

He Took Fefuge in Santa Cruz



PETER ROVNIANEK

One of the greatest representatives of the American Slovak Community in the United States, actually lived for a time in Santa Cruz. In disgrace. "Buried alive."

His name was Peter V. Rovnianek. He lived in the "log cabin" on Laurel Street, the interesting building which was built about 65 years ago by the Charlie Places who were touring actors. They kept it but a short time, then left and it became the home of Mr. and Mrs. Peter V. Rovnianek.

Rovnianek came here in 1911-1912, branded a dishonest swindler by his countrymen.

He lived a quiet life here for several years, it has been described as "buried alive," working in the gardens at the log cabin. While here the Rovnianeks also enlarged the structure which is a true log cabin, made of redwood logs. (Today it is Babbling Brook Restaurant.)

Peter V. Rovnianek was born June 27, 1867, of Slovak parentage, in Dolny Hricov, Slovakia. He was a brilliant student who studied for the priesthood in Budapest and in Austria. In 1888 he migrated to America on money provided by Monsignor Cibulka, and entered St. Mary's College in Cleveland to complete his studies.

and partnership which he accepted. He left St. Mary's after much soul-searching, feeling that he was better suited to help his people as a journalist.

At that time there were about a dozen small Slovak Societies in the mining and industrial towns of Ohio, Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Rovnianek set up bylaws, drafted a constitution and organized a national society during a meeting attended by representatives of these small groups in 1890. "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" was the society's motto.

From a membership of 250 it grew rapidly to 10,000 and Rovnianek was elected president each year until 1901 when he decided not to run. In the meanwhile he had been instrumental in organizing the Zivena, first slovak women's benefit society in the United States.

By 1893 he had a long list of fast-growing business enterprises including in addition to the publishing; coal mining, developing timber lands, and

foreign exchange — which developed into a private bank with a branch in New York.

Rovnianek by then was acknowledged the "uncrowned king" of the Slovaks in America. He was probably the first Slovak millionaire in this country, he was a dynamic and forceful speaker, constantly in demand by Americans as well as by his own people, and he was highly respected.

In 1907 he helped Rev. Stefan Furdek and others to found the Slovak League of America.

A year later, an economic recession hit the U.S. and bank failures became common. Rovnianek, who had made enemies over the years as well as friends, found himself at the mercy of enemies, unable to liquidate his frozen assets in time to save his bank.

A bank in Slovakia loaned him \$100,000 but it was not enough to save the day and Rovnianek's bank failed. Unfortunate depositors branded him a dishonest speculator

who had destroyed their life savings — and he left New York and Pennsylvania in disgrace in 1911, coming first to Nevada, then to Santa Cruz.

He remained in exile from his people who had divested him of his honorary presidency and his membership in the society he had founded — and he must have been a desperately unhappy man. He tried prospecting for gold in California and in 1933 died at Hornitos, the little mining town.

Rovnianek rests in the Bohemian National Cemetery in Chicago, and today a fine monument stands on his grave, commemorating his many outstanding accomplishments.

Society members, realizing at last that his had been an unfortunate chain of circumstances, contributed liberally to the cost of the monument.

"An abler, more fearless advocate of the Slovak cause never lived," states an article in PAMATNIKA, the official Slovak publication of 1965.

"A better American, with just pride in his ancestry, never lived," it goes on. "No man has done more for the Slovaks in America. No man has done more for the National Slovak Society..."

George Vrana of Rodeo Gulch has the publications and a photograph of Rovnianek which we have used for this article.

"He was a great man," Vrana says. "A great man."
—MARGARET KOCH

Rovnianek, who had always loved his downtrodden nation, began writing articles on nationalistic and patriotic themes, urging the formation of a fraternal benefit society. The owners of the only Slovak newspaper then in business in the United States, offered him a co-editorship

REFERENCE