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Chapter 8

Conclusion

In 1941 the editors of *Amerikansky russky viestnik* ran an English-language editorial that indignantly asked the question, “Who is an Alien?” Seven months before the United States entered the world war, the editorialist worried about a rising tide of jingoism. “We Americans are great label makers,” he noted, adding, “We do the same with people. We may not know what they are all about, yet we label them and tuck them away in pigeonholes. And right there we make a big mistake.” The writer worried, however, that, “Now, in a time of national tension and danger, we are indulging this bad habit more than ever. We feel jittery and it makes us feel secure to call people names. One of the worst of these tags we attach to people is the word ‘alien.’ We use it for people whom we feel ‘don’t belong.’”

But the writer asserted that the 40,000,000 Americans who were foreign-born or with foreign parents had just as good a claim to the American label as anyone else. “We call ourselves, proudly, ‘melting pot.’ Well, we are. And the first man to throw a stone at an alien is throwing a stone at himself.”

“What makes us different from the Europe most of us hark back to?” he continued. “Just this. We have proved that people of all races and religions can live together for centuries in peace, going about their business, getting things done, and not getting in each other’s hair, whether it’s blonde or brunette, kinked or red. The Red Indian can sit on his reservation and say he isn’t alien. The rest of us can’t. And we can’t be so sure about the Indian either. Didn’t his ancestors – way back – come over from Asia?”¹

This editorial is emblematic of the growing white ethnic assertion of a rightful place in the nation, calls that from the 1920s were often couched by members of the second generation in the language of American patriotism. Matthew Frye Jacobson notes that during World War II rhetorical homages to “my children,” Americans all, became frequent rallying cries, although all the children of the Statue of Liberty presented in patriotic cartoons were white ethnics from the Irish to the Ukrainians. No black or Asian faces intruded into such happy refrains of “racial” harmony under the stars and stripes. And, as noted in Chapter 4, *New Yorkský denník* as early as 1920 celebrated “Americans All” in a gathering of leaders of 28 “racial groups,” all of them white.² But of course not all Americans

harked back to Europe, and even in 1941 black and Asian Americans seem to have little place in *Amerikansky ruscky vestnik's* editorial assertion of a melting pot with "centuries of peace" for all.

Indeed, if the editorialist had looked through his own paper's morgue he would have soon learned a lesson of black and Asian subordination that for decades his own journal and Slovak papers presented and accepted with little criticism. *Amerikansky ruscky vestnik* and Slovak journals reported on efforts to keep blacks from city neighborhoods and had for decades been arguing for the restriction of Asians from the United States, decrying the "Yellow Peril" and "coolie wages" that threatened the country from China and Japan. Following the declaration of war against Japan at the end of that year, the United States interned thousands of Japanese migrants, and even American-born Japanese, fates that thin-skinned Rusyns were never in danger of facing. And, later in the war, Americans with "kinked" hair were viciously assaulted by whites bent on keeping blacks from parks, neighborhoods, and work sites in Detroit, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and other cities. Intent on asserting the nonalien nature of his own people, the Rusyn editorialist developed convenient amnesia on black and Asian subordination in the land where "all races and religions" stayed out of each other's hair.³

Similarly, immigration historians looking at processes of assimilation and Americanization in isolation from questions of race have told an incomplete story. These silences of who belongs, who fits in, conveniently omit lessons immigrants learned courtesy of their own newspapers – as well as many other cultural productions from mass consumer society, entertainment venues, English-language politicians and newspapers – on who like the Rusyns reading *Amerikansky ruscky vestnik* could fit in after taking out citizenship papers and patriotically waving a new nation's flag, and who would perpetually be marginalized, at least if many Americans had their way. At their worst moments, by World War II some Slavs, like other white ethnics, already asserted a right to bar blacks from their neighborhoods, as Thomas Sugrue documents. At other moments, as in this editorial, an amnesiac silence reigns about non-European people who didn't seem to fit into the grand American narrative that white ethnics wished to embrace as their own.⁴

I have argued that Slovaks and Rusyns were well-primed for categorizing blacks as less than full Americans by the coverage of race in the immigrant press. The presentation of lynching articles, coverage of race riots, minstrel shows, and depictions of exotic, savage Africans and Asians in need of the civilizing hand of European colonial masters presented a portrait of black alterity for immigrant readers of the Slavic press. The coverage of black Americans, particularly, in Slavic newspapers cumulatively added up to a portrait of a hypervulnerable people who might occasionally garner editorial sympathy, but more often contempt, as editors reproduced lynching articles that often presented black criminality and sexual deviance as givens.

Other groups engaged in similar boundary-making exercises. Regarding Jewish immigrants, Karen Brodtkin has made the important distinction between ethnoracial assignment – what other groups said about Jews' status as off-white immigrants – and ethnoracial identity – the sense of peoplehood created for themselves, at least partially in reaction to other groups with whom they interacted in the New World. In post-World War II America, Jewish whiteness became more “naturalized,” in large part due to second-generation Jews (as well as East and South European Catholics) moving into the suburbs courtesy of the federal largess of the GI Bill and the Federal Housing Administration, out to the cul-de-sacs from which blacks were barred. In the same years many Jewish intellectuals began to emphasize their group's “prefigurative whiteness,” in supposed affinity with the white Protestant mainstream, and cultural distance from African Americans' “tangle of pathologies.”⁵

This process – both the suburbanization and the “prefigurative” whiteness – for Slavs occurred even before the post-World War II years. In their newspapers, Slovaks and Rusyns had been reading since the 1890s of blacks' hypervulnerability. While some sympathetic treatment of black lynching emerged in immigrant newspapers, far more frequently such stories emphasized the licentiousness and criminal nature of black victims and the supposedly restorative justice represented by white lynch mobs. Likewise, articles documenting urban race riots as early as the first decade of the twentieth century established a binary between deserving white ethnics and blacks as impermissible intruders on job sites and in residential neighborhoods.

Jacobson has argued that with the 1960s' rise of what Michael Novak called the “unmeltable ethnics,” Ellis Island overtook Plymouth Rock as America's foundational pilgrimage site, the place where “we” Americans built this country. Of course, such a narrative was just as amnesiac of black and Asian Americans as the *Amerikansky russky viestnik* editorial discounting Slavs' alienness.⁶

By the 1960s many of the immigrant papers cited in this book had passed out of business, while others printed less frequently, and with more material in English. As the immigration generation died out, second-generation white ethnics turned to other sources of news. But the naturalization of Southeast Europeans' place in the American pantheon, even as blacks were marginalized, continued in the 1960s. In among the collection of Chicago's “Nada,” the Croatian-American Dramatic Society that presented both socialist and blackface minstrel plays, some Croatian American placed a flyer, the *GOP Nationalities Reporter*, August 1964. The flyer featured an Executive Committee of the Nationalities Section of the party, replete with Slavic, Greek, Italian, and Lithuanian members. The Republican Party already was appealing to white ethnics, especially those of East European background. During the previous presidential election, the ill-fated Nixon campaign issued a Lithuanians for Nixon brochure that featured an executive committee of suburban and urban members from across the country. In 1964, the party's *Nationalities Reporter* carried a front-page article that invited readers to “Meet the Goldwater Family.” The article

noted that the Arizona senator “told an audience of over 1,000 at the Republican Salute to Captive Nations, ‘Like all Americans, my grandparents weren’t born in this country.’” A second article on vice-presidential nominee William Miller, “Meeting the Miller family – Speaking of ethnic backgrounds,” pointed out that Miller’s grandparents were Irish and German “and that Mrs. Miller’s father came to this country from Klimkowce (Galicia) Austria, (subsequently Poland and now incorporated into Ukraine). Her mother was Mary Nowak, born in Buffalo, N.Y., of parents who came from Poland. How typically American.”

While this Republican pamphlet explicitly targeted white ethnics, and highlighted the party’s “Captive Nations Plank,” with reference to “the people behind the Iron and Bamboo Curtains,” the erasure of black Americans in Goldwater’s “like all Americans” referring to white-ethnic immigrant grandparents is telling. The election year of 1964 was also the year that President Lyndon Johnson had signed the Civil Rights Act, beginning to sweep away the hurdles placed before other Americans for decades. Of course, Goldwater had voted against the measure in the Senate, basing his opposition on constitutional grounds. While some Northeastern Republicans were instrumental in the act’s passage, on the national stage the party began to court white ethnics at least in part by distancing itself from the cause of black civil rights. The GOP strategy of reaching out to white ethnics – who certainly could have voted for Goldwater based on the senator’s anticommunist bona fides – was on display here.⁷

To be sure, not every reader of *Slovák v Amerike* developed an antiblack animus, nor were performers at minstrel shows invariably Barry Goldwater and George Wallace voters in waiting. Many Slovak members of my family, steeped in the ethnic culture I have explored in these pages, resisted the urge to disparage blacks or use the generic slurs that some other distant relatives did employ. My Slovak grandmother recalled the kindnesses extended to black neighbors. My mother’s father, of southern Italian background, remained in Newark until he passed away, defiantly voting for the city’s first black mayor, Kenneth Gibson, over his fellow Italians who had previously run Newark into the ground. “I have more respect for the colored than I do for my own damn people,” Grandpa Albanese often said. “My own people are no damn good.” This in spite of the fact that he had performed in his own parish’s minstrel shows in the 1940s and 1950s, events fondly remembered by this talented tenor.

Anecdotal evidence, to be sure, but a corrective reminder that the articles one reads or popular culture one consumes and performs does not automatically lead to anything as glib as a “racist” mindset. Other Rusyns and Slovaks whom I have grown to know as a researcher and churchgoer have been much more complex, contradictory, thoughtful, and warm human beings than such reductionist labels (here I can at least agree with *Amerikansky rusky viestník*’s editorialist and shun one-word epithets). It has not been my intention to condemn, but to understand, the reason for those Slavic articles on “*Negrov lynčovanie*” that first caught my eye so long ago.

What I have hoped to provide is a corrective to the amnesia that has developed considering immigrant newspapers' coverage of race. Such papers were reflective of their era, and the 1890s to 1920s were years in which subordination of black and Asian Americans prevailed. Conversely, South and East Europeans were lucky enough to have "a possessive investment in whiteness," as George Lipsitz aptly terms it, that allowed them many housing, employment, citizenship, and other benefits that were off-limits to black and Asian residents of the United States well into the 1960s. I have argued that it was to a great extent through their own newspapers that Slavic immigrants learned of the marginality of blacks, and the contours of America's racialized opportunity structure.⁸

I'd like to think these early newspapers have relevance for our own day, too. At an academic forum where I first presented some of this book's findings, I was asked if my research on lynching articles and the like in the immigrant press left me feeling optimistic or pessimistic regarding the future for a multiethnic America. Depends on what day you catch me, I answered. It is easy to find unsettling parallels between our own day, with antiimmigrant fervor and demonization of migrants "stealing" American jobs and smuggling in "foreign" faiths and ideologies, and the era in which slurs of "Yellow Peril" or worse greeted Asians, and lynchings were a quotidian part of the news cycle. To be sure, the rhetoric is less heated, and the number of what today are called "hate crimes" are a fraction of the lynchings and race riots of the 1890s to 1920s.

But optimistic days and thoughts intervene. If white privilege is something that was learned and consumed in immigrant journals and many other sources, then it is something that can be unlearned. Studying the manner in which immigrants reacted to non-Europeans, in positive ways as well as negative, begins to uncover a shared American history, the study and experience of which remains segregated and incomplete. It is only by frankly acknowledging where we have been that we as a nation can chart a saner course to where we'd like to go.