

Landmarks Preservation Commission  
July 19, 1994; Designation List 259  
LP-1914

**BOHEMIAN NATIONAL HALL**, 321-325 East 73rd Street, Manhattan.  
Built 1895, 1897; architect William C. Frohne.

Landmark Site: Borough of Manhattan Tax Map Block 1448, Lot 16.

On June 15, 1993, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation as a Landmark of the Bohemian National Hall and the proposed designation of the related Landmark Site (Item No. 10). The hearing had been duly advertised in accordance with the provisions of law. Fourteen speakers, including representatives of the owner, spoke in favor of the designation; there were no speakers in opposition to designation. The Commission has received correspondence in favor of designation.

## **DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS**

### Summary

Bohemian National Hall (Národní Budova) is a rare survivor of the social halls built in the nineteenth century for New York City's immigrant ethnic communities. Constructed in two phases in 1895 and 1897, it replaced an earlier National Hall on East 5th Street, which had served the Czech and Slovak population living in the Tompkins Square area of the Lower East Side. As members of the Czech and Slovak population moved to Yorkville in the late nineteenth century in search of better housing located near the cigar factories that employed a majority of the immigrants, the Hall followed. It immediately became home to most of the city's Czech and Slovak social clubs and organizations. The five-story building was designed by William C. Frohne in the Renaissance Revival style. Richly ornamented, it is faced in buff Roman brick, stone, and terra cotta. Among its prominent features are a projecting entrance porch with paired granite columns and a two-story arcade with Ionic columns resting on lion's-head bases. Bohemian National Hall has been an important center for Czech and Slovak culture in New York City for nearly one hundred years. From the beginning, it served as a focal point for its community, offering ethnic food, instruction in Czech language and history, and space for large community meetings. During World War I, the Hall served as the New York center for the liberation activities that ultimately helped create the country of Czechoslovakia, carved out of the former Austro-Hungarian empire. Today, Bohemian National Hall survives as a significant reminder of a major working-class ethnic enclave which once flourished in Yorkville and as a very visible representative of an important aspect of immigrant history in New York City and the United States.

## Immigration in the United States and New York City<sup>1</sup>

The role of immigration in populating the United States can scarcely be exaggerated. At the end of the sixteenth century, a handful of European colonists and explorers joined an estimated five million Native Americans, and shortly thereafter brought enslaved Africans. By the time of the American Revolution, the population of the what became the new country was roughly twenty percent African and eighty percent Northern European (mostly English but also German and Scots-Irish) in origin. Immigration to the newly established United States was heavily English and Irish in the 1820s and '30s. Potato famines in Ireland led to a major increase in Irish immigration in the 1840s, and the failure of the 1848 revolutions in Europe led to major immigration from Germany. The 1860s and '70s saw immigration from French Canada (to New England), Scandinavia (to the Midwest), and China (to the West Coast). Starting in the 1880s, major streams of immigrants came from southern and eastern Europe, especially Russia and Italy. Many immigrants were fleeing poverty, others political and religious oppression, and many both.

Immigrants have entered through ports on three coasts as well as across land borders. Beginning early in the nineteenth century, the most important port of immigration has been New York City, which was entered by some seventy percent of all immigrants through the 1920s. About half of those immigrants continued on to other parts of the country, but the others stayed in New York, making the city an immigrant center for much of its history.

New York has been home to diverse peoples since its earliest colonial days. In the seventeenth century, reportedly some eighteen different languages were heard on the streets of the small Dutch trading outpost of Nieuw Amsterdam, at the foot of Manhattan Island. Throughout much of its history, New York City has had a higher percentage of foreign-born residents than most other parts of the country. An extraordinary diversity of peoples continues to characterize the city to this day.

### Czechs and Slovaks in New York City<sup>2</sup>

Large-scale Czech and Slovak immigration to the United States began in the nineteenth century, when the present-day Czech and Slovak republics were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Czech immigration, like much other Central European

immigration, was sparked by the revolutionary movements of 1848; Slovak immigration began in the early 1870s, picking up in numbers after 1890.

The first wave of Czechs generally settled in the midwestern states where inexpensive farmland was available, and the largest Czech communities developed in midwestern cities. Many Czech immigrants settled in New York City, however, and by the late 1870s had formed a community on the Lower East Side in the area around Tompkins Square, already known as a German enclave. The Czechs located between Houston and East 8th Streets around the Square, and especially from East 3rd to East 5th Streets along Avenue A; Avenue B became known as "Czech Boulevard."

The great majority of the Czech and Slovak immigrants were working class, who arrived with certain industries. One such industry, the making of pearl buttons, was brought to New York around 1890 by button makers from the Bohemian town of Žirovnice. By 1920, according to one estimate, Czech immigrants accounted for seventy-five percent of the workers in this industry in the eastern states. Many Slovak immigrants worked in shoe factories and textile mills. Those who located in other areas became miners and oil refinery workers.

By far the largest industry associated with Czech immigrants was the manufacture of cigars, which employed as many as ninety-five percent of all Czech immigrants in the 1870s. The involvement of Czechs in the tobacco trade was said to have originated in the Bohemian town of Sedlec, where cigar manufacturing was a monopoly operated by the Austrian government. Immigrants from Sedlec brought the trade to New York City, and were followed by other Czech immigrants who either had worked in that trade at home and sought similar employment in their new home, or could find nothing else and turned to cigar-making as a last resort. Much of the industry was conducted as "homework," carried out by women and children in unsanitary conditions.

During the 1880s and early 1890s, the Czech community migrated from the Lower East Side to the Upper East Side, settling in the Yorkville area between Second Avenue and the East River, roughly from East 65th to East 78th Streets. They were joined there by Slovak immigrants. Yorkville at that time had a diverse immigrant population, including Germans, Italians, Hungarians, Greeks, Jews from Central Europe, and African-Americans. The Czechs

moved to Yorkville in part to take advantage of better housing but also to be closer to the cigar factories.

Fifty years later, the Czech and Slovak communities were still solidly ensconced in that part of Yorkville called "Little Bohemia":

*In addition to the great New York dailies, the newsstands along First Avenue in the lower Seventies carry the two dailies, New Yorkske Listy (Czech), and New Yorksky Dennik (Slovak), for here between Seventy-first and Seventy-fifth Streets east of Second Avenue is New York's "Little Bohemia." After Czechoslovakia became an independent nation in 1918 many Slovaks from downtown moved up into the Czech quarter, and the two groups have combined many of their interests. Pride in their languages and traditions, however, has prompted them to maintain separate sokols where after public-school hours the children can be taught their native speech and history. Their societies present native dramas, folk songs, and dances. On Decoration Day the Czechoslovaks parade in colorful native costume. . . . In the Parsonage of the Jan Hus Presbyterian Church, 351 East Seventy-fourth, are fourteen rooms appointed in typical Czechoslovak peasant style. Excellent restaurants in the neighborhood serve tripe soup, stuffed cabbage (zeli or kapusta), and roast goose, Bohemian style. . . . The Webster Branch of the New York Public Library, 1465 York Avenue near Seventy-eighth Street, is popularly known as the "Czech Library" and has a Czechoslovak collection of about 15,000 volumes.<sup>3</sup>*

#### The Bohemian National Hall<sup>4</sup>

During the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, immigrant groups adapted the American custom of forming fraternal organizations which served a variety of social, political, and economic functions. At one time there were an estimated 2500 Czech and Slovak fraternal organizations throughout the country. As described by one historian of the Czech community in the United States:

*Two distinct classes [of Czech fraternal organizations] are recognizable: benevolent or confraternal organizations which pay a benefit in case of sickness or death, and non-benefit associations. Of the non-benefit class the most interesting are the Sokols (gymnastic), the amateur theatrical clubs, and the choral societies. No community of any consequence is without at least one of the three. The Čech [sic] loves song and the choral society offers him an opportunity to sing; so long as the professional stage in America will not grant entree to the dramas and the comedies of his native playwrights, he will have amateurs act on the amateur stage his kings, his heroes, his peasants, his maids. And what Čech youth would not enroll at a Sokol and give ready assent to the truism that only a healthy body can give lodgement to a sound mind?<sup>5</sup>*

The oldest and largest of the Czech organizations was the Czech-Slavic Benevolent Society, known as C.S.P.S. The most influential of the Slovak organizations was the National Slovak Society of the United States of America, organized in 1890.

The first Czech organization, the "Czech Society," opened in New York City in 1850, just two years after the influx of Czech immigrants had begun:

*The parent society, there is no doubt, originated in New York. Havliček's Slovan of May 7, 1851, contains this direct reference to it: 'As an interesting piece of news for our readers we here give a brief extract of a letter of March 3, received by us from a Mr. T. who emigrated five years ago to New York.' The writer, Mr. T., proceeds to tell how the Čech [sic] residents of New York had organized a club the year before (1850) giving it the name, Čech Society. Nationals who contemplate going to America are advised to write to the club if they desire trustworthy information about the country. Who was T.? Presumably none other than the army deserter, Tuma, who fled from the garrison at Mainz either in 1847 or 1848, and who opened a saloon (casino) in New York. From the diary of Vojta Náprstek we learn*

*that the club alluded to by T. bore the name 'Čech Society.' Václav Pohl was president; Andrew Hubáček, vice-president; F.V. Červený, treasurer; Joseph Čilinský, secretary; Vojta Náprstek, libraries. The Čech Society met in the hotel (saloon) of Colonel Charles Burgthal. . . 14 City Hall Place. This ramshackle building has been torn down to make room for the present Municipal Building.<sup>6</sup>*

Following the lead of the Czech Society, which convened in Burgthal's saloon, most of the Czech immigrant societies met during their early years in Czech-run saloons which played a prominent role in Czech communal life:

*When in 1873 the New York cigarmakers undertook to organize against the rapacity of the bosses, eight relief societies sprang into existence in eight different saloons. What old settler does not recall the saloons kept by Mottl in St. Louis, Slavik in Chicago, Hubáček in New York?<sup>7</sup>*

Hubáček's saloon, run by August Hubáček, existed as early as 1865 in a tenement building on East Fifth Street.

*To have traveled through New York and not to have stopped at August Hubáček's tavern on the East Side would have been tantamount to a gross betrayal of the national cause. The fame of Hubáček's name rang from one corner of Čech America to another.<sup>8</sup>*

When the social organizations needed more formal quarters for special functions, they rented buildings belonging to German organizations, largely because most Czechs (as former residents of the Austrian Empire) also spoke German. In New York they used such halls as the New York Turnverein at 66 East 4th Street, the Harmonie Rooms at 141 Essex Street, and a number of others.

While Czech and Slovak communities in the Midwest built their own social halls, it was not until 1882 that such a hall was built in New York.<sup>9</sup> In that year, a group of Czech fraternal organizations bought out Hubáček's saloon at 533 East 5th Street, already their informal headquarters, and renovated it for use as the Národní Budova ("national hall"). The ground floor continued to house a saloon, along with a stage and dance hall; the second floor housed a library and lodge rooms; the upper floors were residential. The

Czech organizations used the building for dances, concerts, and meetings.

Even as the Národní Budova was being organized, the Czech and Slovak populations had begun their migration to Yorkville. In 1895, the old Národní Budova on East 5th Street was replaced with a new Národní Budova at 321-325 East 73rd Street. While built for the Bohemian Benevolent Literary Society, it specifically was intended as a meeting place for all Czech and Slovak organizations. Fundraising was a major effort; among the events was a "festive welcome" for the world-renowned Czech composer Antonin Dvořák, who had arrived in New York City for what was to be a three-year stay.<sup>10</sup>

Several other institutions constructed buildings nearby, including the Gymnastic Association Sokol at 420-424 East 71st Street and the Czech American Workingmen's Sokol's club house and apartment building at 523-525 East 72nd Street near the East River. Most Czech and Slovak organizations, however, used the new building, also known as Bohemian National Hall.

The new Bohemian National Hall contained a ground-floor restaurant and bar, individual club rooms, a basement bowling alley and shooting gallery, and a ballroom/theater on the top floor. Its facilities must have overwhelmed by demand because in 1897, little over a year after opening, the five-story, fifty-foot wide structure was extended twenty-five feet to the east.

#### The architect and the building

The new Bohemian National Hall, built in two stages in 1895 and 1897, was designed by architect William Frohne in the Renaissance Revival style.<sup>11</sup> Little is known about Frohne or his career.<sup>12</sup> He was in practice as early as 1888 and continued until at least 1921. Most of that time he worked alone; in the mid-1890s he was briefly involved in two partnerships, one with Paul Kühne in 1893-94 (Frohne & Kühne), and another with William Gaul in 1894 (Graul & Frohne). He maintained his office in various Manhattan locations, moving to the Bronx in 1916. His work included loft buildings designed in Renaissance-inspired styles at 26-32 West 17th Street (1907-08), 16-20 West 19th Street (1906-07), and 7-9 East 20th Street (1907), in what is now the Ladies Mile Historic District, and a group of tenements built in 1896 at 516, 518 and 520 Manhattan Avenue.

Besides Bohemian National Hall, Frohne's other major known work was another club building for an immigrant community: the German Shooting Club

(Deutsch-Amerikanische Schuetzen Gesellschaft) at 12 St. Mark's Place.<sup>13</sup> The Shooting Club, a five-story building with a prominent mansard and elaborate ornament, was constructed in 1888, twelve years before Bohemian Hall. The connection between the Czech and German communities, and especially the Czechs' use of German social halls before building their own, might explain the choice of Frohne for the Bohemian Hall commission.

Bohemian National Hall, a five-story building organized in six bays, is seventy-five feet wide and faced in buff Roman brick, stone, and terra cotta. The bays are articulated with paired columns and pilasters, molded window surrounds, stone banding, and stringcourses. Adding to its ornamental qualities are relief panels and decorative ironwork enclosing the areaway and bases of the fifth-story windows as well as adorning the fire escape. The prominent, projecting entrance porch is framed by paired, polished granite columns and surmounted by an entablature carrying spheres. (This porch was enlarged with the original building was extended.) Signaling the placement of the ballroom and theater at the upper stories is a two-story arcade with paired Ionic columns resting on lion's-head bases. (The lion is a symbol of Bohemia.) The windows contain paired wood sash set below transoms. The words *Národní Budova* appear on the first-story frieze and "Bohemian-National-Hall" appears on the cornice.

The facade of Bohemian National Hall, while largely intact, has minor alterations. The westernmost window on the third floor has been half bricked in. Air-conditioners have been installed in the transoms of the ground-floor windows. Several ornamental swags in the frieze beneath the cornice have been removed, as has the second letter "H" in "Bohemian-National-Hall."<sup>14</sup>

#### Later history of the Bohemian National Hall

Czech and Slovak community life revolved around the Bohemian National Hall over most of the following century. During the First World War, when Czech and Slovak aspirations for a homeland independent of the Austro-Hungarian Empire showed signs of possible fulfillment, meetings were held at the Hall. The Slovak League began meeting at the Hall on February 22, 1918, "for the double purpose of helping America and the Allies win the war, and aiding the revolutionary Slavs of Austria and Hungary in their effort to achieve independence," as reported by the *New York Times*. "The ultimate object of the Slovak League is to see the establishment of a separate democracy, composed of

Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, which are now under Austrian rule, and of the thirteen northwestern counties of Hungary."<sup>15</sup>

In 1939, the WPA Guide to New York City described the hall's continuing prominence for the Czech and Slovak communities:

*The largest meeting place is Bohemian National Hall, between First and Second Avenues at 319 [sic] East Seventy-fourth Street, where nearly a half hundred organizations, the oldest having been formed by the Czechs in 1863 [sic], meet regularly.*<sup>16</sup>

Many Czech-Americans still recall their early years of study and social life at the Bohemian National Hall:

*Along with dozens of my generation, I spent six years (not always voluntarily) in the hall's classrooms learning the intricacies of the mother tongue...learning to speak, read and write it with fluency and ease. There was also a curriculum of history, learning about the culture, customs, music and art of the Czech people. Altogether, it was a well rounded education for all of us who benefitted from the largesse of those who ran and operated the Hall. There was also a restaurant on the premises, with ethnic specialties, cooked by the ladies who lived in the neighborhood, my aunt among them. In the evenings, the bar was filled with the local patrons, quaffing Pilsner, arguing politics, and passing on news and gossip of the quarter. What was going on across the sea was very important too. Visitors from the old country were very welcome. People wanted to know what was going on there, and how it would affect their New York cousins.*<sup>17</sup>

The Bohemian National Hall continued as a Czech and Slovak institution for many decades, while the Bohemian Benevolent and Literary Association continued to maintain the building. As the Czech and Slovak populations moved out to the suburbs, however, fewer and fewer functions were held at the hall. Space in the building had been rented out to other organizations, including many unions, from early on; progressively more space

seems to have been devoted to such use over the years.<sup>18</sup>

Today, though vacant, the Bohemian National Hall remains in the ownership of the Bohemian Benevolent and Literary Association, which plans to restore the building and bring it back to community use. It stands as a reminder of the once vibrant ethnic communities of Yorkville, and a monument of the immigrant experience that has characterized such

a large part of the history of New York and the United States.

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## NOTES

1. The following summary is based on Ivan Chermayeff, Fred Wasserman, and Mary J. Shapiro, *Ellis Island: An Illustrated History of the Immigrant Experience* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1991).
2. The information in this section compiled from: Thomas Čapek, *The Čech [sic] (Bohemian) Community of New York* (New York: Czechoslovak Section of America's Making, Inc., 1921), 13, 19, 20, 22, 85; Thomas Čapek, *The Čechs in America* (New York: Arno Press and New York Times, 1969 reprint; originally published 1920), 21, 71, 74; *The Czechs in America, 1633-1977: a chronology & fact book*, compiled and edited by Vera Laska (Ethnic Chronology series: No. 28) (Dobbs Ferry, N.Y.: Oceana Publications, 1978), 111-112, citing Jane E. Robbins, "The Bohemian Women in New York," *Charities*, December 3, 1904.
3. *New York City Guide* (New York: Random House, 1939), 248-249.
4. The information in this section compiled from: Čapek, *The Čech [sic] (Bohemian) Community of New York*, 21-22, 49, 89; Čapek, *The Čechs in America*, 56, 77, 79, 254-255.
5. Čapek, ...*America*, 254-255.
6. Čapek, ...*America*, 255.
7. Čapek, ...*America*, 77.
8. Čapek, ...*America*, 77.
9. Czech halls opened in St. Louis (1854), Chicago (1864), and Cleveland (1871); a Slovak community hall was built in Chicago in 1869.
10. The event raised \$200 for building the hall. "Prehled 50-leteho Trvan," in *Památník Jubilejní Slavnosti Padesátiletého Trvání Národní Budovy 1896-1946* ("An Overview of Fifty Years," in *Commemorative Booklet for the Fiftieth Anniversary Celebration of Bohemian National Hall 1896-1946*) (New York: Národní Budova, 1946); brought to the attention of the author by Christopher Gray of the *New York Times*, and translated by Jan Hird Pokorny, architect.
11. New York City Buildings Department, Borough of Manhattan, New Building application 1827-1895; Alteration application 835-1897.
12. See Dennis Francis, *Architects in Practice in New York City, 1840-1900* (New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1979), 32, 48; James Ward, *Architects in Practice New York City 1900-1940* (New York: Committee for the Preservation of Architectural Records, 1989), 27.
13. The building is illustrated in *King's Handbook of New York City* (Boston: Moses King, 1893), 569.

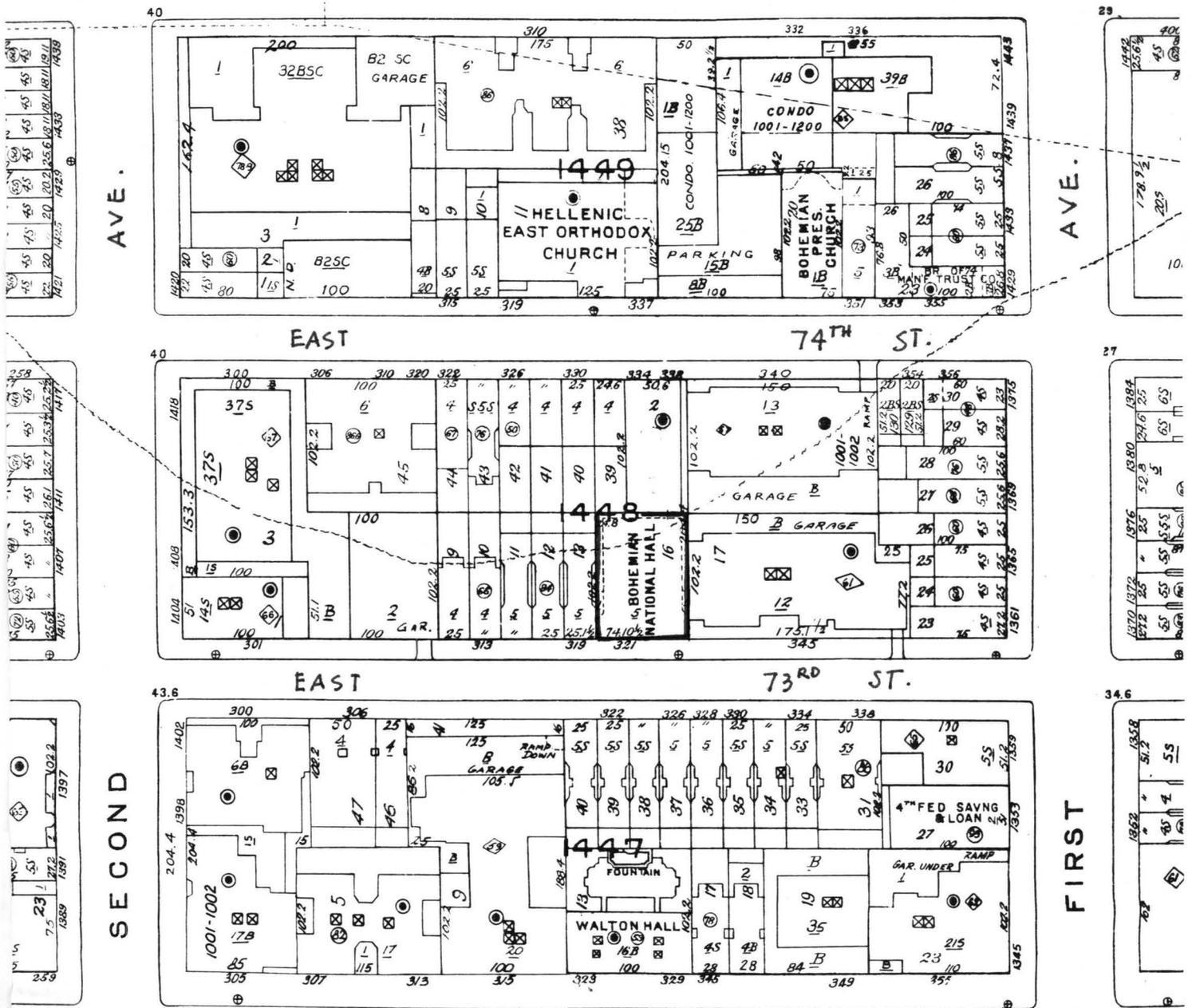
14. In 1914, an extension was built through the block to East 74th Street housing a movie theater, designed by architect Frank Braun. It has since been demolished; its site is not part of this designation. New York City Buildings Department, Borough of Manhattan, New Building application 64-1914.
15. "Slavs Here Pledge Aid to the Allies," *New York Times*, February 23, 1918, 6:1.
16. *New York City Guide*, 249.
17. Ms. Blanche Fiorenza, testimony submitted at the public hearing.
18. The Manhattan Address Phone Directory in 1929 lists tenants at the building including, besides the Bohemian Benevolent and Literary Association, the Cement and Concrete Workers Union, the Marble Workers Union, and the Tile Layers Union, among others. In 1959, there were the Cement and Concrete Workers Union, the Compact Labor Club, the Marble Workers Union, and the White Stone Association, among others. By 1969 to these had been added Stage 73 Bar & Restaurant. In 1979, the Cement and Concrete Workers, the Marble Helpers Local No. 10. In 1986 the building was vacant. Prior to its demolition, the movie theater on East 74th Street was leased to the Manhattan Theater Club.

## FINDINGS AND DESIGNATION

On the basis of a careful consideration of the history, the architecture, and the other features of this building, the Landmarks Preservation Commission finds that Bohemian National Hall has a special character, special historic and aesthetic interest and value as part of the development, heritage, and cultural characteristics of New York City.

The Commission further finds that, among its important qualities, Bohemian National Hall (Národní Budova) is a rare survivor of the social halls built in the nineteenth century for New York City's immigrant ethnic communities; that constructed in two phases in 1895 and 1897, it replaced an earlier National Hall on East 5th Street, which had served the Czech and Slovak population living in the Tompkins Square area of the Lower East Side; that it was built on East 73rd Street to house institutions moving to the Upper East Side, reflecting the move of the Czech and Slovak populations from the Tompkins Square area in lower Manhattan to be nearer the cigar factories that were among their major employers; that it was designed by William C. Frohne, in the Renaissance Revival style and is richly ornamented; that among its prominent features are a projecting entrance porch with paired granite columns and a two-story arcade supported by Ionic columns resting on lion's-head bases; that Bohemian National Hall has been an important center for Czech and Slovak culture in New York City for nearly one hundred years; that it was an important center for Czech and Slovak liberation activities during World War I; that it survives as an significant reminder of a major working-class ethnic enclave which once flourished in Yorkville and as a very visible representative of an important aspect of immigrant history in New York City and the United States.

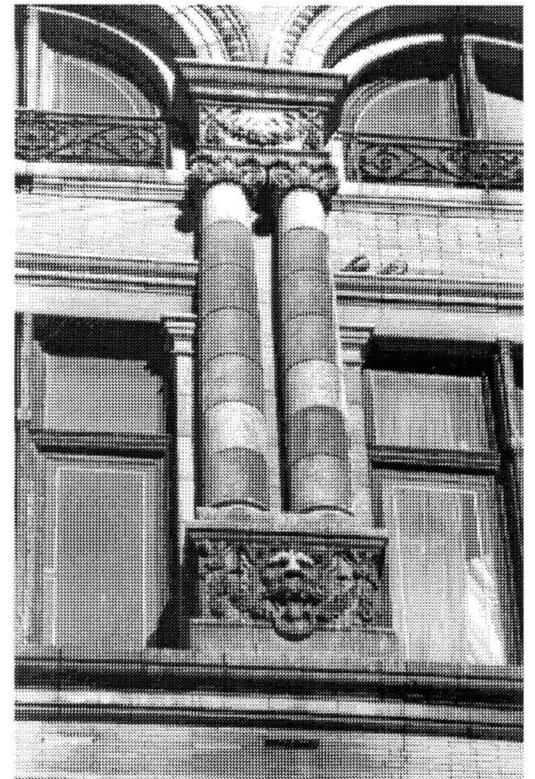
Accordingly, pursuant to the provisions of Chapter 74, Section 3020 of the Charter of the City of New York and Chapter 3 of Title 25 of the Administrative Code of the City of New York, the Landmarks Preservation Commission designates as a Landmark the Bohemian National Hall, 321-325 East 73rd Street, Borough of Manhattan, and designates Tax Map Block 1448, Lot 16, Borough of Manhattan, as its Landmark Site.



Bohemian National Hall, 321-325 East 73rd Street, Manhattan  
 Graphic Source: Sanborn Manhattan Land Book (1993-94), pl. 111



Details



Bohemian National Hall,  
321-325 East 73rd Street, Manhattan

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