

## **The second life of Tuchomyšl: Local identity of displaced people from a strip-mined village**

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### **Abstract**

The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the obliteration of 106 towns and villages and the displacement of ninety thousand people as a result of brown coal mining in North Bohemia and its associated industrial development. Tuchomyšl was one of these villages; its population was resettled to newly built prefabricated housing estates in Ústí nad Labem and Chlumec. Based on an anthropological analysis of biographic interviews with the displaced people of Tuchomyšl, this case study demonstrates how the former Tuchomyšlers identify with the physical space of the village, today non-existent, and how they reflect on the forced eviction. As it turns out, the local identity of these resettled people is influenced by several factors, primarily by the location of their new residence, their age during the obliteration, and the person's economic standing. These people continue to identify strongly with the social space of the obliterated village, which they keep alive through regular get-togethers even 35 years after the physical destruction of the village.

### **Key words**

Tuchomyšl; local identity; mining; displacement; identification with space

### **Abstrakt**

V důsledku těžby hnědého uhlí v severních Čechách a s ní spojeným rozvojem průmyslu bylo v uplynulém století zlikvidováno 106 obcí a vystěhováno devadesát tisíc obyvatel. Jednou z těchto obcí byla i Tuchomyšl, jejíž obyvatelé byli přemístěni do nově postavených panelových sídlišť v Ústí nad Labem a Chlumci. Na základě antropologické analýzy biografických rozhovorů s přesídlenci z Tuchomyšle tato případová studie ukazuje, jak se někdejší Tuchomyšlané dnes identifikují s již neexistujícím fyzickým prostorem Tuchomyšle, a zároveň jak reflektují nedobrovolné přestěhování. Jak se ukázalo, lokální identitu těchto přesídlenců ovlivňuje několik faktorů v čele s místem nového bydliště, věkem v době likvidace a ekonomickou situací daného člověka. Tito lidé se přitom dodnes silně identifikují se sociálním prostorem zaniklé obce, který svými pravidelnými srazy udržují i 35 let po fyzické likvidaci obce při životě.

### **Klíčová slova**

Tuchomyšl; lokální identita; těžba; přesídlení; identifikace s prostorem



## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The North Bohemian brown coal basin is a belt of coal seams under the Ore Mountains seventy kilometres long. Underground mines were first opened in the early nineteenth century, and were replaced with surface strip mining in the latter half of the twentieth. Many of the mines have undergone land reclamation, but the total surface area affected by the mining is approximately three hundred square kilometres. The quarrying has led to streams and rivers being rerouted into artificial channels, natural hills disappearing and being replaced with waste heaps, flooded mine depressions and man-made lakes. Along with the changes to the landscape, coal mining and the associated industrial activity has led to the obliteration of one hundred and six towns and villages, from which ninety thousand people were displaced.

## Tuchomyšl as a prototype mining village<sup>2</sup>

Tuchomyšl was one of those obliterated villages; it used to be situated near the city of Ústí nad Labem, in the easternmost tip of the North Bohemian Coal Basin. The history of the village can serve as a prototype for the mining village of the area as the fate of strip-mined areas between Chomutov and Ústí nad Labem was very similar.

## General history

Traces of human activity in the basin of the Bílina river, which rises above Chomutov and runs almost the full length of the North Bohemian Basin, are documented by archaeological finds from as early as the Bronze Age: the turn of the third and second millennia before common era. The first references to particular settlements mostly date from the thirteenth century, though, in connection with the so-called "colonization", i.e., settlement of the Czech Lands mostly by German people invited to the country by King Wenceslas I with the aim of settling sparsely populated areas of the Czech Lands.

They were tiny farming settlements, and were almost without exception German-speaking. The villages retained their farming personality until the nineteenth century, when industrialization and brown coal mining brought new settlers into the area: workers migrating for jobs to the newly opening underground mines. These farming villages, situated on or near coal seams, acquired the character of mining villages. A Czech-speaking minority appeared along with the migrating workers.

As soon as communist Czechoslovakia began focusing on the development of a powerful heavy industry sector in the 1950s, surface strip mines were opened and many of the villages had to make way for the extraction. Naturally, those villages that lay upon the thickest coal seams were the most endangered; oddly enough, it was those villages whose prosperity (and population counts) had been growing until then thanks to the underground mining. Coal, being the cause of the initial upswing of these villages, became the cause of their obliteration.

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<sup>1</sup> Sources: Glockeler, Reeve: 1997, Zaniklé obce. [online].

<sup>2</sup> Martinovský et al.: 1983, Crková et al.: 1987

### Specific aspects of Tuchomyšl<sup>3</sup>

Until the early nineteenth century, Tuchomyšl was a farming settlement with a purely German-speaking population. As the underground mines opened around it, the village grew and changed into a mining village with a 20% Czech-speaking minority. It had only 308 inhabitants in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, whereas the population was more than fifteen hundred in the late 1920s. After the Second World War, the displacement of the Sudeten Germans and the resettlement from inland Czechoslovakia, the village still had a population of eleven hundred. Underground mining took place in the immediate vicinity of Tuchomyšl until the 1960s, but the first strip mines were already in operation in the Most district. The Chabařovice giant opencast mine was scheduled to open in the area occupied by Tuchomyšl. That is why a freeze on new construction was declared in Tuchomyšl in 1972 and the physical obliteration of the village commenced in 1975, to be completed two years later. The people of Tuchomyšl were gradually given flats in newly built prefabricated housing estates in Ústí nad Labem and Chlumec. Chabařovice, the giant opencast mine also devoured the neighbouring villages of Lochočice, Vyklice and Otovice. The town of Chabařovice proper only survived thanks to the political change of 1989 and the subsequently adopted mining limits. The Chabařovice opencast mine was thus shut down prematurely in 1994. Land reclamation started in the area afterwards. The rectangular Milada Lake has been filling up since 2001, currently covering an area of 250 hectares. It is currently still out of bounds due to ongoing surrounding land reclamation. There are investment projects to turn the area into an attractive sports and recreation centre<sup>4</sup>.

### Starting points

Hereafter, this study works with data from a cultural-social anthropological survey into the local identity of former inhabitants of Tuchomyšl<sup>5</sup>. The paper is based on an interpretative (constructivist) paradigm, which emphasizes that reality is established socially. According to the fundamental premise, there is no single objective reality working outside a person, but many different realities that different people establish with their different perceptions of the world<sup>6</sup>.

In this sense, therefore, identity is not seen as a given, but rather as something that is continuously constructed in different life situations and social contexts. According to Vaňková<sup>7</sup>, the word "identity" is a close relative of the word "identification" because one continuously creates it by oneself, assisted by external influences. Local identity then reflects one of its aspects related to identifying oneself with a specific place.

### Forms of municipal identification

Our analysis of nine in-depth interviews with former inhabitants of Tuchomyšl has uncovered many levels at which Tuchomyšlers identify themselves with the obliterated village. Each of them is interwoven with two aspects of identification with a place. One is

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<sup>3</sup> Martinovský et al.: 1983, Zaniklé obce. [online].

<sup>4</sup> Jezero Milada. Ústí nad Labem Investor Centre. [online].

<sup>5</sup> Růžičková: 2009

<sup>6</sup> Berger, Luckmann: 1999

<sup>7</sup> Vaňková: 2006

the relationship with the physical location and material form of the village, the other one is identification with the social components, consisting of the social relationships, the community of former inhabitants, and the local way of life. Zich<sup>8</sup> identifies a similar duality of a place in his research into the regional identity of people in the borderlands. The study area can thus be seen as a place that has a physical content as well as a social content, and involves not only the village as such but also its people, their way of life, culture and history<sup>9</sup>.

## The physical space

One of the ways Tuchomyšlers identify with the physical space of the obliterated village is the exceptional interest they take in the physical "remains" of the non-existent village. It became obvious from the interviews that the former inhabitants of Tuchomyšl have a perfect grasp of where parts of the buildings from the levelled village and their furnishings have gone to. They include the church furnishings, roof trusses of particular houses, the door to the culture centre, bricks used in building new houses, and the cemetery cross, for instance:

*"So they sold these condemned houses, that's what they called them, we bought one for eighty crowns, so we tore it down (...) those bricks, roof trusses and whatnot... and we brought it up here (...) so we in fact have a little Tuchomyšl up in Ostrov!" (Žáčková)*

Reminiscence of the physical appearance of the place is also reflected in the strong urge of former Tuchomyšlers to exchange photographs. They express it in both the interviews and Internet forums:

*"Anyone still got any photos"* (Tuchomyšl. Zanikleobce.cz. [online].)

*"I sometimes keep an eye on this page just hoping a new photo may come up."* (Tuchomyšl. Zanikleobce.cz. [online].)

The former people of Tuchomyšl still need to remind each other of the physical form of the village, see Tuchomyšl from different angles, revive the memory of the places that they can never again see with their own eyes. The physical space of Tuchomyšl no longer exists, admittedly, but the photographs remain as some kind of "proof" of their local belonging. What they hold in their hand is a proof of the fact that their connection to the place is not a mere figment of their imagination. Their interest in its remains and photographs also manifests their need to assure themselves and those around them that they did not come to their new homes from nowhere. They assure themselves physically of the reality of the place. They assure themselves that their idea of home is not a mere fantasy.

Although the area today does not resemble Tuchomyšl in any way, most of the Tuchomyšlers feel the urge to keep visiting the place. Whereas most people visiting the area where Tuchomyšl used to be only see a vast body of water, Tuchomyšlers recollect where their natal houses used to be, where the railway line ran, where they went for entertainment, etc. Under any circumstances, they know where things were, and the area thus acquires a special meaning to them although it is "void" for the others:

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<sup>8</sup> Zich: 2003

<sup>9</sup> Zich: 2007

*"My son was born here, he's a Chlumec person, so he always says, I don't see what you're on about, and said to him, Look let's cycle to Tuchomyšl forest, the primroses will be in flower there now, he said, (...) C'mon, they're in flower up here too and we'll be scrambling somewhere, a hell of a long way to cycle, when we could be back home in no time! Yeah, he doesn't see at all, but for me, for us it's something... something special, it's as if we were coming back home." (Schmidt)*

## **The social space**

As noted above, the connection to the place is only one aspect of identification with the area of Tuchomyšl. The other one is identification with the social space that the obliterated village had brought to life. As much as they identified with their former place of residence, the former people of Tuchomyšl also identified with their neighbours and the community that used to inhabit the area and the customs, traditions and general way of life in the village. A unique social group was formed, which most of the respondents refer to more emphatically than the physical space.

*"People stuck together very much in Tuchomyšl, helped each other out. We were like a big family." (Sainerová)*

*"It was like a big family. I'm not saying there were only good people there, but you knew what to expect from whom, which is a great plus too." (Čapková)*

The social space of Tuchomyšl has not been destroyed by the disbandment of the village. After the physical area of Tuchomyšl was obliterated, the desire of some of the former villagers to restore the Tuchomyšl community has surfaced, most manifestly observable nowadays in their regular get-togethers.

The fact that the social space of the village has survived its obliteration attests to the autonomous nature of this aspect of local identity. However, its conditioning by the physical space is indisputable. It becomes the very prerequisite for the emergence of a social group. When it was obliterated, the people involved in the social space were put into a paradoxical situation: its legitimacy was endangered, because the prerequisite for its existence was removed. In that case, its existence needs to be justified, thus put back into a meaningful and shared framework of the group's collective life<sup>10</sup>.

Tuchomyšlers achieve this by means of their busy photo exchange, debates on what life in Tuchomyšl looked like, their grasp of where the village "remains" are, and most importantly, their regular emotionally powerful trips to where Tuchomyšl used to be. Whether it is individuals or organized groups who come to look at the "hole in the ground", it always helps them anchor their identity in the space. A similar situation can be seen, for example, when the displaced Sudeten Germans come back to visit the Czech borderland<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Berger, Luckmann: 1999

<sup>11</sup> see, e.g., Svašek: 2002

## Factors influencing local identity after the obliteration of Tuchomyšl

### Place of relocation

The way in which the former people of Tuchomyšl identify with their obliterated village nowadays is influenced by several factors that can be traced in their biographic narratives. The place where they were relocated turns out to be the most important. In general, those who resettled in Chlumec chiefly reflect on Tuchomyšl as a unique village, while those Tuchomyšlers now living in Ústí nad Labem describe a stronger belonging to the social space of Tuchomyšl, which is made even more powerful in their narratives using the contrast between the lost idyll of the communal village and the newly acquired anonymity of the big-city housing estate. Although both the groups miss Tuchomyšl, the nostalgia of the Chlumec people is more concerned with the uniqueness of the village whereas that of those outside Chlumec is frequently instead a nostalgia for village life and its social dimension in general.

The reason for this is that the social space of Tuchomyšl was relocated to Chlumec, a smaller town where a large portion of the Tuchomyšlers moved together. It was for them that the new prefab blocks were built here, and the neighbours from Tuchomyšl houses were now neighbours in flat units. This means their neighbourly and friendly connections were maintained, helping the resettled not feel isolated in their new context. They remained "among their own kind".

"That is we have a lot of people from Tuchomyšl here. All those down below and all those up above are from Tuchomyšl, the lady next door is from Trmice, only those people opposite are strangers. Otherwise the floor below me is all from Tuchomyšl, same up above (...). And when the neighbours had little kids and someone was at home and needed to make an errand, you just sent your kid next door, and it was like everyone was an aunt and uncle and that was that." (Sainerová)

Maybe more Tuchomyšlers moved to other places, but either they settled in previously built housing estates in Ústí nad Labem or they found new homes individually in various areas of the city or even the wider region. It is these respondents that reflect the anonymity of their new places of residence and lack of interest among their neighbours. These resettled were not "among their own kind" after the resettlement, which is why it comes as little surprise that the idea to hold the get-togethers and make a more formal continuation of the social space of Tuchomyšl originated from here.

*"Mother couldn't sleep in her new place for many years, she couldn't get used to it, was afraid in that house (...). Father had a hard time too, although he swapped house for house, but it was no longer home, you no longer meet the same people, do you." (Jaroš)*

### Age

Another important factor influencing the local identity of Tuchomyšlers was their age at the time of obliteration, meaning the portion of their lifetime they had spent in Tuchomyšl. The village was completely levelled thirty-five years ago and many of the older evictees have now passed away. The respondents now mostly belong to a generation that has spent most of their lives in their new places of residence. However, they reflect the older people's situations in their biographic narratives:

*"There were folks that just didn't know how to live in the housing estate (...) These people would stare out of their window and wither (...) Homesick they were, they were*

*folks born in a house, spent their whole life there, and now you're put into a housing block when you're seventy. There's no such diagnosis, like the doctor wouldn't have written Died of homesickness for Tuchomyšl, would he! But I think this affected the length lots of peoples' lives afterwards, even though they may have lived in much more material comfort than they had before." (Jaroš)*

### Other factors

The place identification processes were naturally also influenced by other factors, such as the size of the background that the people were leaving behind, and their economic situation.

*"We were easy! We didn't have a house of our own. Those who had one, they felt terrible, they wouldn't leave their houses. They wished to be demolished along with them, the older folks, they didn't want to move out at all, some of them." (Moravcová)*

There were also different attitudes among those who had lived in Tuchomyšl before the War and those who only settled as part of the borderland resettlement. Many felt relieved when they were given their own flat in a housing estate, because they could be free of the threat of the Germans coming back to reclaim their old homes one day.

### Conclusion

The resettled people from strip-mined Tuchomyšl nowadays identify with the non-existent village at several levels, relating both to the physical area where Tuchomyšl used to be and the social space of the community, involving the neighbourly relationships and the local way of life. How they view them today is influenced by several factors, primarily the place where they moved after the obliteration and their age at the time of obliteration. In the case of Tuchomyšl, part of the social space of the community was successfully transplanted to the new place of residence of a proportion of the resettled community. Those others, absorbed by the anonymous housing estate of a big city, provided the initiative to restore the social life consciously in periodically summoned get-togethers. Therefore, Tuchomyšlers meet in smaller numbers on a monthly basis and more massively once a year to this day to update their memories and reinforce their local identity. With this activity, therefore, they have awakened a second life for Tuchomyšl, a life this time without a physical existence.

Tuchomyšl is by far not alone in this situation. Other strip-mined villages maintain similarly strong social spaces, such as Vyklice<sup>12</sup> and Kopisty<sup>13</sup>. Almost all of the obliterated villages try to get together and remember in a certain way. They only differ in the frequency and the form.

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<sup>12</sup> See Růžičková: 2011

<sup>13</sup> See Benešová: 2011

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