He’s One of Ours: Ethnic Preservation in the Slovak Catholic Church in Schuylkill County, PA, 1920-1930

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Senior Seminar
Fall 2011
The coal region of northeastern Pennsylvania is a region unlike any other due to its diverse and distinct geography and culture. The region stretches over 500 square miles and includes five counties. At its peak in 1914, the coal mine industry employed about 175,000 men and supported a population around one million.\(^1\) The coal industry thrived in the late 19\(^{th}\) century until the mid 20\(^{th}\) century, and during this time coal companies hired many immigrants from Eastern Europe to work in the mines, and as a result of the poor economic and political situations in most of Eastern Europe, many men as well as their families decided to immigrate to the United States.\(^2\) As a result between the years 1860 to 1914, around six million people had migrated from the Eastern European region, largely to the United States with an estimated 296,000 Slovaks who settled specifically in Pennsylvania with most in either coal or steel towns.\(^3\) Scholars have studied ways in which Slovak immigrants affected the areas in which they settled as well as how the immigrants were able to assimilate into American culture. Scholars largely focused their attention on the three institutions established by Slovak immigrants which consisted of their parishes, fraternal organizations, and newspapers.\(^4\) This paper focuses on both the ethnic church and church-related organizations and the involvement and identities of migrants in these institutions. I argue that the church together with its secular organizations, such as fraternal societies, educational services, and social clubs, helped unify ethnic communities and created a unique Slovak American identity in the coal region of Pennsylvania.

\(^3\) Robert M. Zecker. *Streetcar Parishes: Slovak Immigrants Build Their Nonlocal Communities, 1890-1945.* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2010), 17.
\(^4\) It should be noted that most scholars focused predominantly on the elites of each organization as opposed to the average Slovak immigrant. Throughout my research into Slovak immigrants it became apparent that Slovaks and Poles were very similar in regards to language, dress, and cultural traditions from Eastern Europe, therefore I intend to focus on both ethnic groups due to their similarity.
This paper is based on institutional records and newspaper articles as well as my interviews with local residents and fieldwork in summer and fall 2011. I visited several different towns in the coal region, including Shenandoah, Pottsville, Danville, and St. Clair. It was astounding how similar each town was in that they boast of ethnic pride and the various ethnic churches are the first thing that an individual witnesses upon driving through the town. No one can ignore the golden domes of the Greek Orthodox Catholic Church and grandiose steeples of other Catholic Churches. I became interested in why there was a need for so many different kinds of churches; literally every ethnic group had their own church, regardless of religion practiced. For example in some instances two Catholic churches would be across the street from one another with the only difference being that one was Slovak and one was Lithuanian. Even today, one’s ethnicity immediately becomes an important factor in the coal towns. Almost every person I interacted with asked about my roots and ethnicity. As soon as I told people that I was Polish and my grandparents were from the region, they became extremely friendly and helpful with my research.

The first scholars to address Slovak immigrants in the coal region in the early 20th century focused on the “infiltration” of Slavs into the coal communities that had created negative stereotypes about the immigrants based on their different cultural practices. Karl D. Bicha argued that because of their practice of Roman Catholicism, including different religious practices that involved drinking, the Slavs were unjustly stereotyped from the beginning of their arrival to the United States. Therefore, the discrimination aided in the establishment of solely ethnic communities and thus ethnic parishes. The authors of Kingdom of Coal, Donald Miller

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5 At the time of immigration, Slovakia was not an official country until 1993; therefore prior to World War I, it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.  
and Richard Sharpless support Bicha’s argument in that one of the reasons stereotyping occurred was due to the large influx of Slavic immigrants. Catholicism practiced by the Slovaks looked, “very strange looking to Protestants, and Slavs would participate in drinking on Sundays which the Protestants did not practice.” In support of this idea, the historian Peter Roberts who studied the coal region’s ethnic groups in the early 1900s, observed “the Sclavs attend church, but they do not observe the Sabbath. They buy, drink, dance, sing ribald songs, play cards, etc. on Sunday without scruple.” Roberts also recounted a Baptist’s view of Slav practices as follows: “It was terrible; saloons full blast; singing and dancing and drinking everywhere; it was the Sodom and Gomorrah revived; the judgment of God sir, will fall upon us.”

The way in which Slovaks observed Sunday was obviously very different from the way in which Protestants in the United States observed the Sabbath by simply attending church services and abstaining from any indulgent behaviors such as drinking and dancing. The opposition and distrust of other religious and ethnic groups became one of the main factors pushing Slavic migrants to establish their own communities and rely on one another.

Some scholars also examine the fraternal and benevolent societies established in collaboration with ethnic parishes. As argued in Coalcracker Culture, which was written by Harold Aurand, the first Slavic immigrants placed a great deal of emphasis on protection. For example, the benevolent societies usually offered low cost protection against death, injury, and illness for the miners and their families which was made possible by the payment of low cost

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9 Ibid, 53.
dues.\textsuperscript{10} The strength of fraternal societies cannot be taken lightly, and many fraternal societies continue to exist today, which reinforces the strong desire to be a part of something.\textsuperscript{11}

Scholars also noted the establishment of parochial schools for the Slavic immigrants. The fact that parochial schools were established in conjunction with the church, suggests that Slovak immigrants placed greater trust in their “own kind” teaching their children than the American educational system. Slovaks tended to surrounding themselves among other Slovaks in nearly every aspect of their daily life, and because education and religion was important for the youth, the Slovaks desired to teach their children what they deemed pertinent. The parochial schools taught children the importance of “their national histories and religious traditions as well as the national languages.”\textsuperscript{12} Also, the historian Brian Ardan explains that “Slavs did not perceive the enrollment of their children into American schools as an immediate priority.”\textsuperscript{13}

The concept of ethnicity continues to interest many scholars and scholars have found particular interest in how the concept has come about. For example, there has been discourse over whether ethnicity is a type of primordial or intrinsic identity of oneself or if it has been invented since the large influx of immigrants to the United States. Herbert Gans argued that ethnicity is primordial and results in the preservation of certain symbols specific to assimilation of a particular group of people. He challenged the legitimacy of theories such as the melting pot and straight-line theory, which argued “acculturation and assimilation are viewed as secular trends that culminate in the eventual absorption of the ethnic group into the larger culture and

\textsuperscript{11} It should be noted that almost all secondary sources that I read mentioned the importance of the benevolent societies and the fact that they were often organized by the parish priests…For example,…
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 187.
\textsuperscript{13} Brian Ardan, \textit{The Anthracite Coal Region’s Slavic Community} (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2009), 104.
general population.”¹⁴ However Gans believed that ethnicity is not something that is ever fully absorbed in a society, rather individuals still maintain their ethnic identity, even those of third and fourth generation immigrants through symbols. Furthermore Gans continues to define identity as “simply the sociopsychological elements that accompany role behavior and the ethnic role is today less of an ascriptive than a voluntary role that people assume alongside other roles.”¹⁵ The point that Gans argues is ethnics have always been ethnic which coincides with the primordial theory. Therefore, ethnics do not have to live specifically in ethnic communities to maintain their ethnic ties. Their ethnicity exists based on their shared history. There is also a distinct difference between primordial and symbolic ethnicity, especially for the third and fourth generation ethnics they do not have to maintain their ethnicity through groups in the community. Instead, symbolic ethnicity is a choice that each individual makes to maintain certain parts of their ethnic culture which may include: rituals, songs, and food. Thus, ethnicity can be thought of as situational, tailored to meet the needs of individuals at a specific time and place.

Kathleen Neils Conzen and her colleagues reviewed both the “primordial ethnicity” (represented by anthropologist Clifford Gertz) and “interest group ethnicity” and instead they raise the concept of “invention of ethnicity” which historicizes the process of ethnicity being socially constructed over time and with boundaries constantly negotiated by both mainstream ethnicities and minority ethnicities.¹⁶ Furthermore Conzen argued, “ethnicity is not a collective fiction, but rather a process of construction or invention which incorporates, adapts, and amplifies preexisting communal solidarities, cultural attributes, and historical memories.”¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid, 8.
¹⁶ To a large degree Gan’s symbolic ethnicity is similar to this situational interest group ethnicity
¹⁷ Ibid, 25.
theoretical framework for this paper is based on how the Slovak American culture was created and tailored to meet the needs of Slovak immigrants in the Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania.

Based on my research the concept of ethnic identity definitely changes for each generation of immigrants that I interviewed and the fact that the secular organizations played a different role for each generation of immigrants. Individuals cannot change their ethnicity for it is a part of them, however they can choose how to acknowledge their ethnicity. For example, the earlier Slovak immigrants relied heavily on their ethnicity to develop their status in their communities and distinguish themselves from other ethnic groups. However, once their ethnic communities were firmly established and they became more comfortable with American culture, their stricter adherence to traditional Slovak customs began to change and was replaced by this idea of Slovak American culture. Furthermore, Slovak immigrants chose to remain together through the construction of ethnic churches which provided social outlets to reinforce Slovak traditions. For instance, stage plays were enacted in their native language to ensure that the youth maintained the language and learned the old stories that were important to Slovakia.

Community theorists were another derivative of ethnic theory that emerged in the 1990s and focused more on how ethnicity functioned in the community. Victoria Hattam argued that “southern and eastern European immigrants did not fit easily into the existing racial categories, one possible response would have been to use this disjuncture as a means of reexamining the category of race.”

Hattam demonstrates that ethnicity was an invented concept that emerged as a result of the southern and eastern European immigrants who were very different from the earlier immigrants from northern and western Europe. The Slovaks were obviously put into the category of new immigrants and they could not identify with other ethnic groups, because their

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cultural traditions including language were viewed as distinct from the white Anglo-Saxon society in the United States.

For example, the ethnic historian, Kathleen Neils Conzen, argued that the process of immigration and adaptation is a very complex topic that was largely ignored in the earlier written works adopting the assimilative narrative of immigration about immigration. Furthermore, many earlier written works on immigration focused solely on community as opposed to the average family and how they spent their time outside of work in the coal mine.\(^{19}\) Moreover scholars also often mainly focused on large institutions in ethnic communities, the church, fraternal societies, and newspapers as separate from smaller aspects of a community such as family, kinship, and marriage. This paper focusing on the coal region of Pennsylvania and its Slovak immigrants, links larger institutions such as church and its organizations with migrants’ daily life and community activities.

Furthermore, it is becoming increasingly difficult to document the lives of the earlier immigrants as well as first generation immigrants because much of the documentation was written in Slovak and people continue to get older. In addition, while scholars have discussed the importance of the church in regards to cultural preservation, there is a great deal more that has yet to be written about socially.

As this study shows, the Slovak immigrants were highly dependent on their parish for nearly every aspect of their daily lives. The priests of the parish, and arguably the leaders of the Slovak community, in some ways controlled the activities of the church and were credited with the maintenance of the Slovak identity based around Catholicism.\(^{20}\) The Slovaks desired a strong sense of ethnic community in order to feel safe in their new living environments, and as a result


of discrimination from other Americans they were almost forced to establish ethnic parishes. As a result of the establishment of ethnic parishes, nearly all social aspects of Slovak immigrants’ lives was based around the church because it became a place of comfort and cultural preservation because other Slovak immigrants were able to identify and relate to one another based on their common immigrant experience.

The importance of ethnic churches can be at first noted by their grandiosity and intricacy in regards to their architecture and design. The following photograph is of the altar at St. Stephen’s Slovak Catholic Church in Shenandoah.

![Altar at St. Stephen’s Slovak Church](image)

Figure 1. St. Stephen’s Slovak Church, Shenandoah, PA. taken on October 11, 2011.

The church has remained relatively unchanged since its original construction in 1899. The altar has many decorative pieces, probably containing gold and other precious metals as well as several statues which would most likely be made of marble. The elaborate way in which the churches were designed despite the relatively poor economic situations of most of the anthracite

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region reflects the importance of religion and the place of worship. Also, the immigrants had a great deal of pride in their church as well considering the aesthetics where extremely intricate and well thought out. Every mural and painting in the church specifically targeted some of the earliest immigrants to the town. The Slovak migrants could have constructed simpler and more cost efficient churches, however the community leaders of both the Slovak and other immigrant groups all constructed elaborate churches. One idea is that the priests definitely desired the church to serve multiple functions for its parishioners because church picnic grounds and social halls were often constructed alongside the church.

![Mural on the ceiling of St. Stephen's](image)

This picture depicts a mural that is on the ceiling of St. Stephen’s, and the saying says “All who labor come to me and rest.

The above photograph definitely demonstrates the link between the church and the miners/workers that are depicted in the mural, which suggests that the church desired to be a safe haven for them. The mural undeniably targets the working class immigrants, specifically the coal miners as a way to unite the workers in their ethnic communities. The workers were united in their daily laborious tasks, their ethnicity, and lastly their place of worship, which would extend
to their social lives. The coal region can be considered as unique for the specific reason, that nearly all of the migrants were in the same working/lower class and could relate to one another on an economic level. Based on my oral interviews with local residents, they largely agreed that everyone considered themselves to be on the same economic level, and economic disparity or the notion of “being poor” was not a concern. Slovak priests targeted these specific members of the community, because the ethnic church was one of the only places within a community, that all the ethnics could feel free to express their culture as they desired.

Furthermore, the bulletin of St. Stephen’s recounts the reasoning behind the construction of the church. The remembrance book states, “when the Slovak population in Shenandoah was increasing, they naturally wanted a Slovak Church in Shenandoah with a Slovak priest, where they could listen to sermons, recite prayers and sing hymns in their own language.”\textsuperscript{22} The fact that the previous statement was made very generally further indicates that it was merely commonplace for each ethnic group to construct their own churches, despite other Catholic churches located in the area. As many of my sources illustrated, the notion of language, and understanding one another was one of the driving factors that pushed ethnics to worship in the same place. Therefore, the elaborate construction of the church is reflective of ethnic pride, because the Slovaks desired to make their church more personal. The personal touch of the church was represented by the stained glass windows that had inscriptions in Slovak. Also, the church is adorned with stained glass windows of Ss. Cyril and Methodius who are the patron saints of the Slavic nations. Therefore, the Slovak migrants desired to hold onto the saint who meant the most to their homeland.

It should also be noted about the economic aspects of constructing large churches as well as the ongoing maintenance. Every parishioner made sure that they had the means to contribute

\textsuperscript{22}Ibid, 21.
weekly donations to the parish no matter how small that may be.\textsuperscript{23} They were willing to volunteer their time and labor to physically build new churches, while continuing to finance all that they were able to do.\textsuperscript{24} The maintenance and upkeep of a church would be a very expensive, and a newspaper article from the Pottsville Republican in 1913 cited the cost to build the Immaculate Conception Church in St. Clair at $35,000.\textsuperscript{25} The fact that immigrants who virtually came to the United States with little to no money were willing to sacrifice what they had tells a great deal about how Slovaks were taught that faith was one of the most valuable things in an individual’s life. As a parishioner, Peter Yasenchak described how the Slovak community was able to afford the construction of the church, “there were enough people together and with their nickels and dimes they built their own churches.”\textsuperscript{26} Dr. Yasenchak demonstrates how the parishioners were very giving to the church as it was the center of their lives. Moreover the importance of the establishments of parishes can be noted in an article in the Pottsville Republican, which stated that there were nearly three thousand people in attendance at the consecration of the church. The Pottsville Republican stated, “the ceremony was attended by practically every member of the congregation at St. Clair, while twenty of the Slovak societies of this and Carbon County were present.”\textsuperscript{27} Even going further than merely the worship aspect of the church, it was obvious that the Slovaks placed a great deal of importance on the structure of their house of worship and the place of social gatherings as opposed to many of the previously established Protestant structures which were very simplistic.

In regards to churches constructing social halls in addition to their churches, it should be noted that ethnic saloons were often built in the basements of the churches. Yasenchak

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{24} Miller and Sharpless, 186.
\textsuperscript{25} “Slovak Church Consecrated.” \textit{Pottsville Republican}, November 27, 1913. Pottsville (Pennsylvania).
\textsuperscript{26} Dr. Peter Yasenchak. Oral interview by Sara Budsock. October 15, 2011.
\textsuperscript{27} Pottsville Republican.
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reminisced about how his father always went to the Slovak saloon. Yasenchak described, “most of the churches had a bar room, but it was down in the basement because the priests said we know they're going to drink so if they're going to drink at least let the money go to our church.”

Therefore, the bars were not merely to support the solidarity of the Slovak community, rather it also served economic purposes for the church. The bars were established because the priests needed parishioners to donate more money towards the church. Therefore, priests could be considered interest groups who worked together for a monetary benefit, not simply the desire to keep all of the ethnics in one place. However, the bars were also created at a certain point in time, that the churches needed the most money, which was at the time of construction. Thus, some of the first migrants specifically established the social halls of the church to meet their needs at that time. In regards to ethnic togetherness, the bars also served the people with their traditional drinks from their homelands. Furthermore, Yasenchak even recounted how in his town there were four ethnic bars on each corner of the street, and you always went to “your own.” It would have been an oddity for the immigrants to walk into the bar of the different ethnicity. However, this is not to suggest that there was a strong disdain between the different ethnic groups, rather it was more of a language basis for staying close to one another. Obviously, immigrants desired to be among those whom they could understand and relate to.

The inclusiveness v. exclusiveness of coal towns coincided with one another, because each ethnic group may have worked together in the mines, but would retreat back to their specific ethnic communities at the end of the day. The different ethnic groups were usually amicable, but there were definite tensions between certain groups. For example, once Slavic immigrants arrived to the coal region, it was already evident that certain earlier immigrant groups such as the Irish and Italians were discriminated against. As, a new immigrant to the

28 Yasenchak.
United States, the Slovak migrant sought to establish their own identity within the coal region that set them apart from other ethnic groups.

From the establishment of ethnic churches came the creation of other aspects of the church which included cemeteries and missions. For example, one of the priests in the late 1900s, Father Samuel E. Bella, oversaw the parish and created a Slovak mission in Mount Carmel as well as opened a cemetery and rectory.29 As was indicated in my trip to St. Clair each ethnic church had its own cemetery, because it was assumed that those of the same ethnic groups desired their own cemetery as well.

![Tombstone in St. Michael’s Cemetery in St. Clair, PA. Inscription reads in Slovak as “here lies.”](image)

Figure 2. Tombstone in St. Michael’s Cemetery in St. Clair, PA. Inscription reads in Slovak as “here lies.”

Most of the ethnic cemeteries that I visited were divided into different sections based on ethnicity. There was a section for Slovaks, Poles, Russians, and several other nationalities. There is little to no English on the tombstones, rather the earlier graves were all in Slovak. Also, the ethnic cemeteries seem to support the idea of primordial ethnicity because Slovaks wanted to be with other Slovaks because of kinship and bloodlines. Therefore, their ethnic ties could not be broken even in death. The construction of ethnic identity and solidarity means an additional process of hardening its boundaries to exclude other ethnic groups.

One of the next social functions of the church was fostered through the creation of fraternal societies. The historian Harold Aurand states, “every major group in the anthracite region maintained at least one benevolent society. Often the organization of a benevolent society preceded the formation of the ethnic church.”\(^\text{30}\) However, my research suggests that those who constructed usually built a type of social hall or basement while constructing a church. This shows that the parish priests and organizers wanted to ensure that their congregation had a place to socialize within the realm of the church.\(^\text{31}\) Therefore, the benevolent society was a service provided by the church, which suggests that low cost societies within the church was for members to pay their dues and hold fund raising activities such as picnics. Ultimately the goal was to have the necessary funds to provide payments to individuals and families during times of disability or the death of a family member.\(^\text{32}\) In most cases the insurance plans provided by the church included hospital plans, life saving plan, and these plans created by the churches were better than the plans at the bank.\(^\text{33}\)

A good example of a benevolent society for men was SS. Peter and Paul Society which was located in Lansford. “It was founded to help Slovak miners during times of sickness and death initially based on monthly dues of only 10 cents.”\(^\text{34}\) Additionally there were other requirements for members of fraternal societies, and one of the most important factors was to maintain good standing with the church. The historian, Hammer wrote, “if for example they did


\(^{32}\) Ibid.

\(^{33}\) Yasenchak.

\(^{34}\) St. Michael the Archangel Roman Catholic Parish (Lansford: St. Michael the Archangel Roman Catholic Parish, 1991), 49.
not attend Mass regularly, they could be expelled.”35 Hammer’s reference to the importance of maintaining a good reputation with the church and its members shows that the church took its membership into fraternal societies very seriously and any infraction would result in expulsion. The idea of ethnic exclusion is a constant theme throughout the secular institutions of the ethnic churches, which could suggest that the construction of ethnicity at this time in history was a constant back and forth. On one hand, migrants wanted to accept some forms of American culture, yet they still did not want to completely give up their Slovak identity. It was almost as if the Slovak migrants or at least the first generation did not completely trust those who considered themselves one hundred percent American as well. Also, the fact that societies were built specifically for Slovak miners who were in need of aid reinforces that fact that Slovak immigrants may have questioned whether or not they would be able to get help from other non Slovaks. Yasenchak described the role of the church in regards to these organizations as, “ethnicity was so strong because what you had in your church was you had your own undertaker, because he spoke the language, you had your own bar room, because he was one of ours, you had your own attorney, because he could work for us, and then what the church’s did was try to create different organizations.” Therefore it became more about the desire to be among individuals who were similar to one another and of course the bond that they shared, which were the immigrant background and obviously the language.

The fraternal societies were not only a type of contract between the society and its members, rather the fraternal societies provided social outlets as well, which were often religiously based. The one person I was able to interview, Sister Catherine Lauboure, provided very good information about the different fraternal societies that were offered at St. Stephen’s

Church in Shenandoah. Lauboure stated, “the fraternal societies were very strong. There was one that I remember, the women of the parish, they had an activity where they would pray, the mysteries of the rosary in which they prayed together but not together physically, but spiritually.”\textsuperscript{36} The rosary society for the women provided an outlet where they could come together, instead of simply participating in a solitary form of worship. Miller and Sharpless even argue that the church’s organizations provided women the opportunity to be removed from the household and they were able to pursue other interests such as volunteering. Therefore, “women sewed vestments for priests, prepared the church for religious holidays, and cooked and served on social occasions found useful roles and fellowship outside family and home.”\textsuperscript{37}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\caption{Pierogie makers at Immaculate Conception Church, St. Clair.}
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\textsuperscript{36} Sister Catherine Laboure, Oral interview by Sara Budsock. October 1, 2011.
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\textsuperscript{37} Miller and Sharpless, 189.
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The above photograph shows a group of women who had a pierogie making group, where the women would come together to make pierogies to sell at church events, which would ultimately go back to supporting the financial aspects of the church. The pierogie making is important, because they are a traditional food from Eastern Europe and making them was a way of maintaining traditions from the “old country” and passing along the traditions to the younger generations. Prior to the establishments of the organizations that women could be involved in, they mainly maintained the household and were not traditionally involved in any aspects outside of the home.

The main society for the men was the Holy Name Society, which was described as working for the honor and glory of God, and the good of the parish. More specifically the Holy Name Society at St. Michael the Archangel Church in Lansford, Pennsylvania stated the goals of their society were, “to promulgate the Catholic faith, and, through the diffusion of the principles of charity and benevolence, be financially supportive of church institutions.” Therefore, they would collect money from parishioners every weekend at mass and offer support in times of need. Anne Yulickni, another person who I interviewed and a native of Shenandoah described how important the society was in times of a family member’s death. Yulickni remembered, “when people had funerals everyone came and brought food for the family, and the body was laid out in the house and you had to stay up all night and tell stories about the deceased and have food and drink…they would help others in their loss.” Yulickni’s point is important because it reiterates how everyone in the community would come together to help one another during hard times, and it seems as though the fraternal societies led the way to help the parishioners.

38 St. Stephen’s.
39 Ibid, 52.
There were even social societies with the church for the youth as well, such as the Sodality Society. Laboure spoke very fondly of the days she spent at her church and with the societies that she participated in as a young girl. I asked Laboure to elaborate on her days spent at the church and she stated that nearly all of her socialization outside of her school was spent at St. Stephen’s church, especially involved in the Sodality Society. Laboure recounted “we would have parties, we would go on trips together, but it was a way of connecting that we were not all singular people. We have relationships so you related with your own age group.”\textsuperscript{41} It was evident that the parishioners of the church were constantly socializing with one another, and truly lived in a community that was dependent on one another.

Another way that the church aided in the development of social relationships was through the participation in athletics. In the particular photograph that I analyzed is of a men’s softball team which was known as the Young Men’s Society of the Resurrection and was associated with the Polish National Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{42} The photograph is of fourteen young men in worn softball uniforms with the initials of their organization printed on the front of their softball t-shirts. The men all look relatively happy and complacent and several of the men even have smiles. The photographer for this particular photo is unknown however the picture was probably taken as a yearly picture to add to a church bulletin or church yearbook to show that these young men were involved in the social activities of their church. The use of athletics was a very useful way for immigrants to become part of the Slavic community in their towns. Sports are one of the best ways to demonstrate that the coal miners did lead rich lives outside of working in the earth’s crust. The active participation in sports was a good “clean” way for Slovaks to entertain themselves, and it would have been a form of entertainment approved by white Anglo-Saxon

\textsuperscript{41} Laboure.
\textsuperscript{42} Ardan, 112.
Americans. I previously stated that the Slavs were looked down upon in how they spent their free time drinking in saloons, gambling, and dancing which was not a very acceptable form of entertainment at the time. Rather, sports were already a popular part of American culture so if immigrants participated in sports it would be seen as a form of integration and acceptance of American culture, especially with playing baseball or softball which is credited with being a very “American” sport. The invention of ethnic athletic teams and leagues is evident of a way in which the Slovaks created their own Slovak American culture as opposed to strictly adhering to one specific culture. As baseball was not a common sport in Eastern Europe, it was definitely an attempt for the migrants and their children to expose themselves to American pastimes. Yet, the Slovak migrants were not fully ready to fully participate in an athletic team of mixed ethnic groups, at least until it was more acceptable for ethnics to attend public high schools, such as Shenandoah High.

Every church that I looked at had several clubs for girls, mostly which reinforced etiquette, a faith based life, and traditional Slovak values. One of the photographs I analyzed was contained a group of young girls along with two nuns and a priest. The caption under the photograph says that the picture is of a group of girls to pay honor to the Blessed Virgin Mary, and this particular group is from SS. Peter and Paul in Mount Carmel.43 The mission of the group was to promote good social skills with young girls based on religious ethics and typically the leader of this type of groups was the nuns of the local parish. There is no date under the photograph; however I would guess that based on the style of dress the photo was taken between the 1920s and 1930s. It is important to point out that the girls in this photograph were not dressed in traditional clothes of Eastern Europe; rather they were dressed in the typical clothes of young

American girls at the time. Therefore, American culture was becoming more important to the children of first generation parents, simply based on one aspect such as dress. The migrant parents became more accepting towards their children in including some forms of American culture into their lives. The importance of this photo is that parents clearly wanted their children to receive an even greater religious background but have that applied to daily social lives for the young girls. The religious aspects of the group were often taught in Slovak, and that is where the girls would learn traditional folklore and romanticized tales of Slovakia. Also, it was a way for the young girls to foster friendships with other young Slovak girls of the same age, so reinforcing inclusiveness of other Slovaks. Therefore, parents knew where their children were after school, and they could also be confident that their children were receiving the kind of religious instruction that they deemed necessary. The fact that ethnic churches established these types of clubs for the youth continues to reinforce the fact that Slovaks still wanted a degree of solidarity among their children. The solidarity of the children is best demonstrated in the Slovak parochial schools, which will be discussed later.

Attendance at masses was traditionally very high as well, because that was the main opportunity in which people had to socialize and be removed from the hard work in the coal mines. Therefore, churches would organize events such as, “dances, picnics, dramatic presentations, festivals, and athletic events.” Also, all of the events were organized and run by volunteers within the parish. Laboure enthusiastically recounted, “we would often have, dances, that would be Slovak dances and wear the costume, the traditional dress of Slovakia or eastern Europe, we sang songs and we sang them in Slovak so that would keep a sense of pronouncing the language.” There definitely was an emphasis on social events that honored the traditional

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44 Ibid, 189
45 Laboure.
customs of Slovakia. The romanticized folklores and descriptions of the “Vaterland” portrayed positive images of rural Slovakia. The Slovaks who organized the dances and festivals were the individuals who had direct control of how many Slovaks perceived Slovakia, especially those of the second generation who never saw Slovakia. In particular some dance groups as well as theatrical groups became very popular and traveled to different ethnic churches in the coal region. For example, the Polish dance group known as Krakowiac performed authentic dances of their native country and were eventually invited to other parishes to perform throughout Schuylkill County.\textsuperscript{46} The dance groups were an interactive form of entertainment for the migrants.

Another way the migrants entertained themselves while maintaining cultural traditions was through the celebrations of holidays. For example, a male group known as the “Gubas” from St. Michael’s Orthodox Church would travel throughout St. Clair on January 6th and January 7\textsuperscript{th} and would tell the birth of Jesus Christ in word and song. Traditionally the performance was always carried out in Slovak as well.\textsuperscript{47} Another tradition that was very popular was the participation in the choirs, which would sing all of the songs in Slovak. Yasenchak, who was and still is a member of the male Byzantine choir, and it was always a tradition for the choir to visit every home of the parishioners of the church and sing. One of the main songs that the choir would sing in Slovak was “Christos Razsajetsja-Slavite Jeho” which translates into “Christ is Born-Glorify Him.”\textsuperscript{48} Yasenchak stated that the choir would always be invited into the homes of

\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Christos Razdajetsjia Slavite Jeho}. Sung by the Slovak Men’s Byzantine Choir, Pottsville Pennsylvania.
the families that they visited, and the families would lock the choir inside so that they could eat and drink with the family and celebrate the season.

Furthermore, church events definitely reiterated the need for escapism from the hard life of living in a coal town, and the fact that it is common among various ethnic groups to get associated with people of the same heritage reinforced the level of comfort that immigrants felt by staying close together for support. In regards to closeness, the Slovak immigrants desired a way to keep their children together when it came to receiving a religious education, which reinforced the goals of the church and other fraternal societies of the parish.

Parochial schools were established to ensure that the children of immigrants received religiously based educations. The educational aspect of the parochial schools consisted of both spiritual learning as well as the foundations of basic grammar school education. The goals of the church also states:

[A]mong the purposes for their existence are to promote healthful lifestyles, encourage education and instill patriotic zeal so that members become good citizens of the United States and loyal sons and daughters of the Slovak nation.\(^{49}\)

I found it extremely interesting that the leaders of the church incorporated American patriotism into their goals as well as Slovak nationalism. The leaders of the church specifically formulated a Slovak American ethnic identity and national loyalty. This particular document was essential because it directly demonstrates that Slovak American culture is something new and unique that was created at this particular time in history. At the time, the United States had already experienced the World War I, in which the government called for a stronger stance of American

\(^{49}\text{Ibid.}\)
The Slovaks did want to become a part of the United States; however they desired to do so on their own terms, as opposed to completely immersing themselves into American society. Of course the first generation immigrants had a more difficult time facing the differences in American and Slovak culture; however they also learned that they did not have to completely reject either culture. It is very evident that Slovaks did not want to reject their rich culture from Eastern Europe, and they wanted to pass along their traditions and customs to their children. One important aspect that I did learn from the function of ethnic churches was that there were not many Americans who were willing to reach out to Eastern Europeans to make them feel more welcome into American society; rather the immigrants learned that they had to depend on one another. Thus, parochial schools emerged as one of the major ways in which the children of Slovak immigrants could learn about religion and academics on their own terms, instead of through public schools which mandated that the children learn certain things which may not have been of as great importance to Slovaks.

In regards to religious teaching and upbringings, the establishment of parochial schools was another important way the Slavs preserved their faith and culture. Miller and Sharpless note that the parochial schools taught children the importance of “their national histories and religious traditions as well as the national languages.”

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51 Ibid, 187.
Figure 4. Vent in St. Cyril and Methodius Catholic School, in Danville, PA. The vent depicts three peaks, which is representative of the Carpathian Mountains in Slovakia.

The above photograph is important because it reinforces how even in the construction of parochial schools there were always reminders about one’s ethnic pride as is depicted in the vent. The Slavs desired their children to have a strong religious background and to not be too Americanized so that they forget their cultural heritage. Also, Ardan explains that “Slavs did not perceive the enrollment of their children into American schools as an immediate priority.”

Furthermore, public schools were looked down upon by Slavs because they did not have any religious backgrounds. Marie Skovranski grew up in the coal region with her family who was of Polish descent. Religious education enabled the immigrants to practice traditions and customs from Eastern Europe. For example, Polish schools in the coal region were taught in Polish and the children learned to read and write in their native language. Language is an aspect of the “old country” that could not be taken away from the Poles because it demonstrated to their children the importance of their ethnic heritage. The parochial schools were taught by individuals who from Poland and usually religious priests or nuns. Nearly all immigrant children of Polish descent attended these schools. Skovranski described the importance of parochial school in that, “when we went to receive Holy Communion you know you had to go school, in them days four years before you can receive.” Therefore it is evident that the Polish immigrants believed that the preparation for Holy Communion was one of the most important moments in a child’s life.

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52 Ardan, 104.
At the parochial school, the child would practice and study the Bible in order to receive Holy Communion, but would also learn how to read, write, and sing in their native language. When Skovranski described her beliefs about the importance of learning about her Polish heritage in school, she spoke very highly of it. She stated, “I was never sorry a day in my life. I read and write and I do everything, I can sing in Polish, and I was so proud because I can even write letters as far as that goes. I never did regret that. I am not ashamed of my background.” It is evident that Skovranski found her lessons in Polish to be one of the most valuable aspects of her childhood.

The idea of pride and ethnic unity definitely comes across strongly when parochial schools are discussed even among second generation immigrants who did not have as strong of a tie to their homeland as their parents, such as Irene Wieczorek. In an interview with Bodnar, Wieczorek spoke of her ethnic heritage, As far as that we weren't strict Polish but we were to the sense that we were Polish and we all attended parochial school.” Wieczorek’s perspective on her ethnicity, suggests that times began to change with the newer generations in the coal region. Therefore, the idea of Slovak American was not consistent from one generation to the next, rather it evolved. In most cases, the migrants who came from the “old country” would cling to their language and not use English. For example, a child’s school report card would often be written in mostly English, however the teacher who would undoubtedly be of a Slovak background would write in Slovak so that the parents could understand. The children played a large role in shaping the way in which the Slovak identity adapted to be more beneficial to the members of the community.

54 Ibid.
56 Ardan, 106.
Second generation Slovak immigrants generally had more education than their parents, and some were able to find jobs outside of the mines, and many of the fraternal societies were responsible for employment opportunities. For example, one man’s father was a member of the National Slovak society and was very involved with his local chapter and as a result his son became a member as well. Through his father’s involvement in the society he was able to learn about leadership roles and how to organize social groups, which enabled him to eventually obtain a low position job in the society, which eventually led him to become president of the organization. The above story further explains the non-religious benefits of membership in a fraternal society. The society provided a way for Eastern European immigrants to learn about social structures and other valuable leadership skills that they were not necessarily taught in Eastern Europe. The fraternal societies may seem as if they are an obvious example of interest group based ethnicity, however the fact that their role continued to change as membership was no longer required to advance in society. The Slovaks did not have to completely reject their culture in order to come to the United States to work; but it definitely changed based on factors in their communities.

The ethnic churches were the most important aspects in coal towns for migrants, because they directly influenced the way in which ethnicity was developed. Coal mining may have been the occupation; and as the common occupation, the community members of the coal town desired an escape from the difficult life. In particular the Slovaks had a very rich culture that they brought with them to the United States and they desired to maintain some aspects of their culture which may have appeared very different to other members of the coal community. Also, religion provided a link to the “old country” for many first generation immigrants, and enabled them to connect if only spiritually with family from their homeland.

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57 Hammer, 78.
The church as an institution literally became the center of every coal town where a large number of Eastern European immigrants were present. Essentially everything within a coal town was linked through the church, therefore it is important to learn about the degree of impact that the church had on individuals and families. One of the most astounding things about the roles of the church and the benevolent societies is that they were entirely created once the Slovaks came to the United States.  

The Slovaks did not have organized societies in the villages where they came from, and as most of the immigrants were peasants they did not have experience with education. Therefore it is truly incredible that the Slovaks were able to adapt so quickly and thrive in the United States on their own terms and through the creation of their own ethnic communities that took their language and traditions from home. Additionally the Slovaks were able to better themselves intellectually with the emphasis on education through parochial schools.

The study highlights the roles of the church as a social institution for immigrants in their adaptation to American society. The leaders of the Slovak community in coal towns were able to construct a Slovak American identity through constantly adapting and changing different aspects to meet the needs of the Slovak community. Festivals, holidays, language, food, and rituals were just some of the ways in which fraternal societies, social clubs, and parochial schools were able to preserve aspects. The aspects of the Slovak culture that were preserved tended to be more romanticized and idealized perspectives of Slovakia that newer generations looked to fondly. Slowly, stricter adherence to Slovak culture was dismissed such as speaking in Slovak in daily

58 Hammer, 120.
life. Rather, small phrases were preserved for special occasions such as holidays and continue to be practiced today. Ethnic identity has definitely changed a great deal in the coal region, however the fourth and fifth generations continue to remember their Slovak American ethnic identity through symbols, yet these symbols have changed over the years which reinforces that ethnicity is a multilayered process that will continue to change with each passing generation.

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Father Gasparik could have influenced the bishop since he was a member of the Diocesan Building Committee. 20. Frank Benkovsky to Rt. Rev. 25. This description of lay involvement in Slovak churches in Hungary was derived from: Jednota, 20 July 1904; Zweihnder Kázâzskéâzskéâchodky, bohatstVâjâÊ (Priest's income, wealth), Jednota Katolicky KalendÁjr, 1911, p. 54; Stefan, Furdek, Zweihnder Ve1'konoÁnâ© SpovedâÊ (Easter Confession) Jednota Katolicky KalendÁjr, 1913, pp. 105â€œ107; The Catholic Encyclopedia, 1913, s. v. ZweihnderHungary,â€ by A. Aldasy; interviews with Ferdinand Dvorsky. There he worked as a millwright and builder. Like Slesinger, one of his sons took an active role in the unsuccessful European Revolution of 1848. Another son, George Dostal, Jr., was born in Ricany in 1811. He became a manufacturer of woolen cloth and married Jennie Blazek, the daughter of a fellow Ricany clothmaker. Nevertheless, from ethnic, linguistic, and many as one thousand Slovaks were living in Colorado by 1900. 23 Historically, they were Slovaks. 25 Early arriving compatriots had established a foothold in the state, and in 1876 at sixteen years of age Hornak left eastern Slovakia for they wrote home to relatives and friends in their native villages, Pueblo, Colorado. Roman and Greek Catholic Slovak Union, lodge number 93, was established in December 1892. Source for information on Slovakia, The Catholic Church in: New Catholic Encyclopedia dictionary. Hlinka spent several years in prison, where he translated the Bible into Slovak. The continued unity of the two Slovak Catholic Churches, despite the religious and cultural differences that exist, illustrated the potential for unity within a secularized and diversified post-communist culture. As John Paul II commented of the importance of the Slovak Church in eastern Europe, it continued to serve as an example to all Catholics of how to "breathe by both lungs." See Also: Czech Republic, the Catholic Church in.