

Bohemian and Swedish Immigrants

The three novels that Willa Cather wrote between 1913 and 1918—*O Pioneers!*, *The Song of the Lark*, and *My Ántonia*—center on immigrant female artists from Sweden and Bohemia: Alexandra Bergson, Thea Kronborg, and Ántonia Shimerda. Between 1850 and 1950, some 50 million Europeans left their homelands—mostly for North America. What motivated so many thousands of Bohemians and Swedes to immigrate to Nebraska?

Bohemia

Bohemia is a former kingdom bounded by Germany, Poland, Austria, and Moravia. In 1918, Bohemia became the core of the newly formed state of Czechoslovakia. On January 1, 1993, Czechoslovakia was split into two independent states, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The Czech Republic comprises the former province of Bohemia.

My Ántonia begins in 1883, when Bohemia was still part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A growing Czech nationalism led to ethnic tension between the Czech-speaking population of Bohemia and their German-speaking rulers. Such divisions encouraged many Bohemians to immigrate to the Great Plains, especially since the circulation of railroad company advertisements in Czech newspapers and magazines offered cheap land in Nebraska. Worsening economic conditions and overpopulation pushed most Czechs out of their homeland. Many Czechs relied on weaving industries for their livelihoods, but increased industrialization made it impossible to support a family that way.

Contrary to negative stereotypes, many Bohemian immigrants had education, money, and respect in their homeland. Coming to America—where they

were lonely, poor, and often manipulated—was simply too much to bear for many men and women who, like Mr. Shimerda, “died from a broken heart.” All told, between 1856 and World War I, over 50,000 Czechs moved to Nebraska.

Sweden

Between 1845 and 1865, severe crop failures and poverty in Sweden—due partly to large population growth—caused the first spike in Swedish immigration. By 1890, approximately 478,000 Swedes had immigrated to America, ultimately reducing Sweden’s total population by one fourth. As in Bohemia, economic and social circumstances motivated many to leave. As it became unfeasible to buy land in Sweden, the Homestead Act made such a dream possible in America. Religious persecution, personal misfortune, failing farms, and unfair employment practices led other Swedes to leave. After the Civil War, Swedish settlements expanded from Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota, to the Great Plains of Kansas and Nebraska. Between 1845 and 1930, over 1.2 million Swedes migrated to America.

My Ántonia accurately reflects some of the difficulties faced by immigrant pioneers, although the novel should not be read as a history book. For example, many early settlers had to survive without wood. Even after the railroad connected Hastings to Red Cloud in 1878, the transportation and price of lumber remained too expensive for most families. Sod houses (built with bricks made from various kinds of grass) attracted snakes and other varmints. Dirt floors and leaking roofs made these homes especially unwelcoming during rainstorms and blizzards. Most families replaced them as soon as they earned enough money from their efforts to tame the Nebraska Divide.