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DEBTS WITHOUT DEBTORS: THE PHANTOM PRESENCE  
OF GERMAN-SPEAKING INHABITANTS OF CZECHO-  
SLOVAKIA AFTER 1945\*

*“Let us learn from the mistakes of the past!”<sup>1</sup> Instead of an introduction*

Jičín (or Jitschin in German) is a town of about 16,000 people in the Hradec Králové region of northern Bohemia. The best-known citizen of this town is the fairy-tale robber Rumcajs,<sup>2</sup> and in the local market, at least according to his creator, children’s author, Václav Ćtvrtek, you can still buy the chopped-up pieces of the rainbow. But the story I am about to describe is far removed from the charming children’s tale. In the summer of 1945 a pipe burst in the Jičín hospital. The plumbing was quite old at the time so the event came as no surprise to the hospital staff. The consequences of the accident were cleaned up and the hospital management, who had insurance against such incidents, decided to apply to the insurer for compensation. It turned out, however, that the insurance company responsible for underwriting the policy had changed since the time the policy had been contracted. Jičín hospital happened to be insured by the Sudetendeutsche Union, up until then a German insurance company, which was, however, now in the process of being passed over to Czech management. The hospital considered the conditions of the policy unfavorable, and therefore expressed their wish to cancel the contract, whose term ran for a period of ten years, from 1943 until 1953. But no reply came from the insurance company – neither from the nearest local branch in Liberec, nor from the company’s management in Prague. The hospital managers decided to seek help. They wrote to an institution called Ćeské zemské ústředí obcí, měst a okresů (Bohemian provincial Headquarters of Municipalities, Towns, and Districts – ZÚO) in Prague, asking for their assistance:

As advised by Chief Commissioner Schindler, we are turning to you for advice on how to proceed in this case.<sup>3</sup> Or perhaps you know the procedure for the complete termination of the contract. With thanks, in anticipation of your reply, Yours faithfully.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Učme se z chyb minulosti [...]”. In: Věstník českého zemského ústředí obcí, měst a okresů (1947) 12, 326.

<sup>2</sup> Rumcajs (German Rumzais or Fürchtenix) is a cartoon hero from the 1967 television program “Good-night Children”, created by author Václav Ćtvrtek and designed by Radek Pilař. Ćtvrtek later published several books of Rumcajs’ adventures. The hero started life as a shoemaker from Jičín, but after a conflict with a local official he escaped into the woods and began his life as a robber. The cartoons – and the novels – were highly popular in all countries in the Eastern block, and Rumcajs became the symbol of Jičín region.

<sup>3</sup> Underlined in pencil in the original.

The ZÚO agreed to mediate.<sup>5</sup> Even in the chaos of the first postwar months, their communications were not left unanswered: they managed to determine that the insurance company had closed down, and that it had subsequently resumed business, this time as a Czech company. The German employees had disappeared along with German authorities who had signed the original contract with the insurance company on behalf of the hospital: “During the Nazi regime, the district governor signed the contract on our behalf at the offices of the Sudetendeutsche Union, Liberec,”<sup>6</sup> but the premiums had not been canceled. In 1946, one year after the war had ended, the insurers were still insisting that the premiums had to be paid: “The insurance company is demanding payment of the premiums, and we are again turning to you for advice.”<sup>7</sup> At the outset, the ZÚO officials had decided to try to terminate the contract, or rather to prove that it had never been lawful, and that on the basis of the Presidential Decree of 19 May 1945<sup>8</sup> it could be considered to have been agreed under duress from the occupying forces. The hospital therefore sent a required statement. Then suddenly a Mrs L. S. Dolmalová appeared out of nowhere. She declared on behalf of the insurance company that the company had passed into Czech ownership and that the aforementioned Decree therefore did not apply:

We are writing to inform you that there is no legal basis for the cancellation, of which we have been notified, of the legally binding insurance contracts with our company, and we therefore cannot satisfy your request. We further inform you that the Unon [sic!] Insurance Company can no longer be considered a German institution because it has become State property, and, without legal grounds, we cannot cancel the insurance contracts. We therefore reiterate that all the insurance contracts you have referred to are unaffected by the decree of the President of the Republic of 19 May of this year, and we therefore cannot cancel them without legal justification.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The official stationery of the hospital is underlined. Národní archiv České Republiky v Praze [National Archive in Prague, further quoted as NA ČR], collection České zemské ústředí obcí, měst a okresů [Bohemian provincial Headquarters of Municipalities, Towns, and Districts, further quoted as ZÚO], record 808, box 136, 4706-5099. Letter from the hospital to the ZÚO, Jičín, 20 August 1945.

<sup>5</sup> The letters from the ZÚO are usually signed by two people: its director “JUDr. Klemša v.r.” and its manager “JUDr. Plíml v.r. The abbreviation “v.r.” stands for “vlastní rukou”, or “personally signed”. “JUDr.” is the Czech equivalent of “Dr. jud. or LL.D.”.

<sup>6</sup> “Za nacistického režimu, okresní hejtman uzavřel pojistku pro nás u Sudetendeutsche Union v Liberci”. Underlined in pencil in the original. NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 4706-5099. Letter from the hospital to the ZÚO, Jičín, 20 August 1945.

<sup>7</sup> The stationery is now headed in Czech only. NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 4706-5099. Letter from the hospital to the ZÚO, Jičín, 29 April 1945.

<sup>8</sup> This of course refers to one of the Presidential Decrees (often called the Beneš decrees), specifically to Decree No. 5: Decree of the President of the Republic, of 19 May 1945, on the null and void nature of some property transactions from the period of oppression and on the national administration of property of Germans, Hungarians, traitors, and collaborators and some organizations and institutions, and, more precisely, to Point 1, Article 1: Any transfer of property and any property or legal actions, whether relating to movable or immovable property, public or private, shall be null and void if concluded after 29 September 1938 under the duress of the occupation or national, racial or political persecution. The decree can be accessed online at the official website of the Czech Parliament: <http://www.psp.cz/docs/laws/dek/51945.html> (last accessed 5 January 2014).

We have access only to a copy of this letter attached to the one sent to the ZÚO by an already pretty desperate hospital, so it is hard to judge whether an error in the spelling of the company name (UNON instead of UNION) was made by a careless copyist, or had also already been in the original. (By the way, the first part of the name, “Sudetendeutsche”, had discreetly disappeared.) Nor is it clear who Mrs Dolmalová was (is it possible that there may have been a stamp on the original letter, which could give us some idea of her job?). The ZÚO then intervened once more with the insurance company:

Our member was materially prejudiced by the unlawful interference of the German district governor there, who unjustly assumed legal authority and concluded the insurance contract, in the name of the management, with the former German insurance company. The management would not have done this at its own initiative and without coercion, for there was no need for any such action.<sup>10</sup>

After this letter there was an extended break in the correspondence between the hospital and the ZÚO. No further correspondence occurs between the two institutions until April 1946, when an alarmed hospital administrator asked if the case had finally been resolved, for the insurance company had not sent them any new correspondence since the letter in which they demanded payment of premiums. The ZÚO replied in July:

This is more a question of transfer of the company’s liability, which was previously in German hands and has now passed into Czechs hands. Since the outcome of this dispute is uncertain, we recommend amicable negotiations with the Union insurance company concerning the amendment of insurance contracts in accordance with the law on insurance to make them better meet the needs of the policyholder – a reduction in the premiums, the removal of some of the risks from the insurance policy, etc.<sup>11</sup>

As the mysterious Dolmalová had done before them, so too did the officials point out the inapplicability of the fifth Presidential Decree issued in 1945, recommending the negotiation of a friendly solution. They also claimed that the insurance company was willing to negotiate. The letter ends with an assurance that the ZÚO looked forward to further cooperation with the hospital. But, as it turns out, the officials did not in the end settle for a resolution along these lines. At about the same time as the fate of the insurance of the hospital in Jičín was being decided the ZÚO received another letter from a new correspondent. This time the communication came from the hospital in Humpolec, a small town in the Vysočina region. Union had threatened them with legal action for non-payment of premiums. Now the ZÚO could be sure that it was possible to prove that the contract had been concluded under the duress of the occupying forces, since this was the second similar case with the same

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<sup>9</sup> NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 4706-5099. Copy of the letter attached to the letter from the hospital to the ZÚO, Jičín, 9 December 1945.

<sup>10</sup> NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 4706-5099. The copy of the letter from ZÚO to the Union Insurance Company, Prague, 13 September 1945. Emphasis underlined in original.

<sup>11</sup> NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 4706-5099. Letter from ZÚO to the hospital, Prague, 8 July 1945.

insurance company playing the principal role. (The officials wrote simultaneously that whether the question was one of injustice or of speculation was something that needed to be carefully considered. They were probably afraid of being accused of helping the wrong side of the conflict, we can assume that there still was a possibility of the case turning out to be one of the hospital trying to avoid paying its dues). The way out now involved invoking the second point of the aforementioned section of Decree No. Five of the President of the Republic, which declare that a further decree was to be issued, which was to contain the means for resolution of claims due to invalidated property-related contracts. The ZÚO officials write with some sarcasm: “Before the issuing of the announced decree it is, as we have learned, pointless to enter into discussions with this insurance company.”<sup>12</sup>

Then, as early as August 1946, the officials informed the Union Insurance Company that both hospitals had the right to invoke the decree.<sup>13</sup> The same information was sent to Humpolec<sup>14</sup> (we do not know if the Jičín hospital was also notified) and there the correspondence ended. In all, the correspondence between the hospitals, insurance company and public institution comprises sixteen documents, together with a number of copies.

I came across them, along with several other folders containing documents marked “České zemské ústředí obcí, měst a okresů v Praze,” during my research at the National Archive in Prague. The folders contained letters – enquiries and replies – fastened together either with rusting paper clips or with a kind of adhesive tape which left greasy stains on the paper it had been stuck on to, as well as official memos recording the reception of telephone calls, samples of propaganda posters and annotated manuscripts of speeches. The papers were dated mainly within the period from 1945 to 1948. As illustrated by the example given above, the papers illustrate some of the complications that erupted after the war in many areas of everyday life which had been off limits before 1945. Only a few historians have tried to portray the ordinary life of people in Czechoslovakia in the three-year transi-

<sup>12</sup> “Před vydáním ohlášeného dekretu je zbytečnou [“ou” manually changed to “é”] se zmíněnou pojišťovnou, jak jsme se již přesvědčili, diskutovati.” NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 4706-5099. Letter from the ZÚO to the hospital in Humpolec, Prague, 22 January 1946.

<sup>13</sup> This is a reference to “Zákon o neplatnosti některých majetkově-právních jednání z doby nesvobody a o nárocích z této neplatnosti a z jiných zásahů do majetku vzházejících” [The law on the null and void nature of some property transactions from the period of oppression and about claims that stem from this null and void nature and from other encroachments on property], whose tenth section reads: “The competent court for decision on a claim is the regional court at which the individual against whom the claim has been made has his or her usual court, or, according to the choice of an authorized [body], a regional court in whose jurisdiction the matter to be decided upon lies. The Act is accessible online at [http://www.pravnipredpisy.cz/predpisy/ZAKONŮ/1946/128946/Sb\\_128946.php](http://www.pravnipredpisy.cz/predpisy/ZAKONŮ/1946/128946/Sb_128946.php) (last accessed 5 January 2014). – ZÚO refers to it in its letter to the Union Insurance Company. NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 4706-5099. Letter from the ZÚO to the Union Insurance Company, Prague, 28 August 1946.

<sup>14</sup> NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 4706-5099. Letter from the ZÚO to the Hospital in Humpolec, Prague, 17 August 1946.

tional period between the two great events of that time: the end of the war and the Communist takeover in February 1948. But the contents of the ZÚO archive include discussions of such trivial everyday matters as part of its daily agenda. The *České zemské ústředí obcí, měst a okresů v Praze* received the letters not just from concerned institutions such as hospitals or municipal agencies, but also from private citizens who, in the postwar chaos, were unsure of how to deal with the new reality. Thus in the papers we can find, for example, requests for help in calculating the pension for a soldier's widow, or about whether a power station has the right to demand payment for urban electricity supply or not, the above-described disagreement over insurance policies, or an enquiry on how to deal with the inheritance of allotments. In this last case, the office confessed it did not know how it could help, and, what is more, considered the matter clearly beyond its powers – so much so that the matter annoyed the official responding to the enquiry, as is evident even in the politely formulated answer.<sup>15</sup>

From the anthropological point of view, it is interesting to study such an institution, which, mainly due to the special context in which it worked, differed starkly from the well-known Euro-American cliché of the stereotypical agency or organization associated with public administration. Following a line of research practiced by scholars working in the anthropology of institutions and bureaucracy through the discipline referred to as “the study of things” (also known as the material culture studies), I will try to show that not only how we look at the traces remaining from the entire process of expulsion of Czechoslovakia's German-speaking inhabitants, but also how we look at the cultural landscape and Czech (then as part of the Czechoslovakia) society after the war, may be altered through research into the ZÚO documents. In this article I want to show how these traces of the past – these objects left by German-speaking inhabitants of Czechoslovakia, specific examples of post-war mentalities and of the mode of operation of such unique institutions as the ZÚO – can help us to see some larger historical questions in a slightly different light.

With that in mind, I would like to draw attention to some interesting issues that arise in the legal and advisory dispute between the ZÚO, Jičín hospital, and the insurance company described above. Firstly, we can see the phantom presence of Germans in the whole affair. It concerns the assignment of blame to the local German government of occupation of the region (to be precise, Liberec's “Landeshauptmann”) and the management of the insurance company, which, we may presume, had already fled, had been expelled from the country, or were in the process of being expelled, for forcing hospitals to sign contracts unfavorable to the policyholder's interests. Secondly, the question of ownership of the insurance company and the identity of a person who sent the letters containing the reminders to pay the premiums remain quite sketchy for several months, until the mysterious Mrs Dolmalová appears on stage, announcing the acquisition of the property by Czechs, who are every bit as ephemeral as their German predecessors. (I should reiterate here that we do not know who Mrs Dolmalová was: it is very doubtful that she was sim-

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<sup>15</sup> NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 4706-5099.

ply a Czech person who alone took over the insurance company on her own behalf, but we do not have any information on any other persons who might have been involved). The bureaucratic skirmish is then transferred to a higher level, to a mysterious institution, but to whom that institution belongs and what authority external to it governs it, we do not know either. Thirdly, during the whole of 1945 the correspondence received from the hospital is written on Czech-German stationery, which adds further depth to the strange presence-absence of German inhabitants in the whole affair. After all, it concerns a situation in which Germans no longer live in the region – and indeed even in the German text we see remarks indicating that that text is no longer valid. The paper itself suggests that nothing written in German remains valid, and yet the insurance company still requires that its premiums should be paid. That very demand appears out of place, somehow inappropriate.

At the same time, I want to draw attention once again to the fact that in the copy of the letter from the insurance company, the first part of the company name has disappeared: it is now simply called “Union.” Thus it remains the same insurance company as before, with the right to demand premiums, and yet not the same, because it is clearly no longer a German institution. It claims continuity (the contract cannot be cancelled, the company still exists) and at the same time rejects any such continuity. Nor is it without significance that an appeal was made to a particular presidential decree to resolve the dispute, from among the entire corpus of decrees primarily and unambiguously associated with the expulsion of the country’s German-speaking inhabitants.<sup>16</sup> This document, which in effect cuts out all the Germanness from the Czech space, acts like metaphysical scissors. All such contracts can be regarded as invalid because they were signed “under duress of the occupier”, regardless of whether the German side of the contract in question was actually associated with the occupying regime or not. Perhaps having drawn lessons from their experience, and wanting to prevent possible similar cases, ZÚO officials published an advertisement in a newsletter by the end of 1946, containing the following: “Let us learn from the mistakes of the past! Support local business. Take out insurance only from local insurance companies. Slavia, a mutual insurance and financial institution.”<sup>17</sup>

*České zemské ústředí obcí, měst a okresů v Praze: A brief history*

As we have seen, the ZÚO documents often reflect problems that may seem trivial or irrelevant from the point of view of the historian dealing with the “grand narrative”. Although such issues do indeed belong in the “historical background,” they can provide new perspectives on the economic and social history of the transitional period. Taken as a whole, what I have been describing also sheds light on some

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<sup>16</sup> This is, of course, a bit of a simplification, since the decrees of the President of the Republic also regulated political and social life in post-war Czechoslovakia.

<sup>17</sup> “Učme se z chyb minulosti! Podporujme domácí podnikání. Pojišťujme se jen u domácích ústavů. Slavia, vzajemá pojišťovací banka”. In: *Věstník českého zemského ústředí obcí, měst a okresů* (1947) 12, 326.

aspects of Czech-German relations connected with the expulsion of the German-speaking citizens of Czechoslovakia. My research perspective also accords closely with widespread clamor for further study on the expulsion, as expressed by one of the best-known researchers in the subject, Tomáš Staněk.<sup>18</sup> The restriction of the time horizon to 1945-48<sup>19</sup> is imposed by the documents themselves. My analysis concentrates on cases connected to things left by German-speaking inhabitants after their forced migrations began in 1945. I therefore appeal primarily to those of the letters in the ZÚO archive that are associated with the displacement of Czechoslovak Germans.<sup>20</sup>

At this point I should perhaps address the question as to what the institution introduced at the beginning of my article as *České zemské ústředí obcí, měst a okresů v Praze* actually was. We do know that an organization of this name was established in 1930 and began functioning on Thursday, 13 March of that year, the day on which it held its first plenary meeting. Its history, principles and objectives extend deeper into the past than just the 1945-48 period, the years upon which I focus in this article. It would seem sensible therefore to look back into the depths of its histo-

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<sup>18</sup> Staněk writes: “There is still a need to map subjects connected to the expulsion and what followed on a regional and local scale, in a number of different social and cultural microclimates [...]. To deepen the study about postwar “German problems” we need to [...] nowadays emphasize the systematic studies of important archive materials on both a central and regional scale”. Staněk, Tomáš: Stručné zamyšlení nad výzkumy poválečných „německých problematik“ v českých zemích. In: *Arburg, Adrian von et al. (eds.): Německy mluvící obyvatelstvo v Československu po roce 1945* [The German-Speaking Citizens in Czechoslovakia after 1945]. Brno 2010, 15-24, here 21, 23. – In the same volume is also Adrian von Arburg’s article, in which he points to the need of regional studies to refer to an overall view of the “German question” in Czechoslovakia after 1945, and to describe the 1945-1948 period in terms of “Alltagsgeschichte” (“everyday history”). *Arburg, Adrian von: Jak dál ve výzkumu poválečného postavení německy hovořícího obyvatelstva v českých zemích?* [What’s next in Research into the Postwar Situation of German-Speaking Inhabitants in the Bohemian Lands?]. In: *Německy mluvící obyvatelstvo* 25-53. – Both authors pay attention to the perhaps obvious fact that there is a dire need to find new perspectives from which one may look at the issue of the German-speaking inhabitants’ forced migrations that will contribute to the studies’ over and above simply poorly understood factography.

<sup>19</sup> I chose such and no other timeframe, even though the office existed until 1949, due to the fact that I did not find any 1949 documents in the ZÚO files relating to the topics that interested me. Is it perhaps possible that, sensing the approaching end of their role, the officials were not quite as active as they had been?

<sup>20</sup> In addition to the two questions discussed in this article, the ZÚO also advised and helped a number of communes in the borderlands. For example, in 1946, they sent engineer August Turek to Planá (a town near Mariánské Lázně), where he reviewed the commune’s books for 1945 and advised them on how to keep their accounts in the following years. NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 4706-5099. – In the same year the ZÚO made an attempt to decide who should pay for street lighting in the town of Dolní Žandov near Mariánské Lázně. NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 6597-6743. – Other manifestations of ZÚO activity in the borderlands include for example contacts with „The Settlement Office in Prague” concerning the unification of small communities in the borderlands (NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 4706-5099) and participation in the “Budujeme osvobozené kraje” [“We Build Liberated Regions”] exhibition in Liberec in 1946. *Ibid.*

ry in order to understand the fascinating evolution of the institution – an evolution that reflects the spirit of the difficult times in which it operated.<sup>21</sup>

The organization, which brought together the communes, districts, and municipalities of the Bohemian Lands, was established in its original form at the beginning of the twentieth century. It was named the Svaz českých okresů (Association of Bohemian Districts)<sup>22</sup> and began its work in 1908. When Czechoslovakia first appeared on maps of the world as an independent state, another additional organization of this type is brought into life: Svaz československých měst a obcí (The Association of Czechoslovak Towns and Communes). Both institutions were theoretically apolitical and functioned as voluntary associations representing a collective of individual communes, districts and municipalities (which in practice meant that not all local administrative bodies had access to either organization). During the interwar period the two associations made attempts to merge. These attempts were ultimately destined to be successful, but not exactly in the way one might expect. But let us not get ahead of ourselves: the younger organization seems to have refused the fuse with the older one, despite the fact that the two bodies dealt with similar problems. Whatever about that, the fact is that, despite the negotiations on unification that took place during the 1930s, nothing was to come out of it at the time.<sup>23</sup> Finally, due to the administrative reform that occurred in 1927, the institutions that represented the lower levels of the state administration were reorganized. But this reorganization was not to last: in 1930, the association that had been functioning since 1908, was reconstituted into a new body: the very one that we have already encountered above

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<sup>21</sup> The history of the ZÚO as presented is mostly based on the findings of the authors of the introduction to the inventory of the archive: Úvod [Introduction]. In *Helešicová, V./Janíková, V.: České zemské ústředí obcí, měst a okresů 1933-1949. Inventář* [Bohemian provincial Headquarters of Municipalities, Towns, and Districts 1933-1949. Inventory], <http://badatelna.eu/reprodukce/?fondId=968&zaznamId=337879> (accessed 1 December 2013).

<sup>22</sup> This organization was certainly concerned with districts, but the dualism that was characteristic of the administrative division of the Czechoslovak Republic until the end of the 1940s should be noted. Aside from districts (politický okres, or in German “Bezirk”), there were also court districts (soudní okres, German “Gerichtsbezirk”). The Czech administration maintained this division (first introduced during the Austro-Hungarian Empire) for a long time: part of one county would sometimes consist of several court districts. The duality was abolished in 1949, through Act 320/1948 Sb., in which the boundaries of the court districts were unified with the boundaries of the districts.

<sup>23</sup> The merger of the two organizations was also discussed at national government level. See the minutes of the 298th session of the Senate dated 4 April 1935, on the official website of the Senate of the Czech Republic, [http://www.senat.cz/informace/z\\_historie/tisky/3vo/stena/298schuz/S298003.htm](http://www.senat.cz/informace/z_historie/tisky/3vo/stena/298schuz/S298003.htm) (last accessed 12 December 2013). Thus the rationale for the existence of two organizations with similar principles and objectives was questioned, for example by Senator Antonín Novák of the Czechoslovak Social Democratic Party: “True – I repeat what I said in the budget committee – the local government officials are partly to blame, because only we can afford such a luxury: we have the Bohemian provincial Headquarters of Municipalities, Towns, and Districts and in addition we need to have, and indeed we do have, the Association of Bohemian Towns. But nobody knows why or for what purpose, or whether the situation has any practical dimension.”

– České zemské ústředí obcí, měst a okresů. Yet despite this, Svaz československých měst a obcí still continued its work. The end was finally (and unexpectedly) to come as late as nine years later. In February 1939, the ZÚO became the only organization that gathered all Bohemian local governments under its umbrella, as it was then that Svaz československých měst a obcí made its decision to disband. It is difficult to say whether the decision was voluntary, as there is too little material now available on the organization to be in a position to make that judgment. However, it is clear that the end of the 1930s was not a very conducive period for engaging in disputes between local government associations, as Czechoslovakia was immersed in far more serious problems. For this was the period of the fall of the First Republic, shortly followed by the occupation of the Sudetenland and then Bohemia and Moravia by the Third Reich, and the establishment of the Protectorate.

Thus, the ZÚO was now on the stage alone. From this time on it acted as a specialized unit of the other organizations: initially of the National Unity Party (Národní jednota) and later of National Unity (Národní souručenství). Its apolitical character, which was a fundamental principle in its previous activity, now became questionable. If we consider the right-wing character of the National Unity Party, clearly wending towards Czech nationalism in the short period of the Second Republic, and of National Unity, which I will discuss further below, we can see that any commitment to remain apolitical was no longer an option. The official authorization of the ZÚO as a public body was eventually provided by Ministry of the Interior Order No. 18.089/1939/6 on 26 April 1939.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time however, we can identify some clearly outlined objectives that guided the organization. These were: (1) to improve local government authorities, to protect, enhance and develop such authorities, (2) to increase the level of general education of the people, (3) to encourage and to support initiatives designed to increase the national, economic, cultural and moral consciousness of the Czech people, and (4) to deepen and to enhance the national self-awareness of all classes of the people.<sup>25</sup> We can see from this list, which might perhaps sound a little exalted to the modern ear, that the ZÚO substantially inherited its worldview and political program from the National Unity Party, as well as from some of the assumptions guiding National Unity. The latter organization, whose members were required to be adult Czech males, was the only legal political organization in the days of the Protectorate and was obliged to show support for the Protectorate. In fact, at least initially, National Unity aimed more towards supporting anti-German activities, leading the occupiers to go so far as to accuse it of being a kind of patriotic organi-

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<sup>24</sup> In 1941 the organization functioned under the slightly modified name of the Central Office for Bohemian Rural Districts, Towns, and Districts (Ústředí českých obcí, měst a okresů), but later reverted to its previous name. At the same time, a separate organization was also established for Moravia and Silesia under the name The Central Office for Moravian-Silesian Rural Districts, Towns, and Districts (Ústředí moravskoslezských obcí, měst a okresů), located in Brno.

<sup>25</sup> Helešicová/Janíková: Úvod 4 (cf. fn. 21).

zation.<sup>26</sup> After 1943, it was transformed into a corporation pursuing cultural and educational aims.

At this point, we can for a moment set aside our tracing of the ZÚO's history in favor of looking at the methods used by the organization to achieve its goals. Worth mentioning here are the following: (1) publishing instructions concerning uniform procedures to be used in similar cases (hence introducing something along the lines of the American legal system based on precedents), (2) providing legal advice, (3) organizing surveys and meetings to deal with all issues relevant to the activities of local governments, (4) organizing lectures for professionals and laypersons, and (5) publishing a bulletin and issuing standardized forms. The ZÚO newsletter, "Věstník českého zemského ústředí obcí, měst a okresů v Praze" (The Newsletter of the Central Office of Bohemian Rural Districts, Towns, and Counties in Prague), had been published since 1930 and – apart from a period between 1943 and 1945, when it was known as "Die Kommunalverwaltung in Böhmen und Mähren" – was printed in Czech. We should keep in mind these modes of operation when looking into the history of the ZÚO. The organization did not share the fate of the other similar bodies with which it was forced to work together from the late 1930s onward. After the war it was still in operation, accommodating itself to the new conditions. We may follow the advice of Helešicová and Janíková and divide the types of activity undertaken by the ZÚO in the post-war period more or less into three classes:<sup>27</sup>

- (1) Supporting and initiating (following the development and activities of local government bodies and guiding them onto the right track where necessary)
- (2) Counselling and intervening (as the heading suggests, this group of activities concerned giving advice and asking about ZÚO intervention on higher levels of authority)
- (3) Informing and publishing (mostly by means of the bulletin, but also through the guidance and instructions it gave to officials).

ZÚO activity in the new political environment was to continue in 1947. The association even took part in the Two-Year Plan, whose aim was the development of industry, the replacement of the rationing and food distribution system and – here we come to the most interesting point – settling the borderlands, meaning the areas where there had been a loss of population as a result of expulsion of the German-speakers from Czechoslovakia. What did the ZÚO intend to contribute to provide support to the government plans? Their work appears to have been centered around issuing boilerplate texts (especially in relation to accounting), providing help with bookkeeping and giving general assistance to national councils (in Czech: národní výbor), organizing training sessions for the workers of such councils, advising authorities on how to make administrative processes simpler, as well as supporting

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<sup>26</sup> See Brandes, Detlef: *Češi pod německým protektorátem. Okupační politika, kolaborace a odboj 1939-1945* [The Czechs under the German Protectorate: Occupation Policy, Collaboration and Resistance 1939-45]. Translated by Petr Dvořáček. Praha 1999, 53-54.

<sup>27</sup> Helešicová/Janíková: Úvod 8-9 (cf. fn. 21).

the concept of the land reform, with emphasis on the nationalization of forests and – finally – the promotion of tourism, health spas and general health education in the villages. At first glance, it seems that the ZÚO's ideas have little to do with what we have already seen in relation to the aims of the Two-Year Plan. If, however, we consider the fact that the biggest Czech health resorts are located in the borderlands (the famous “spa arc,” which takes in the health resorts of Karlovy Vary/Karlsbad, Františkovy Lázně/Franzensbad and Mariánské Lázně/Marienbad), the promotion of health resorts ceases to be simply a problem linked to the development of health services. The same applies to tourism: encouraging people to visit areas previously inhabited almost exclusively by German-speaking citizens was part of an effort to convince Czechs that the settlement of the borderlands was peaceful in nature. It was also part of their attempt to appropriate culturally heterogeneous (and, at that time, also quite dangerous) areas.

*Stop being simply onlookers,<sup>28</sup> in other words, why you should be interested  
in the ZÚO*

As we have seen, České zemské ústředí obcí, měst a okresů v Praze is interesting from the anthropological point of view for several reasons. Looking at the work of anthropologists dealing with bureaucracy<sup>29</sup> who take the Weberian definition of an official as their point of departure, the literature shows how the bureaucracies become institutions that, instead of simply playing their respective official roles, end up turning them into tools for the promotion of the interests of the officials working within them. The officials will simply be inclined to deal with those affairs in which they have an interest and to exercise their institutional power to their own advantage. What emerges is a clear gap between theory and practice. Weber in fact, in his monumental work “Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretive Sociology”, describes the ideal type of an official as follows: a specialist who provides certain services to the masses on the basis of a fair and impartial application of rational knowledge.<sup>30</sup> Weber is aware how such bureaucracies end up looking in reality and he emphasizes at every step that the process in which such official-specialists appear, or are likely to appear in the future, takes a long time – and is one that is by no means everywhere complete.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> “Přestaňte býti pouhými diváky” – the catchphrase on the poster, encouraging viewers to assist the national committees and to participate in a survey conducted by the Ministry of Interior in relation to their functions, found in the ZÚO correspondence. NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 4706-5099.

<sup>29</sup> I refer primarily to the articles published in the “Political and Legal Anthropology Review”, a journal addressing matters related to the study of bureaucracy, offices, institutions, and corporations.

<sup>30</sup> See Weber, Max: *Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*. Translated by Guenther Roth, Claus Wittich et al. Berkeley, Los Angeles 1978, 225.

<sup>31</sup> See Weber's remarks in *The Types of Legitimate Domination*. In: *Ibid.* 212-301.

The tendency of humanities to prove the point of one of the fathers of sociology, namely, that in many places in the world this process has not yet ended, is also detectible in some more recent studies on bureaucracy. Anthropologists dealing with the phenomenon of bureaucracy emphasize its role as a decision-making body, having almost unlimited control over the matters that come within its remit.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, according to this perspective, emphasis is put on the fact that officials have control over information flows<sup>33</sup> and, instead of using the rules – Weberian “rational knowledge” – to help the “masses,” give preference to self-interest over their responsibility for the tasks assigned to them, with the result that the individual tends to disappear from their field of vision. We should add that Weber himself admitted that bureaucrats have too much power, and some of his successors also admitted the same in subsequent years, including such authors as, for example, Michael Herzfeld in his work on the symbolic roots of western bureaucracy “The Social Production of Indifference: Exploring the Symbolic Roots of Western Bureaucracy” (1992).<sup>34</sup>

German historian Susanne Schattenberg, who deals with the specific case of Russian bureaucracy in the 19th century, in her work “Die korrupte Provinz? Russische Beamte im 19. Jahrhundert” (“The corrupt province? Russian civil servants in the 19th century”) emphasizes the fact that when using a Weberian understanding of who an official is, we should go beyond the “ideal” bureaucrat and resort to another of Weber’s intuitions.<sup>35</sup> Schattenberg expresses doubts about Weber’s presupposition that the process that generates the official-specialist tends to look very similar everywhere, every time and place in which it occurs, and she contradicts Weber’s view that such processes are inevitable. She emphasizes that his concept of the “ideal official” should be used more as a helpful theoretical construct than as a normative model. At the same time, she makes no claim that Weber was himself of any other opinion:

For one thing Weber had not intended his ideal types as a normative model, but rather as a helpful construct to be better able to highlight the distinctive features of a historical phenomenon by contrast with that construct.<sup>36</sup>

However, she does state that Weber himself did not fully take the consequences of this thesis into account in his work:

However, he also succumbed to the error of thinking that such a model can apply universally, and that it is not itself a cultural construct, an instrument that would become unusable as soon as one removed it from its historical context.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> *Bernstein, Anya/Mertz, Elizabeth*: Bureaucracy: Ethnography of the State in Everyday Life. In: *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 34 (2011) 1, 6-10, here 7.

<sup>33</sup> *Hoag, Colin*: Assembling Partial Perspectives: Thoughts on the Anthropology of Bureaucracy. In: *Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 34 (2011) 1, 81-94, here 82.

<sup>34</sup> *Herzfeld, Michael*: *The Social Production of Indifference: Exploring the Symbolic Roots of Western Bureaucracy*. Oxford 1992.

<sup>35</sup> *Schattenberg, Susanne*: *Die korrupte Provinz? Russische Beamte im 19. Jahrhundert*. Frankfurt/Main, New York 2008.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 15.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

She also shows that it is not quite so easy to describe non-Western administrative structures using this Weberian definition. She describes popular approaches in the research of the 1960s and 1970s, where some academics attempted to analyze some non-Western state organizations (the examples in which she is interested are located, of course, in the context of Tsarist Russia) using a methodology that appeals to “half of Weber” in contrast to “the whole Weber,”<sup>38</sup> without realizing that the former approach cannot in fact be applied in societies which developed under circumstances different to those in which Western systems emerged.<sup>39</sup>

In the case of the institution with which we are concerned here we need to apply “the whole Weber.” The crucial point for understanding of such a historical phenomenon as the ZÚO is its historical and geopolitical context. The organization is operating under difficult conditions. At first, it struggles to stay afloat during the times of the Protectorate, and later, after the war, though it has not been entirely dismantled, it has seen its importance decline substantially, and it struggles to stay afloat during the difficult years between 1945 and 1948. For example, the anger visible in the reply to the unfortunate inquirer on the subject of allotments (see p. 22), and the clear assertion that *České zemské ústředí obcí, měst a okresů* deals with much more important matters (an assertion that was accompanied by a list of the body’s competences) could be taken as an indication that the position of the association after the war was fairly shaky. The documents give us a picture of an institution that was struggling to regain its position in the chaos of the first few months after the end of the war; an institution about whose role not everyone was sure and – as had been expressed ten years earlier by Senator Novák – whose existence it was not clear everyone considered justified. The deeper we go in our analysis of ZÚO correspondence, however, the clearer we see that it managed to regain some of its old importance, at least for smaller local centers that found themselves unable to cope with the problems of being once more in what was at least partially a sovereign country. Having had a look at ZÚO correspondence, we can also note that the organization enjoyed considerable popularity, especially in regions where there had been a serious breach in continuity in local government – thus especially in the borderland areas, where the local population was attempting to create new Czech local governments, often consisting of newcomers who had no idea about the area’s history or about its individual character.

But why does the ZÚO differ from the familiar theoretical stereotype of the bureaucratic institution, or, to pose the question in other terms, why is the “inner logic” of the ZÚO’s functioning so different from the logic of the “stereotypical” bureaucracy? First of all, despite its consumption of large quantities of paper, the ZÚO did actual work: not just by responding to the letters it received, but also by

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<sup>38</sup> Her differentiation between “the whole Weber” and “the half of Weber” is based on the paper by *Wehler*, Hans-Uwe: Von der Herrschaft zum Habitus. In: *Die Zeit* No. 44, 25. 10. 1996. *Schattenberg* claims that, through their abandonment of such categories as mentality, *Weltanschauung* or tradition, historians are effectively using exactly this “half of Weber” methodological approach. *Schattenberg*: Die korrupte Provinz 19 (cf. fn. 35).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* 13–21.

sending its officials out to relevant areas (see footnote 20), to help out (mainly on accounting matters), intervening at a higher levels of authority or mediating in difficult cases. At the same time, it does not seem that ZÚO employees actively cultivated the characteristic barrier between official and applicant. This assertion can be proven: for example, in one issue of their newsletter they published information on the marriage of a ZÚO board member and later also published profiles of its officials.<sup>40</sup> The ZÚO would seem to have been closer to a guild than a bureaucratic authority in character, understanding a guild as a type of organization where the private connects up with public. Such a view could go a long way to explain the attempts that were made to create ties between citizens and officials, as well as between officials and other officials (as seen in the tasks that the ZÚO set for itself).

Moving on to the other side of the issue, the range of problems that arose as a result of the expulsion of the German-speaking inhabitants to countries west of the Oder is already well known.<sup>41</sup> Areas previously inhabited in the majority by expellees needed to be settled anew, a process that failed in some regions, as the numbers of new settlers in some parts of the borderlands were smaller than those of the displaced populations. At the same time, the external conditions and the absence of any psychological power of attraction in the areas to be resettled did not encourage settlers in the early post-war years<sup>42</sup>. However, it should be remembered that expellees had been citizens of Czechoslovakia up until the Beneš decrees and, after rejecting a negativistic policy in the 1920s, had actively participated in the life of the country. The concept of “Czech German”, as it is construed by documents in the ZÚO archive, is therefore more than simply of someone deprived of citizenship, in whose wake a vacant place would appear in the landscape – more than simply of

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, *Věstník českého zemského ústředí obcí, měst a okresů* (1947) 18, 1.

<sup>41</sup> For further information on postwar Czechoslovakia see: *Spurný, Matěj: Nejsou jako my. Česká společnost a menšiny v pohraničí (1945-1960)* [They are not like us. Czech Society and Minorities in the Borderlands (1945-1960)]. Praha 2011. – For the postwar reality in terms of issues related to the displacement of Czech Germans see also von Arburg's and Staněk's edition on the Czech borderlands after 1945. So far, the first three volumes of the documentation have been published, further volumes are currently being prepared. *Arburg, Adrian von/Staněk, Tomáš: Vysídlení Němců a proměny českého pohraničí 1945-1951. Dokumenty z českých archivů* [The Expulsion of Germans and Changes in the Czech Borderlands, 1945-1951. Documents from Czech Archives]. Vol. 1. Středokluky 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Proof that the borderlands were not attracting the large numbers that government wished, is provided, for example, by the publication of guides showing places where empty houses were still available. Released in 1948, the booklet “Poslední příležitost k osídlení. Seznam míst v pohraničí kam ještě možno přesídliti” [Last Chance to Settle: A List of the Locations in the Borderlands still available for Settlement] gives a strong impression of an advertisement or other contemporary notice of sale or rental of a property. At each village in which there were vacant homes, an estimation was given on “who could earn one's livelihood in the locality”: i. e. what kind of craftsmen would find employment (not to mention a well-equipped workshop) in the locality, what civic infrastructures could be found in the area (such as railways, electricity, post offices) and what sort of natural assets are located in the immediate vicinity (mainly listing woods – giving, one cannot help but feel, little encouragement to the reader). *Tomáš, Eduard: Poslední příležitost k osídlení. Seznam míst v pohraničí kam ještě možno přesídliti*. Praha 1948.

someone who needed to be got rid of to make space for other citizens. This aspect distinguishes the ZÚO documents from other records produced at the time in Czechoslovakia.

I use the term “document” to refer to all the archives located in the boxes labeled as the archive of the ZÚO. However, the institution that I am describing here did not have any real power. It was merely an advisory body, providing help in difficult cases (we should recall its method of operation, which we have described above). As the authors of the introduction to the inventory of the archive write:

All of these administration associations that have been described so far [this refers to all local organizations of local governments before 1938], were organized as private law corporations on the basis of voluntary participation. That is why they had no executive power and were merely advisory bodies, or engaged in providing information or interceding on behalf of others, and could issue neither by-laws nor binding regulations, nor hold any decision-making meetings.<sup>43</sup>

I therefore understand “document” more widely than as a paper that carries its own agency, but quite simply as any physical piece of paper deposited in the archive – thus as an archival document. Matthew S. Hull, in his article “Documents and Bureaucracy,” sets out to look at the materiality of the document: to look at documents themselves, and not at some other problem being studied through them.<sup>44</sup> He chooses to treat them as intermediaries.<sup>45</sup> In this perspective, the document is no longer simply a medium of discourse, but also an intermediary that creates the meaning of the objects described within it and that defines its relationship with the objects to which it relates<sup>46</sup>. Equally, what is revealed by the ZÚO documents is the ability of things to remember.<sup>47</sup>

We cannot ignore the materiality of the documents. The mere presence of the documents upon which I worked, the fact that they evoked the subject of the present

<sup>43</sup> *Helešicová/Janíková*: Úvod 7-8 (cf. fn. 21).

<sup>44</sup> *Hull*, Matthew S.: Documents and Bureaucracy. In: Annual Review of Anthropology 41 (2012) 251-267, here 253.

<sup>45</sup> Hull quotes Bruno Latour here (things that transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry). In this paper there is no need to focus extensively on the methodological disputes in the field of anthropology, and I therefore merely wish to highlight the problem. *Ibid.* – The quotation from Bruno Latour’s extracts from: *Latour*, Bruno: Reassembling the Social. Oxford 2005, 39. – The problems arising from use of Latour’s theory were remarked on recently by *Olsen*, Bjørnar: In Defense of Things. Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects. Lanham 2010, 155-156. – I propose, however, to accept the thesis of Hull, interpreting things as intermediaries, taking into account Olsen’s objections that it is all too easy to treat things merely as the embodiment and reflection of the meaning that we want to see in them (*Ibid.* 84).

<sup>46</sup> *Hull*: Documents and Bureaucracy 253 (cf. fn. 44).

<sup>47</sup> I refer here again to the work of Olsen. In fact, the Norwegian researcher writes that this ability is naturally associated with the innate capacity of things to accumulate and to endure, as well as with a particular concept of history, which Olsen explains as follows: Thus, history is not a projected stream leaving the past behind but bends and twists in a disorderly manner, interrupting the expectations of the “have been” and the becoming. The past proliferates more than ever in the present. *Olsen*: In Defense of Things 110, 128 (cf. fn. 45).

article and, as we explored above, the way they went so far as to impose upon me the temporal frame of reference, taken together, all mean that I cannot overlook the topic of the materiality of the document, a topic developed by researchers in material culture over the past twenty years. Also at the center of my focus therefore are issues concerning the sources themselves, as well as the material objects to which they relate. It should be pointed out here that the individual and institutional petitioners who turned to the ZÚO in matters concerning the deportation of Czech Germans never asked for any advice, instruction or mediation in matters relating to people. They asked rather only about issues relating to objects; to things (in the sense used by researchers into material culture – thus also to documents, landscapes, buildings, etc.<sup>48</sup>) that were either left behind by the people who had been expelled or were somehow bound up with those people. However, I should distinguish between the materiality of sources, meaning the documents that I am exploring and to which I have the direct access, and the essence of the objects referred to in the ZÚO documents.<sup>49</sup> For items described in the sources to whose materiality I do not have access – such as telephones, for example – I can say nothing. But we should keep in mind that the important point is that they are precisely things, not humans – things left behind by expelled Germans, and not the expelled Germans themselves.

Therefore, the materiality of the documents I describe is the problem to which I now wish to give careful consideration. As Andrea Pellegram, an anthropologist dealing with a similar problem, writes in her essay “The Message in Paper,” office workers, although surrounded by paper, actually do not think much about the paper they used.<sup>50</sup> She cites certain behaviors as an instance of her thesis: the shredding of defective printouts, throwing paper balls about, and so on. But the case discussed here completely contradicts this thesis. In the post-war period, there was a drastic shortage of paper, a state of affairs we can clearly see in the documents of the ZÚO. For example, among letters to the ZÚO from the hospital in Jičín we find several examples of letters written on official stationery. The problem appears to be that the hospital had vast stocks from the time of the Protectorate, and perhaps even from the interwar period,<sup>51</sup> so that we can see two texts on the header: “Všeobecná veřejná okresní nemocnice Jičín” and, above it, “Allgemeines öffentliches Bezirkskranken-

<sup>48</sup> For more on this subject see, for example, a summary of studies of things in *Olsen*: In Defense of Things (cf. fn. 45).

<sup>49</sup> This would be close to what Heidegger calls “Dinglichkeit” (“thing-ness”). As it is no more than a marginal problem in this paper, I will not discuss the question further. See *Heidegger*, Martin: *Off the Beaten Track*. Translated by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes. Cambridge 2002.

<sup>50</sup> *Pellegram*, Andrea: A Message in Paper. In: *Miller*, Daniel (ed.): *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter*. Chicago 1998, 103-120, here 105.

<sup>51</sup> According to law in the First Republic, in the areas where over 20% (later the government increased this threshold to 50%) of the population declared German nationality, official processes had to be conducted bilingually. See *Majewski*, Piotr M.: “Niemcy sudeccy” 1848-1948. *Historia pewnego nacjonalizmu* [“Sudeten Germans” 1848-1948. The History of one Nationalism]. Warszawa 2007, 187. Czech translation: *Sudetští Němci 1848-1948. Dějiny jednoho nacionalismu*. Brno 2014.

haus in Jitschin”.<sup>52</sup> Someone – probably the same sender, though it is possible that the crossing out was done in a job lot for the whole stationery stock – crossed out the top header very carefully using a ruler. An additional stamp appears on the paper: “We are using this [paper] until stationary stocks run out”<sup>53</sup> (in lower case). “We are saving paper for the Republic”<sup>54</sup> (lower down the sheet, in capital letters). The same fate as the German name of the hospital befell all other bilingual elements printed on the stationery: designations for date and place (for example, “Jitschin,” “den,” “Betrifft,” and “Beilagen”) were all crossed out. One of the letters that arrived from the hospital in Frýdlant was written on the back of an official document in the German language. The German text is marked by means of a red stamp declaring “Německý text neplatný!” (“German text is no longer valid!”)<sup>55</sup> imposed diagonally across it. Sometimes the reasons for using German headed paper are very clearly emphasized. For example, a diagonal stamp declaring “We are saving paper!!”<sup>56</sup> was added to the letter from the National Council of Kamenický Šenov, which was written over an official document in German in Fraktur (a font that was regarded as typically German, in contrast to the Latin font used by Czechs since the mid-nineteen century: Fraktur’s “Gothic” character connected it with German culture so that it was considered a symbol of “Germanness after the war”). Sometimes more radical methods were used: the German header in the letter from hospital in Hořice was overtyped using ‘x’s. Judging from the strength of the imprint, it looks very much like the ‘x’s were typed with great force.

What we see here is the cultural recycling and processing of foreign cultural elements. We can see however that not everything can be erased. After all, the paper still shows the original German text: it remains visible even where it has been aggressively overtyped, just as in the last example given above. What we observe here is a kind of fear of any bilingualism in the document, as if any such bilingualism might be seen as a commitment to do something or might be prone to being read as a demonstration of something. At the same time, the alterations on the paper are not about transforming the strange into something familiar. “Familiar” paper would not need the justificatory stamp “we are saving paper”. It is clearly the result of a sad historical necessity that compels the staff to use this and no other paper, rather than any attempt to make the material more familiar.

On the palimpsests I mention above we can read the concrete processes that were going on in the Czech (or Czechoslovak) society in that period. The fact that we are

<sup>52</sup> NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 4706-5099. Letter from the Jičín hospital to the ZÚO, Jičín, 30 August 1945.

<sup>53</sup> “Používáme do vypotřebování zásoby tiskopisů”.

<sup>54</sup> “Šetříme papír Republice”.

<sup>55</sup> Something similar was done with the text written to the Central Union of Hospital Insurance Companies (Ústřední svaz nemocenských pojišťoven) dated 8 May 1946, where the following was typed in the header: Německý text neplatí! [German text no longer valid!]. Both letters can be found in the same record: NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 4706-5099.

<sup>56</sup> “Šetříme papírem!!” NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 4706-5099. Letter from the National Committee of Kamenický Šenov to the ZÚO, Kamenický Šenov, 3 April 1946.

able to do this is not, however, due to the will of the documents' authors, but is rather thanks to that same materiality that has its own capacity to accumulate signs of its creator and of previous cultural and historical contexts (in terms of texts, stamps, etc.) and to remind us of that creator and those contexts that it appeared necessary to erase from such materials (whether due to the perfectly reasonable revulsion against everything associated with the Nazi occupation or for other reasons – such as the desire to get rid of all traces of German culture from the country).

*Accumulation of (non)presence*

Yet it is not merely the materiality of the documents, but also their content, that seems to confirm my hypothesis on the role of things in the life of Czechs after the expulsion of the region's German-speaking inhabitants. It was visible in the first case I described, and it can also be seen in another case that can also be found in the ZÚO correspondence. This second case I want to describe concerns the post office in Jablonec.<sup>57</sup>

This case is both very similar and at the same time very different to the case of Jičín hospital. One similarity is that the Jablonec case also concerns money. This time the local administration in the town of Jablonec nad Nisou (Gablonz an der Neiße), (a location in the Liberec region famous mainly for the costume jewelry produced there) received a letter from the Directorate for Post Offices in Prague, the inspectorate in Ústí nad Labem (Aussig), with a request for the repayment of the overdue telephone bills.<sup>58</sup> On the list attached to the letter we find amounts of between 70 and 600 crowns.<sup>59</sup> The problem was that the debtors listed on the schedule were, for example, Mr Fitschek Oswald (who apparently owed 568 crowns and 40 hellers), Friedrich Wagner (owing 523 crowns and 20 hellers) or engineer Karl Hartmann (listed as owing 241 crowns and 40 hellers). Clearly, the debtors were former German inhabitants of Jablonec, who had already been expelled from the town. This raised the issue as to whether the Czech local authority should be expected to pay the bills, especially since – as it put it in a letter to the ZÚO – it had already suffered considerable financial outlay in the expulsion of the debtors: “During the period up until 31 March 1949 [sic: 1946], the town of Jablonec nad Nisou incurred very considerable costs in transferring the Germans and administering the assets seized from the expelled Germans”.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> All papers I describe in these two cases can be found in NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 4706-5099.

<sup>58</sup> All we know about the entire case is taken from a copy of this letter, dated 9 April 1946. NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 4706-5099. Letter from the local administrative committee to the ZÚO, Jablonec nad Nisou, 18 April 1946.

<sup>59</sup> For evaluation of the amounts are mentioned: the exchange rate of the crown during this period was about fifty crowns to the US dollar, thus making one crown the equivalent of 17.7734 mg of pure gold. See Štiková, Renata: Členství Československa v Mezinárodním měnovém fondu v období 1945-1954 [Czechoslovakia's Membership in the International Monetary Fund in the Period 1945-1954]. In: *Mezinárodní vztahy* (2009) 3, 74-91, here 77.

<sup>60</sup> [Městu Jablonci n. N. [nad Nisou] vzešly již v době do 31.3.1949 [the subject matter is of

The local administration calculated expenditures on administration of the confiscated German property at “6,318.117” crowns,<sup>61</sup> though they did not specify exactly what that figure represented, and complained that Fond národní obnovy<sup>62</sup> (The National Renewal Fund in Prague) had still not repaid that amount. The local government committee (Místní správní komise) responsible for the matter therefore asked who should pay the bills (if they were to be paid at all): they themselves or the Fund.

The post office in Jablonec points out, however (and the words are underlined with red pencil, probably at the ZÚO headquarters, as the same red pencil was used to underline the sentences in other documents relating to the case) that telephones had been disconnected in accordance with the directives of the Directorate for Post Offices in Prague, but that the committee, together with the local military authorities, had asked for the devices to be re-connected.<sup>63</sup> It also points out that since the devices were then still in use, even though their owners were no longer there, the bills would continue to be accrued and delivered to the committee, which was responsible for the houses taken over from Jablonec’s inhabitants who had been expelled, having been classified as Germans.

In response, ZÚO asked for an opinion from the Fund. The Fund was of the opinion that such accounts (as well as unpaid fees for water, electricity, gas, etc.) should be settled using money obtained from the sale of the property that had formerly belonged to the German debtors, and which the local administrative committee had taken over:

All such unpaid debts, if they are accrued in the name of a German already expelled – on the condition, of course, that it relates only to payments which that German had not paid up to the date of expulsion, – should always be reimbursed out of the proceeds from the assets which that German left after expulsion.<sup>64</sup>

It follows that telephone bills for the premises belonging to a particular (and not to any other) German should be paid from the proceeds of the sale of the assets of this particular German ex-citizen. Alternatively, the matter should be reported to the Fund and the committee should then wait until the Fund takes care of it.

At first glance, everything seems to have been arbitrated fairly (at least as far as feasible under such conditions). There appears, however, a problem clearly not perceived by the committee – or perhaps the committee did not want to see it! The post

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course about 1946] velmi značný náklady z odsunu Němců a ze správy zabaveného majetku odsunutých Němců] [corrected spelling: in the original “ě” and “ů” are written, probably due to the typewriter without Czech diacritics (perhaps using a German typewriter), as “e” and “u”]. NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 4706-5099. Letter from the local administrative committee to the ZÚO, Jablonec nad Nisou, 18 April 1946.

<sup>61</sup> This probably indicates more than 6 million crowns, since the “117” after the decimal point cannot indicate the number of hellers, because 100 hellers equals 1 crown.

<sup>62</sup> Institution established by Presidential Decree No. 108 of 1945, which governed the administration of the confiscated German property and dealt with how it was to be divided up.

<sup>63</sup> NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 4706-5099. Copy of a letter from the Jablonec post office to the local administrative committee, Jablonec nad Nisou, 9 April 1946.

<sup>64</sup> NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 4706-5099. Letter from the ZÚO to Jablonec administration committee, Prague, 3 May 1946.

office clearly stated that the issue related to bills generated after the telephones had been reconnected, with the bills thus having been accrued at a time when at least some of the alleged debtors had already been deported. Fortunately, the ZÚO officials were watchful. They remark that in such situations the telephones had been used by someone else than the person named on the account. But by whom? The probable answer was either the military authorities or members of the committee. If such was the case, the Fund was not obliged to cover the bills, either at the expense of expelled Germans or from the sale of their property from which they had been dispossessed. The letter containing this position was the last letter on the subject (which involves only a few documents: no more than three letters). The Jablonec committee did not reply, which could be interpreted as indicating something. It is moreover possible that problems had arisen in relation to the sale of the assets of the German inhabitants of Jablonec. Could it even be the case that by 1946 there was no longer anything to sell?

In this case too we come across an ephemeral presence of the Germans. On the list of debtors attached to the first letter, the debtors' names are written very carefully, along with the places of residence and with a note explaining that the names of the streets used was as they were in the pre-1945 period: the street names appearing in the old accounts were used to avoid confusion.<sup>65</sup> The accounts are summarized accurately and carefully. But the exercise was like sending bills to ghosts – phantoms of people who no longer materially existed, but were now no more than the addresses so carefully rewritten by the post office. The whole business concerns telephones in the houses of expelled Germans whose names are set out on the list, while the local military authorities and members of the administrative committee – the people most probably responsible for running up the debts – are represented on the letter to ZÚO only by the illegible signature of the president of the committee, written in green ink on the typescript. However, the list of the names and addresses of German-speaking inhabitants of Jablonec does not make them really present. The issue is rather exclusively about the data on the right-hand side of the list, the numbers that indicated the correct amount to pay in Czechoslovak crowns. It is the money that in the end remains real here – though even the money also in a sense vanishes, as we do not know (on the basis of the ZÚO's documents at least), if anyone ever paid the debts.

The mere fact that the telephones had been disconnected is also worth mentioning. The action had obviously served to cut the German-speaking inhabitants off from the tools they used to communicate with each other, thus isolating the community. How then we can explain the fact that the telephones were re-connected? Of course, we could simply content ourselves with the explanation that it was a deliberate deception by the committee, but we could also look at it in the following way: it might have been an attempt to restore normalcy. If there is anything in this interpretation, the action would have made a clear statement: Germans may not be here

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<sup>65</sup> “Názvů ulic bylo použito podle starých účtů, aby nedošlo k záměně”. NA ČR, ZÚO, record 808, box 136, 4706-5099. List of debtors, attached to copy of a letter from the Jablonec post office, Jablonec nad Nisou, 9 April 1946.

any longer or may be soon to be deported, but there are still Czechs about, and Czechs have a right to use these telephones. Is it also possible that it was an attempt to make the place more attractive to potential settlers? To reinforce the reputation of the wealthy town (to show that it already had a very large number of telephones installed)? Otherwise, only the telephones at the city hall and at the post office would have needed to be re-connected. It is also interesting that the blame for the unpaid bills was put on the expelled Germans. After all, in this case it looks as if the Germans were no longer there, even though the telephones remained their property. The phones did not yet belong to the new Czech inhabitants; they remained German, and had not yet become formerly German. It might be said that adding the blame for unpaid telephone bills to the whole list of harms done by Jablonec's German-speaking inhabitants was just another pebble in the avalanche of the historical denigration that they suffered.

#### *Conclusions*

It now seems that we can answer the question: what can be traced back from the two examples? In such cases as those described in detail above, in which institutions involved asked the ZÚO for their help, it is clear that the expulsion of the German-speaking inhabitants from Czechoslovakia did not end with the physical removal of the people themselves from the country. At an administrative level, on sometimes absurd issues like the payment of the telephone bills of people who had been deprived of citizenship along with all the associated rights, including the right to use telephones in their homes, or like the cancellation of insurance premiums being paid to an insurance company that no longer existed in its original form, we can clearly see the void that came into being in Czechoslovakia in 1945 and 1946. It seems that in everyday life it was impossible to forget the void that was left by the expulsion. There was no easy way to get around the subject, although it is clear that efforts were made to attempt to do so: the correspondence quoted above speak of the displacement of the Germans sometimes using words that might be considered neutral, such as "odsun" (transfer), but at other times, in the correspondence about the telephones, for example, using such aggressive language as "vyhoštění Němců" (banishment of Germans), indicating a moral legitimization of what happened to the Czechoslovak citizens of German nationality after the end of World War II.

One can still essentially feel the phantom presence of German-speaking inhabitants in post-expulsion Czechoslovakia. This can be seen especially when considering the material objects left by the expelled people. In the period of the first three years after the end of the war there was still a palpable uncertainty about who they belonged to. They served as a kind of spiritual trace, capable of pulling back the presence of the people who had been displaced.

We can also see from both the cases we have discussed, the ongoing game of presence and absence of Germans played by the Czechs taking over the German property. The game is played at the level of remnants of the past: of the things left by the expelled people. One strategy, used in the case of Jičín hospital, was to take over what was financially beneficial, the second, visible in Jablonec, was to show the lack

of an owner, and to ask what is to be done next with the property left behind? The ideology behind the expulsions thus boils down to the second approach: what remains is purely a matter of economics. This is perfectly illustrated by the official stationery, used in the described cases: in theory what remains in German is no longer there (*německy text neplatí*<sup>66</sup>), yet at the same time it is (we are holding the piece of paper in our hand). This phantom presence of Germans is clearly visible, although it stays at a subconscious rather than conscious level in the documents that I have analyzed.

The study also gives us the opportunity to look at a bureaucracy that was outside official state circulation, working under the difficult conditions of the time, far from what would generally be regarded as standard circumstances in peacetime. In the above-described examples we can most clearly see that the expulsion was not a process that lasted only for the period of actual deportation, but for a long time afterwards, as all German traces had to be removed from official acts, and such traces still popped up regularly in everyday legal and administrative problems.

České zemské ústředí obcí, měst a okresů v Praze was finally closed down in 1949. The administrative reform of 1948 and the simultaneous introduction of a regional government level (with the regions called “*kraje*” in Czech) diminished the importance of the organization, which was associated with the lowest levels of local administration. Nor was the body necessary any longer from the point of view of the state authorities. The ZÚO’s liquidation committee, which dealt with the files left by the old body, officially ceased to exist in 1951, passing all documents to the national archive in Prague. These documents were catalogued in 1966. In 2012, I came across them accidentally.

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<sup>66</sup> German text is no longer valid!