

Ordinary Czechs and Their Cottages



Petra Schindler-Wisten, *O chalupách a lidech: chalupářství v českých zemích v období tzv. normalizace a transformace [About holiday homes and people. Holiday homes in the Czech Lands in the period of so-called normalisation and transformation]*, Praha: Karolinum 2017, 210 pp.

The development of the 'holiday home phenomenon', that is the habit of spending one's leisure time at a second home in the countryside, is often associated with the emergence of the normalisation regime in the Czech Lands after 1968. The ownership of a weekend cottage became a common phenomenon, its popularity has continued in the Czech Republic to this day. A new book by historian Petra Schindler-Wisten of the Centre for Oral History of the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences examines the wider context of this phenomenon. She is interested in what the initial causes were before 1968 and how this tradition has been kept alive after 1989. She endeavours to find out about its importance for individuals and families, asks how the owners of holiday homes perceived themselves, and how this activity affected their leisure time. In the end, she poses the question why Czech society is still considered to be a 'holiday home nation'. The author, who generally pursues a historical-anthropological approach, seeks the answers to these questions largely in her own oral-historical research, which she supplements with other types of sources.

On the opening, on ten pages, she summarises the popularity of second homes abroad. Although she only devotes a few paragraphs to the individual countries, she succeeds in showing that this was widespread not only in Czechoslovakia, and, to varying degrees, across Europe on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Owning a second home is still popular, for example, in the Nordic countries, in Spain and in France. A large part of the book, almost one half, is a description of the development of the phenomenon in the Czech Lands since the end of the 19th century to the present. The origins of this phenomenon, according to the author, are related to the development of cities and the change of lifestyle at the end of the 19th century, when the city's upper middle class began to use holiday homes, especially in the vicinity of Prague. In the inter-war period, camping quickly became popular. The latter, for the most part, was practiced by a different social stratum, but it was common to both to 'escape into nature' in consequence of urban development.

The author finds an important prerequisites for the boom in second homes in the post-war period. After the expulsion of the Czech Germans from the border regions of the Czech Lands, it was not possible for all buildings to be occupied by the inhabitants of the hinterland. Then, in the early 1950s, other changes were made in the Czech countryside. Collectivisation and wider changes in the structure of Czechoslovak society led to another wave of migration from rural peripheries to urban centres. Specifically, in the more remote areas of the country, there were many available properties.

They came into full use, in particular after the 1970s, when the number of recreational properties in Czechoslovakia doubled between 1970 and 1991. According to Schindler-Wisten, the reasons for this boom were above all political changes. She



points to the withdrawal of many people into the family spheres as well as to the very limited opportunities to travel abroad. Together with Pauline Brenn, she notes that the Communist dictatorship under the normalisation regime was based on the idea of people living a peaceful life, with an emphasis on consumerism and family life, in which the spending of free weekends at one's cottage fit well. Purchases of new properties, on the other hand, were made possible by improving living standards and the related development of car transport. As the author goes on to say, despite a slight decline in the 1990s, the popularity of holiday homes grew, notably after the year 2000. In addition to the enduring tradition, she sees the same reason for this as in the previous decades. It is a temporary escape from hectic urban life.

After diachronic analysis of the requisites and the development of the phenomenon in the 20th century, a smaller part of the work is devoted to synchronous analysis. The author tries to capture the basic aspects of holiday homes in the second half of the twentieth century. Again, she elaborates on the motivations that made people purchase a country cottage. At the same time, she shows this as a lifestyle that shaped leisure time in a significant way. Early departures from work on Friday and subsequent relocations to cottages, where repairs were often carried out with the help of the entire family, became an obligation. Thanks to them, a number of older buildings could be preserved in good state of repair. The physical activities and the limited availability of some consumer products went hand in hand with the popularity of DIY, the home improvement phenomenon and home production of everyday items, ranging from lawn mowers to kettles. The relationships with the locals varied, and some holiday home owners managed, at least from their point of view, to fully integrate into the local community, while others remained in the fringes.

Even though the book in general meets what it had set out to do, it would be stimulating to further develop some aspects. It shows, for example, how popular is still having a second home in the Czech Republic as it is embedded in the collective memory and in the personal memory of many narrators. For a more complete answer as to its popularity, however, a more detailed analysis of the press, series and films devoted to this would be needed. Some of them are mentioned in the book, but more as a supplementary material for analysing oral-history sources.

The author does not work with a rigid interpretation of normalisation as a totalitarian system, where the holiday home owners were suborned by the regime or escaped from repression. She shows that the boom in the phenomenon was largely due to the development of cities and automobile transport and individual's endeavours to relax after hectic life in the cities. These factors were equally evident in other European countries and had a strong influence on the post-1989 events. However, she does not offer a closer country by country comparison do not offer, and after all, this is not where her interest lies. On the other hand, she often writes about the normalisation regime as an impersonal institution that has its intentions and its policies. But, she does not ask what kind of people shaped the regime. As she remarks pointedly, some of the critics and supporters of the movement were dissidents, while others held senior positions in the Communist Party. It was a phenomenon that went beyond the classic opposition between the leadership of the state and its opposition. Thus, it would be thought-provoking to elaborate on the way in which the members of the

establishment and their opponents perceived it, and to take into account the social stratification of the narrators, to ask how this phenomenon was viewed by different social groups. For a deeper understanding it might be beneficial to further explore the possible (dis)continuities before 1989 and afterwards.

Petra Schindler-Wisten places the book deftly in the context of modern Czech history and of some aspects of the development of modern society across Europe. As a result of her in-depth oral-historical research, she has been able to show vividly many aspects of the holiday home phenomenon in the Czech Lands. Then again, because of her emphasis on single type of sources she is unable to elaborate a number of interim findings and in the end, to showcase her contribution to general history.

Jakub Vrba

