

Simplified Czech and Slovak Character Support in Genealogical Applications

by Chris Mikšánek

For some, maintaining diacritical characters is a lot like restoring a classic automobile. They carefully reapply the lost háčeks and čarkas to see their family name in its original glory. Others view the task of preserving these characters more matter-of-factly. After all, the letters “s” and “š” are as different in the Czech language as are “a” and “z” in ours: “skala” means “rock” but “škála” means “scale.”

In 1996, I introduced genealogists researching Czech, Slovak, Moravian, and other Eastern-European ancestry to problems maintaining and sharing data with diacritical characters (<http://www.csagsi.org/fonts.htm>). Though time and technology has brought us closer to the vision of a global village, diacritical character support is still a struggle and many solutions aren't particularly satisfactory or permanent. For example, users who have installed a third-party Slovak or Czech font have found that documents they tried to share display differently on PCs without the special font installed.

The good news is that for simple genealogical database inputting and word processing, Microsoft Windows users already have everything they need in a tool that has remained virtually unchanged

since I first started recommending it more than a decade ago. It's called Character Map and is available from the Start menu: Start -> Programs -> Accessories -> System Tools. There are many more characters available than appear on a standard keyboard and Character Map provides a window to the palette of all of them. (Figure 1). Notice how both standard and diacritically-marked characters are available in the same font. To access them, simply click on character, it will then be added to the small window from which you can Copy/Paste to your document or database.

A more robust solution is also popular with Windows users. It involves configuring Microsoft's Regional and Language Options (accessible via the Control Panel) to install keyboard support for Slovak, Czech, or

any of dozens of other languages. The operation is intuitive which is fortunate because of the absence of online help (terse help is available by pressing F1). Figure 2 illustrates a Windows XP system with English, Slovak, and Czech keyboard support. (Windows versions differ slightly in their configuration.)

Microsoft also makes available a convenient application called the “Visual Keyboard” (Microsoft

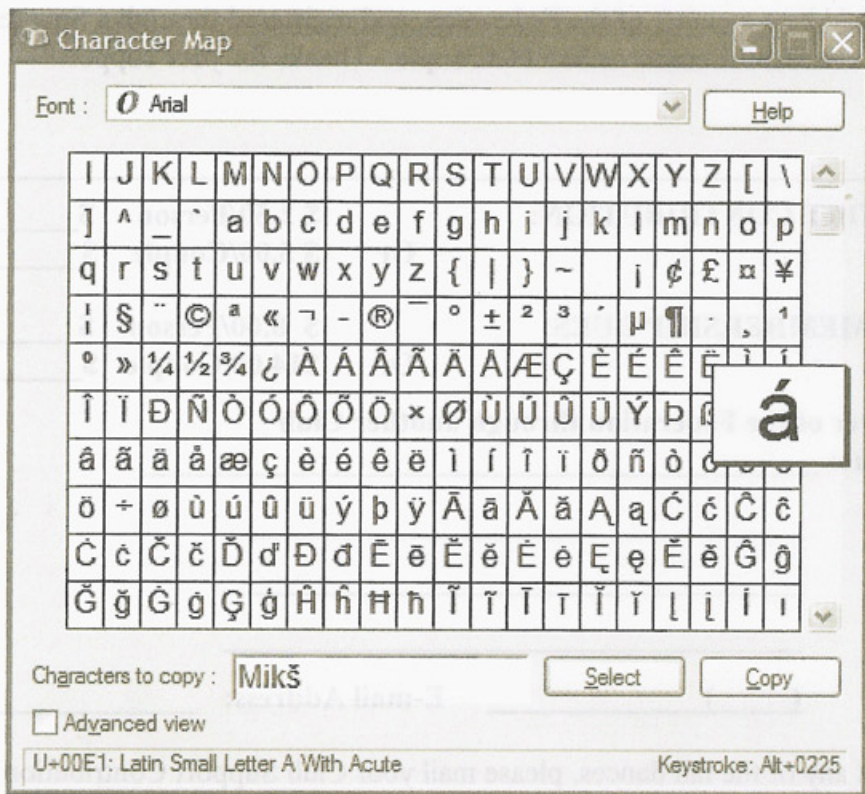


Figure 1



Figure 2

Office users may already see it installed Start -> Programs -> Microsoft Office Tools, otherwise, you can find it by searching www.microsoft.com/downloads. The Visual Keyboard lets you type using your mouse and an on-screen keyboard representing any of the languages you have installed (Figure 3). No Copy/Paste is necessary, clicking the mouse places the data wherever the cursor is located. (For more convenient access, right-click and drag a copy of "Visual Keyboard" from the "Start" menu to your desktop.)

Typing the diacriticals is just half of the solution; the application must also support the non-standard characters. While Microsoft Windows can fully support Slovak characters, it is not true that every application permits their specification. An older version of a word process-

ing program or genealogical database, for example, may not support alternate fonts or "special characters." Fortunately, most applications today tolerate text copied from Character Map or typed via the Visual Keyboard by embracing Unicode, an international standard that facilitates multi-language support. Microsoft Word supports Unicode as does *Personal Ancestral File* version 5.0 (Figure 4). But even if your application doesn't support Unicode, you can still input some of the diacritical characters. The Windows XP version of Character Map lets you access just those characters in the "Windows: Western" font set where you'll find a "safe" subset of the diacritical characters.

If you are unsure of your application's ability to support diacriticals, try the Copy/Paste technique, you may be surprised. You might also want to contact the application's tech support department to understand the extent to which support is in place for the special Slovak or Czech characters.

About the Author

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Sidebar:

The key to proper character display lies in understanding the manner in which a computer stores text



Figure 3

data. Actual characters are not saved to your hard drive. Instead, numeric representations of the characters are saved. It is the proper interpretation of this data that permits correct display; conversely, misinterpretation of this data (e.g., same numeric value but different display font) results in a corrupt view.

Searches and sorting may also be handled differently. From a computer's perspective, a character is just a numeric value, so "S" and "Š" are two different characters. Just how that impacts application usability varies. For example, some programs "infer" a similarity and group these characters together in sorted lists; others don't. Some will return diacritically-marked characters with a search request for the non-marked counterparts, others will not.

Edit Individual

Jan Mikšánek

PERSONAL:

Full Name:

Jan /Mikšánek/

Sex:

Male

EVENTS:

Birth:

6 Mar 1871

Place:

Velke Lhote, Moravia, Bohemia

Christening:

7 Mar 1871

Place:

Velke Lhote, Moravia, Bohemia

Death:

23 Jun 1929

Place:

Cicero, Illinois

Burial:

26 Jun 1929

Place:

Bohemian Nat'l, Chicago

