'Jáchymov's Hell': Trekking in the Memoryscape of Czechoslovakia's Communist Forced Labour Camps

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Abstract

This article treks through the timeworn remnants of Czechoslovakia's Communist forced and correctional labour uranium camps in the Ore Mountains in the northwest Bohemian region of Jáchymov. These camps held tens of thousands of detainees, largely political prisoners convicted in sham trials or individuals sent there for re-education. Conditions were deplorable. Throughout the 1950s, the young Czechoslovak Communist regime compelled detainees to hard, life threatening labour and subjected them to maltreatment and arbitrary violence. This article traces some of the visible, invisible or overgrown artefacts of the former camps, as well as public as private memories about what happened there. It reflects on the current memoryscape of these forgotten places of human suffering and describes the aesthetics of these aging sites of atrocity.

Keywords

memorialization – communist Czechoslovakia – forced labour camps – aesthetics of atrocity sites

1 Introduction

Through the 1989 so-called 'Velvet Revolution' Czechia underwent a relatively peaceful transition from communism to liberal democracy and a market economy. As in any post-transition context, however, the histories of the troubled past are far from settled. Indeed, myths are circulated and recirculated—and facts forgotten or lost in emotions, political manipulations and local sensitivities. The questions of what, when, how, even where to remember—for instance, who are the oppressors and who are the oppressed—are extremely blurred and complex. Accordingly, the recent past of the 40-year-long Communist repression remains a very contentious and debated issue in Czechia. The fact that large parts of the Czech society in one way or another 'collaborated' or 'went along' with the *ancien régime* for such a long period, with only small deserted islands of resistance,¹ complexifies the memory landscape and how we see it historically. Not many individuals, and certainly not society, seem ready to gaze in the mirror and face the—perhaps ugly/unpleasant/confrontational—reflection of their past selves. One such uneasy *memoryscape*, mired in myth and sentiment, is the use of forced labour and abuse of (political) prisoners in the detention camps in the uranium-rich mines in the Jáchymov region in the 1950s and early 1960s. Sixty years on we traced—while wandering and wondering—some of the visible and invisible artefacts of the camps, as well as public as private memories about what happened there. As with other atrocity sites, with passing time, some of the memories and physicalities of this troubled past have been purposefully hidden, destroyed and forgotten to be later rediscovered, elevated and cultivated; some were repurposed; and others just left in nature's oblivion to age and slowly disappear. With this essay we do not aim to conceptualise and theorise. Rather, we critically and creatively raise and explore questions of *what* of the violent past is being remembered (or not), *by whom*, *where* and *how*. We do so by (i) offering our visual and sensual reflections on the aesthetics of the remaining physicalities of the camps during our stay in the Jáchymov area in the summer of 2020; and (ii) engaging with (oral) histories, museal narratives and the public record.²

1 Cf. M. Drumbl and B. Holá, 'Collaboration and Opportunism in Communist Czechoslovakia', in J. Espindola Mata and L.A. Payne (eds.), *Comprehending Collaboration in Authoritarian and Armed Conflict Settings* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2021, forthcoming).

2 Cf. D. Lisle and H.L. Johnson, 'Lost in the Aftermath', 50(1) *Security Dialogue* (2019) 20–39.

2 Ski Resorts and Spas in Grim Mountains

Bordering Germany in northwest Czechia, Jáchymov normally is a popular retreat. After Marie Skłodowska Curie discovered radium in the ore originating from the greater Jáchymov area at the end of the 19th century, the little town became known for its unique spa facilities; since then locally sourced radon has been used to treat rheumatism and vascular diseases. Already in the 16th century, Jáchymov—at the time the second most populous township in the Kingdom of Bohemia, right after Prague—thrived because of its intensive mining industry. The local nobility mined silver and minted coins, which were known as ‘tolars’ (coining the word ‘dollar’). If there were not the COVID-19 pandemic at the time of our visit in the summer of 2020, the town would have been most probably flocked by patients and tourists, who are attracted by fancy ski resorts and the many beautiful hiking trails that meander through the lush Krušné hory—the Ore Mountains in English, but meaning ‘Hard’ or ‘Grim’ Mountains in Czech.

Against the background of its picturesque decor and its flourishing past, Jáchymov is also known for much darker times as narrated in the museum at the town’s centre square. Right before World War II in 1938, according to the controversial Munich Agreement,³ Jáchymov was annexed by Nazi Germany. During the war, Soviet captives were put to work there to harvest uranium, which was used for Nazi military research. Forced into hard labour, the Russian-speaking war prisoners were interned in different encampments in the thick woodlands. The men subsisted in gated communities, overseen by timber watchtowers; they were always a walking distance away from the mines. Post-WWII—and after cleansing the area from German remnants—the Czechoslovak government retained the lucrative camps. In 1945 it signed a secret accord with the USSR, even expanding the mines; still to yield uranium—but this time to be sent to the USSR for its nuclear weapons research. After the Communist take-over in 1948, the entire area surrounding the mines of Jáchymov, Příbram and Horní Slavkov became a ‘no-go zone’. It was closed off to the public; any highly

3 The Munich Agreement was signed, without the presence of the Czechoslovak government, by Germany, Italy, Great Britain and France on 29 September 1938. The German, Italian, British and French representatives agreed to cede areas of Czechoslovakia bordering Germany, the so-called Sudetenland, including its population, agriculture and industry, to the Third Reich—while some other disputed areas were also transferred to Hungary and Poland. As a result, over 1/5 of Czechoslovak territory and a quarter of the population was lost. See K. McDermott: *Communist Czechoslovakia, 1945–1989, A Political and Social History* (Palgrave, London, 2015), p. 10.

confidential information about the uranium industry was only to be seen by the highest echelons of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ).⁴

3 ‘Czech Gulag’

‘[I]n a paranoid environment of Stalinist Czechoslovakia people were sent to the camps based on suspicion, that they are capable of committing a crime.’⁵

At first, mainly German prisoners of war and Czech Nazi-collaborators were held in the uranium camps to do the hard work. Later, in 1948, the state established a network of forced labour camps (‘tábory nucené práce’, TNP) ‘in order to educate individuals to approach work as a civic duty and to use their work abilities to the benefit of the whole’.⁶ KSČ representatives and national committees (‘národní výbory’) ensured that real or perceived ‘enemies of the State’ ended up in what some described as ‘really bad summer camps’.⁷ Any Czechoslovakian could end up in ‘the system’ without any judicial trial for 3 months to 2 years—and at times longer. Anywhere across the country where extensive and cheap labour was required TNPs popped up. Most were found near industry, mines and construction sites.⁸ The majority of the camps had a barrack-like, not a prison-like regime; detainees were not prisoners in a legal sense, as they were not sentenced by a court of law. At some sites, special TNP units for detainees were established within existing prisons, at others a special camp, resembling more what one archetypically imagines as ‘a forced labour camp’ was erected close to places where manpower was required. Hardly are there any photographs of the surreptitious sites. But in our historical imagination—in black and white—we see open spaces surrounded by woods and at times, barb wire fence, shielded so that civilization cannot see what is going on

4 K. Pinerová, *Do konce života: Političtí vězni padesátých let—Trauma, adaptace, identita* (Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů, Prague, 2017), p. 68.

5 During their existence, more than 20 000 people were sent to forced labour camps (TNP); J. Padevět, *Komunistické lágry, Tábory nucené práce, nápravně pracovní tábory, pracovní útvary vězňů a internační místa duchovních 1948–1962* (Academia, Prague, 2019), p. 6.

6 Law 247/48 Sb on forced labour camps, adopted on 24 October 1948, para.1 (translated by the authors). The forced labour camps according to the law 247/48 were running until 1954.

7 F. Bártík, *Tábory nucené práce se zaměřením na tábory zřízené při uranových dolech v letech 1949–1951* (Úřad dokumentace a vyšetřování zločinů komunismu, Prague, 2009).

8 Padevět, *supra* note 5, p. 6.

'the inside'; men built their own 'barracks', each neatly placed next to the other—using the timber that also naturally surrounded them. Other sites, closer to the inhabited world, were located in existing buildings. Concrete walls, not a dense forest, made it more difficult for prisoners to escape and for the public to see inside. Within the 'camps', circumstances were oftentimes brutal, like in the five TNPs around Jáchymov and Příbram areas.⁹

Apart from the 'regular' TNPs, the regime also ran a special branch of correctional labour camps ('nápravné pracovní tábory', NPT). Between 1949 and 1962 NPT camps held political- (convicted for crimes against the state in the State Court's show trials),¹⁰ retributive- (Nazi collaborators convicted by the extraordinary people's courts)¹¹ and ordinary- (criminals, murderers and thieves convicted by normal courts) prisoners. According to historian Jiří Padevět, NPTs strikingly resembled Nazi concentration camps: wooden barracks, double layered (at times triple layered) barb wire, watch towers, armed guards and tiny isolation 'correction rooms' for misbehaving prisoners.¹² Like the Nazi-lagers, these places were run by a macabre social system, including prisoners guarding and oftentimes mistreating other prisoners like 'kapos'.¹³

In total, there were 422 camps and labour correctional facilities,¹⁴ but numbers on their detainee population and casualties vary widely. General estimates, however, hold that between 1948 and 1954 the TNP's held around 20 000 people.¹⁵ Likewise, the numbers of inmates in the 18 correctional labour camps around Jáchymov, Příbram and Horní Slavkov (see Table 1)¹⁶ varied depending on the level of repression and increasing demands for work force: in 1949 there were 'only' 209 prisoners; at the peak of the Stalinist repression in 1953 almost 15 000 individuals were held there.¹⁷ A poster in the Jáchymov museum states

9 In 1951 some of the TNPs were transformed into correctional labour camps.

10 Law 232/1948 Sb on the State Court, adopted on 6 October 1948. The State Court was to deal with crimes stipulated in the Law 231/1948 on the protection of People's Democratic Republic and the Court was abolished in 1951.

11 Presidential Decree no. 16/1945 Sb on punishment of Nazi criminals, traitors and their helpers and on extraordinary people's courts, adopted 19 June 1945.

12 Padevět, *supra* note 5, p. 6.

13 *Ibid.*; Z. Bauer et al., *Jáchymovské tábor—peklo, ve kterém mrzlo* (NZB, Prague, 2019) pp. 122–123; 269. For a discussion on the agency of kapos during the Holocaust, see M.A. Drumbl, 'Victims Who Victimise', 4(2) *London Rev. Int. Law* (2016) 217–246.

14 M. Hauner, 'Crime and Punishment in Communist Czechoslovakia: The Case of General Heliodor Píka and his Prosecutor Karel Vaš', 9:2–3 *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* (2008) p. 344.

15 McDermott, *supra* note 3, p. 65; Padevět, *supra* note 5, p. 6.

16 Pinerová, *supra* note 4, p. 68.

17 L. Petrášová, *Vězeňské tábory v Jáchymovských uranových dolech* (Separát, Prague, 1994) p. 440.

TABLE 1 Correctional Labour Camps: Jáchymov, Horní Slavkov and Příbram

Camp	Established	Closed down
Ústřední	4 February 1950	12 December 1954
Bratrství	21 February 1950	12 June 1954
Vykmanov I	1 March 1949	Still serves as a prison
Vykmanov II	February 1951	26 May 1956
Svornost	4 December 1949	29 October 1954
Mariánská	4 June 1949	1 April 1960
Rovnost	19 September 1949	1 June 1961
Nikolaj	November 1951	1 July 1958
Eliáš I	29 July 1949	End of 1951
Eliáš II	8 December 1950	1 April 1959
Vršek—Barbora	August 1951	30 March 1957
Prokop	2 July 1949	14 May 1955
Ležnice	26 January 1950	22 August 1955
Svatopluk	April 1951	14 May 1955
XII	September 1951	9 August 1954
Vojna	probably end of September 1951	1 June 1961
Bytíz	May 1953	Still serves as a prison
Vykmanov JAV (prison)	1954–1955	Still serves as a prison

SOURCE: LUDMILA PETRÁŠOVÁ, *VĚZEŇSKÉ TÁBORY V JÁCHYMOVSKÝCH URANOVÝCH DOLECH* (PRAGUE: SEPARÁT, 1994), p. 437.

that there were in total 186 000 persons ‘imprisoned in TNP’s and concentration camps’. According to the same poster, 15 726 individuals ‘violently lost lives in prisons and camps’, while scholars estimate that around 3000 to 4000 political prisoners perished as a result of maltreatment and torture.¹⁸

In what now is dubbed the ‘Czech Gulag’,¹⁹ the 18 camps around Jáchymov, Horní Slavkov and Příbram were among the most notorious. Living standards were largely suboptimal. Inmates were untrained, unfit and unequipped for hard, slave-like labour—some, such as intellectuals, professors, civil servants,

18 K. Williams, ‘The StB in Czechoslovakia, 1954–89’, in K. Williams and D. Deletant (eds.), *Security Intelligence Services in New Democracies, The Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania* (Palgrave, London, 2001) p. 25; R. David, *Communists and Their Victims, The Quest for Justice in the Czech Republic* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, PA, 2018) p. 26.

19 Hauner, *supra* note 14, p. 344.

priests or students, had never worked with their hands before.²⁰ Unshielded internees had to handle radioactive materials. Drinking water was scarce and was often sourced from the toxic mines.²¹ Next to these dismal circumstances, there was violence and humiliation; prisoners basically depended on the will of camp commanders to constrain abusive guards and *kapos*.²²

Histories about the camps vary tremendously. There are accounts that describe bearable conditions (Eliáš I, Bytíz) while others talk about the camps as deadly (Rovnost, Nikolaj, Barbora).²³ During the Prague Spring in the late 1960s, political prisoners started referring to themselves as *MUKL* ('muž určený k likvidaci'—man earmarked for liquidation) and used tropes such as 'Jáchymov concentration camps' or 'liquidation camps'.²⁴ Generally, there has been extensive mythological discourse about the uranium camps while independent, more or less objective, scholarly investigations have started to surface only in recent years.²⁵ From what we gather each camp must have comprised a world on its own, with its own dynamics, whilst along the way life probably changed as much as the composition of inmates.²⁶

4 Gate Towards Freedom

After the last camps were closed down in the early 1960s, the regime demolished nearly all physical traces of their existence. To track down the few visible remnants and gauge how they are being represented and memorialised, if at all,²⁷ we trekked through Jáchymov and its surrounding hills in the summer of 2020. The town's lower part is encircled by fancy neo-classical spa hotels. On the road to the St. Joachim church on Jáchymov's main square one passes by more derelict buildings, deserted non-stop bars and abandoned tobacco shops and casinos. Old things gradually make place for new things. Apart from the mid-summer construction works on the main road, which dissects the town in half, Jáchymov was deserted, sleepy, quiet.

²⁰ Pinerová, *supra* note 4, p. 71.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, pp. 71–72.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Bauer et al, *supra* note 13, pp. 737–738.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 661–671.

²⁶ Pinerová, *supra* note 4, p. 77.

²⁷ On the passage of time, (forgotten) places of memorialisation as 'footnotes in the history' and their aesthetics see also A. Kumar, 'Trial as a Tool of Colonialism: The 1858 Trial of Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar', in this issue, pp. 166–188.

Right next to St. Joachim church, opposite to the museum, stands a memorial. It is the town’s most prominent and visible *lieu de mémoire* to the victims of communism. Designed by sculptor Roman Podrázský (1943–2001) the commemorative space is titled Way of the Cross towards Freedom—‘Křížová cesta ke svobodě’. Its creation in 1996 was demanded by the Confederation of Political Prisoners (CPP). We observe here a clear politics of memory at play. The non-mentioning of other prisoners (and civilians), who also suffered undeniable hardship, exposes the line drawn between political prisoners and the complex victimhood of prisoners of war (including former perpetrators), retribution prisoners and the ordinary correctional prisoners. On the market of compassion for past harms, victims compete for recognition, and in order to be recognised one must be visible, noticeable and signposted.²⁸ Yet, the monument could be also understood more inclusively. A sandstone sculpture located right in front of the yellowish basilica, ‘The Gate towards Freedom’, depicts broken bars tumbling on a man’s physique on one side, and on a woman’s body on the other. The years 1948–1989 are inscribed at the bottom—while the camps were only operational until 1961 and only men were detained. Walking up to the Gate, we wandered pass fifteen large stones. Each bears the name of a camp—but it is ambiguous why certain sites were omitted. Every boulder carries some unique symbol—such as barb wire, chains, thorns, Judas’ purse, candle, springs and tears, flowers, roses, a halter—leaving it for the spectator to imagine camp life and contemplate the depicted symbolism of each of the included camps.

5 Jáchymovské Peklo—‘Jáchymov’s Hell’

From the church square also starts ‘Jáchymov’s Hell’, an 8 kilometre trek in the surrounding mountains. Created in 2001 by the CCP, the former Mining Union Barbora, the municipality and the Karlovy Vary tourist club, the walk’s aim is to educate tourists about ‘the horrors of the labour camps’.²⁹ Criss-crossing through steep, green, forestry slopes, trekkers trail a path along places—some virtually empty perhaps because of COVID-19 restrictions in place when we were there—where camps and mines had existed. Up the stairs, on the church’s right, is the first halt: the still operative ‘Svornost’ (Concord) mine.

28 Cf. J. van Wijk, ‘Who is the little old lady of international crimes? Nils Christie’s concept of the ideal victim reinterpreted’, 19(2) *Int. Rev. Victimol.* (2013) 159–179.

29 For a brief description of the trek see <https://www.laznejachymov.cz/jachymovske-peklo/> (accessed 7 February 2021).

Nowadays, the facility extracts radon-enriched water for the spas. For tourists, the company exhibits a refurbished rail transport cart bearing a hammer and sickle. Back in the greyish 1950s, it could hardly have been so polished and clean. Close-by, up the steep hill, are the remains of the Svornost camp: some stones, overgrown by grass and bushes and the leftovers of a 'correction room'. A plaque informs that the gloomy, bunker-like, underground place had served as a holding for prisoners whom guards considered to have misbehaved. However, when we later in the week talked to Luboš Modrovič, a former political prisoner and our local source who is a historian by experience, we learned that the actual site probably had been a storage room—using its darkness and coldness to preserve food stock—and not a cell. Regardless of the authenticity of this particular structure, historians confirm that these 'prisons in prisons' were indeed used in some of the camps.³⁰

Like the cave, curators recreated other camp physicalities. Their aesthetic is somewhat caricatural for how we imagine these spaces of internment must have looked like. Deeper into the forest we passed by a wooden watch tower; barb wire fences are neatly positioned along the walking paths (see Figure

FIGURE 1 Watch towers and barb wire at Jachymov's Hell trek.

³⁰ Pinerová, *supra* note 4, p. 73; Padevč, *supra* note 5, p. 73 describes the use of such 'correctional facility' for example in the Rovnost camp.

1)—with cobbles, mud and a slow water stream coming from the hill. This was the daily route prisoners took to go to ‘work’. For today’s tourist—wearing sportswear and carrying a backpack with snacks and supplies—the experience is an uneasy *mélange* of comfortably enjoying the beautiful nature and thinking about an ugly past.

Much like other curated sites of past atrocity across the globe—but quite surprisingly unlike the representation of the Nazi concentration camp at Theresienstadt, located just over 100 km from Jáchymov—the narrative weaves in features of other world historical affronts into the specific, local dreads. Like elsewhere, the trek’s curators tenaciously seek to entice memories about Auschwitz. On top of a hill at Svornost we stumble upon sign boards. ‘Práci ke svobodě’, ‘Zakázané pásmo’ they say in bold—Arbeit Macht Frei and Forbidden Area. Modrovič told us such insignia were actually not placed at this spot 70 years ago. At other places close by, like at Nikolaj camp, historians maintain that such texts were indeed written on camps’ entry gates.³¹ Whether factually correct or not, tourists are enticed to see the structures and symbols on display through the commemorative iconography of the Holocaust. Images of oppressive Nazi concentration camps and language are summoned to help visitors memorise the crimes of communism (Figure 2). It works to some extent, but it can also spark confusion, paradoxes, disconcertment—in some

FIGURE 2 ‘Forbidden Area’ and ‘Arbeit Macht Frei’ signs at former Svornost.

³¹ Padevět, *supra* note 5, p. 55.

FIGURE 3 The nature overgrowth at former Nikolaj.

of the camps around there, Nazi prisoners were sanctioned to forced labour, particularly in the early days.

At the top of another hill used to be the camp Nikolaj. But apart from a recent plaque several hundred metres away, there is no trace whatsoever that prisoners lived here (Figure 3). It seems that dealing with the past was left to nature and it simply overgrew and overpowered the haunted memories. The lives and histories of detainees became obscured by the force of nature. Memories of violence, oppression and suffering became undergrowth. We stood there, in the middle of the forest, imagining the looks, the sounds and smells of the earthed past. On the open spot surrounded by the tall green trees and hidden in the grass, the only concrete evidence we find is a couple of indigestible iron columns and concrete. Home of middle-aged trees, the space is now serene, soothing. Its only inhabitants are now wild boar, foxes and birds.

The story of hardship, imprisonment and violence vanishes. The past is bygone. In the 1950s, however, Nikolaj held around 800 inmates.³² In their memories, Nikolaj lives on as a sad, painful and angry reminiscence of what must have been a deplorable place. Some former prisoners speak about Nikolaj as 'a liquidation camp'.³³ Camp-commandos (themselves retribution and criminal prisoners) had bullied, beaten and tortured political prisoners.³⁴ Notorious was the beating commando's chief, Břetislav Jeníček, who during the war had led the collaborative organisation 'Vlajka' (Flag) and was an active Gestapo-confidant. His infamy stems from his violent brutality against his co-prisoners. After his release from the camp in 1954, following the 1953 amnesty, and well into the 1960s, Jeníček, true to his reputation, became an energetic collaborator

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Pinerová, *supra* note 4, p. 71.

³⁴ Padevět, *supra* note 5, pp. 55–56.

of Czechoslovakia's secret police (the StB).³⁵ Jeníček's 'commando' not only bullied and beat political prisoners, but had, according to Padevět, *de facto* similar powers as the camp leadership, including a possibility to place detainees for indeterminate time into the correctional room.³⁶ In between the arbitrary violence inflicted by the *kaapos*, like Jeníček, and guards, on normal 'work' days, life was not easy either. During daytime, Nikolaj's prisoners laboured at the Eduard mine, which is about 1000 metres uphill. As the Eduard mine and the camp were connected by a public road, prisoners had to walk in a formation called the 'Russian (or also Jáchymov's) bus';³⁷ five in one row, and one row after another; the men were tied together by a hemp or steel rope. Former prisoner Zdeněk Mandrholec is quoted at placards on the roadside, saying that '[h]e counted it and he walked in such way over 1140 kilometres'. History's irony and in fact capitalism's disregard of the dark stories is that very near the area where Eduard was located is now a sports complex with paintball facilities, Nordic walking and a biathlon shooting range.

From Eduard, the trek descends pass the former Eliáš I, Eliáš II and Rovnost camps. Rovnost (Equality) was founded in 1949 at a former labour camp created for Wehrmacht soldiers and SS members—some of whom remained there well after 1949.³⁸ Over its gate hung the sign 'Soviet Union, our ideal'.³⁹ By the end of 1950, more than 1200 prisoners were detained there.⁴⁰ František Paleček—say historians and former prisoners—was amongst the cruellest and most sadistic of the camp's commanders and guards;⁴¹ he beat captives over their fingers with a metal cable, or with key chains against their faces, and he coerced prisoners to stand outside in the frost of the night. Prisoners remember that one of them was forced to stand outside in the freezing cold for 50 hours, until 'his face turned black'.⁴² Some recall how Paleček extinguished cigarettes on peoples' bodies. The atrocities often left the victims unconscious.⁴³ As if the abuse was not enough, Paleček also had, according to prisoners, forced them, for his own pleasure and whims, to build a brick, miniature castle. Through its ruins in the forest, the contours of the so-called 'Paleček's castle' are still clearly

35 Allegedly, Jeníček collaborated with the StB already while in the camp. Padevět, *supra* note 5, p. 58.

36 Padevět, *supra* note 5, p. 56.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 58.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 70.

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*, *supra* note 5, p. 71.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

42 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 73.

discernible. Where Rovnost was located, close to the thumb-nail castle, there is also a much larger ruin of the so-called ‘řetízkárna’ building, which used to be a changing room for prisoners into and out of mining gear. Meanwhile, much of the area of the former camp is being slowly but surely taken over by newly built residential houses and recreational cabins. At this site, the overgrowth of the memoryscape has been manmade.

Jáchymov’s Hell trek is prudently curated and narrated. After a successful crowdsourcing campaign by the CPP, Jáchymov authorities, former prisoners, historians and Jáchymov’s museum personnel, the trail was refurbished and updated in 2015.⁴⁴ By invoking the Holocaust, it now offers sightseers an experience of re-imagining torment, while also telling a cautiously crafted narrative. And indeed, the imagery of these dark days long past and the story of the ordeals of thousands of unnamed victims is meant to make visitors pause and stop, perhaps shock even. Contrasts could not be fiercer: we passed through this dark history on a sunny day, seeing the watchtowers against a canvas of rolling hills and a blue sky—but also solitary; the COVID-19 pandemic kept other visitors away.

6 ‘Discover, Play and Relax!’

Besides the camps showcased at Jáchymov’s Hell trek, there had been various other camps in the region. Most of them are disremembered, now used for other more current or future oriented purposes and pleasures. In the area of Horní Slavkov, for example, the grounds of Camp XII are now a forest park and children’s playground—funded by the European Union. Bordering a monotonous residential area with low flat buildings—on a strip with parked cars and coloured cans for separated garbage—a billboard at the entrance welcomes visitors and invites them to ‘*Discover, Play and Relax! [...] If you think you enter another world, you are correct...*’ Locals seem unaware that this once was a correctional prison site keeping between 1500 and 2000 inmates.⁴⁵ There is no mention whatsoever that in the camp, built in 1951, prisoners were frequently subjected to violence, bullying and sadism inflicted against them by their overseers.⁴⁶ According to former prisoners’ testimony, conditions at XII were comparable to Nazi concentration camps.⁴⁷ When we visited the park, it was

44 See <http://www.politictivezni.cz/naucna-stezka-jachymovske-peklo.html> (accessed 7 February 2021).

45 Padevět, *supra* note 5, p. 31.

46 *Ibid.*

47 *Ibid.*, p. 41.

FIGURE 4 Playground and sewage at former Camp XII.

a rainy, grey, warm summer morning. Only a couple of people—young and old—were walking their dogs there. Otherwise, the park was deserted and the empty monkey bars felt sort of out of place.

We tried to find some relics of the camp. And hidden among the pathways and trees we found some. At the outskirt border of the park, a lonely column, left from the camp's palisade, is covered in the thick bushes.⁴⁸ A bit further, just outside the park in the meadow, we discovered a massive piece of concrete in the tall grass. It appears we stumbled upon a leftover of Camp XII sewage system (Figure 4). Now, the hole is filled with empty beer cans, bottles and street litter.

However, the camp inmates' ordeals are not left in total obscurity. These memories are kept somewhere else, at the other side of town. At the local cemetery on a hill overlooking Horní Slavkov, there is a memorial desk. It commemorates five prisoners, who were shot dead when they had tried to escape Camp XII in 1951.⁴⁹ Just opposite the wooden cross is a well-maintained memorial to Soviet heroes who died during the 'Great Patriotic War'.

From Camp XII and the competing memorials, we continue our journey, tracing other seemingly forgotten camps, left to gracefully (or disgracefully) age and disappear with the passage of time. Interestingly, at times, and in contrast to Jáchymov's Hell trek, we located and found some quite substantial physical traces of former camps. Among these is Svatopluk (just outside of

⁴⁸ See also *ibid.*, p. 38.

⁴⁹ The tombstone, next to the names of the five individuals, states that it is 'Tomb of Political Prisoners Tortured to Death during the Communist Totality'.

Horní Slavkov), established in 1951, which held over 1500 prisoners in 1952.⁵⁰ The famous Czech writer Jiří Stránský was held here. He later published several books and stories (many of which were made into movies) based on his camp experiences, shaping public representations of this dark past. Nowadays, the place is quite difficult to find. There is no signpost, no guidance, no map, no master narrative, no curating. After driving around for a while, we stopped at a huge complex with what appeared to us were abandoned barracks. Deceived by our preconceptions of what to search for (barrack-like constructions, a rusty wire fencing, or a signpost) we thought we 'hit the jackpot'. The loud barking of an alarmed German Shepherd, echoing through the derelict buildings, perfectly complemented the mood of the premises. However, the place actually turned out to be just some kind of an agricultural farm. When we asked a lady, who lived there, where we could find the labour camp she nonchalantly answered: 'Yes, it is there just around the corner, where people bring trash nowadays. I think'. Her husband, a man of little words who had just arrived, nodded in confirmation. And indeed, a couple of hundred metres up the road the ruins of what used to be correctional labour camp are still there. Left derelict, without signs directing anyone to visit and remember, surrounded by waste from building sites and stuff (like old mattresses) people want to get rid of for one reason or another (Figure 5).

Apart from birds singing, what remains is silence. It is nothing like the carefully curated and manicured Hell's track. The old Communist regime had not cared to destroy the premises, but it had just abandoned it. The new liberal democratic regime, or anyone really, has not cared to elevate the ruins to an official site of remembrance. Here, time and nature have taken over; the buildings are gradually disintegrating and disappearing, trees are maturing in the buildings. Only time will tell how long this site continues to be overgrown by

FIGURE 5 Trees and garbage taking over at former Svatopluk.

⁵⁰ Padevět, *supra* note 5, p. 25.

tall grass and green bushes, outgrown by aged trees, or covered in things people want to throw away and forget.

7 Red Tower of Death

On our last day we drove to Ostrov, just south of Jáchymov, where we met Luboš Modrovič (the amateur historian mentioned above). He is one of the active representatives of the now abolished Karlovy Vary section of the CPP. Modrovič, a middle-aged gentleman, met us at the fenced side of a road that leads to the still functioning Ostrov prison—when we passed we saw prisoners crossing the street to work their shift in the factory opposite the jailhouse. A former political prisoner himself in the 1980s (he refused to enter military service), the sympathetic and extremely talkative Modrovič was lucidly passionate and very well-informed of Jáchymov's history. But next to giving us entry into his oral histories he also had the key to a rusty door of a large concrete enclosure. Modrovič took us inside the premises of former camp Vykmanov, which prisoners remembered as one of the most brutal ones. Living conditions had been rigid and the regime was rough.⁵¹

Also, at this location is the so-called Red Tower of Death (Figure 6). The seven-story redbrick tower is on the UNESCO World Heritage list and there is a huge road sign advertising it. Surrounded by high concrete walls, and difficult to see from the outside, the Tower—with its two accompanying factory halls and railway track—stood tall in the middle of a large piece of land against the clear blue mid-summer skies. From the outside, it looked very well maintained and taken care of. It had been built and used to 'smash' and sort uranium. The hazardous substance was then directly sent off by train to the USSR. Modrovič tells us how prisoners were forced to work with the highly radioactive rocks and powder; they had no protective equipment, made long shifts and constantly breathed in toxic dust. Besides bad nutrition, cancer took the lives of a large majority of labourers—hence the Tower's grim nickname.

After Vykmanov camp was padlocked in 1956, the Škoda company took over the area to assemble trolley buses and used the pylon as an administrative building. In 2008 the car manufacturer sold the entire property to the CPP for the symbolic prize of 1 Kč (approx. 0.03 EUR). Modrovič led us into the facility. In one of the two former factory halls—which could also be the perfect venue for a Berlin-style minimalist industrial hipster's food

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

FIGURE 6 Red Tower of Death.

court—he operates a sort of personal, make-shift but well-maintained museum. It is his personal tribute to the political prisoners, whose (oral) histories he has been collecting. The walls are covered by do-it-yourself noticeboards showcasing the stories of prisoners (but also of some guards and commanders and regional historical figures). Pasted next to each other, their biographies are printed on A4 white papers in dense blurring text. Now and then they are illustrated with a black and white picture. In the ‘museum’ one can also see some of the tools prisoners were using, a heavy piece of uranium and dissident cartoons and magazines from the 1950s. The aim, Modrovič told us, is once all the legal quarrels are settled

over the ownership of the Tower,⁵² to make the museum official and use it to educate youth and school children about the history of the area.

8 Reflections: Aesthetics of Atrocity Sites, Passage of Time and Pandemics

The use of forced labour, arbitrary detention and abuse of prisoners in the 1950s and early 1960s constitutes one of the many dark spots in Czech(oslovak) history. Tens of thousands of individuals were incarcerated for 're-education', or tried and sentenced in show trials because the Communist Party disliked who they were, what they were thinking or how they were behaving. Remembrance of this relatively recent past is still unsettled and debated, victimhood is claimed and denied. With the passage of time some memories and historical narratives have been exaggerated and elevated, some turned around and twisted, while others were silenced or just left alone to be forgotten. And the same can be said of the physicalities of the Jáchymov uranium camps as sites of atrocity. The Communist regime had tried to destroy any physical remnants of the camps. And as the time was passing and the places were aging, nature and/or human cultivation gradually took over the landscapes and thus changed the past atrocity sites. At these memoryscapes, past oppression and suffering became undergrowth. Whilst these sites of dark memories aged, they became increasingly invisible, naturally overgrown by nature's green trees and weeds or purposefully overbuilt with men's grey cement or red bricks. After the dark covers of Communism had been lifted by Czechia's new regime, which strived to become a transparent democracy, some of history's forgotten places were purposely made 'visible' again—as Jáchymov's Hell trek, invoking the imageries of the Holocaust—while some were just left to age and gradually disappear.

We visited Jáchymov in the summer of 2020, while societies the world over were in lockdown, trying to control disease and death, protecting the vulnerable aged and turning to virtuality. Traveling in isolation through the reality of the present insecurities and restrictions while investigating what was left of insecurities and peril of a different time was an experience of mixed emotions and contradictory impressions. When we arrived, Jáchymov was desolated, a ghost town, as if it became the no-go zone it was more than 60 years later.

⁵² There are court proceedings among different fractions of the Confederation of Political Prisoners regarding the ownership and administration of the tower.

However, us being there, being able to see and smell not through a screen but ‘for real’ was strangely elating. All the pre-pandemic rush and hurly burly were gone and the town and its beautiful landscape were absolutely peaceful. It was eerie and soothing at the same time. The standstill, peace and quiet, however, allowed for it to be observed, to be felt and reflected on in a very unique moment of serenity. And we wondered whether the Jáchymov’s trek with its powerfully evocative stories and memories, recorded on the placards carefully situated along the path by its curators, had been more crowded, more visited and more seen before the pandemic. And if so, how would the aesthetics of the place change with tourists (some coming for history, some for spas or non-stop bars) lining up on the narrow paths? And by the same token, will the visitors, post-COVID-19, come back? What will the future hold for such, at the moment virtually deserted, physical places of memory of the old suffering after the pandemic ends? Will such memorial sites also become virtualised,⁵³ and thus frozen in time oblivious to any overgrowth and ageing, for anyone from anywhere to ‘visit’ from the comfort of their living rooms to take a virtual tour and remember? And what would such virtualization mean for the experience of ‘virtual visitors’ and their sensations and feelings, which physical memory sites of past atrocities are meant to elicit and provoke?⁵⁴

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53 For a discussion of aesthetics of virtual reality see also R. Vos and S. Stolk ‘Courtroom 600: The (Virtual) Reality of Being There’, in this issue, pp. 308–327.

54 Cf. Annaclaudia Martini, Dorina Maria Buda, ‘Dark Tourism and affect: framing places of death and disaster’, 23(6) *Current Issues in Tourism* (2020) 679–692.