

# Jáchymov Camps - Hell where it was freezing

## The Prison Camps in the Jáchymov Region and Exemplary Shaming Punishments for Objectors to Uranium Ore Mining

Between 1949 and 1961, approximately 65,000 prisoners were gradually detained in Czechoslovakian prison camps near uranium mines. About half of them were men accused of alleged anti-communist activity. The prisoners were housed in cold plank houses filled with parasitic insects. They were forced to mine uranium ore in primitive ways, in unsatisfactory safety conditions without regard to any health consequences. Inefficient individuals were punished with reduced food rations and other disciplinary sanctions. Every day in the camps was accompanied by the malicious whims of the camp wardens. The harsh ever-present winter in the mountain camps made prison life difficult from autumn to spring. Plus, the bad weather conditions were used by camp guards to impose additional punishments. The opposers of uranium ore mining had to stand in the freezing cold for hours or even days until completely exhausted.

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The story of the prison camps built by the repressive Czechoslovakian Communist regime and their State enterprise of the *Jáchymov Mines* (in the Czech original: *Jáchymovské doly*), is a story of short-sighted overriding ideological interests above the economic and moral welfare of the nation. It is also a story of the ruthlessness and hatred of the ruling elite towards the troublesome people of the population. It is one of the many stories of human history that tells of how “*there is a time where one man ruleth over another to his own hurt.*”<sup>\*</sup> The central interest of the ruling elites in our narrative is the uranium ore and maximizing its extraction at any cost. The development of events is primarily influenced by power interests and intolerance towards all who are not one-hundred percent loyal to the social monopoly of the Communist Party. However, post-war nationalist passions and the ruined legal awareness of a significant part of the Czechoslovakian people also distinctly enter the story. Notably leaving its mark on these footsteps of events is the haughtiness of contemporary authorities towards the civilian population.

### Colonial practices and the Soviet system

Immediately after the US confirmed to the world in **August 1945** that it was the only power of the world to possess atomic weapons, the Soviet authorities woke up from their hitherto lethargy in this field of research. Breaking the atomic monopoly in the shortest possible time became a question of prestige, military balance, and ideological

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\* Bible, King James Version (1611).

necessity for the Soviet Union (USSR). But it was necessary to get enough uranium ore to produce the atomic bomb. Therefore, the interest of Soviet experts immediately began to focus on its deposits on the western border of Czechoslovakia. These local mines were the only European place within the potential sphere of influence of the USSR where it was possible to start uranium ore mining immediately. Therefore, as early as **September 1945**, armed Soviet troops occupied mines near the town of Jáchymov, using the as yet unsettled post-war situation in the border periphery of the Republic. In **November 1945**, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet party signed an *Agreement*, in which Czechoslovakia was to extract the maximum amount of uranium ore. Then in the shortest possible time, hand it all over exclusively to the Soviets. The means for implementation became the newly established company *Jáchymov Mines*, officially directed by Czechoslovakian-Communist management. In practice, however, it was significantly subject to Soviet political pressure. In the years 1948 and 1949, the Soviets even wanted to take over the entire business exclusively for themselves, which was prevented only by the direct intervention of the Communist State president Klement Gottwald. The operation of individual mine shafts remained under formal Czechoslovakian control. The ideological and economic direction of the company was supervised by the *Permanent Mixed Czechoslovakian-Soviet Commission in Prague*, which loyally fulfilled the political tasks of the central authority of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KSČ), headed by President Gottwald.

The marginal mining of Jáchymov uranium ore, used before the war only for medical purposes, scientific experiments, and the production of phosphorescent colors, took on a whole new dimension with the end of the war. The existing shafts were deepened, old tunnels were reopened, and new mine pits were made. Especially between the years 1946 and 1953, Czechoslovakian uranium ore was mined in maximum possible volume. The Soviets paid a significant part of the costs of mining and geological exploration. From an economic point of view, this period was the best for Czechoslovakia. However, the military industry hampered the development of other important areas of the Czechoslovakian economy and dramatically failed primarily morally. The Communist State apparatus was completely indifferent to betraying its own population in exchange for keeping a deceptive agreement.

Beginning in 1946, a model typical of Soviet totalitarian power began to be applied at the Jáchymov mines: the demanding of large quantities of work and the superiority of the mining plan exceeding the real capabilities of the miners. Amateurish management and insufficient mechanizations were combined with tyranny and slave labor. The situation is also extremely tragic in the terms of historical penological context. The prison system of absolutistic rulers at the end of the 18th century was gradually becoming humanized. Galley-like slave work in chains during the 19th century was gradually replaced by various creative activities; political prisoners were totally acquitted from prison work from the mid-19th century. However, these positive achievements of modern penitentiaries were totally ignored by the Nationalistic totalitarian systems of the 20th century.

In the beginning, to fill the need because of the lack of miners, an ostracized national minority of Czech Germans from the border area were abused into service under various threats. At the same time, the State tried to attract new civilian workers to the border region through recruitment campaigns. Temporary workers, even soldiers, came to help. The Soviet authorities, however, made it clear that they did not intend to leave the supply of a large amount of the required work force to the Czechoslovakian government, but they would provide it themselves. From February 1946 to early 1950, the Soviet GUPVI (*Main Administration of the Prisoners of War and Internees*)\* operated at least **14 prisoner-of-war camps** with soldiers of the defeated German army to extract uranium ore in Czechoslovakia. The Czechoslovakian authorities were not idle either. From the autumn of 1949 to the summer of 1951, **five forced labor camps** (TNPs) were operated by the Czechoslovakian *Ministry of the Interior*, working in the field of uranium ore mining. Politically unreliable civilians were forced into slave labor within these camps under various threats and **without any court decisions**.

However, **convicted prisoners** – both criminal and a large number of political – made the biggest contribution to the speeding up of the extraction of the required ore. There was also a group of Nazi collaborators convicted after the war of crimes against national honor. Joint prison camps for these three groups of convicted prisoners began to be opened in Czechoslovakian uranium mines from March 1949. The first establishment of the area was in the village of Vykmanov, near the town of Jáchymov. From 1949 to 1961 eighteen **prison camps** began to gradually operate at the individual mining affiliates of *Jáchymov Mines*. In addition to the Jáchymov region, some mines were built around the nearby town of Horní Slavkov. Two prison camps were even established near the town of Příbram in the central part of the Czech Republic.\*\* Together they formed a system of detached workplaces of one single prison institution with central administration in the village of Vykmanov near Jáchymov. The central camp *Vykmanov* (temporarily placed at the Jáchymov mine shaft *Bratrstvi* between 1950 and 1954 for better secrecy) was a nodal communication point between the authorities of the superior ministry and the individual camps. Methodical and factual leadership was given to the individual supervisors of the prison camps from this central camp.

We consider irrelevant the disputes that sometimes arise in the mass-media about whether or not these prisons can be considered *concentration camps*. Such a discussion focuses exclusively on the bureaucratic side of the problem, while at the same time ignoring the very operation of the camps and the suffering of the prisoners there. Of course, in comparing Nazi camps and Communist camps, we would find a number of similar as well as different features. Prison camps at Czechoslovakian uranium mines

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\* One of the dreaded Soviet repressive commissariat of the NKVD.

\*\* The mining towns of Jáchymov (also known under the old German name Joachimsthal) and Horní Slavkov (Schlaggenwald) are located between 9 and 40 kilometers from the western Czech-German border, about 20 kilometers from the famous spa town of Karlovy Vary (Karlbad). The town of Příbram (Freiberg), on the other hand, lies in the central part of today's Czech Republic, about 60 kilometers from Prague.

were undoubtedly one of the concentration-type camps. The main concern of the prisoners in the Nazi camps was that they should not be killed. In the Czechoslovakian prison camps, the convicts' concern was not to be seriously ill and not to be crippled. The level of brutality that prevailed in the Nazi camps during World War II is entirely incomparable with almost anything else. If the Czechoslovakian prison camps of 1949 until 1953 had any characteristics close to the Nazi camps, it would be, to a certain extent, the Nazi concentration and working camps from the pre-war period 1933–1937, and that only at certain levels. In the Nazi camps, for example, there could never be such disorder. Management and the re-educational system in Czechoslovakian prison camps were, in any case, inspired by Soviet camps.

### **Camp operations in the years of peak militarization**

The camps, along with all their equipment, were the property of *Jáchymov Mines*, which rented the housing with primitive furnishings for a fee paid to the Ministry. The mining company, on the other hand, hired prisoners from the Ministry, primarily for underground work, and partly for construction work on the surface. **From March 1, 1949 to May 31, 1951**, the prison camps at the uranium mines were administered by the *Ministry of Justice*. The operation of the camps was managed by the *Prison Guard Corps* (in the Czech original: *Sbor uniformované vězeňské stráže*, abbr SVS).

Until the autumn of 1949, prison security at the camps kept their professional honor and did not use any significant physical or psychological violence against the camps' prisoners. It was not until the end of that year that the repressive authorities of the Communist State began to cultivate ideological hatred of political prisoners in order to make imprisonment as hard as possible. During 1950, the camp regime became considerably stricter. Senior SVS guards began to use harsher methods for fear of losing their command post. In contrast, many young and naively inexperienced SVS members were trained to hate right from their joining the service. Correspondence and visits by relatives were substantially reduced in all camps. The prisoners' free time began to be disproportionately filled with secondary work tasks, often humiliating or completely unnecessary, hypocritically referred to as voluntary work (so-called *brigády*). In the Soviet prison model of the so-called differentiated meals, the prisoners' food supply was reduced according to the demagogic principle: those who did not meet the work standard of 100 percent or more would not receive a full portion of food. Also, the prison punishment of disciplinary solitary confinement (so-called *correction*) was overused for various offenses against camp order. A disciplined or punished prisoner was thrown into a cold concrete dungeon for many days, where he experienced difficulty sleeping and minimal food rations. Sometimes in a small correctional room, a group of people had to be crowded together for several days.

However, what characterizes the situation in the first years of the existence of the prison camps most accurately is the appalling living conditions which were caused, not only by the increasing repression of security officers, but also by the irresponsibility of the representatives of *Jáchymov Mines*. Especially between 1949 and 1951, they made a

**fundamental contribution to the existence of the inhuman exploitation system.** Company management ignored the dignity of prisoners, their physical and mental needs, as well as the right to fair treatment. The main causes were incompetent direction, slowness and indifference of the responsible workers, and the neglect of the needs of ordinary workers. There was extraordinary **chaos** in the workplaces of the mining company, in addition to a lack of work equipment, and no interest in complying with safety regulations. The organization of the work had a very amateurish character. The timbering of underground shafts and basic mining **equipment** was in **disrepair** and continuously was causing serious injuries, including many fatalities. The whole socialist system built by the Communists was based on the dictatorship of the proletariat, so that many people who were put in a number of important places were unqualified, without any deeper understanding of timeless values, and all the more blinded by the promises of the Communist Party. Conscious of their prominent position in the structure of the State economy, the *Jáchymov Mines* handled necessary corrections only after numerous interventions and only to the extent necessary. The flagrant lack of interest in the basic needs of the prisoners resulted in both wasted health and lives.

The only thing that the management of *Jáchymov Mines* managed to constantly enforce was the pressure to increase the mining output. By neglecting any care for civilian employees, the company paid virtually no attention to the needs of employed prisoners. For a long time, obligations to equip the camps were ignored. In some camps, for example, drinking water for the prisoners was not even available. Sometimes even service water for washing was lacking. Some of the prisoners had no place to sleep, and a significant number of prisoners did not get functional work clothes or shoes. There was nowhere to dry wet work clothes. **Wooden camp huts** designed to accommodate prisoners did not comply with building, fire, and hygiene regulations. Most of the quarters were leaking, lacking any thermal insulation, and the porous boards were rotting. At the same time, especially in the Jáchymov region, located in the Ore Mountains (Czech: Krušné hory, German: Erzgebirge), the **weather and wind conditions** were severe for a considerable part of the year. The summer was short. Between 1950 and 1953, warm summer days with a temperature above 20 °C (68 °F) lasted about one week. For one fifth of the year, the average local air temperature was below zero. In winter the temperatures in the hills above Jáchymov fell to -13 to -18 °C (8.6 to -0.4 °F). A third of the days of these years are defined locally in the meteorological tables as so-called *frost days*. One-tenth of the annual temperatures fell into the category of *icy days*. At the latest, from December, the Jáchymov region had snow cover. It usually disappeared at the earliest during April, sometimes even at the beginning of May. Chill and cold were the basis of camp torment. During the winter months, prisoners had hoar frost on their blankets at the morning wake-up call. The conditions on the hills around Horní Slavkov were not much more tolerable.

In addition, serious safety and health risks related to mining activities and radioactive material extraction were like a cloud that hovered over the already unsatisfactory living conditions, along with camp bullying. In addition to a number of occupational

injuries in the underground mines resulting from downplaying work safety, civilian and prison miners were threatened with clogged lungs (silicosis) from dust. Breathing of radioactive radon contributes to lung cancer. There was increased radiation in the uranium underground. Increased radiation could also cause a number of fatal health problems, especially if the prisoners drank underground radioactive water when they were in need. The highest concentration of radiation exposure was to convicts working in surface sorting plants of uranium concentrate. Especially infamous sorting areas were in the *Vykmanov II* camp, code sign “L”, where the convicts literally waded in radioactive debris without any protective equipment while working on crushed stone. Serious consequences of this work included malaise, rheumatism, rashes, red blood cell loss, various immune system disorders, and various glandular diseases. Years later many of the convicts were diagnosed with leukemia or other forms of cancer.

The **second stage** of the prison camps at the Czechoslovakian uranium mines **began on June 1, 1951 and ended on October 31, 1954**. At that time, the administration of the prison camps was taken over by the *Ministry of National Security* and its *SNB* servants, *Jeřáb* (Crane, component of the *National Security Corps*).<sup>\*</sup> During 1950, the highest authorities of the Communist Party gradually lost patience with both the continuing disorder in the mining company as well as with the various inconsistencies in the ranks of the SVS, and the conflicts of jurisdiction between the SVS and the Soviet specialists. The international situation was also complicated. The unleashing of the Korean War (1950) intensified international fears of a possible World War III, which the entire Communist bloc began to prepare for fiercely. The result was further acceleration of uranium ore mining. The emphasis on performance became the essence of the militarization of the domestic economy. The daily regime in the camps became even more difficult to bear. The civilian population outside prisons and camps was attacked by daily propaganda about the dangers of American imperialism and encouraged to hate the enemies of the Communist regime. At the same time, the ongoing Stalinist purges encouraged the **search** for supposed hidden **enemies within their own ranks**. Within these orgies of intolerance, several Communist leaders of the Jáchymov enterprise were arrested, tortured, and imprisoned without any hesitation, just as were a group of loyal members of the SVS (1949–1952) who were falsely accused. The Communist General Director of the *Jáchymov Mines* was also replaced, while the highest government representative for uranium mining was driven to suicide.

### Stepping up camp repression

Increasing the volume of mining was achieved by State authorities using the **carrot and stick method**. While in the civilian sector points were scored primarily with promises of high profits, the detained labor force in the camps were primarily driven by

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<sup>\*</sup> *National Security* (in the Czech original: *Národní bezpečnost*) was a euphemistic term for Communist Police units shared by the *National Security Corps* (*SNB*). A special police force was the *Secret State Security* (Czech: *Státní bezpečnost*, *StB*), the main repressive and spy authority of the Communist Party.

threats and bullying. Between 1951 and 1953 with the more rebellious prisoners, the members of the *SNB Jeřáb* did not hesitate to use very harsh forms of physical and psychological violence, which went far beyond the law of that time. The systemization of State terror was also made easier by camp *self-government* – a group of prominent prisoners who had been given authority over the other prisoners by the head of the camp. The task of self-government was to maintain order in the camp and eliminate any resistance. At most of the camps, the self-government was assembled from unprincipled criminal rapists and war collaborators whose bad reputations preceded them. The agency's network of secret informers among prisoners also improved. Frequent escapes from the camps practically ceased due to higher security of the camps as well as extremely cruel hunts for escapees and their ruthless elimination. Whether or not the escapees survived, their bodies were transported back to the camp. Then as a warning, they were thrown into the camp roll-call area where the entire camp personnel had to march past them. The surviving captured escapees were then separately subjected to cruel torture in the investigation room of the *Secret State Security (StB)*, which tried to beat out more information from the prisoners.

As inhuman as the everyday atmosphere of debilitating slave labor, bullying, and hunger was, even more so was the bad weather that eventually became one of the worst tools of repression. Census check-ups at the camp yard became famous among the convicts. Guard service was regularly and unnecessarily extended regardless of wind, snow, or frost. Several times a day the prisoners had to stand one or two hours in poor prison clothes in the **camp roll-call areas**, while the guards were clothed with warm footwear, gloves, caps, and fur coats.

During 1950 or 1951, a new phenomenon appeared at the uranium camps: opposers of uranium ore mining. In a few separate cases, several political opponents refused to go to work because all the uranium was taken by the Communist USSR. In these cases, it was usually sufficient to place the rebellious prisoner into correction for a few days, whereupon he succumbed to pressure. It was different in cases where uranium mining was **refused by conscientious objectors**. In archival materials of the period and in memoir literature, the objectors that are continually mentioned are of three religious denominations – Baptists, Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses. Careful research has excluded Baptist participation in refusing to mine. In the camps, Jehovah's Witnesses or Adventists were mistakenly labeled in this way. Between 1950 and 1953 Jehovah's Witnesses continually, and in large numbers, refused to extract uranium ore because at that time it was intended exclusively for the arms industry. Orthodox Adventists refused to go to work on Saturday because it was a holiday for them. One objector was also found from the Evangelical Church. He was part of the Jehovah's Witnesses community in the camp.

Adventists offered to make up Saturday's work on Sunday. Jehovah's Witnesses asked for reassignment. But the camp heads refused to make an exception. On the contrary, they began to expose them to exemplary public punishments, so as to deter other prisoners from any rebellion. **Public camp shaming punishment**, consisting of stan-

ding for many hours outside – mostly in winter, rain or ice – began to be imposed on all objecting prisoners. Sometimes they stood under the barrels of machine guns; at other times they were tied up in one place, or their shoes were nailed to the ground with steel nails. The punishment was fully comparable to the military punishment of tying one to the stake (the so-called *Field Punishment Number One*), which was abolished decades earlier in many Western armies because of being completely inhuman. The Nazis used it as one of their favorite punishments in their camps with civilian prisoners during the years 1933–1945.

Objectors of uranium ore mining in Czechoslovakian prison camps usually had to stand at the exit of the camp where prisoners' work crews passed, or in front of the command house, or by the camp fencing. One-time rebels were shamed for two to three hours. Adventists stood all day Saturday in bad weather. The next day they had to make up their missed work, despite the fact that they were frozen and tired from the previous day. However, the worst torture was saved for Jehovah's Witnesses who did not want to extract uranium ore at any cost, regardless of a calendar date. In some prison camps they had to stand or walk for several days in snowstorms without practically any breaks.

In-depth archival searches and a careful comparison of all cases found confirm that camp public shaming became the standard of camp punishment between 1951 and 1953, which is documented by almost all prison camps at *Jáchymov Mines*. Moreover, the length of public shaming of some prisoners in the camp was combined with physical beatings, placement in correction, interrogation in a heated office (after which they had to return outside into the chill, and were doused with ice water), or restrictions on any movement at all. Fastening the objectors to the roof of one of the camp huts (where it was windier) also became rampant.

Between 1951–1953 the lowest daily temperatures in the hills above Jáchymov ranged from  $-10$  to  $-15$  °C (14 to 5 °F). February 1953 was the coldest ever, when the average temperature around  $-16.3$  °C (2.66 °F) dropped to  $-18.4$  °C ( $-1.12$  °F). Prisoners punished at Camp *Rovnost* (945 meters above sea level) could thus be exposed to the apparent temperature of  $-23$  °C ( $-9.4$  °F).<sup>\*</sup> Of the cases of Jehovah's Witnesses who stood in the cold (not just for hours but for days, to the point of being completely unconscious), it can be concluded that their skin temperature clearly dropped to a critical level of 27 to 24 °C (80.6 to 75.2 °F). According to witnesses, the motionless bodies of the objectors were removed and taken away. It was not possible to confirm that some of the shamed objectors were frozen, though some witnesses said so. The most serious cases of frostbite and pneumonia were apparently transported to the hospital in Karlovy Vary. The other shamed objectors were mostly moved to another camp or to a walled prison after a few days of freezing torture, so that their fellow prisoners could not see them as victorious heroes. Obviously, none of the conscientious objectors were broken by this

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<sup>\*</sup> *Apparent temperature* is the perception of the human body. It may differ from the actual measured air temperature due to various factors (e.g. cold, humidity, etc.). It is not a fictional phantom feeling, but a temperature as the body perceives and responds to it.

cruel treatment. Without making any effort, they earned considerable respect from the other prisoners due to their resiliency. On the other hand, the morally distorted administration of the prison camps revealed to what extreme and inhuman forms of torture they were able to go. From a moral point of view, they reached the imaginary bottom. The fact that the objectors morally prevailed is beyond any doubt. But by the same fact they suffered serious health problems and possibly life-long consequences from their standing several days in the freezing cold. In that sense, this shaming punishment in the Czechoslovakian prison camps was most similar to the Nazi concentration camps, where this inhuman punishment was also used.

### **The final period of existence of uranium camps**

The events of the following years proved how imprudent the blind ideological subordination was of Czechoslovakian Communists to the USSR. First of all, during the years between 1951–1954, the price of uranium ore on the world markets began to decline gradually due to a constant increase in the volume of mining. The Soviets got into negative numbers by buying Czechoslovakian uranium. Between the years 1951–1952, the period of profitable economic returns ended for Czechoslovakia, and the USSR began to pay exclusively the costs associated with mining. In addition, part of the payments were made in kind (grain, meat, diesel, iron, etc.), the volume of which Czechoslovakia generously devalued in favor of the USSR after the monetary reform in 1953. In 1954, the first signs of a possible decline in uranium ore mining began to appear. Because of an easing in political tensions in the world, previous preparations for a potential World War III became outdated. Over time, the militarization of the Czechoslovakian economy increasingly was shown to be a drowned investment. The astronomical costs spent on building an expansive uranium industry, which also began to be maintained by artificial subsidies, dragged the state's economy to the ground.

**From 1954** in connection with the ongoing development, we can see the **final period of the existence of the prison camps near Jáchymov Mines**, which definitely **ended between 1959–1961**. The era of the greatest repression and inhumanity of the camps essentially ended soon after the death of the Soviet dictator Stalin and his Czechoslovakian counterpart Gottwald in the spring of 1953. Instead of psychological and physical violence, the camp authorities now attempted to re-educate political prisoners ideologically (but unsuccessfully) through political lectures and propaganda films. Everyday camp bullying was significantly reduced. Differentiated meals also ended. Instead of demagoguery, financial benefits and various small perks also played an important role in the prison environment. No later than 1955 the situation of the camps was stabilized, and a new status quo was set up between security and prisoners. There were several major attempts at prison revolts during the year, due to the mistaken euphoria of some of the prisoners. However, they were decisively pacified. Prisoners were reminded of the clear rules of standard prison discipline.

At the end of 1953, the former Ministry of National Security was completely abolished in favor of the Ministry of the Interior. The then current camp security authorities

SNB *Jeřáb* was replaced in the autumn of 1954 by the *Interior Guard of the Ministry of the Interior*, which also looked after other economical strategic facilities. The Czechoslovakian Communist representation (1955–1960) expressed that it had attributed the “*inconsistencies*” of earlier years to a bad international situation, and did not intend to return to them; nor did it want to draw any major consequences from them.

*Jáchymov Mines* ceased to exist in its original form at the end of 1955 and underwent significant restructuring. The gradual liquidation of individual camps began with the **reduction of mining**. Of the eighteen facilities, only half were in operation by the middle of 1956. In the area of Horní Slavkov, the use of prisoners stopped completely. The *Vojna* and *Bytíz* camps in the Příbram region were removed from the jurisdiction of the Jáchymov central camp and incorporated under the Regional Administration of the Ministry of the Interior of Prague, or more precisely, the Příbram Detention Facility. As of 31 December 1959, the Jáchymov Camp Administration ceased to exist, and the remaining camps in the Jáchymov Region became part of the Regional Administration of the Ministry of the Interior of Karlovy Vary. The last Czechoslovakian prison camp finished its operations in June 1961. The only one remaining was the *Bytíz* camp in the Příbram area, but it was used almost exclusively for imprisoning criminals (until 1986).

#### **Legends versus reality, lessons and warnings**

Some events from the prison camps are still **mythized**. Interpretations of journalists and some witnesses must therefore be treated with caution. A prime example is **František Paleček** (aka) Albín Dvořák, Head of Camp *Rovnost*. As a synonym for all evil, he appears in the memories of a number of witnesses, including those who did not experience Paleček-Dvořák or who did not witness any of his violence. Paleček's co-responsibility for some of the unlawfulness is unquestionable, including his inhuman pleasure of mistreating mining objectors for many days in the frozen weather. At the same time, however, it is necessary to reject unfounded rumors that present Paleček as a lone demon of the entire camp system. Paleček was a fanatic of discipline and a lover of complete order. One of the tools he used to maintain discipline at his camp was the long-term support of the exaggerated *camp legends* about the alleged cruelty and brutality of the camp's security, whereas in conversations with prisoners, these rumors were rather purposefully applied to him. Rumors that Paleček liked to take a single prisoner to pick berries in order to secretly shoot him were told in prison quarters, and with the fluctuation of prisoners between camps, these rumors began to have a life of their own. The real Paleček-Dvořák was far from being a law-abiding model. But the media image of the alleged multiple murderer and sadist does not correspond to reality. Paradoxically, during the 1970 investigation he did not deny the punishment of conscientious objectors by standing them in the freezing weather. He recognized that this was extreme punishment. But he said he didn't know how to force the objectors to work. He has never been convicted of these inhuman punishments.

In an effort to accentuate the inhuman living conditions of the Communist camps, some narrators and journalists use terminology relating to the Nazi camps between

1939 and 1945 to describe life in the prison camps. Referring to the stone *Todesstiege* (stairs of death) in Mauthausen, Austria,\* the wooden staircase at Camp Svornost is also commonly referred to as the "*Mauthausen Stairs*". However, comparable inhumanities did not occur in the Jáchymov region. The prisoners at Svornost did not even carry any load up the stairs. Similarly, the code name of the second Vykmanov camp "L" is commonly »decrypted« as "L = *Liquidation*", although there is no evidence to suggest that the camp organizers allegedly used liquidation purposes. The commonly mentioned interpretation of the prison slang term "MUKL" is also an apocryphal stylization. The generally accepted claim that it is an acronym "*Muž Uřčený K Likvidaci*" (= *Man Intended to be Liquidated*) to refer to political prisoners is not true. There is clear evidence that the word *muckel* (in German, *guy*) was commonly used in the Czech-German criminal environment over a hundred years ago. An ahistorical backronym claiming the intention of liquidation did not appear in the environment of former political prisoners until the late 1960s.

Consequently, there are similar cases in which a public image of the prison camps at the uranium mines is partly misinterpreted. Attention remains focused on the general criminal nature of Communist governments in Czechoslovakia between 1948 and 1989 and the repressive elements of the totalitarian state, which ignored traditional moral postulates and applicable laws. However, the publications which justify the illegality of the 1950s solely by Communist ideology, the repressive apparatus, and the contemporary context, prevent the simplified conclusions from seeking out the elementary causes and processes that underlie ideologically motivated repressions. On the contrary, impartial research must contradict part of the traditional and uncritically accepted claims. The essence of Czechoslovakian prison camps was certainly not based on the routine killing of prisoners. It is therefore necessary to reject stories such as how '*guards liked to shoot at prisoners who went to the outhouse toilet at night*'. The vast majority of prisoners who died in the camp system between 1949 and 1961 are known to historians (357 persons are mentioned). Of course, during this period, the exceptional and subsequently camouflaged killings of some of the prisoners cannot be ruled out. But there is no indication that it was a systematic element.

The real **horror of the prison camp system** at the uranium mines lies, for example, in the massive extent into which it grew. During the years 1949–1961, approximately every second Czechoslovakian prisoner was in the uranium camps. In this context, the ominous thesis of the American psychologist Philip Zimbardo that **the vast majority of people who commit inhumanity are quite ordinary people** is confirmed. Because they do not have sufficiently strong moral constraints, they succumb to social pressures. In practice, they either tolerate evil or start to actively participate in it. This was also the

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\* The staircase with 186 steps between the Wiener Graben quarry and the Mauthausen concentration camp. Here the Nazi prisoners had to carry up heavy granite blocks weighing up to 50 kilograms on their backs. Many were seriously injured, some were shot or murdered by being thrown down the rocks on the whim of SS security guards.

case with some camp security officers, initially considered conciliatory and tolerant. After undergoing a destructive metamorphosis of the *Lucifer Effect*, they began to accept even the most vicious forms of camp repression. At the same time, it is confirmed that inhuman acts are not necessarily perpetrated by mental primitives. Among the members of the camp's security and administration we can find not only simple people, but also very intelligent or extraordinarily organizationally capable people. In other words, intelligence or education is not an automatic remedy for illegality and cruel treatment. Sometimes the gangster system can even accelerate to larger dimensions, as evidenced by the educated creators of the Nazi repressive system or South African apartheid. Likewise, the Czechoslovakian forced labor and prison camps were in inspired by the precise planners of Soviet gulags and the GUPVI administration.

Interesting circumstances can also be noticed in terms of social prison structures. Just as in Nazi concentration camps, so too in uranium camps, proven criminals, and on rare occasions political prisoners, were appointed to some of the repulsive functions of the camp's self-government from time to time. Mostly it was either a last-minute solution, a fatal mistake, or a strategic move by camp administration. However, the cases described confirm that camp function does not necessarily distort character - although trying to avoid such functions holds true.

As in Nazi camps, uranium camps could be a big asset for maintaining mental balance if a prisoner belonged to one of the non-mainstream communities professing some higher ethos. Vigilance against informers, provocateurs, and devaluers of community order strengthened their members in common matters. On the one hand, they were somewhat reserved. On the other hand, they were willing to accept a reliable novice under certain circumstances. The examples of objectors showed the irrationality of totalitarian repression. Instead of an easy *win/win* solution, the tormentors tried to demonstrate their power, but they created unnecessarily aggravated situations and with them room for the extreme circumstances of the persecuted.

Although Czechoslovakian prison camps between 1949 and 1956 and 1961 constituted one centrally coordinated prison facility, virtually every camp became known for some **local specifics** resulting from either the site or camp management. The camp at the former Capuchin monastery, called *Mariánská*, was infamous for its local StB (State Security) examination room. The former Gestapo informer Bretislav Jenicek, who became famous at the *Nikolaj* camp, managed to motivate a significant number of criminal prisoners to systematically and very brutally attack local political prisoners. In addition, Nikolaj was one of the hungriest camps between 1951 and 1953. The escorting of local prisoners to the Eduard mine, one kilometer away, was also infamous for the prisoners being undignifiedly tied together into a single pack of several hundred prisoners while walking. The tired convicts of Camp *Svornost* had to climb 270 high stairs up the steep slope leading from the mine tower to the camp as they left work. In several camps between 1951 and 1953, not only was there in operation a correction facility in the form of a separate brick building but also there were shockingly inhuman underground dungeons. They have been preserved in the former camps of *Svornost* and *Vojna*.

The nature of the camps' illegality comes from several elementary causes. As a result of the post-war tolerance of violence and the social ostracization of alleged or actual supporters of the Nazi occupation, the idea that cruelty towards other groups of the population may be legitimate has been rooted in the broader population. Legal instability was also eroded by the post-war nationalization of large, medium-sized and, later, small businesses and establishments in which the state confiscated property from private owners. Traditional forms of legality and law were suddenly unenforceable in many ways. Bullying, formally criticized in working or school groups, received a bizarre hallmark of social benefit.

It was shown to be false hope that large state-owned enterprises would automatically treat their employees with greater altruism. The unclear structure of irresponsible workers, power influences, and political interests has not diminished the space for corporate crimes. The example of the *Jáchymov Mines* in the first half of the 1950s is an exemplary example.

As in every era, the mass media failed to function again. It was a trumpet of traditional clichés, biases, and misinterpretations, along with compulsory ideological propaganda. Under the pretext of national security, it became possible to condemn and harass any inconvenient opinion. Antagonism mobilizes.