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UNIVERSITY OF BALTIMORE
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

ORAL HISTORY DEED OF GIFT

The University of Baltimore’s Oral History Collection is comprised of taped interviews of people giving first-hand accounts of some aspect of Baltimore history which might otherwise go unrecorded.

You have been asked to give an interview. A tape recording of your interview will be made. The tapes, along with an abstract of their content and, in some cases, a verbatim transcript, will be deposited in the University of Baltimore Archives, 1420 Maryland Avenue, Baltimore, MD 21201. These materials will be made available for research by qualified scholars, for educational use, for scholarly publications, and other related purposes.

I, Eva Slezak, have read the above and, in view of the historical value of this information, agree to the recording of my voice and my stories. I grant the University of Baltimore the full use of this information in all media known and unknown. I grant and assign all my rights pertaining to this information to the University of Baltimore.

Signed: Eva Slezak
Name (print) Eva Slezak
Address 2802 Mayfield Avenue
Baltimore, Md 21213
Telephone (410) 488-0950 F (410) 396-1789 H
Date Dec 13, 1997 Interviewer Jeannine Railey
**INFORMATION SHEET**

**INTERVIEWER:** Jeannine Railey  
**PROJECT:** East Baltimore Oral History

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**GENERAL TOPIC(S) OF INTERVIEW:**

**INFORMANT’S BIOGRAPHICAL DATA**

| NAME: | Eva Slezak  
| ADDRESS: | 2802 Mayfield Ave.  
| PHONE NUMBER: | 396-1789  
| PLACE OF BIRTH: | Prague, Czechoslovakia |

**MEMBERSHIPS:**

- Afro-American Historical & Genealogical Society  
- Association for the Study of Afro-American History & Culture  
- Czech & Slovak Heritage Association of Maryland

**SCHOOLING AND/OR OTHER TRAINING:**

- Western Maryland College  
  - undergrad.  
- Drexel University  
  - grad.

**OCCUPATIONS:**

- Reference Librarian  
- Editor, Maryland Czech & Slovak Heritage Newsletter

**PARENTS**

| MOTHER’S NAME: | Emily Cech  
| DATE OF BIRTH: | 1924.04.15  
| PLACE OF BIRTH: | Czechoslovakia  
| FATHER’S NAME: | Charles Slezak  
| DATE OF BIRTH: | 1918.01.18  
| PLACE OF BIRTH: | New York (City) |
Interview with Ms. Eva Slezak

Today is December 13, 1997. Interview with Ms. Eva Slezak.

Good morning Ms. Slezak and thank you for the interview.

Eva: I’m Eva Slezak and I’m a librarian; a reference librarian.

Jeannine: Okay, I’d like to start with a brief personal history. Could you tell me where you were born?

Eva: I was born in Prague, what was then called Czechoslovakia, now the Czech Republic.

Jeannine: And your parents names?

Eva: My mother’s name is Emily, and my father’s name is Charles.

Jeannine: Are both of them from the Czech Republic as well?

Eva: Yes, and no. My mother was born in the Czech Republic, my father was born in the United States in New York City as a matter of fact, although both of his parents had been born overseas. And then he went back overseas, and that’s how he met my mother.

Jeannine: And when was that?

Eva: That was in the, um., early forties when he met my mother, I think they went back in the thirties.

Jeannine: What do your parents do?

Eva: You mean...

Jeannine: Occupation?

Eva: My mother was a student at that time, and my father was working for a, uhh..., it was a tanning company.

Jeannine: Not suntan?!

Eva: Leather company.

Jeannine: Okay. Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Eva: One brother.

Jeannine: Older? younger?
Eva: Younger brother.

Jeannine: Okay, can you please tell me a little bit about your childhood?

Eva: Well, we came to this country again, um., or my father again returned, but my mother and I came in 1950. Right during the MacCarthy years which was great fun,... and settled in a small community in Harford County called Belcamp, where the Bata Shoe Company was located, and lived there for a while. Went to school in Aberdeen, moved to Elkton.

Jeannine: As a child of Czech descent, did you feel your childhood was any different from others in your neighborhood?

Eva: Other than the fact that I had wonderful Czech food... compared to the American rather dreary food that I encountered, and fabulous Christmas cookies, and that we spoke Czech at home, since I stepped in the door, we would be speaking Czech and as soon as I would step out of the door, back in to English.

Jeannine: Was that difficult?

Eva: No...no, and my brother who was born in this country also learned Czech, and encountered no difficulty.

Jeannine: Was he able to switch back and forth as, as, easily as you? Or, was it more practiced for him?

Eva: I think he understood that when we were in the house, he was to speak Czech, and when we were outside we had no problem. We knew that they didn’t understand Czech so we spoke English; and to some extent that might have improved our English because we didn’t pick up a lot of slang in our diction. We only repeated what the teachers would say.

Jeannine: Now you mentioned the Christmas cookies, uh., what other special activities, celebrations did your family entertain?

Eva: You have to consider most of the time when I was growing up, we would be the only Czech in the area. So when we had any kind of celebrations it would be in the context of the home situation, also with my grandparents, my father’s parents. So it would be only the six of us at
the most. And we would also celebrate Name's Days or what's known as Saint's Days.

Jeannine: What date is that?

Eva: Now those are, uh.. Americans for the most part are not familiar with this practice, although, those who are Roman Catholic are acquainted with this practice. This is also celebrated in the Hispanic communities in the United States. This is more prevalent in Europe, um..., When you are named, you also have a Saint's name, and the calendar year is divided into such a way that each day has at least one Saint's name appropriate to it. For instance, November 4th is Saint Charles of Borromeo. We all know St. Patrick's Day, but also there is St. Joseph's Day in March. And so you have St. Anna's Day and you have, um., St. Emilio's, which is Emily, so those are more significant to some degree, and are celebrated more often than even birthdays.

Jeannine: Now is this, um., your Saint name given at the time of Confirmation?

Eva: When you're named. When you're named.

Jeannine: Oh, at birth. Then, Okay.

Eva: So, certain names are more popular, for instance, Joseph is almost like a state holiday because there's so many named Joseph. So you would have parades, um..., That's overseas anyway, and special celebrations and especially in the villages and so on, and you would even get cards printed up and they're still available in some stores in this country. You can find patron, patron saint's names on calendars and the cards, they go along with it.

Jeannine: So that does differ, now, do you take another name upon, upon confirmation?

Eva: I don't really know. I don't really know the differences in day in the Catholic faith. But we celebrated the Name's Day because everybody did that, regardless whether you were Protestant or Catholic, you celebrated Name's Days.

Jeannine: So that's not a religious sect.

Eva: No.

Jeannine: It's pretty much a national.

Eva: It was secular.
Jeannine: Oh, wonderful,...

Eva: And sometimes we would have to celebrate the holidays a little differently. Essentially the same way as Americans did, but again some of the element of the Catholic in our background we would fast Christmas, day before Christmas, we would fast on Good Friday, and then we would have fish for our evening meal.

Jeannine: During Lent, or every Friday?

Eva: Good Friday, and then also certain kinds of foods would be prepared. Just as you may have turkey for Thanksgiving, we might have roast duck, or roast goose. And now we substitute chicken because it’s healthy.

(laugh)

Eva: But you also have certain types of pastries and special breads that you would prepare for the holidays, and being a small family, and also because my father was in business, we couldn’t always take off the time that we needed to really celebrate as much, so we would reduce some of the celebrations.

Jeannine: As far as the preparation time for them?

Eva: Um huh..

Jeannine: The baking?

Eva: You can do it as extensively, or even attend other festivities that we would have liked to.

Jeannine: This would be for Christmas, Easter that you would celebrate....

Eva: Usually the two.

Jeannine: I want to say “Micheluas”, December 4th or 5th?

Eva: There’s also The Three Kings, but we didn’t, we pretty much followed American customs. I mean, we knew of the Three Kings and, and the celebrations, but we didn’t do any of the other activities with it. Now some of the Czech communities where you had a larger group, like in the mid-west and I know even in Baltimore, for a long time they celebrated certain activities. They would have not just dinners, but they would have the dances that would go along with it. And
there would be dances, I’m not sure of the exact time, in the springtime there would be certain
dances, and in the autumn, you had your “vinobrany” which is a celebration of the harvesting of
the grapes. And that is still done on an annual basis in the Baltimore community where they
have a dinner dance.

Jeannine: So these aren’t religious holidays, they’re more..

Eva: Seasonal to some degree.

Jeannine: I see.

Eva: And they really stem from a basically rural background. Because of the harvesting of the
grapes and in the spring basically, it was a sort of celebrating “spring has come” kind of
situation, so there would be a dinner dance associated with that, too. But all of these of course
stem from the rural village life. So in an urban setting you can only do so much, you can’t do as
much as you could in perhaps as in Kansas, or Nebraska, or Oklahoma up to even Texas.

Jeannine: Where the land is their source of livelihood...

Eva: Where they still do it. Sure.

Jeannine: Sure, that makes sense. Do you attribute these special interests as a historian of
Czech culture from your experience as a youth, I mean, with all of these special holidays and the
language, so enriched you that you wanted to continue with your scholarly research?

Eva: I was curious to see how American society affected not just the original settlers, but to
some degree, how much we were able to maintain or adapted, or incorporated. For instance, now
a days we usually celebrate Thanksgiving, even though that’s not a Czech holiday. You see we
participate in that, but sometimes we use our own foods or types of things. Instead of having
turkey as I mentioned, we might have had roast goose and dumplings, and sauerkraut.

Jeannine: Sauerkraut?

Eva: Yes

Jeannine: Sauerkraut soup, is that something you’re familiar with?

Eva: No, we never had that at home. We had liver dumpling soup in a clear broth, which you
know is very good.

Jeannine: No, I don’t (laughing)

Eva: It’s very good, very, very good!

Jeannine: I’m sure it is. My grandparents are Czechoslovakian as well, so I have experience in some of these foods.

Eva: It is an art to preparing these foods.

Jeannine: I’m sure.

Eva: Especially the clear broth.

Jeannine: When you were mentioning the pastries, that’s fond memories of my grandmother. So what exactly is your educational background. You mentioned your younger years in Aberdeen, then to Elkton high school?

Eva: No, Elkton I attended elementary school and then we moved to Oxford, Pennsylvania, where I attended high school, junior and senior high, and from then I went to Western Maryland College in Westminster, and then I went to graduate school in Philadelphia, Drexel.

Jeannine: Drexel? What was...

Eva: To get my library degree.

Jeannine: Oh, I was an old Terror also, up there at Western Maryland.... So that’s library science?

Eva: Library science.

Jeannine: What was your undergrad at WMC?

Eva: I majored in modern foreign languages and received a degree in French. But studied German, Russian, any, any language I could get a hold of that was available at the time.

Jeannine: That’s great. So when did you return to, or come to Baltimore?

Eva: June of 1969. I moved to Baltimore to begin my job at the Enoch Pratt Free Library.

Jeannine: So, this was right after you graduated from Drexel?

Eva: Um huh. About ten days.
Jeannine: That’s wonderful. (came to work here.) Where did you begin your work here, what was your position?

Eva: Worked in the Humanities Department.

Jeannine: And what did that entail?

Eva: That time was basically desk duty, and I was given a special responsibility for the vertical files, and then gradually took over the periodicals, and serials, and also the bibliographies and so on... I stayed there for eight years, eight and a half years.

Jeannine: So you were in the Humanities department for eight and a half years; what was your move after that?

Eva: In 1977, I applied for the job I presently hold, which is librarian in charge, Afro-American collection, which is now called the African-American collection, and also provide assistance with Maryland department desk duty.

Jeannine: How vast is the African-American collection here at the Enoch Pratt?

Eva: Presently, the collection is close to 8,000 volumes, and it also includes, besides books, special files, what we call vertical files, they are more archival than with the (?) normally associated with that, and we have several cabinets of those, in fact we have, I'm trying to think, how many drawers, about 24, 25 drawers, ... 26 drawers of legal-size and, um.. also there’s some microfiche holdings, and microfilm holdings, special collections and that’s extensive, growing every time because there’s more and more coming out. And now, we’re also venturing into CD ROM’s. Some information is only available in that and it’s also cheaper and with access more readily accessible computers, not just to the public, but to the staff as well, it almost makes sense, because that unless someone pockets the CD, um.., we have more control over that.

Jeannine: More durable...

Eva: Uh huh, more durable.

Jeannine: How far back do these, the archives go?

Eva: Well, the information that’s found in the files, the vertical files themselves, were almost
non-existent when I took over in ’77, but they have expanded greatly. So it tends be from ’77 to the present, however, there are, there are references to the index, there’s also a card index which indexes the vertical files and other materials, books, and stuff, and references in there that date further back, as we find information. In the books, we have somethings as old as 1783, which is in the vault. It is a collection of Phillis Wheatley books and we have quite an extensive collection of abolitionists over at the Olmstead thing currently on going, I can see that that’s going to be, some of that is going to be extremely interesting.

Jeannine: Oh, that’s incredible, these were found and just donated to the libr..

Eva: Many were already in the collection. That’s what makes it so interesting. Many of these things were already part of the library. And then through the years, things were acquired by gift, and in some instances at auctions, um... Sometimes just a fluke, it seems someone’s cleaning out house and says”I’ve got this book I don’t know what to do with, “ so.... that’s when we really get excited.

Jeannine: Big finds?

Eva: Uh huh!

Jeannine: Oh, wonderful!

Eva: We have been able to acquire some books that way, through older families disposing of material, they don’t want it to be sold, they want it someplace where the public can use it, and that’s what makes it truly, truly a gift. Because they are interested in the next generations. They want this to be available, rather than stuck in a drawer somewhere, or in a museum.

Jeannine: Switch back now to the Bohemian migrants in East Baltimore. Now the East Baltimore’s population demographically has changed many times over the years. When, when did the Bohemians in East Baltimore really make their presence, um... known?

Eva: From what I can decipher from various sources and I got into this purely because I was interested in finding out more how the community came about, and I didn’t really have any living sources to consult, to tell me about their family history, so I depended on primary
documents such as newspapers, federal census, petition to the mayor and city council,

Jeannine: Stating what? Asking for citizenship?

Eva: No, different kinds of things, ... I'll describe some of those in a minute. Also naturalization papers, passenger ship lists, things of that nature. And what I discovered, I had a theory and from what I had heard from other researchers in Texas, and so on, that people started coming before the Civil War. And that's true, but it was just a trickle. There were already some people here. However, after the Civil War is when the bulk started to migrate to Baltimore. You had all kinds of factors involved. You had the fact that you had the shipping line, the major shipping line, the North Lloyd Dutch, Deutsche actually, not Dutch, D E U T S C H E, which had its head office in New York City, but its second most important office in Baltimore. And it had its pier, and they went straight out of Germany and so the Bohemians, because that's what they were called at that time, versus Czech, would go to Hamburg or Brennen, get on these ships and come to Baltimore. Now you had a couple factors involved in why they stayed in Baltimore or didn't. Sometimes they stayed in Baltimore, sometimes that was just a point to go west. To the mid-west and west, to go to Chicago, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Wisconsin and so on, because you had your B&O trail lines.

Jeannine: So, this was a point of entry?

Eva: Right, as they got off the ship, they never even got into the city most of the time, not unless they had to spend the night. But they even had from what I understand, accommodations down there. They go straight from the ship, processed, get on the train and head out west. So we had a lot of people coming through that way. But some people changed their mind, they might have said "oh, I've got a cousin, or a friend, or I've heard that Baltimore's nice", so they knew that there was a group of people here. We're talking about the mid 1860's, 1870's is when the trickle became a flow. And then it really got going in the 1880's. And that's when we start seeing almost entire passenger lists, um..., steerage, I should say, oh, not first class, Bohemian, Bohemian. These were the German ships, so on the lists you would sometimes find the Czech
name listed with German, in a German fashion.

Jeannine: Because?

Eva: Um. that's because... I'm trying to think of an example, of a name. The man's name might have been Menache, but he would have been listed as Miller, or Mueller. It's the same thing, but phonetically the would write the Czech name, but they would write it with German phonetics. Because many of the people were acquainted with German, so they were more likely to put it that way. So, you would find a variation in the spelling, which sometimes made it a pickle for people when they're doing research. So, you have to keep that in mind, that a name that might have been written with Czech lettering, all of a sudden, phonetically it still the same, but it has a different kinds of consonants. To show that combination of that sounds.

Jeannine: I see.

Eva: But one of the things that came out of this is, unlike in some places, the Bohemians were identified as being Bohemian and you would have “Behm” or “Bahm” which is German for Bohemian and not Austrian.

Jeannine: What was.

Eva: At that time, it was still the Austria-Hungarian Empire.

Jeannine: What was going on in the Austria-Hungarian Empire in the 1880's that would have so many Bohemians leaving their homeland? Was there a Depression or the mines,. Bohemia was primarily a mining. or ore mining area?

Eva: No, No. Although you got part of it right. It was the high, it was much highly industrialized, compared to Slovakia, although you had farmland, you had high industry, and you had a lot of craftspeople. Now, basically they note three factors: politics, religion, and you have your economic. Religious and social might fit, or you might say politics and social. Some people felt pressure because they could not worship as they chose. It was predominately a Roman Catholic country, some of the Protestants felt they were being put upon, there was a strong pressure. Also at this time there was a strong pressure by the Austria-Hungarians to Germanize
everything, so there was pressure to point where some people Germanized their names. For instance, my name instead of being Suchak would have been Schlesenger because I wanted to get ahead. So, some people felt they were being treated a second class citizens. There had been some problems prior to that where they tried to assert the nationality and had it squelched so some people felt threatened.

Economically, Europe was going through a real bad time. And so, that's why we find certain migration patterns and I noticed that in looking at what I could determine of those settled in Baltimore, most of them came from the southern part of Bohemia. You find very few from the area my ancestors are from, the northern part, because the economic conditions didn't hit them as badly, for some reason. I don't know the history of that. So, what you find, and I've found this pattern to be true in other settlements, so, people were drawn, that were farmers, were drawn to the mid-west, those that were craftsmen and tradesmen were drawn to the cities and often stayed in the cities, and the story goes that, and I've heard it from every Bohemian community, whether it's New York, Baltimore, and the mid-west, Chicago, as well as the heartlands, it was said that when a Czech came in the morning, by nightfall he had a job, usually before noon.

Jeannine: Following the same trade they plied...?

Eva: Not necessarily, and that's the other thing that was said. Even though whatever craft they knew, or trade they knew, if they weren't hiring for that, you learned whatever trade was necessary to be hired.

But it is also known, especially in Baltimore, and New York from experience I've heard my parents telling me and other people, you had a lot of Germans who were acquainted with the Czechs and of course, the Czechs spoke German. So this was something they had that maybe other immigrants did not have. So, you have a nice, large, active German community in Baltimore. They were at the piers waiting for the Czech workers, because of their reputation, and the fact that in most cases, they were familiar with German language, and they were familiar with
German culture. They had a similar, they understood each other in that way. They were familiar with the Czech reputation as being good workers, and here you had people coming over who were skilled. They didn’t have to train them. They were used to a certain kind of discipline and organization.

Jeannine: So assimilation was easier with the...

Eva: Assimilation between Czech and Germans was easier, so in Baltimore especially, Czechs did not encounter the same kind of resentment they may have encountered in other cities. And so, that’s why you also see that pattern of where they settled. They went into an area, although Baltimore was a, had a large population of Germans to begin with, so they came over on the German ships. They were met by people who spoke German. The ship’s captain took the list down in German, so right there they didn’t have the same kind of hassles that others may have encountered. And, they would be met at the piers by, often by Czech people who might even had been there to scout for the German companies. So their adaptation was much easier. Also, when they moved into what was then, what became later the 7th Ward, Northeast Baltimore at that time because the boundary only went up to North Avenue. So that area from Fells Point northward up through Broadway and then the other streets around Maceldry, a lot of them and Johns Hopkins Hospital, Barnes, Abbott, many of those streets that had been identified as alley houses, Durham, Madeira, all those. They moved into that area, but you already had a large German population there and some Irish.

Jeannine: Irish Catholics?

Eva: Some Irish Catholics in there too.

Jeannine: With the, um., with their move to East Baltimore you said they were craftsmen. Now, I’ve noticed by Monument Street there’s still a Bohemian loan...

Eva: Oh, yes.

Jeannine: Bank there and I was curious as to when they came in, if the loans were granted to help them start up their businesses so they could ply their trades that they had, or was it more
for homeownership? To get these..

Eva: It was more towards homeownership, so they were basically building and loans. And how these got started...I don't have exact dates to give you at this time..., but one of the businesses that was prevalent in the Czech community, also in the Polish, was what were called "saloons".

Jeannine: You're saying that like it would mean something different than a pub.

Eva: Well in English, in English, right. But that's what they called them in America. Although, we would call "Hospoda" overseas, which is like a pub. And a hospoda, now that's where you got together and hung out, and discussed things, and you had food, and you had drink, and the news of the day was passed around, and so on. So, in many of these hospodas or saloons, the owners became politically knowledgable, and active. Also, they had some money. So, if you were a newly arrived immigrant, or had been here a couple of years, and go to one of the American banks looking for a loan, they'd look at you and say "No. You're just a tradesman, you know, we don't know you, you don't even know the language, etc etc..." So maybe some guy was hanging around in the hospoda, and telling how he wanted to get a loan to get a house. And the guy says "Yeah, I'll loan you the money." And so, some of these savings and loans were started in a saloon, the idea for it. What's interesting looking at some of the records, the early ones, is that a group would get together, sometimes the first meeting would be in a saloon, eventually they would find maybe the second floor of somebody's home, or an office, and they would incorporate. And, the paperwork was meticulous.

Jeannine: What year are we, are we still in..

Eva: We're talking about the 1880's. We're getting into now the really, really active years. The record keeping was absolutely meticulous. Minutes were kept in Czech, and in some cases English, later on it would be in English as well. They would state who was present, who said what, how much was paid into the fund, because people would contribute to this fund.

Jeannine: To have a percentage of the fund?

Eva: And whatever they could do, manage at that time. Sometimes you would see someone and
give $1.50, you’d see somebody else give $.25, and these records were kept.

Jeannine: Now is this money given, to better their position they’re giving money, or is it out of altruism?

Eva: This is how they are starting. Because, of course, they will be rewarded by the fact that once these people get their homes, and start paying back the money with interest, that of course, then enables that individual to move ahead. Which means everybody moves ahead,’cause that was the whole idea. But almost the first thing upon coming to the United States, was to own your own home. And what we discovered was that by 1900, in the Federal Census, if they weren’t at the top, they were second in the highest percentage of owning their own homes. What that means now is the German’s might have been first, but the Bohemians were very high at the top.

Also, another thing to keep in mind, even though they might not know English, at the time, or that they were..., or they could write English, the Bohemians had, and this has been proven in other... for other settlements in the States, had the highest literacy rate of any immigrating group to the United States.

Jeannine: Now that’s amazing, seeing their language is a different alphabet. So..

Eva: No, it’s the same alphabet, just the Slavic language. But, it’s the same alphabet. The Czech language uses Roman letters.

Jeannine: Oh, okay. I thought it was like the Russian Cyrillic.

Eva: So, they had a high rate of literacy, they had a high rate of employable skills, and from what I see, they assimilated quickly. Lots of times I hear about how the Slavs had, and this is overall Polish, and others, had trouble understanding the democratic system. And this is regarding the petitions that I mentioned earlier. I was digging around, and I found as early as the 1870’s, a petition to the mayor and city council. At that time, and we still have these tremendous storms that, and lots of water comes gushing through that area of East Baltimore. At that time you had the run that wasn’t covered, but they would flood. So, in this particular case, the horrendous storms took place in July. Flooded the area, and floated away the outhouses, and
destroyed things, and a lot of debris from the slaughterhouses and everything was all over the place. And the system that was supposed to enable the water to go away backed up and flooded into the homes. So, that as they described in the paper, the furniture was floating around the first floor, and people, and floating out the street and everything was one of these tremendous storms. Well, one can say “Okay, these are ignorant people, who don’t know what to do. Don’t know the democratic system.” What did they do? They petitioned the mayor and city council for damages and got it! And that is recorded in the city council minutes. They misspelled the names of the people represented. The other interesting part of it is, some of the lawyers and businessmen that were involved with this were German and Irish, with the Czech community. So here you already have a coalition building.

Jeannine: The whole community pulling together.

Eva: You have a community. Those are people in some cases who had newly arrived. On the petitions that you find to the mayor and city council, you find petitions for the...improvement of the street, for the extension of the street and for street lighting.

Jeannine: So everyone would benefit?

Eva: The signatures indicate many of the individuals were homeowners. And what’s interesting is to find that in the early years, like in the 1870’s, when one of the petitions I found, when they signed their name, they signed it as they do in Europe, or did at that time. Like last name first, and they had it with the accent marks. In Czech we use a “hacek” which is a little v, and a “carka”, which is like a little, little slash, or a little circle,”krouzek”, and so these were there. Checking property ownership listings and city directories, I discovered they actually owned these homes. So, these were already homeowners. Now, in later years, the petitions often had the same names, sometimes Anglicized a little bit, but the marks weren’t there, they dropped it. And that’s one of the things that happens in this country.

Jeannine: So, we dropped our accent marks?

Eva: But interesting enough, some of the strangest combinations, because we have a lot of
consonance in our names, and some of the names are rather unusual, were kept. So, that’s another misconception, that everybody changed their name, or shortened their name. Many, and it seemed to be prevalent in the Czech community, they did not, they held onto their original name, or as much of it as they could.

Other petitions included, two others, that were extremely interesting, again we’re talking about political involvement. One, there was a petition to have a certain individual in the community appointed as a lamp lighter. Now, unless you know the history of Baltimore, you don’t know that this is a key political position to go around lighting lamps.

Jeannine: This was a position of power?
Eva: The gas lamps. It was important and power. And the second which was extremely interesting, was to have an individual appointed as a translator. To go with the immigrants, to deal with the administrative, and the city government, so that an individual who did not know English, would have a translator go with him to take care of things.

Jeannine: For loans, to get them property?
Eva: The paperwork.

Jeannine: Just to make sure they wouldn’t be taken advantage of?
Eva: Um huh. So, there was a petition to the mayor and city council as to, they knew the perfect person for this job, who knew about five or six languages, including German, Czech and what they called the Slavish, and some others, and they could assist in facilitating things. They didn’t use that word, but I found that extremely interesting.
The remainder of the interview deals with discussion on the changing patterns of East Baltimore’s population. The vacant buildings and the various plans for renewal are discussed. Ms. Slezak was hesitant to answer many questions, stating that she wasn’t familiar enough to respond. I knew this ahead of time so the conversation was geared to more abstract solutions. The community base was viewed as the key to rejuvenate the area. The bonding of individuals as a group is the only way she feels the neighborhoods can survive. She mentions the need for businesses to take a chance in the community, and the importance of the neighborhood’s support to keep them there. She feels in order to keep a solid foundation, the community must work to sell their neighborhoods. They must stress the positive to draw in new occupants to avoid the vacancies left by urban flight.

In the follow-up interview, many of the Czech terms had to be clarified. The proper spellings and usage were unclear. The brief conversation dealt with how the words were to be pronounced, and why the spellings had changed. Ms. Slezak was a pleasure to interview. She was extremely knowledgable and took the time to make sure I understood her meaning.