

The Miss Czech-Slovak USA Pageant was conceived and created by John Fiala and his wife, Lois in 1987. Below is an article, written by John, describing the history, objectives and purpose of the pageant.

MISS CZECH-SLOVAK USA

By John Fiala



The Miss Czech-Slovak USA Pageant was founded in 1985 to help perpetuate Czech-Slovak culture, heritage, and traditions, encouraging young people to exemplify the pride of Czechs, Moravians, and Slovaks in the United States and the world over. My wife Lois and I *conceived* the idea of a Miss Czech USA Pageant (later renamed the Miss Czech-Slovak USA Pageant), and it became part of the Czech Festival in Wilber, Nebraska.

In the first pageant in 1987, there were four contestants. The winner received a \$100 U.S. Savings Bond, a crown, and flowers. The winner now receives a \$2,000 savings bond, a one-year college scholarship, a trip to the Czech Republic or Slovakia, personal keepsake items, and numerous public appearances. There are also awards for the first and second runners-up, along with awards for winners in the talent, costume, and congeniality categories. The contestants are housed in the historic Wilber Hotel. With funds and leadership provided by the Wilber Chapter of the Nebraska Czechs, the pageant continues to grow.

Contestants in the pageant must be of Czech-Moravian-Silesian-Slovak descent. They are judged on their talent, personality, interviews, and a special category of costumes, better known as "kroje." The kroje can be either authentic or Americanized, handed down from ancestors or made from scratch by the contestant or her relatives and friends. Since the kroj has departed from its original form during its years in America, the pageant includes two divisions in the costume category: authentic and

americanized. The costume competition, along with interviews by judges and by the master of ceremonies, and talent presentations in either English or the Czech or Slovak language, make for a lively and entertaining event.

After some early struggles, the pageant has persevered to accomplish the goal of bringing public attention to the pride and heritage of Czechs, Moravians, Silesians and Slovaks. It is a non-profit event, with awards furnished by many people, locally and in the Czech and Slovak Republics. Many people have contributed to the success of the pageant over the years in an effort to make it the best possible ethnic pageant. Among them is Joseph Yager of Ohio, who wrote a special "Czech and Slovak Pageant Song" in 2000. It begins,

*"We've come here today to celebrate our way
from spring to summer goes our lives they say.
Immigrants we are, to find a freedom here,
now commemorate our homeland every day of the year."*

Over the past 17 years, the pageant founders have also been instrumental in helping to organize state pageants in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Kansas, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas and Iowa. Prior to the birth of the Miss Czech-Slovak USA Pageant, only Nebraska and Oklahoma had state pageants.

Several years ago the question was asked, "What's the real purpose of this ethnic pageant?" For the young women involved, it's an opportunity to explore and express pride in their ancestry, culture, and heritage, making them ambassadors who perpetuate the traditions inherited from their ancestors. During the first 15

Miss Czech-Slovak USA Pageants, more than 190 contestants have become youthful ambassadors. The knowledge they gained will be passed on in the future. The future of Czech and Slovak culture and traditions depends much on the ambassadorship of young people such as these. To encourage future contestants in this pageant and instill pride in their ancestry, a program called the "Little Sisters" was initiated several years ago. A Little Sister is assigned to each contestant, who mentors the younger girl and helps her learn to appreciate her heritage.

Helen Keller once said, "The best and most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or even touched. They must be felt with the heart." This is the experience of the young women in this national pageant. One of the remarks frequently made by contestants after participating in the pageant is, "I am not the same person I was before. I have become more involved in Czech and Slovak events and it has helped me to grow and develop a strong sense of self-esteem." Lisa Volesky, a student at the University of Northern Iowa and winner of the 2001 Miss Czech-Slovak USA pageant, participated in the 21st SVU World Congress (Czechoslovak Society of Arts and Sciences) in Pilsen, Czech Republic, in the summer of 2002, presenting a message of youthful hope for the future.

The Miss Czech-Slovak USA Pageant is truly an educational experience for the contestants. With the opportunity to model the kroje, present varied talents, develop their knowledge of family and ancestral history, and express themselves clearly they are molding a path to their future. Approximately 20 states will be represented in the 17th annual, Miss Czech-Slovak USA Pageant, which will be held during the Czech Festival in Wilber, Nebraska on August 2 and 3, 2002, with several thousand spectators on hand to view this colorful cultural event.

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