

A Slovak Perspective on the Lattimer Massacre

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As Michael Novak noted in the "Introduction" to his *Guns of Lattimer: The True Story of a Massacre and a Trial, August 1897-March, 1898*, one of the greatest labor slaughters in American history "has been strangely neglected in history books."¹ Perhaps that is why the American film and television industry has also ignored it.² And yet, as George Turner pointed out over a decade ago, there are plenty of sources on this tragic episode in American labor history, including those produced by immigrants.³ I will look at the reaction of one immigrant group that was victimized at Lattimer—the Slovaks—in order to add to our knowledge of the reaction of various ethnic groups to this tragedy.

The Slovaks were recent immigrants to the United States. They had been coming from their ancient homeland in the Kingdom of Hungary only since the 1870's in search of work in America's industrial heartland. The largest number found employment as unskilled laborers in the anthracite and bituminous coal fields of eastern and western Pennsylvania, in the steel mills of the Pitts-

1. Michael Novak, *The Guns of Lattimer: The True Story of a Massacre and a Trial, August 1897-March, 1898* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), x. Since then the situation has not improved very much. When I checked the recent CD ROM on "American History and Life" under the heading "Lattimer Massacre," in our university library, I found only eight titles related to this subject: Michael Novak's book, a review of the book, three articles on the massacre commissioned by Novak and published in the annual *Slovakia*, 1977, an article by Harold Aurand on "Early Mine Workers' Organizations in the Anthracite Region," *Pennsylvania History*, 58 (No.4, 1991), and an article in *Pennsylvania Folklore*. We still do not have a book written by a professional historian on this subject.

2. I know of no film or television program that has dealt with the Lattimer Massacre. Michael Novak informed me some time ago that the actor Jack Palance, who hails from Lattimer, had taken out a one-year option on making a film about this massacre. However, he did not exercise this option.

3. George A. Turner, "Ethnic Responses to the Lattimer Massacre," in *Hard Coal, Hard Times: Ethnicity and Labor in the Anthracite Region*, ed. by David L. Salay (Scranton: The Anthracite Museum Press, 1984), 126-52.

burgh and Cleveland regions, and in the oil refineries of Ohio, Pennsylvania and New Jersey.⁴

Like other ethnic groups which had come earlier, Slovak immigrants very rapidly established several key institutions to help them cope with their new surroundings. Since American workers in the nineteenth century enjoyed virtually no social benefits, Slovaks quickly established both local and nation-wide fraternal-benefit societies whereby they would help each other in case of illness, accident or death.⁵ In addition, since most Slovaks were very religious, they also established over 300 Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Greek Catholic and Calvinist parishes wherever they settled in sufficient numbers.⁶ And, since the immigrants were naturally curious about news from both Slovakia and the United States in their own language, they established a vigorous newspaper press.⁷

One of the best sources for the study of public opinion in the United States is the newspaper press. Slovak-Americans, like other immigrant groups, established their own newspapers starting in the 1880's, and some of them survive to this day. Even though American Slovaks published fifteen newspapers in 1897, the year of the Lattimer tragedy, only two that cover this period have thus far been preserved on microfilm and are available for research: the weekly *Amerikánsko-slovenské noviny* [*American Slovak News*] (Pittsburgh, 1886-1922) and *Slovák v Amerike* [*The Slovak in America*] (Plymouth, PA and New York City, 1889—).⁸ Both had several thousand readers nationwide.

4. For the story of Slovak migration and settlement in the United States see my *Immigration and Urbanization: The Slovak Experience, 1870-1918* (New York: AMS Press, 1989), chs. 1-3.

5. For more details see my "Slovak Fraternal-Benefit Societies in North America: An Overview (1883-1993)" in *Ethnic Fraternalism in Immigrant Countries*, ed. by Matjaž Klemenčič (Maribor, Slovenia: University of Maribor Press, 1996), 147-59.

6. On Slovak parishes see my "Lay Initiative in American-Slovak Parishes, 1880-1930," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia*, 83 (September-December, 1972), 151-8.

7. I have described "The Slovak-American Press" in Sally M. Miller ed., *The Ethnic Press in the United States: A Historical Analysis and Handbook* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1987), 355-68.

8. Both are preserved on microfilm at the Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota. Originals of other Slovak-American newspapers do exist at the Slovak Institute in Cleveland, Ohio but they are not preserved on microfilm, and, because of their poor physical condition, are not available for research.

When one reads these Slovak-American weeklies, one quickly perceives the immense outrage with which the readers responded to news of the Lattimer tragedy. On September 10, 1897, Sheriff James Martin of Luzerne County, Pennsylvania, lost control over his posse of 86 deputies. Some of the latter shot and killed 19 unarmed striking Slavic miners and wounded another 38 (out of about 400 strikers) at Lattimer Mines in the anthracite fields.⁹ *Amerikánsko-slovenské noviny* published an eye-witness account of the slaughter in its September 30th issue.

In a letter-to-the-editor, Helena Reháč wrote the following:

Hazleton, PA. I was an eye-witness to the Lattimer events and, therefore, I would like to share my experiences with you. I had sent my son to work, but when he was late coming home, and I heard that the workers were marching on Lattimer, I ran through the woods to find him and stumbled upon the following scene: a lot of men were lined up, armed with rifles. They were the sheriff and his deputies. Then we heard the strikers coming. Two of the deputies approached the strikers and said something to them. All of a sudden one of the [American] flags which the strikers were carrying disappeared, there was some shouting and shooting broke out. Fearful, I took cover behind a tree stump. Bullets flew over my head as bleeding strikers jumped over me. Anyone who still had the strength ran for his life because the deputies were shooting them in their backs. When the shooting stopped, I cautiously picked myself up and beheld a terrible sight. There were dead bodies on the streetcar tracks and wounded in the gutters and bushes. The bodies of the dead and wounded were carried away on bedsheets. The next day the army arrived. There is a lot of crying and wailing because the dead have left a lot of widows and children who are in dire straits.¹⁰

This shooting of the strikers provoked an immediate outcry from other readers of the Slovak Press. Ján Kiličuk of Bridgeville, Pennsylvania, for instance, sarcastically lamented what had happened in “this freest country on earth,” and was appalled that the sheriff and his deputies had “shot at people as if they were rabbits.” He asked of the sheriff and his deputies if “they even know what is a human being?” He then lectured the posse for not having tried to reason with the strikers, and for not having explained American law to them. Had they done so, he continued, this

9. Turner, *op.cit.*, 126.

10. *Amerikánsko-slovenské noviny*, September 30, 1897, p.3.

11. *Ibid.*

tragedy might have been averted.¹¹

In addition to letters from indignant individuals, Slovak newspapers also received letters of protest on behalf of local organizations. Thus, Slovaks in New York City, organized in a local branch of the National Slovak Society, held a protest meeting at their National Hall on September 25th against Sheriff Martin who "so foolishly ordered his deputies to shoot at our brothers."¹² Similarly, a group of Slovaks, Poles and Lithuanians met in Keystone Hall, in Pittston, Pennsylvania on September 27th and condemned the slaughter while taking up a collection for the widows and orphans of the victims.¹³ In addition, Slovaks in Passaic, New Jersey, met in their local hall on October 9th to protest the "Lattimer murder" and to establish a committee to organize other such meetings.¹⁴ So did the Slovaks in Reading, PA, who gathered on October 23rd, and heard the Reverend Jozef Kašpárik ask how the sheriff and his deputies "could shoot at our peaceful countrymen as if they were wild animals?" They then raised \$40.00 for the widows and orphans and promised to send more in the future.¹⁵ Slovaks in Philadelphia, meanwhile, met at their National Hall on October 24th to hear Juraj Matej, on behalf of the Society of St. Peter, denounce the sheriff and his deputies, and to declare, "The capitalists not only suck our blood, but if we walk peacefully on a public road, in order to earn our bread by the sweat of our brows, they shoot us down like wild animals."¹⁶ Finally, even in far-off Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Branches 94 of the National Slovak Society and 89 of the First Catholic Slovak Union met on October 10th, 1897, elected an Executive Committee to organize a protest rally for October 17th, a fund-raising ball for October 30th, and passed a resolution that deplored the Lattimer Massacre and called upon the Governor of Pennsylvania to see to it that the sheriff and his deputies would stand trial for murder.¹⁷

Not only did Slovaks at the local level react with indignation to the Lattimer Massacre, but their leaders at the national level did likewise. Thus, on October 14, 1897, eight editors of the major

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Slovák v Amerike*, October 7, 1897, p.1.

14. *Ibid.*, October 14, 1897, p.3.

15. *Ibid.*, October 23, 1897, p.3.

16. *Amerikánsko-slovenské noviny*, October 28, 1897, p.5.

17. *Ibid.*, November 4, 1897, p.4.

Slovak-American newspapers met in Cleveland, Ohio and resolved to stop fighting among themselves. They proclaimed that, while they had quarrelled, “renegades and nativists” had gone after their “treasuries, their rights, and their very lives.” Indeed, “In Lattimer they shoot us down like four-legged live-stock and justify it by saying that ‘it is only Hungarians.’”¹⁸ Indeed, in his annual report to the Central Assembly of the National Slovak Society on June 27, 1898, Anton S. Ambrose, the Recording Secretary, reported with satisfaction that there was now peace among previously-warring factions of American Slovaks because a “momentous tragedy—the Lattimer Massacre—where the Slavic nation was gunned down like wild animals,” had taught Slovaks to respect and work with each other.¹⁹

Most editors of Slovak-American newspapers echoed these sentiments, and even helped to shape them. This was quite natural because the editors of these newspapers were among the leading intellectuals of the Slovak nation. The editor of the weekly *Amerikánsko-slovenské noviny* in 1897 was František Pucher-Čiernovodský (1861-1905), an ex-seminarian who had mastered twelve languages. He had emigrated to the United States in 1888 to escape the wrath of the Hungarian government which opposed any manifestation of Slovak nationalism. In his new homeland Pucher edited a variety of Slovak-American newspapers, including the *Fakľa [Torch]*, America’s first Slovak socialist monthly in 1894.²⁰ In reporting this tragedy on September 16, 1897, Pucher lamented that, “In the freest country under the sun, people are shot at like dogs. Slavs are the victims of American savagery.” As an ex-seminarian and a committed socialist, he then proceeded to lecture his people for their lack of unity, and their alleged meekness and subservience to American capitalism. He also called upon the Austro-Hungarian government to “make honourable and serious intervention on our behalf,” and he asserted that “The burden of responsibility in this matter rests primarily with our Slavic organizations which, in every respect, bear

18. *Slovák v Amerike*, October 28, 1897, p.1.

19. *Amerikánsko-slovenské noviny*, July 7, 1898, p.5.

20. “František Pucher-Čiernovodský,” *Národný kalendár*, X (Pittsburgh, 1902), 232-33; Konštantín Čulen, *Slovenské casopisy v Amerike [Slovak Newspapers in America]*, (Cleveland: First Catholic Slovak Union: 1970), 41-2; and *Encyklopédia slovenska*, IV, N-Q (Bratislava: Veda, 1980), 589.

the characteristics of American organizational structure." In other words, the American capitalist system was at fault and Slavic fraternal-benefit societies, which were also capitalist-oriented, should use their clout and resources to try to seek some form of justice from the American courts.²¹

Pucher's views were largely shared by his colleague and assistant Ján A. Ferienčík (1865-1925). A former schoolteacher and nephew of Mikuláš Štefan Ferienčík, one of the leaders of the Slovak uprising against the Magyars in the 1848 Revolution, Ján emigrated to the United States in 1894 after he had worked as an assistant editor at a Slovak-language newspaper in Budapest. After Sheriff James Martin and his deputies were tried and found not guilty of homicide by a jury of their peers in March of 1898, Ferienčík lamented that, "The capitalist triumphs in spite of his crime and guilt. The wretched workman loses even though it is he who has been wronged."²² Ferienčík's colleague echoed these sentiments one year later when he reminisced about the trial: "They crucified truth! They grossly trampled upon the rights of the disadvantaged workmen of this free country. Why? For no reason other than that the slaughtered victims first saw the light of day in Hungary, Russia, in Germany or in Italy."²³ Thus, the editors of *Amerikánsko-slovenské noviny* laid the blame for the Lattimer Massacre at the door of the mine-owners, who had ordered the sheriff and his posse to break the strike, and at the nativism of the sheriffs' deputies, who had actually pulled the triggers.

The editor of the New York-based weekly *Slovák v Amerike* in 1897, meanwhile, largely mirrored the views of his rival Pittsburgh weekly, but without the lecturing. Gustáv Maršall-Petrovský (1862-1916) was a Slovak writer of some repute who had been driven out of his homeland in 1892 by Magyar authorities

21. *Amerikánsko-slovenské noviny* (Pittsburgh, September 16, 1897), as cited by Konštantín Čulen in *Dejiny Slovákov v Amerike* (Bratislava: Slovenská Liga, 1942), 166; the chapter on the Lattimer Massacre was translated by M. Martina Tybor and reprinted in *Slovakia, 1977* (Vol.27, No.50), 44-61. The quotation is from Tybor's translation pp.48-49. Even though I looked for this editorial in the microfilm of this newspaper, I could not find it. Nor could I find any other articles that Čulen cited. Entire issues of the newspaper were either missing, or the relevant pages were missing. I strongly suspect that Čulen removed the issues/pages for his own use. Thus, all subsequent quotations from *Amerikánsko-slovenské noviny*, unless otherwise indicated, will be from Tybor's translation.

22. *Ibid.*, March 31, 1898, as cited in *Slovakia, 1977*, 58.

23. *Ibid.*, February 5, 1899, as cited in *Slovakia, 1977*, 58.

24. *Encyklopédia slovenska, III, K-M* (Bratislava: Veda, 1979), 500.

because of his Slovak nationalism.²⁴ While the issue of *Slovák v Amerike* immediately following the Lattimer massacre has not survived, the September 23rd issue makes no bones about where Marsall stood. He reported that “After Black Friday, September 10, *when the mine-owners had so many of our brothers so unjustifiably shot...*” other workers in the region showed their indignation by joining the strike, but peacefully.²⁵ He added, in the September 30th issue that “This evil deed by the capitalists is being condemned by every righteous person. The capitalists are willing to let the workers be beaten, but they will not let them cry.”²⁶

In subsequent issues of his newspaper Maršall published a variety of articles about the massacre, including appeals for funds from the National Prosecuting and Charitable Committee of the Lattimer Affair, which had been formed by leaders of the ethnic groups slaughtered at Lattimer. The treasurer of this Committee was the Slovak immigrant Ján Németh of Hazleton. The very first appeal read: “Donate to the widows and orphans of Lattimer and to their lawsuit against Sheriff Martin and his accomplices! Only that person is worthy of freedom who values and defends it!”²⁷ The Committee published several subsequent appeals and, by March 17, 1898 reported that it had spent \$4,000 of the funds collected, with \$1,800 having gone to the widows and orphans of the murdered miners, and the rest for court costs. In his last appeal Ján Németh asked for additional funds in order to proceed with 17 more indictments against the “bandit deputies.” He lamented the lack of justice for immigrants in America with the comment that everyone knows what happens when “a Turk tries a Turk.” Therefore, he urged the newspaper’s readers to continue to contribute funds to his Committee for the sake of the future, “so that we will not be gunned down like animals.”²⁸

The editor of *Slovák v Amerike* also covered the murder trial of Sheriff Martin and his deputies which took place between February 1 and March 9, 1898 in the city of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. The editor called them “bloodstained, murdering bandits,” whose defense attorney would “with the aid of false testimony”

25. “Stávka na okoli Hazletonu [Strike in the Hazleton Region]” *Slovák v Amerike* (New York), September 23, 1897, p.7. I have added the italics in the quotation for emphasis.

26. “Z krvavého poľa [From the Bloody Field],” *Ibid.*, September 30, 1897, p.2.

27. *Ibid.*, October 7, 1897, p.2.

28. “Vyzvanie [An Appeal],” *Ibid.*, March 31, 1898, p.4.

try to prove that the strikers were “dangerous” and that they wished to “attack” other miners and thereby shut down the Lattimer mine.²⁹ In his editorial, Gustáv Marsall-Petrovský predicted that “the perpetrators will not be justly and rightly punished” because “in Pennsylvania justice is controlled by Republican capitalists.”³⁰ In a subsequent report on the trial, the editor lamented that the defense attorney had “purchased false testimony” against the strikers and that “in America, the land of the free, there is no justice for the poor.” He added, “The devil take such laws, which are based on the ability of the rich to wantonly murder their slave laborers.”³¹ While the March 10 issue of *Slovák v Amerike*, which undoubtedly carried news of the “not guilty” verdict by the jury, has not survived, it most probably aired a similar editorial lamenting the lack of justice for immigrants in America.

One might conclude from the above quotations from *Amerikánsko-slovenské noviny* and *Slovák v Amerike* that Slovak-American leaders and their followers were united in their denunciation of the Lattimer Massacre and in their support for the indictment of Sheriff Martin and his deputies for murder. Indeed, striking Slovaks from Harwood and Lattimer (suburbs of Hazleton) proudly announced that all Slovak-American newspapers, except one, supported their strike.³²

The one exception was, ironically enough, the weekly *Slovenské noviny* [*Slovak News*] published in Hazleton. According to Slovak strikers in Harwood and Lattimer, a certain “Asiatic newspaper” falsely accused the miners of fomenting violence and this “miserable Magyar” of a newspaper then falsely reported that Sheriff Martin had, indeed, read the riot act to the workers, who chose to ignore it. At the end they finally identified this “snake that is willing to kill Slovaks,” as the *Slovenské noviny* [*Slovak News*] of Hazleton.³³

While I have not been able to confirm the charges by Slovak

29. “Súd šerifa Martina [The Trial of Sheriff Martin],” *Slovák v Amerike*, February 3, 1898, p.2.

30. “Úvahy [Reflections],” *Ibid.*, February 3, 1898, p.4.

31. “Krivé svedectva [False Testimony]” *Ibid.*, March 3, 1898, p.2.

32. “Protest,” *Ibid.*, October 7, 1897, p.1. The newspapers they mentioned as supporting them were *Amerikánsko-Slovenské noviny*, *Katolík*, *Slovák v Amerike*, *Jednota* and *Slovenská Pravda*.

33. *Ibid.*

strikers in Harwood and Lattimer that the *Slovenské noviny* did, indeed support the sheriff and his deputies against the miners,³⁴ the strikers' accusations may very well have been true because of the national orientation of the newspaper's publishers and editors. This weekly, which was subsidized by the Hungarian government, was published by a Magyar named Ferenc Tóth and edited by the Magyarone Slovak priest Ferenc Dénes. Furthermore, it was published in an eastern Slovak dialect, whereas all other Slovak-American newspapers at that time were published in the codified central Slovak dialect. Dénes was one of a small group of Slovak Roman Catholic Magyarone priests who opposed Slovak nationalism, collaborated with the Hungarian government, and sought to keep Slovak immigrants loyal to their Magyar-controlled Hungarian homeland. Indeed, by publishing in the eastern Slovak dialect, they hoped to create a schism among Slovaks in the United States, and weaken the growing nationalism that was so apparent among American Slovaks at that time. Therefore, if all the Slovak nationalist newspapers published in America at that time denounced the Lattimer Massacre, it would have made sense for their opponents at *Slovenské noviny* to have taken the side of Sheriff Martin and his deputies.³⁵

Slovenské noviny notwithstanding, it should be apparent that both Slovak editors and their readers in America expressed great outrage at the Lattimer Massacre. The editors identified the mine-owners as the instigators of the slaughter and the sheriff and his deputies as their hired guns.³⁶ Furthermore, the editors predicted that justice would not be served by the trial of the sheriff and his deputies because, in America of the late 19th century, the editors

34. I have not been able to find any copies of this newspaper.

35. For an analysis of *Slovenské noviny* see Konštantín Čulen, *Slovenské Časopisy*, op. cit., 131-36; for a good discussion of Slovak Magyarone priests in America see Bela Vassady, Jr., "Mixed Ethnic Identities among Immigrant Clergy from Multiethnic Hungary: The Slovak-Magyar Case, 1885-1903," in *The Ethnic Enigma: The Salience of Ethnicity for European-Origin Groups*, ed. by Peter Kivisto (Philadelphia: The Balch Institute Press, 1989), 47-67. For the rise of Slovak nationalism in America see my "Immigration and Eastern Slovak Nationalism," *Slovakia*, XXVI (1976), 13-20.

36. In this respect, the Slovak editors would have disagreed with Michael Novak's conclusion that the Lattimer Massacre was largely a case of "ritual bloodshed" by one ethnic group (Anglo-Americans) versus the "Hunkies" of Eastern Europe (*The Guns of Lattimer*, pp.245-46). Instead, the editors stressed that the capitalists were largely responsible for the slaughter, and the sheriff and his deputies were merely their tools. Their ethnicity made it easier for them to pull the triggers. It was not the root cause of the massacre.

charged that the rich controlled the wheels of justice, and nativism was rampant in the land. This Slovak interpretation of the Lattimer Massacre and trial was beautifully illustrated in an editorial cartoon published in the *Alamanc of the National Slovak Society* in 1899 (see attached copy).³⁷ In this cartoon Sheriff Martin, with a smoking gun, stands above the murdered Mike Cheslak, a leader of the strike, and Mike's grieving widow and children are looking at the sheriff, with the widow pointing her finger of blame at him. Above the widow stands a shocked American workman, who is watching the symbol of American justice being bribed by a wealthy matron. The symbol of American justice has one eye peeking from behind his blindfold at a moneybag being handed him, while his scale of justice has tipped in favor of a heavy coin, which easily outweighs a human heart. If a picture is truly worth a thousand words, then this editorial cartoon best summarizes the Slovak-American reaction to the Lattimer Massacre.³⁸

37. "Lattimerský súd," [The Lattimer Trial] *Národný kalendár*, VII (1899), p.101.

38. The only portion of the cartoon that makes little sense is the figure of the American matron handing a bag of money to the symbol of American justice. It seems to me that one of the mine-owners should have been shown as bribing American justice. However, the cartoonist may very well have feared a potential lawsuit if he had drawn one of the mine-owners in this role. Therefore, the cartoonist probably drew an anonymous American matron, who was obviously rich and a part of the establishment, to get his message across.

Národný kalendár, 1899 (VII , Pittsburgh: National Slovak Society), 101.



LATTIMERSKÝ SÚD.