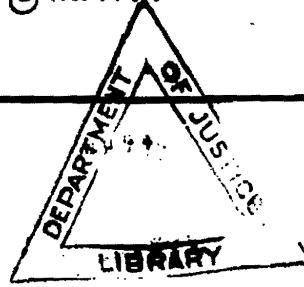




Department of Justice

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REMARKS

by

ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT F. KENNEDY

at the

SLOVAK CATHOLIC SOKOL CONVENTION

Pick-Ohio Hotel

Youngstown, Ohio

July 14, 1963

Bishop Grutka, Reverend Fathers, Chairman Prusa, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is both an honor and a pleasure to meet with you today, and to participate in this festival and convention.

Your Sokol tradition, so closely linked with the Slovaks' historic efforts for independence and for national self-realization in modern times, is a reminder to us all of the vital role of the Slovak people in the continuing worldwide struggle for freedom.

And the entire Catholic world is celebrating this year as the eleven-hundredth anniversary of the Christianization of the Slovaks by Saints Cyril and Methodius. The work of your Sokol organization in laying the foundation for the new Institute at the Vatican, named in their honor, has been highly commendable.

I can't help feeling that those two traditional traits of your parent country--a continuing struggle for political freedom and a deeply ingrained religious faith--give us a great deal in common.

Both of my great grandfathers, like yours, were born in another country whose national pride is built of those same two characteristics.

And they came here, like your grandfathers, your fathers and some of yourselves, as poor men with very little more than those two strong traditions to sustain them.

They came not only in flight from oppression, but with something of the valor of explorers and pioneers--as men willing to pit their enterprise against the mystery and complexity of a New World; men determined, against great odds, to survive and prosper and plant the roots of their future generations in foreign soil.

That they did survive, your forefathers and mine, that they did prosper and create American families with the cultural heritage of their homelands--this will stand in everlasting tribute to their personal courage, to the honor of the countries that gave them birth, and above all to the glory of America.

For it is this very quality of American life, more than any other, that has always electrified the imagination of the world: that men of humble origins have been able to fulfill their ambitions here in ways that would never have been open to them in their native lands.

You are Slovaks, and justifiably proud of it. I'm an Irishman, and proud of that too. But it is with no sense of contradiction that we can thank God we are all Americans.

I had the pleasure of visiting your fathers' country a decade ago. I spent a good deal of time in Bratislava and drove for hundreds of miles through your beautiful countryside, meeting any number of friendly and courteous people along the way who perhaps were the relatives of many of you here.

I know something of the nostalgia you must feel for that fine homeland of yours, and I know how distressed you must all be to think of it now under the tyranny of communist rule.

As a representative of the United States Government, the President has asked me to tell you that the United States will continue to support the just aspirations of all people in the world for independence and liberty--aspirations which the Slovaks share today with many other captive nations.

Our Government seeks to keep in close touch with the people of all such nations, in order to assure those who are oppressed of our continuing sympathy and support, and to encourage their rightful hope for a better future.

But it is primarily as Americans, as fellow-immigrants, that I want to address you here today.

I want to remind you that your people have a deep and proud heritage in American history, as well as in the history of Europe.

George Washington's army had a good many Slovaks in its ranks--and one of them, Major John Ladislav Porelecky, won a place for himself in the history books for his command at the Battle of Newark.

The Slovak Company of the Union Army in the Civil War was famed for its daring and fortitude. Gejza Mihaloczy, an officer of that company who died of battle wounds in 1864, is still a legendary figure in the annals of that war.

Countless other Slovak-Americans served their adopted country with gallantry in the First and Second World Wars, and in Korea; and in their civilian careers your people have made vivid contributions to all aspects of American life.

Your clergymen have risen to positions of high eminence in American Catholicism. I need only mention three such men who have graced us with their presence today: Bishop Grutka, Abbott Theodore Kojis (Koyish), and Monsignor Clement Mlinarnovich.

Your people, who were once denied ownership of their lands by foreign nobility, now own and cultivate vastly productive tracts of farmland in most, if not all, of our fifty states.

Slovak-Americans have founded no less than fifty-five newspapers in this country since 1885, a proud journalistic tradition that is typified by the outstanding careers of men like Michal Bosak, the Pennsylvania publisher.

Still other Slovak-Americans have distinguished themselves in the professions, in business, in government service, and in many other areas of public life, from the novelist Gustav Marshall-Petrovsky to the celebrated young jockey Willie Hartack.

Clearly, the United States would be a poorer nation today, economically, intellectually, culturally and in every other way, if it were not for the two-million of our citizens who are of Slovak birth or ancestry. And, needless to add, those two-million would be poorer if it weren't for the work of the Catholic Sokol throughout the nation.

You may have every reason for being grateful to America; but I hope you will never doubt or forget that America has every reason to be grateful to you.

But America imposes moral obligations on you, too, as it does on all of its citizens. As Americans today, of whatever other national origin, none of us can afford to ignore the pressing and in some ways desperate problems of minority groups less fortunate than ourselves.

I refer primarily, of course, to the conditions of blind prejudice that have continually foiled the American Negroes in their struggle for fundamental civil rights. And there are other, subtler but no less sinister forces of prejudice at work in America today--against Indians, Puerto Ricans, against Mexicans, against people of Japanese, Chinese and Philippine ancestry.

Nor is color the only criterion for intolerance: prejudice still prevents many people of the Jewish faith from attaining their full share of the freedom, the equal opportunity, the untrammelled right to the pursuit of happiness that are so clearly promised in our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution.

The plight of all such afflicted minorities, and the need for all of us to set it right, cannot help but stir the conscience of anyone fit to call himself a citizen of this country. All of us, it seems to me, face a clear challenge today to reaffirm and to demonstrate, in our daily actions, the sense of democratic justice that unites us as Americans.

If we fail to do so, we become no better than the oppressors our fathers found intolerable in their native lands. Only if we succeed, as we can and must succeed, will the ideals of this nation be fully realized. I cannot believe our fathers would have wanted it any other way.

In conclusion, if you will forgive an Irishman's poor pronunciation, let me salute you all with the only two words of Slovakian I understand: "ZDAR BOH!"