

## CZECH REPUBLIC – HERITAGE @ RISK!

State supervision over heritage conservation is stipulated in the State Preservation Act No. 20/1987 and carried out by:

1. Executive bodies that include the Czech Ministry of Culture – Conservation Department, district authorities – cultural departments, and municipal authorities of Prague and other appointed cities.
2. Specialised institutions, such as the State Conservation Institute, Prague Conservation Institute, and eight further regional conservation institutes.

Besides this, there are various associations and foundations that take care of the condition and conservation of cultural heritage, for example the Association for Old Prague or the foundation PRO BOHEMIA.

Historic towns and municipalities are organised into the Associations of Historic Settlements in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia that are very active in organising various events in support of the conservation of heritage places, mainly in reservations and conservation zones.

In spite of all the efforts of both conservationists and heritage owners, there are still many heritage places at risk, some of them even in crisis. That is due to several reasons:

### After the establishment of the Communist regime in 1948

The property of all businessmen, churches and the wealthy was nationalised and given to be used by numerous so-called socialist organisations and by the army. Such socialist organisations included the then emerging Standard Farming Co-operatives and State Farms which farmed in out-buildings of chateaux, manors, etc. These users usually devastated the buildings, carrying out only minimal maintenance or not maintaining the buildings at all. The same situation occurred to the precincts of monasteries, as they had been abolished and religious orders dissolved.

Only minimal financial resources were allocated to the maintenance of churches and monasteries for ideological reasons. Jews and Jewish monuments were excluded during the Communist regime. Numerous synagogues and Jewish cemeteries were destroyed, others devastated.

This poor management lasted for forty years and had a very unfortunate effect on un-maintained monuments. The destruction was completed by vandals and thieves.

Our historic towns and municipalities have been severely affected by the intentional and ruthless demolition of monuments within historic centres, and historic buildings have been replaced by standardised housing estates and tower blocks typical of the socialist era or grandiose shopping malls and cultural centres (eg in the towns of Kadan, Jihlava, Zdár and Sázavou, Sokolov, Znojmo, Beroun, Predklásterí u Tisnova, and many others). The picturesque image of our towns and villages has been spoiled by housing estates of prefabricated blocks of flats.

The effect of mining activities, especially strip-mines in Northern Bohemia, is almost tragic. Not only has the entire natural environment been destroyed (leaving a moonscape behind), but also entire towns have disappeared (eg the ancient town of Most and the former district town of Prásečnice), as many as 116 villages and settlements in Northern Bohemia and 20 in Western Bohemia! Simultaneously, individual items of architecture have disappeared – chateaux (Ahníkov), churches, and chapels, etc.

Former military areas and the frontier zones have suffered similar impacts. These areas had been cleared of all the population, and abandoned churches and other buildings were targets during military training.

The construction of large dams has doomed numerous villages and many historic monuments.

Probably no other European culture or country suffered from such a large-scale devastation as did the Czech Republic.

With the system of central economic planning, building firms were directed towards new construction and large recon-

Terezín: too many advertisements and billboards on the façades of the historic buildings



Telč: inappropriate alterations to the roof of one of the most valuable historic houses at the square





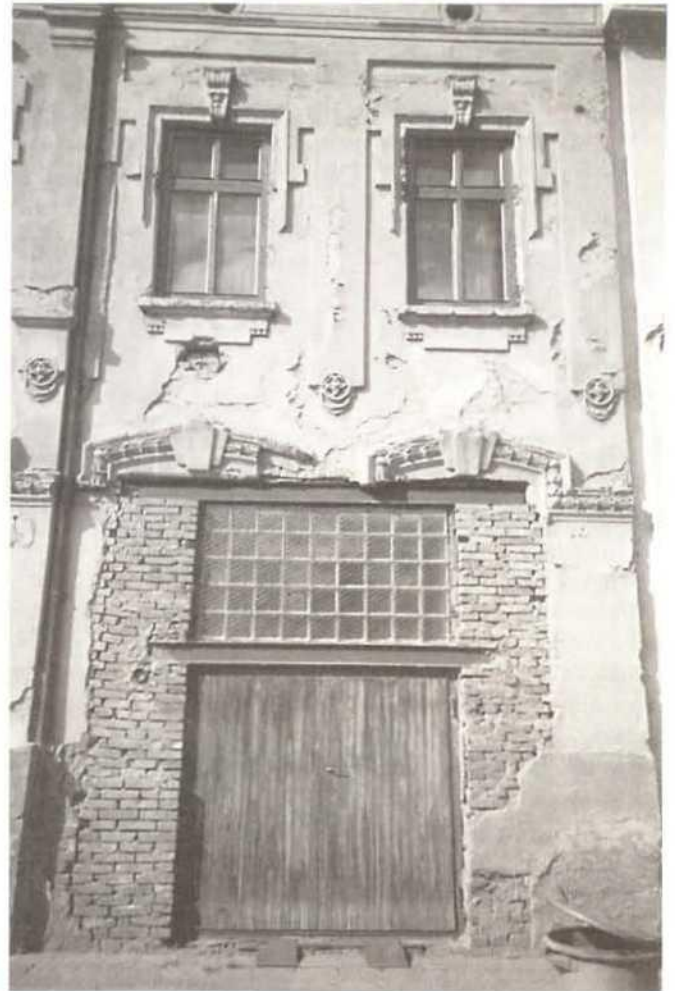
structions, not to the repair and maintenance of historic buildings. Cultural heritage was not included in their long-term plans. Building materials were of poor quality and insufficient range. The only exception was the work of conservators. The emphasis of the Czechoslovak economy on heavy industry and the mining of raw materials resulted in extreme air pollution, the effects of which adversely impacted not only the natural environment but also on built heritage.

### After the “Velvet Revolution”

Recently, since the so-called Velvet Revolution ten years ago, our towns, and especially Prague, have been hit by another danger – the world of money, of commerce, of capitalism. The interest of both foreign and domestic investors in attractive lots of land in historic town centres, the acquisition and use of monuments for excessively overvalued programs and their restoration for such use, has been carried out in an insensitive, even ruthless way that damages the heritage place and is unacceptable to conservation.

The building boom has especially affected the ground floor of buildings where numerous new shops have been established with new display-windows, entrances and a multitude of questionable advertisements. Penthouses have caused problems with various dormers and roof windows, or roofing materials of poor taste; wooden windows have been replaced by plastic ones with much broader frames, cross-pieces and supports, or by modern windows without articulation; all this adversely changing the characteristic image of historic settlements.

Monuments and green areas in historic towns are also en-



Znojmo: former entrance converted into a garage

Libá (Cheb district): staircase in the north wing of the castle ▶



Libá (Cheb district): the main façade of the castle





dangered by new construction of technical infrastructure and new traffic systems, the construction of underground parking, and the establishment of above-ground parking areas. The low level of cultural understanding by developers is yet another risk to heritage.

The new era has brought about a new adverse phenomenon, namely speculation. Many heritage places, mainly chateaux, have become the target of speculation, their values being artificially increased, and serving as collateral for bank loans. Their owners have not spent the borrowed funds for the restoration of these monuments, but for other purposes (eg Cervená Recice, Brtnice, Bor). Another group of endangered monuments includes the chateaux abandoned by the army or units of the Ministry of the Interior (eg Planá, Star Hroznavov, Dobříčany, Stružná, Kanice, Hostoun). Some of them have become the subject of speculation, others have failed to have a suitable use or investors found (Zelená Hora, Chotěšov, Jaroslavice).

The situation with unused heritage places falling into disrepair has not been resolved either by the process of restitution – as the owners – restitutions, municipalities, churches or individuals often do not have money for the expensive restoration of destroyed heritage places and so are considering their sale or have already sold or leased them (Nové Hrady, Chotěšov, Skalka, Zalužany).

At this point, we should mention the endangered movable heritage where restitutions illegally sell collections from returned chateaux and take them out of the country.

Some industrial heritage places from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that continued operating in large numbers, are also endangered. These mainly include mines and smelting works in the Kladno region and especially Ostrava, where some have decreased or already discontinued their operations. The most important of them are the Ironworks of Vítkovice, established in 1828 and in operation for as long as 170 years. Blast furnaces of the Ironworks together with the coke plant and the mine, Hlubina, form a typical industrial urban landscape. The area has been proclaimed as cultural heritage. However, financial resources are not sufficient to properly maintain and open the site to the public. Other than a couple of exceptions, industrial heritage items fail to be successfully adapted for new, attractive uses – for retail, or residential use, etc.

The major problem in the field of heritage conservation is the lack of financial resources, both for individual monuments, areas, historic towns and villages, and for the overall regeneration of affected regions.

The responsibility for the state to contribute financially is not obligatory, it is allocated depending on sums that are available in district budgets and the budget of the Czech Ministry of Culture. In 2000, budgets were reduced by up to 50% compared to past years. No considerable tax deductions were offered to owners of heritage places. Although many heritage places have

been restored and rescued during the past ten years, and although the image of our towns and villages has considerably improved, numerous heritage places are still in jeopardy.

In 1999, the National Conservation Institute (SPP) prepared and published the List of Immovable Monuments in the Czech Republic which are the Most Endangered and Unused. The List contained 546 items. It had been prepared using data provided by regional conservation institutes and will be updated each other year. The List is not intended as a complete survey of heritage places in the Czech Republic which are in jeopardy, there are many more of them. So far, the List does not include, for example, endangered town houses, or objects of popular architecture, etc.

Archaeological sites and artefacts rank among the most endangered heritage places since these are mostly located below ground. They are in jeopardy mainly from destruction or damage during earthworks and/or due to the public's ignorance. In the case of identified archaeological sites, there is a risk of destruction before any rescue archaeology is conducted due to a lack of funds, as the developer is not obliged by law to pay for the cost of research and the institution which is to conduct the research has not been allocated the necessary funds by its establishing body. Although the government has created a fund to cover the cost of rescue archaeology in such cases, its amount is far from sufficient.

Developers or investors frequently destroy sites merely because they consider it more profitable to break the law and pay a relatively low fine than to pay for the cost of the delay to construction and the postponement of a building's operation (and the start to earning a profit). The construction of the Delvita supermarket near Rudná near Prague is such an example, where the developers intentionally destroyed an Early Bronze Age settlement because they considered the cost calculated for the rescue archaeology as too high. This case has been discussed over a few years by the media, as well as investigated by the police.

Archaeological sites where long-term, systematic archaeological research had been conducted, and where built remains were found (frequently the most important localities), are endangered by a lack of finances and unresolved legal questions. That is why their conservation is prevented and such heritage is falling into disrepair due to continuing legal actions. This is the situation, for example for the castle of Vížmburk in North East Bohemia or the late Hallstatt and early La Tène buildings at the settlement at Závist near Prague. Archaeological sites are also endangered by theft, especially by plundering using metal-detectors. Inadequate legislation provides virtually no chance of prosecuting the perpetrators, and the situation is complicated by the overloaded and inadequate resources of the police, particularly in regional areas. As an example, the Celtic oppidum, Stradonice, near Beroun can be mentioned.





Jaroslavice (Znojmo district): main façade of the country house as seen from the village



Jaroslavice (Znojmo district): the arcaded courtyard



Bečváry (Kolín district): main façade as seen from the park



Bečváry (Kolín district): view into the courtyard

Branná (Šumperk district): view into the first courtyard of the country house



Trpísty (Tachov district): main façade of the country house

