

*The Story of My Life* . By Frank Vlcek. Translation edited by Winston Chrislock. (Kent: The Kent State University Press, 2004, xvi, 392 pp., \$34.00, ISBN 0-87338-817-8.)

*The Story of My Life* by Frank Vlcek is an extraordinarily detailed account of the fortunes of a Czech immigrant who arrived in Cleveland in 1888 and went on to become one of the city's leading manufacturers and a prominent member of Cleveland's Czech community. The book was first published in Czechoslovakia in 1928 and in 1929, Fern Long, an employee of the Cleveland Public Library, translated it into English but it has remained in manuscript form until the appearance of this edition edited by Winston Chrislock. All of those interested in Cleveland's history will be grateful for its appearance since it contains a wealth of detail about the city's industrial and ethnic life written from the perspective of an individual who participated in Cleveland's emergence as a major industrial city.

The book's opening section describes Vlcek's growing up in a small southern Bohemian town, then under Austrian rule, where the rhythms of life appeared unchanged since the Middle Ages. The youngest of fourteen children, Vlcek became a migrant blacksmith and his narrative contains details of his work experiences ranging from small shops to a modern Austrian factory. Little is left out of Vlcek's account which includes his admiration for the beauty of the Alpine countryside, his resentment at being treated as a "country yokel," the kindness of farmers who let him sleep in their stables, his friendship with other tradesmen seeking work and his first tentative approach to a young woman. Right from the beginning, Vlcek makes clear his contempt for those who overindulge in drink and frivolity, a theme that appears throughout the book. After suffering humiliations from Germans who treated Czechs as inferiors and those who considered themselves "superior" to ordinary blacksmiths, Vlcek, discouraged and unable to find any work, returned to his home village whereupon he decided to join two sisters who had already settled in Cleveland. The balance of the book focuses on Vlcek's life in Cleveland. The segments that detail his involvement in the Czech community and the divisions between freethinkers and Roman Catholics are interesting but do not offer many fresh insights. But the description of his rise from an ordinary blacksmith to a major manufacturer provides a rare, firsthand account of an immigrant entrepreneur who recognized that machine-made tools would replace those which were hand crafted and who grasped the opportunities presented by the rapid rise of the automobile industry in the early twentieth century.

Vlcek's "dream" was "to become a great manufacturer" (213). The road, though, was not easy. He had to overcome fires, neighbors disturbed by the pounding of his machinery, irresponsible and treacherous employees, duplicitous salesmen, troublesome trade unions and unethical competitors. Nevertheless, Vlcek understood that "life in America was work, work and again work" (206), and he succeeded by eventually concentrating on the production of tools specifically earmarked for Midwestern automobile manufacturers. There is no other book available which includes such detail – from his sharpening tools for stonecutters working on Cleveland's Soldiers and Sailors Monument to the supplying of hardware stores with tools, and the ins and outs of the machine tool industry. Along the way, Vlcek adopts manufacturing methods advocated by the father of scientific management, Frederick Taylor (although he never mentions him by name), and a variant of welfare capitalism advocated by many industrialists during the 1920s. Fortunately, the editor has not deleted his observations of various ethnic groups which offer valuable insights into thinking common in this time period. Other sections of the book offer a glimpse into the social life of an immigrant manufacturer who became a leading member of the Czech middle class. In his early years, Vlcek lived on Cleveland's southeast side in the heart of Cleveland's Czech neighborhood, participated in theatricals and other community events and enjoyed buggy rides to Wade Park. By the 1920s, Vlcek had bought a home in Shaker Heights and enjoyed Sunday joy rides to the countryside in his Packard. It is not clear why the editor included Vlcek's description of his trip to Panama and Cuba, and the account of his return trip to Czechoslovakia is not as rich as his earlier description of life in Bohemia, but this is an extremely valuable work that offers insight into why Cleveland in the early twentieth century became a center of technological innovation and a rapidly rising manufacturing city.

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