but if there is no harvest, what can you do? We have 20 cows, so we can earn a living, but where will we get the money to pay interest and taxes? This time of year we ought to have the most work to do, harvesting and threshing, but this year we aren't doing anything. So I don't know how things will be in the future, just think, already four harvest-times have passed, last year there was something, but this year nothing. On top of everything I am getting a trousseau ready for our youngest daughter, she is getting married at the beginning of September. She is also marrying a farmer, they hope that things will take a turn for the better. Later I will send you pictures. Růži is also seeing a boy, they have several farms, but they are also waiting for better times so that they can put together a farm. Mařenka's boyfriend didn't want to wait any longer, so we had to consent to it, both of them are fine boys. Vavřín laughs when I complain, he is generally good natured, says we're not starving yet. Josef's boy Stáňa is also going to get married soon, but Toník is already married, I don't know if I wrote you about that or not. He was in the service (he volunteered) and he was supposed to come back this year but he wrote that he was enlisting for two more years and that he had gotten married. He married an English girl and they live quite a ways away from here—in California. So the children are all getting married and we grow older, but what can be done about that! I always used to say that we would return to our homeland, but what is there now there? Mother is not there and we have our children here and we have gotten used to things here, so we probably will never return home. Anyway, it's all the same whether you live your life here or there, and here it's definitely easier to make a living. While I am writing this I am looking out the window and thinking that we at least won't go hungry. Several hundred chickens and hens are running around out there, so somehow we will work things out and things will be better. As long as we are healthy and, thank God, we all are. So, aunt, give our best to your children and



In August of 1933, grasshoppers devoured tree bark, leaves, grass, and crops. This pile of dead grasshoppers was raked off a small lawn after a single poisoning.

Grasshoppers also gathered on buildings, where they occasionally ate the paint.

their families and to Uncle, too, and write again. Whenever we get a letter from you I call Hedvika up right away and tell her "we've gotten a letter from Šaratice, come on over!" Mojmír hasn't been writing, how are they doing?

Greetings from all of us,
Marie Střítecká

Write the address the way it is on the envelope, nothing more.

February 13, 1934

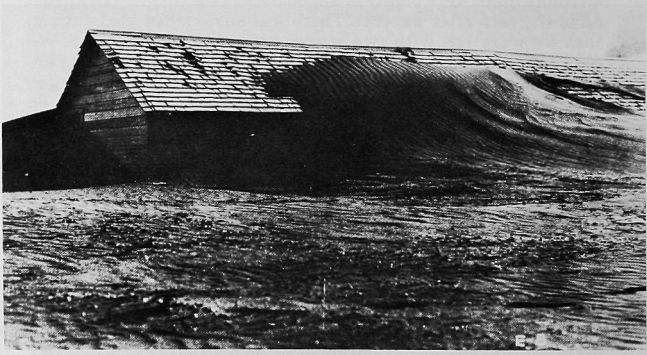
Dear ones,

Yesterday we got a letter from you, aunt, and I am writing back immediately, it makes me very happy that we can always rely on you to send us news from Šaratice. Tell Jenofka that if she wants more pictures we will send them to her. Ruži is going to get married after Easter, so we will take some pictures of our own then. So what to tell you first of all? First, about that wedding. I have to tell you that Mařenka had a civil wedding. You know, that is fairly common here, especially when only one is a Catholic. By the way, he, Josef Křižan, and his parents are very nice and decent. His father is empowered, as a judge, to perform marriages, so he married them, too, at our home. It was touching, the vows were exchanged in Czech. We believe they can be just as happy this way; you know, aunt, although you are an ardent Catholic you look upon everything reasonably. Ruži is going to have a church wedding. Now I will tell you something about the customs here. Weddings are performed in all possible ways here. They drive off somewhere, get married and the whole thing is over. We invited only our closest kin and their relations to the house, but we sent more than 400 invitations to the reception in the evening (here they call it a "ball"). I'm not even going to tell you about all the preparation there was at home, there are all different kinds of cakes, salads and meat left over here, for the ball a small supper is fixed for each guest, hors d'oeuvres, each one gets a "sandwich" (a loaf of white bread about the size of a large cake [*kolac*] is cut in half and meat is put in it), a piece of pie, cake and a cup of coffee. And the guests bring presents. Mařenka got quite a few gifts, everything possible, hand towels, pictures, tablecloths, pots and pans, dishes, a lamp, flatware, two clocks, just everything imaginable, we couldn't even fit everything into the car. But we had plenty of work with that dinner. And now for Ruži's wedding we are going to invite our closest relatives for dinner and all our acquaintances for

supper, but we are not going to fix any supper for the ball. When the wedding is over, I will write you again. Mařenka is living on a farm adjacent to his parent's farm, but it isn't far from us, we can get there by car in fifteen minutes. She is doing well. They are renting, but his parents own the farm. Mařenka comes to visit every week, Josef has a job in an office in town as well, they register these migrant farmers, and that brings in 18 dollars a week for them.

Now about our miserable conditions. You ask how we feed the livestock when these grasshoppers have destroyed everything. In 1932 there was plenty of rainfall so that the grain flourished, although there were plenty of grasshoppers that destroyed almost all of the corn after harvest. There was enough hay that year, so that we were left with two stacks and one stack of clover. We didn't sell the grain, the price was very low and we are feeding the livestock with that even now. Last year, when the grasshoppers started to devour everything before harvest-time (it had been very dry), we took our harvester and reaped the grain, putting it into stacks. We also cut some hay. That way they don't eat it. And then also, we had straw from 1929-32, so we have something to feed the cattle. We have 20 milks cows, a bull and 26 calves a year old and younger. We work two quarters, i.e., 320 acres, it is sandy soil, but something can be grown there each year, these grasshoppers don't do much damage there, so that last year we had some corn there, and we have something to feed the pigs with. But there are people who have had to sell everything, they didn't even have a handful of stones left. We are also planting here now, it is called kafirka [kafir corn, a kind of sorghum — Trans.], it is something like corn, but it has an ear like grain does, on top there are leaves like corn, the grasshoppers don't eat it and we harvest it green. Then it is dried and put into stacks for the winter. Now, how and on what do people live here? Our current president is, as I have said, blessed. In the entire United States all the unemployed have gotten work, and in the areas affected by drought and grasshoppers, people have been given work for the entire winter. They repair roads, put in ponds, just so they can have work and a salary. The winter here has been rather mild, only after Christmas there was quite a freeze, so it is good that they can work, Vavřín is working, too. At first they worked 30 hours a week, now they work 15 hours, but they may start working 24 hours. They get paid 50 cents an hour, so that for 24 hours of work they earn 12 dollars. And if he rides his horse to work, he gets an allowance of one dollar per day for the horse. Those are good earnings. Then, last spring the

government bought millions of pigs, there was allegedly a surplus, the pigs could weigh only up to 50 kg., all of these were slaughtered and cured or canned, and now they are being given to people for free. We got some, too, although we have enough of our own meat. What he earns on the horses he doesn't get money for, but rather is paid in kind with feed, hay, wheat or corn. We also got some flour. Last year we also sold the government some pigs, I don't even remember how many, perhaps 55, and we left the females, in the fall they had 25 piglets, now we are selling them for 5 dollars a piece. Prices here are all very low, but that is improving slowly. I



Taken in 1935, this photograph of a hog house in south central South Dakota vividly illustrates the "dust" that Tripp County farmers like the Stříteckýs had to contend with during the Great Depression.

have to brag that we have never had a hog as well fed as this year, he wasn't much short of four meters. We had already slaughtered one bigger hog, and then for two years we fattened up this one, but we sold some of the meat from it, the rest I preserved and canned, so there will be something in the spring. Now, more about those chickens. You know, aunt, that we always sell off some of them, we have gotten used to meat here, so that when the chickens weigh one kilogram, then we slaughter daily one or two, and on Sunday when someone comes to visit perhaps even four or five, and it goes on like this until autumn, when we sell the ones that are left over.

Likewise we slaughter geese and ducks, these I don't sell, I have about thirty ducks, and just last year I started raising geese again, I had only eight from one goose. But poultry brings a low price, a hen used to sell for from 75¢ to $1.25, and now it won't bring more then 35¢ for a 7 lb. chicken (1 kg is 2 lbs.). There is plenty of meat here, many people say that meat here doesn't smell good, of course not, because everybody eats too much of it. Back home we had meat only in the winter, in the summer we bought only a little piece, so it smelled good. So, life here is pretty good, but what havoc those grasshoppers and the drought have been wreaking these few years! We are not paying the interest on the debt we had on the farm, so that if there isn't going to be any harvest this year, we don't know what we will do with it. It's true, no one is rushing us, here that is all different from back home, they will wait until we have it. Only it's turning out to be another dry year, we haven't had any snow yet and there are dust storms. When the wind comes up, it even penetrates into the house, we have never had anything like that happen here before, the house has never been so full of dust like this. True, aunt, we are nicely settled here, there is a water faucet in the kitchen, the pigs go to drink their water by themselves, the same for the cattle, we would be sorry to leave so much work here, yet we will wait. So, once again I have written a bit about this farm of ours, and now you just write and tell me what you would like to know, and I will gladly write, I won't leave anything out and I won't embroider it. We are not doing so badly yet, we are all healthy and satisfied, especially Vavřín, he likes it here so much and I have had to get used to it. I really don't know what Růži is earning now, I think at first she was getting $75 a month, maybe $80, then during that crisis she was making less, now her boss is in government service, and she is in charge of it herself, so now she is making more. Her boss wouldn't like to lose her before she gets married. She will probably keep working there for some time, until the other girl learns the ropes. The news from Šaratice interests us greatly, we always pass it on to Josef's family. Only when you write again, write us *everything*!

I will find out somehow about that estate. Heartfelt greetings to you, aunt, to uncle, to all friends of the house and the whole family from all of us.

Marie Střítecká

Afterword

Marie and Vavřín Střítecký, my grandparents, lived out their lives on the family farm outside of Colome, South Dakota. They survived the depression, but they never returned to Czechoslovakia, even for a visit. They saw their daughters grow up and some of their grandchildren born in South Dakota. Some of my earliest memories are of going to Grandma Střítecký's for family gatherings on Christmas Eve—a house full of people, food, presents, and Grandma playing the part of Santa Claus. Vavřín Střítecký died in 1939 and Marie in 1944. The farm on which they settled after so many miles of travel from their homeland is still a working farm. It is operated by their daughter Sedonia and her husband, Lawrence Wagner, along with their son, Lawrence Wagner, Jr., and his family.

Marilee Richards

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