The Slavs of Mahanoy City, PA: Migration, Perception, Representation

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"An Easter Gift" Excerpt

In the yard of the nations live eight families, close together, like so many sardines in a box.[1]*[…]*

The nationalities in the yard represent nearly all of Europe. One family is Polish, one Lithuanian, another Greek, one Serbian, another Slovak, one Niger and two are Italian families.[2] *The heads of these families one from Lombardy and the other from Sicily – married sisters, after much quarreling,*[3] *and now fail to recognize each other as fellow countrymen. […]*

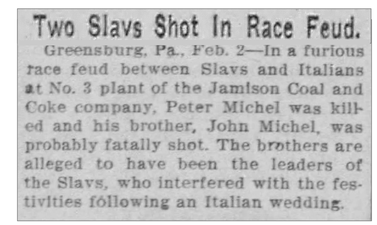
Sometimes the disputes of the neighborhood were brought to the Squire's office for adjustment but that official became perplexed by the babel of tongues and was compelled to disperse them because all talked at once.[4]

[1] 273 people lived on West Railroad Street (**A**) in 1910.
[2] (See ethnic composition pie charts)
[3] A large population of recent immigrants between 1880 and 1914 made Mahanoy City fertile for cultural misunderstandings and race-based skirmishes. The *Daily News* chronicled the discord under headlines such as "Two Slavs Shot In Race Feud," and "Three Killed in a Saloon Row."
[4] *Daily News* article "Case like Tower of Babel" describes a situation in which a newly-appointed rector of Shamokin's Lithuanian and Slavonian churches "is perfectly willing to hear his people's confessions" but "it is impossible to make him understand" because he does not speak the same language as his parishioners.

Abstract

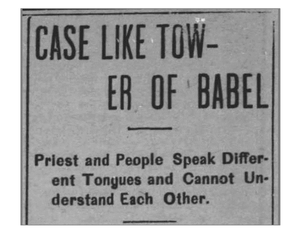
When Slavs from the Austro-Hungarian Empire immigrated to America en masse in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many settled in Central Pennsylvania where job opportunities for unskilled laborers in coal mines were plentiful. This first wave of Slavic migration saw Eastern Europeans working in the most dangerous and lowest-paying jobs and residing in communities often hostile toward "Hunkies" and "Slavishness." Texts written about Slavs in the Coal Region contain themes of violence, drunkenness, spousal abuse, and foreign religion, which reflect the community disaffection for the recent immigrants. Our discourse analysis of Mt. Carmel newspapers, organized into word clouds, illuminates the public perception of Slavs as "laborers," "strikers," "murderers," and above all "foreigners." However, texts written by Slavs of the Coal Region, such as the poetry and prose of Carpatho-Rusyn writer Rev. Emil Kubek of Mahanoy City, reflect the ideals and aspirations of the first wave of Slavic migrants: hard work, honesty, honor, sobriety, and the desire to assimilate alongside nostalgia for the old country. Since much of the first wave of Slavic literature has not been translated into English, Slavic cultural contributions have not played a major role in American literary history. This project aims to establish an Emil Kubek Walking Tour of Mahanoy City, translate and publish annotated editions of Father Kubek's poetry and prose, and preserve the contributions of the Slavs of Mahanoy City to American literature.

Fr. Emil Kubek



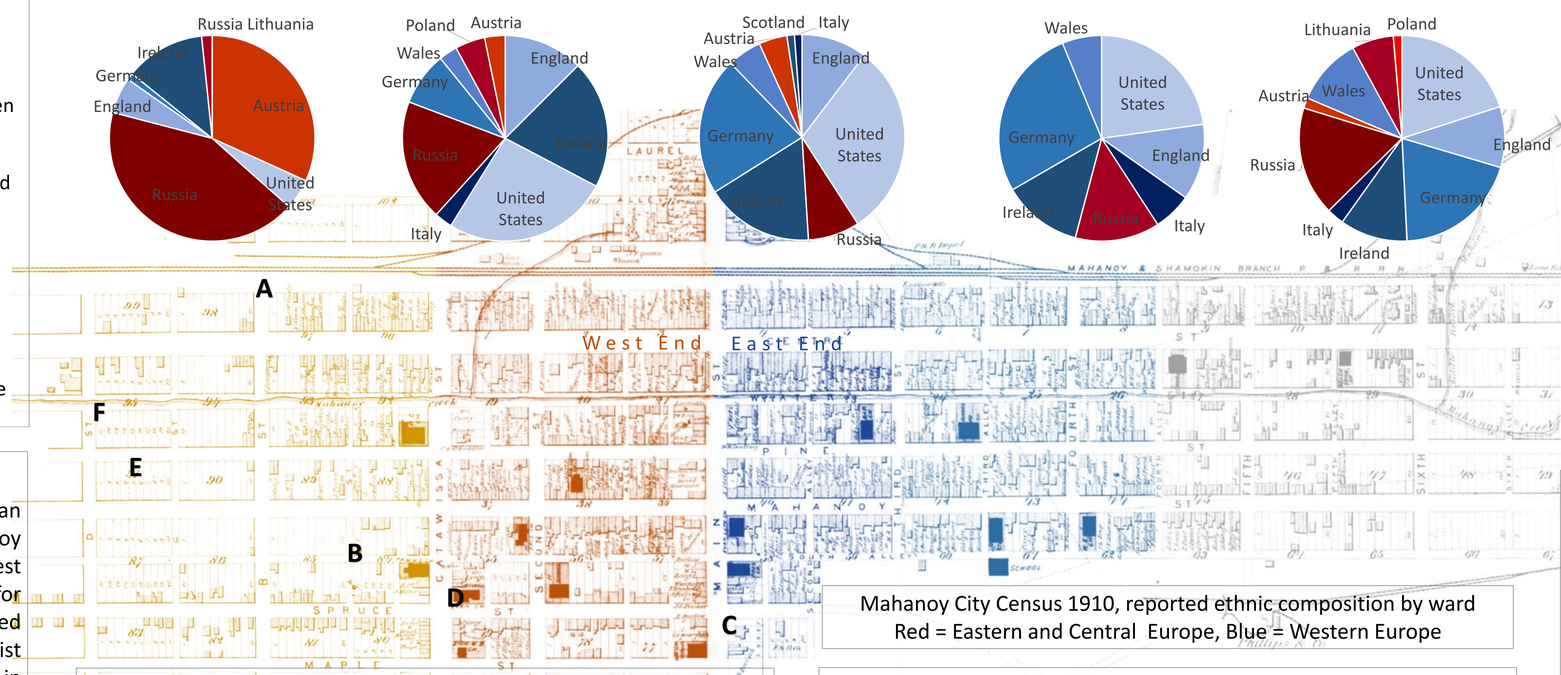
Two Slavs Shot In Race Feud.

Greensburg, Pa., Feb. 2—In a furious race feud between Slavs and Italians at No. 3 plant of the Jamison Coal and Coke company, Peter Michel was killed and his brother, John Michel, was probably fatally shot. The brothers are alleged to have been the leaders of the Slavs, who interfered with the festivities following an Italian wedding.



CASE LIKE TOWER OF BABEL

Priest and People Speak Different Tongues and Cannot Understand Each Other.



Mahanoy City Census 1910, reported ethnic composition by ward
Red = Eastern and Central Europe, Blue = Western Europe

English Newspapers

Headlines from the nearby Mt. Carmel *Daily News* between the late 19th and early 20th centuries include "Drunken Huns and Slavs," "Stabbed by Striking Slavs," "Entombed Slav a Raving Maniac," "Slavs and Huns Stampede," and "A Tricky Slav." A discourse analysis of the words used to describe Slavs and their actions in the *Daily News* (word cloud above) reveals a common perception of the recent immigrants. Slavs were unable to dispute possible slander because out of the 1200 Sunday papers sold in Shenandoah each week, Slavs purchased only 25 of them.

Fr. Emil Kubek

Fr. Emil Kubek emigrated from the Hungarian Kingdom (present-day Slovakia) to Mahanoy City, PA in 1904 where he served as the priest of St. Mary's Byzantine Catholic Church (**E**) for 36 years. Before his immigration to the United States, Kubek was an accomplished journalist and lexicographer. He continued writing in Mahanoy city "and produced articles, stories, and verses for our magazines, calendars and newspapers" (Kubek, 1938). Although he jokes in his 1938 autobiography, "these sentiments of mine were endorsed by many who had never read my writings," his literary contributions, including the first Carpatho-Rusyn novel *Marko Šoltys* (1915), are prolific among the Carpatho-Rusyn community. Like much of his work, Kubek's short story "An Easter Gift," translated into English by Rev. Louis Sanjek and published in *The Record American* newspaper in 1931, is set in a fictionalized Mahanoy City and frames the lifestyle and values of his contemporary Slavic immigrants. Kubek acknowledges some truth behind the unflattering stories circulated by local newspapers (see left), but he writes beyond the Slavic stereotype to create moral and relatable characters.

Non-English Newspapers

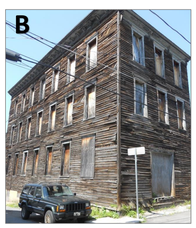
Mahanoy City was home to two Eastern European newspapers: the Lithuanian *Saule* (*The Sun*) published by the W. D. Boczkowski Company (**B**), and the *Amerikansky Russky Viestnik,* (*The American Rusyn Messenger*) created by John Smith as the Greek Catholic Union's official publication. The *ARV*'s first editor Paul Zatkovich viewed the paper as a safeguard for the national identity of the Carpatho-Rusyn people, as well as an educational tool "which would break the ice of the frigidity of our people's attitude toward learning, enlightenment, and higher convictions." It featured news articles, opinion papers, and Rusyn-language literature, including the work of Fr. Emil Kubek.

Rev. Louis Sanjek

Although "coal miners were described to [him] as ill-mannered and given to fighting," Rev. Louis Sanjek of Mahanoy City's Holy Emmanuel Slovak Lutheran Church (**D**) "found Slovak miners were respectful toward their pastor and good church goers," even if they were inclined to drink the "hard stuff" in order to "wash down the diminutive particles of coal dust" (1970, 44). Fr. Kubek became his "closest friend among the town's clergy," and in 1931 Sanjek translated Kubek's "An Easter Gift" from Carpatho-Rusyn into English (1970, 45). In his memoir *In Silence*, Sanjek describes Kubek's parishioners as "carefully educated" and "held in high regard by their fellow Americans."

West End Café

The Carpatho-Rusyns, like many of their fellow Slavs, had a reputation for being heavy drinkers. As the longest continuously operating drinking establishment in Mahanoy City, the West End Café (formerly Gud's Café) would have been undoubtedly frequented by West End residents on their way home from work or church (**6**). According to Rev. Peter Roberts, sociologist and minister in Mahanoy City, "all Sclavs drink" and "many drink to excess," taking advantage of Mahanoy City's 1904 ratio of nine bar rooms to every one church. Confirming numerous local newspaper stories, "observers say that it is only when lager and whiskey are mixed that the savage brute is aroused in the breast of the Sclav, and on these occasions brawls occur which end in bloodshed and death" (1904, 52).



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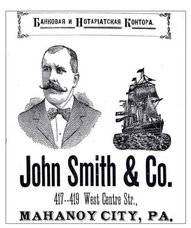

John (Žinčak) Smith

Mahanoy City's wealthiest Carpatho-Rusyn, John Smith made his fortune in the hotel, grocery, and banking business, and used his influence to found St. Mary's Byzantine Catholic Church (1891) and the Greek Catholic Union (1892). His mansion (**C**) remains a Mahanoy City landmark.