

Weaving from Czechoslovakia

by ROMA CROW WALTERS

It has been my pleasure during the summer to conduct a weaving project at the International Institute in Youngstown, Ohio. The International Institute, as you may know, is that branch of the Young Women's Christian Association which is of particular service to the foreign born in helping them become assimilated in our American life. This is an industrial community which means, of course, that many nationalities are represented among its citizens. The hope which prompted the Secretary of the Institute, Miss Mable Marquis, and me to start the work was that we might develop a center of weaving from all lands—with a twofold end in view. First, we wished to bring the women from other countries into the pleasantest association we could think of with the women of America—that is, a craft program. A sane and safe way in which to develop international understanding might be thru the arts and crafts of all lands. We wanted the foreign born to realize that they had a contribution to make to the land of their adoption in addition to their efforts to become good citizens. Second, in these hard days of unemployment for so many workers, we hoped to enable the women to make the contribution of their weaving to our community, at the same time a paying contribution to themselves. The project was in no sense a money making plan for the Institute.

Large classes in English and Citizenship are conducted at the Institute for foreign born women, and it was to these

classes that the women were asked to bring any weaving they had done in their old home. An interesting collection came in—almost entirely from Czechoslovakia, which was not surprising since the Slovaks comprise the largest nationality group in Youngstown. The next step was to bring an exhibit of my own weaving to show them—and that established me at once as a friend—true of the weaving sisterhood all over the world. Then with the aid of an interpreter I explained that I wanted to bring a loom to the Institute and invited any of them who wished to use it, to come and talk over the plan. Having only one loom available, we had to choose only one weaver. It was difficult to choose. They were all so eager, their faces so interesting, their samples of weaving so lovely. It was perhaps a piece of weaving one of them had done ten years ago in her old home that helped us decide.

I thought it would be a simple matter to equip a four harness loom with a framework to hold up dowel rods—a method described by Nellie Sargent in "The Weaver". I also thought all I had to do was to thread the loom in a simple pattern so that if anything happened to our experiment I could use the warp myself. A threading for plain weaving is all that is necessary for their type of weaving. But those ideas were all wrong. My weaver insisted that the loom must have only two treadles, two harnesses and string heddles (not wire ones) with eyes an inch long. I



Luncheon Set—Red and Blue.



Sampler.

held out for an inch and a quarter or an inch and a half but I might as well not have expressed an opinion. "In the old country" string heddles an inch long were used, and they were carefully measured off on the yard stick for me. There was a good bit of discussion (thru an interpreter of course) about whether or not I could make string heddles and they seemed inclined to doubt that I could although I gave a demonstration. "In the old country" two women made them, working together, on some kind of framework and from the description they gave, the process began to assume the proportions of a major operation involving a blood transfusion and serious complications.

It suddenly occurred to me to call in my husband—HE could understand the drawings they were making and perhaps could construct the contraption for them. Well, he is a very patient man and interested in any weaving project I take up, but when the framework the Slovak women were trying to draw began to look about as intricate as a Korean chest, he asserted himself as American males do sometimes, and drew for them the simple contrivance for making heddles, pictured in Mr. Worst's book, "Foot Power Loom Weaving", on page 25. They finally agreed to let me try it, although from the shaking of heads and the conversation in Slavish which was not translated to me, I sensed that the American woman was being humored and that they were skeptical about the outcome. Making string heddles was not much of a job—particularly when I did it in the evening listening to the radio or better still, to the family's conversation.

I have taught a good many children to weave and really thought I knew a good bit about it, but my experience with the first of the Weavers of Other Lands has taught me many new methods—some an improvement on our own and some not. The loom was finally set up to Slovak specifications—two harnesses, two treadles, string heddles—and it was with real relief that I saw my Weaver's look of pleased surprise and heard her "Oke" that universal symbol of approval. The weaving started.

Slovak weaving, as I believe you can tell from the illustrations, has a style all its own. You may be able to tell that the patterns are developed almost entirely in groups of four threads. The background is invariably white cotton—No. 20 the women tell me, but it doesn't have the same texture as our 20 cotton. It seems not to be so tightly or evenly twisted. Their cloth is very firm and closely woven. The favorite color is a bright red—like our old turkey red. The next choice is blue—dark blue or a rather vivid blue with a good bit of green in it. When they combine colors, they use yellow and orange and some green, occasionally a magenta shade that is the only jarring note to me in any of their weaving. The women told me that the various patterns were distinctive to various provinces and they like to weave the patterns they are familiar with. This presented another problem with which everyone is familiar who has done any work with the foreign born—that is, what provincial prejudices which they have brought to America to try to break down and which to cherish. In getting our program started, it seemed to me wise to use their pride in their own province as an asset, so our first weaver is doing almost entirely the patterns native to her province or zupa—Zupa Zvolenska No. 18, Czechoslovakia, Village Pohorella.

At the Institute we are trying to adapt their technique to our color scheme in order to produce an article that will be

saleable and usable in the American home but which will retain its Old World individuality and the character of its native land. The warp used in our pieces has been Bernat's Egyptian Cotton 24-3 and the pattern thread perle 5. We set the first yardage 24 to the inch but our next threading will be 30 in order to cut down on the size of the over-shot since they must use four threads as their scale in working out the patterns.

Illustration No. 1 shows a 12 x 18 inch place mat from one of the luncheon sets. The border on either side is done in Bernat's perle 5 red No. 1046. The center design is in perle 5 blue 1042. This is a striking and beautiful luncheon set. This is a Zupa Zvolenska No. 18 pattern. We have made it in several color combinations. It was copied from a very lovely bed spread, made by the Weaver in her old home, which was done in very fine bright red thread. We made a table runner in dark red with fringed ends which lent itself readily to an American interior with mahogany and oriental rugs.

Illustration No. 2 was a sampler which I had made for myself in order to help me plan work for prospective customers both as to pattern and price, for the Weaver kept close watch on her weaving time for each pattern. This piece is done in clear peasant colors—red, yellow, blue and green.

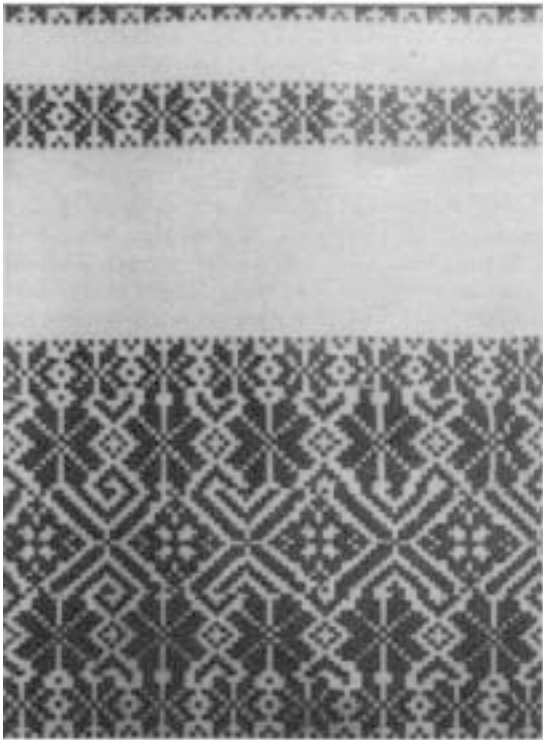
Illustration No. 3 is an unusual piece of older Czechoslovakian weaving. The background is very firm and close, the color a bright green blue, and it is made for a man's shirt. The wide stripe is for the front of the shirt and the narrower stripes for the collar and cuffs. This was not done at the Institute but is an example of the fine weaving which the secretary, Miss Marquis, has in her own collection which we may copy if we wish.

Illustration No. 4 is an old piece of weaving. It is a table cover about a yard wide with several stripes of the pattern running thru its length. The fringe is beautifully tied.

Using four warp threads as the unit, these patterns could be copied by any American weaver with patience, time and squared paper.

Although the method described by Mrs. Sargent in her article mentioned before is much simpler than that employed by the Slovak weavers at the Institute, I will describe their way of doing the work. After the long eyed heddles are made, the only equipment required are some leash sticks (we use yard sticks), the number depending on the changes in the pattern, and a very thin smooth board two and a half inches high. We use a piece of composition wall board—the thinnest we could get.

Take the simple pattern marked off on squared paper. It is pictured also in the sampler. With a bodkin and a very heavy thread, skip the first four threads, pick up the next four, skip the next four, pick up the next four and so on across the material. (If your warp has the customary leash sticks already in it, you would of course not have to count off these four threads since they would already be separated on the leash sticks.) Lift up the threads counted off on the bodkin and thread, and back of the harnesses, put a leash stick thru them and slip it to the back of the loom. (The long eyed heddles make it possible to raise this pattern back of the harnesses from the front of the loom.) Next with the bodkin and heavy thread pick up the first four, skip the next eight, pick up the next four, skip the next eight, pick up the next twelve and so on. Holding up the



Czechoslovakian Shirt Front.



Table Cover.

pattern thread and bodkin put a leash stick thru in the same manner and push to back of loom. For the center of the pattern, pick up twelve threads and skip four all across the material. This pattern requires only three leash sticks. Heavy threads might be used instead.

Now for the weaving. Weave the amount of plain weaving required. Lift the first leash stick and put the two and a half inch pattern board thru the ways and push it upright very close to the back of the heddles. It stays in place and serves to hold up the warp in front of the harnesses so you can throw across the shuttle of colored pattern thread. Beat, treadle for tabby thread. Throw pattern thread and so on. Four pattern threads were used in the sampler. For the second section in picture, the same procedure is followed, putting the pattern board thru the warp held up by the second leash stick and so on. Although the weaving takes much more arm movement than ours does (moving the pattern board up and down) it is done remarkably fast.

We hope the program at the Institute will grow. Its growth will depend on our efforts and the interest in the community. Certainly, the Institute and the weavers will do their part. After every Slovak woman who wishes to weave has had a chance, we hope other nationalities will become interested. There are many to draw from in Youngstown.

I learned something else which I am sure no school of weaving has ever taught. I learned to weave bare foot! I noticed when I went out of the room, my Slovak friend slipped off her shoes but hastily put them on again when I came in—until I urged her not to. As soon as I got home I tried it myself! (What good weaver ever failed to try something new?) It was fun. Then when the weather got hotter and hotter this summer I dispensed with stockings. As a result the muscles of my feet have gone thru a set of exercises which might have come from the bag of tricks of an orthopedist!

