

Where the Countryside met the Town: Latest Explorations of the Ostrava Industrial Agglomeration¹

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The Ostrava agglomeration is one of the most industrial and populated regions in Central Europe. In the mid-19th century, many industrial corporations in the sectors of coal mining, iron processing, and chemical production arose in the heart of a traditionally residential area. Along with heavy industry, dense railway, road, and transport networks were built by public authorities, as well as by private companies. In the surrounding villages, workers who regularly commuted between their rural home and the urban industrial districts were hired. The economic boom in the 1860s attracted thousands of migrants of a peasant origin, hailing from distant agricultural regions; these were settled in the newly established workers' housing schemes. The housing schemes, comprised of small-scale workers' houses with tiny gardens and yards, hindered classic urban development. The transformation of the Ostrava region from a rural area into an urban space with an enormous ethnic, social, religious, and cultural heterogeneity has left its significant mark in the mental development of local inhabitants.

This mark, characterized by the merging of the town and the countryside, soon became the topic of intellectual as well as scholarly inquiries. Since the 1950s, Marxist historians, geographers, and ethnologists focused on the rise of the modern Ostrava agglomeration, and carried out systematic studies, which have lasted several decades until the present. One very promising scholar who builds on the results of these researchers is Martin Jemelka (*1979). With his inspiring and innovative manner, Jemelka confronts the older conclusions of the historical, demographic, and ethnographic explorations

of the Ostrava industrial region with newly accessed archival documents and qualitative interviews. With the support of conceptual tools from the history of everyday life and the history of working class culture, Jemelka has published and edited several monographs, which have analyzed the problems of urbanization, industrialization, and migration in the micro-historical context.

Jemelka's first monograph (2007), or its rewritten and extended version (2008), respectively, deals with the social and cultural history of the largest and the most populated workers' housing scheme in Ostrava. This housing scheme known as "Šalamouna", named after the powerful businessman and industrialist, Salomon Mayer Rothschild (1774–1855), was erected in the late 1860s and early 1870s. After almost one hundred years of its existence, it was demolished and replaced by prefabricated concrete housing blocks – the most visible sign of postwar modernity and communist utopia. The main focus of the monograph lies on the interwar period, and aside from analyzing the building documentation and the population census results, it includes several unique sources that captured the experiences of former inhabitants of the housing scheme.

As it has been already stated, the leit-motif of Jemelka's work is a blending of the urban and rural world. During the boom of housing schemes in the 1920s and 1930s, industrial corporations preferred the construction of houses with a maximum of eight housing units. Thus, houses were not only hostels for tens of industrial workers, but they also tried to provide a certain level of housing culture and an economic base for the worker's family. The houses

included shelters for domestic livestock, small gardens for growing vegetables and fruits, and corporations also provided the opportunity for renting tiny agricultural fields in the close proximity of the schemes. All this played out in the shadows of mining towers and factory chimneys. Jemelka argues that workers' households evoked a rural past and contributed to the persistence of rural lifestyles and of a traditional peasant mentality in a modern urban industrial society. The housing schemes in general, and the workers' houses in particular, disturbed the long-term patterns of urbanization and urban development. The childhood, adolescence, and maturity of the inhabitants of the housing schemes neither took place in an urban or a rural environment, but rather in the space that could be called "in-betweenness" (Katherine Lebow).

Even though Jemelka has not explicitly used this concept, his monographs have collected many examples of spaces in which "in-betweenness" or "rurbanity" was articulated. The rural past of the inhabitants of housing schemes affected family, friendly, and social ties, which were based on a regional background. Houses in housing schemes were originally settled by male tenants, lodgers, and acquaintances who came from the same village and region. This type of grouping determined the choice of partners, wedding attendants, godparents, neighbors, and colleagues at the workplace. Moreover, the regional background was also manifested in memberships in trade unions, in civic associations, or in religious communities. Some pubs were accessible only to members of of a specific regional group, and other denizens were subjected

to physical violence upon their visit. The mapping and topography of such regional affiliation, which sometimes almost delves to the level of particular streets and houses, is probably the most interesting moment of Jemelka's analysis.

In 2007/2008, when Jemelka published his first monographs, historians began to use sociological, ethnological, or demographic surveys from the past as an interesting source for historical analysis. In this sense, Jemelka's approach was in many aspects innovative and promising. However, the fact that Jemelka sometimes accepted the conceptual framework of Marxist ethnographers is problematic. Thus, workers' festivals, habits, sustenance, and clothing are interpreted as an "anachronism" – remnants of a rural origin and background. An explicit reflection and contextualization from the contemporary perspective is missing in this case. Similarly, Jemelka shows very interesting examples of how local dialects and language varieties of rural migrants persisted in the urban environment, as well as how workers of rural origin appropriated their new world through older vocabulary, using excerpts from the daily press, school chronicles, complaints and court files. Unfortunately, Jemelka understands these phenomena in a very static manner, and overlooks their dynamic moments.

During their work on monographs, Martin Jemelka interviewed the former inhabitants of housing schemes and their family members. A selection of collected interviews and memories was published in the separate book called "People from Housing Schemes Tell their History" (Jemelka 2009). The book met extraordinary response from the public: e.g. the

radio version of the publication was read in a series. The book presents the subjective testimonies and personal narratives of people who were born in the housing schemes, and who grew up and spent part of their productive age there. Later, many of them left the housing schemes and moved to new, prefabricated concrete housing blocks. The long-term perspective enabled the author to capture the gradual change of local memory and oral tradition, including the current, mostly distant attitudes of former inhabitants towards the mentioned “rural anachronism”. For example, in 2007, Milada Kaupová (*1928) recalled that the “house scheme was, for us, like a trip to a village”. Moreover, the collected and published interviews also revealed one interesting moment that was not explicitly present in the archival documents, i.e. the existence of “Jews” and Jewish prejudice. Interviewees identified “Jews” through classical stereotypes as shopkeepers, sellers of alcohol, brothel operators, doctors, and lawyers. Interviewees did not distinguish Jews, for example, among ordinary miners and steelworkers. Jews were the others who differed from “us.”

Even though Martin Jemelka described many examples which illustrate the merging urban and rural environment in housing schemes, he did not inquire about their general context. Emotional ties to nature and to animals, holidays and vacations spent outside of the town, economic shortages and the need to find supplies in the countryside during the economic crises of the 1930s, World War II, or under communist dictatorship did not interrupt the relations of the inhabitants of housing schemes with the rural world. The expulsion of the German population in the late

1940s, political campaigns calling for the settlement of borderlands and for an intensive connection to relatives encouraged many industrial workers to the “return” to the countryside after their retirement. In this respect, boundaries between urbanity and rurality were very blurred. It raises the question of the necessity of a more precise definition of “urbanization” and “anachronism”, used by Jemelka for his interpretations.

The themes, methods, and sources which were shown in the exploration of the housing scheme “Šalamouna”, were utilized by Martin Jemelka in the collective research of eighty other housing schemes in the Ostrava agglomeration. The result was a three-volume encyclopedia entitled “Ostrava Workers’ Housing Schemes”, which compiled several thousands of topographic data (Jemelka 2011, Jemelka 2012, Jemelka 2015). All three volumes have a unified structure that makes reading through them easier. A description of the spatial layout allows readers to create a mental picture of where each housing scheme was located, and how the inhabitants traveled to work. The detailed depiction of the building development opens the doors of individual houses, and guides the reader from the cellar to the ground-floors, and provides literal insight into the kitchens and bedrooms of the housing schemes’ inhabitants. What is valuable and unique, though, is that the authors attempted to put the building development of housing schemes into the historical and architectural context, and to show how many houses were typical of their time and corresponded to the housing types of a given professional group or social strata. In the description of the housing

standard, readers are informed about the size of the dwelling unit, about the level of hygienic facilities, and about the introduction of electricity or the connection to the municipal water supply system. These are considered to be attributes which distinguish urbanity from rurality.

When the authors examined the territorial background of the housing schemes' inhabitants, they pointed out the linguistic, regional, social and religious heterogeneity of the Ostrava agglomeration. This heterogeneity affected the specific forms of the nation-building processes in the region, where people from different places of the Habsburg and the German empires immigrated to. The authors point out that work migration has been linked to a whole range of issues which had an impact on the life of inhabitants in housing schemes. Many of the migrants came from poor rural regions, were illiterate or semi-literate, performed unskilled work, and established closed communities. Alcoholism, prostitution, violence, or the Antisemitism evoked by the distinct habitus of the Hasidic community manifested. When the authors consider the housing schemes as the proverbial melting pot, they should demonstrate, however, what the result of the melting process was.

Whereas during the capitalist urbanization housing schemes provided respectable shelter to the wage workers, under communist dictatorship, they offered asylum to the Roma dispersed in industrial regions. The Roma were to be "civilized" in the housing schemes in accordance with the ideals of a new socialist man and society. It were the Roma themselves who, in addition to the retired employees of the coal-mining and metallurgical corporations, represented the last inhabitants of the housing schemes

before they were demolished in the 1980s. The housing schemes were removed not only because of their obsolescence, but also because they were considered to be an anachronism of the capitalist past and outdated approach to housing issues for working classes (Jemelka 2013). According to Jemelka, the Roma in the housing schemes appreciated the possibility of living in the middle of the urban environment while maintaining a partially rural life in the separated residential neighborhoods with small gardens and green landscape.

In the tree-volume topography of workers' housing schemes in Ostrava, the intersection of urbanity and rurality is not a primary goal, but a by-product of inquiry into the spatial layout, demographic development, social structure, and everyday life. Jemelka purposefully analyzed the entanglement of the urban and rural space (the creation of a rurban environment) in a concise article in English (Jemelka 2014). In contrast to previous examinations of "industrial villagers", i.e. those workers who lived in the countryside and seasonally worked in industry jobs, Jemelka takes into account other types of sources for their analysis, i.e. works of fiction. Stories of poor peasants who were forced to leave the countryside and begin to work in the industrial sector nostalgically recalling the rural landscape, referring to environmental pollution, idealizing the village community, and criticizing urban (im)morality are certainly examples of a classic literary topic. The bards who celebrated the Ostrava region in their poems and novels are not any exception. However, the confrontation of literary and historical narratives that Jemelka has undertaken is quite an inspiring approach to this issue. In general,

Jemelka's previous studies were characterized by a social and economic determinism that served as an interpretative framework. Jemelka did not neglect cultural, mental and folklore motifs in his inquiry; however, he did not research them systematically. They were of secondary importance for his analysis, and he used them for colorful description. Although similar attempts still remain at the half-way mark, one wants to read more. This is a reason to look forward to Martin Jemelka's next monograph.

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