CHAPTER 11

Forced labor displacement during the Second World War

Czechs in Norway and their postwar memorialization

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Abstract

Nazi Germany conscripted some 2,000 young men from the occupied Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia for forced labor in Norway (and Finland) during the Second World War. Their experiences as forced labor migrants in a distant polar habitat, as well as their commemoration during the Cold War, have been largely neglected in Norway and deliberately ignored in Czechoslovakia. Based on documents from the German bureaucracy, ego-documents from individual workers, and interviews with their descendants, this chapter explores the cohort's collective experiences, memories, and memorialization from a

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prosopographic perspective. By first examining their experience from conscription in 1942 to repatriation in 1945, the chapter observes an inherent ambiguity between misery and tourist mode. In the second part of the chapter, it is argued that the ambiguity prevailed as memories persisted in close social networks in Czechoslovakia. Only in the Czech Republic was it possible to commemorate the cohort in public, when the compensation discourse tipped the balance of ambiguity in favor of misery.

Introduction

Josef Lébl (1921–1991) was subjected to Nazi Germany's transnational forced labor program during the Second World War. He was one of nearly 2,000 Czech citizens who were forced to work under harsh conditions in Norway. When Lébl's daughter, Jarmila, was recently asked how her father had spoken about his displacement, she claimed that he had eagerly recounted the experience: "When I was a child, my father would read from his Norway diaries before I went to bed. His reading was always like chocolate on the tongue. He talked about the fjords and showed postcards. In my childhood I felt that Norway belonged to us together with the Czech lands" (Hingarová, Maršálek, and Vlk 2021, 35). Lébl obviously talked about his experience as a forced labor migrant in rather lively and almost touristic tropes. A careful reading of his ego-documents confirms that he did not conceptualize his experience in terms of decay and misery, although he never ignored the elements of coercion and constraint.

The massive Nazi forced labor program in Europe was transnational and may have involved 20 million people, the majority from Eastern and Central Europe (Wagner 2011). Repatriation was part of the equally massive "unmixing of peoples" that occurred in Europe as Germany capitulated (Brubaker 1995). During the Cold War, the Kremlin tended to limit memory of the program in order to avoid embarrassing attention to its own use of forced labor displacement (Polian 2004). We agree with Gatrell (2007) that it was only with the collapse of communist rule in Eastern and Central Europe that a more profound debate on the history of forced displacement became possible. Even in the West, research on the Nazi forced labor program was hesitant well into the 1980s (Herbert 1985; Jacobmeyer 1985). It was the German compensation scheme for former forced laborers in 2000

that triggered the wave of historical research on this program (Borggräfe 2014). The same is true for the Norwegian program (Hatlehol 2020). Norwegian studies have shown that it involved about 130,000 foreigners, of whom more than 100,000 were Soviet and Polish prisoners of war (POWs), and Yugoslav and German prisoners. The rest were conscripted civilian workers from 21 countries. This scholarship has focused on the organizational machinery that affected living and working conditions and showed that, even with a high demand for labor, Nazi racial ideology played a role in shaping working conditions (Soleim 2009; Hatlehol 2015; Stokke 2024). In contrast to local memories and memorials to foreign forced laborers, there was no national act of remembrance. Norway's policy of limiting commemoration of Soviet POWs during the Cold War is well documented (Soleim 2018). While a formal bilateral friendship group was created to honor Yugoslavia's suffering, marked by immense casualties, the Czech forced labor contribution was not memorialized in Norway until the 2020s.

This study aims to understand how the forced labor displacement in Norway was experienced, remembered, and memorialized by focusing on the Czech group. Former studies show that communist Czechoslovakian governments stifled public discussion about forced labor memory, while Czech conscripts who had worked in the German Reich found practical ways to come to terms with their past individually (Jarská 2010; Thonfeld 2011). While we agree, we also argue that experiences in Norway influenced memories and that postwar remembrance continued. The prevailing view is that the Czechs in Norway had relatively extensive rights, were treated comparatively well, and exercised some agency (Hatlehol 2015; Frøland et al. 2021). We inquire about the collective experience that emerged during the war and its subsequent remembrance and memorialization. We will refer to the group as *Noráci*, which in the Czech colloquial language means the Norwegians, although this phrase was applied by the group itself only from 1985. We indeed acknowledge the bias of memory studies towards "cultural homogeneity, consistency and predictability" (Kantsteiner 2000) but believe that using the historical prosopography approach (Verboven, Carlier, and Dumolyn 2007) weakens this bias. The data we use originate in our research project, which works up historical knowledge on the conditions of the Czech group and how it preserved memory about its Norwegian experience based on egodocuments (https://noraci.cz/en/front-page/). The corpus consists of

12 wartime diaries, 600 wartime letters, and 4,000 photographs, alongside 15 retrospective postwar memories written mostly in the 1990s. In addition, we have conducted 20 oral interviews and 200 email communications with descendants.

The first part follows the *Noráci* cohort from the first day of drafting in the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia in September 1942 until their repatriation to Czechoslovakia by August 1945. We argue that the *Noráci* indeed acknowledged being victims of forced labor displacement, but, although working conditions were hard and provisions insufficient, and despite the constant risk of punishment, their collective experience also emphasized pleasant tourist impressions: natural scenery and social encounters with a friendly local population. This ambiguity was most succinctly expressed in retrospect by Jan Šefl (2009): "Beautiful islands and fjords all around, but hunger didn't allow me to take care of them." While emphasizing the shared meaning of community within the group, we explore this ambiguity between victimhood and tourist mood. Inspired by literary analysis, we view the two moods as narrative memory tropes (Mellard 1987), implying that they served as dominant and persistent rhetorical figures that bound memory to the narrated group experience.

In the second part, we show how the ambiguous experience of the *Noráci* cohort evolved into an enduring memory after the war. Although our approach is genuinely historical, we take into account Jan Assmann's (1988) simple and robust conceptual distinction between communicative memory and cultural memory. While the former is socially negotiated in an everyday manner in small groups such as family, neighborhood, or friendship networks through everyday oral exchanges with eyewitness(es) in the midst, the latter implies that memory has reached the public sphere and tends to be negotiated by larger social groups, formal organizations, and experts – and, not least, influenced by the state. Museums and memorials, commemorative rituals and speeches, written documents, and media coverage tend to shape and sustain cultural memory. We argue that an enduring communicative memory soon took hold, and that the communist government rejected its potential transformation into a cultural memory. The transformation to cultural memory did not occur until after the Velvet Revolution of 1989. We further argue that the ambiguity between victimhood and tourist sentiment prevailed and was passed on to the next

generation but suggest that the discourse of forced labor compensation in the 1990s reoriented commemoration in favor of victimhood.

Drafted and displaced: the experience of Czech forced labor in Norway

It is not entirely clear how many *Noráci* worked in Norway. In total, 1,366 people were registered in the index file of the Einsatzgruppe Wiking, the task force of the Organization Todt (OT) that was sent to Norway in the spring of 1942 to build infrastructure, but about 400 unregistered people were observed in other records (Hingarová and Maršálek 2022, 247). In addition, Czechs were brought to Finnish Lapland for the same purpose and transported across the Norwegian–Finnish state border. In August 1944, only 86 Czechs remained in Finland (Lundemo 2020, 86). From this we can estimate that between 1,800 and 2,000 Czechs were deported to Norway as forced laborers. The majority were between 18 and 22 years old, but about 20 percent were older. The total duration of their displacement is not yet known, but most were conscripted between September and November 1942 and arrived in Norway between November 1942 and January 1943. From the spring of 1943 the number remained stable until the fall of 1944, when several hundred were transferred to Germany.

Most *Noráci* followed a standardized itinerary, as illustrated by the first group of 313 people. Nineteen-year-old Jan Jansa (1923–unknown), a resident of Cizkrajov in southern Moravia, had been ordered by letter to report to the local labor office one week after receiving his blacksmith's certificate in August 1942. To avoid being drafted, he immediately signed a short-term contract with a German company operating in his area. When it expired in October, the labor office called him to work for OT. Joseph Lébl, a 20-year-old resident of Černolice near Prague, was drafted by the local labor office on November 2. From their various congregations, Jansa and Lébl met at Prague railway station, from where they arrived at the OT transit camp at Schlachtensee, south of Berlin, on November 7. The group remained in the camp for a week, undergoing medical examinations and receiving identification marks, before being transported to another transit camp near Szczecin. After waiting there for 16 days and receiving individual equipment, the batch left by ship and arrived in Oslo on December 3. On December 6,

they were sent by train to Trondheim, where they arrived the following day (Frøland et al. 2021).

While acknowledging conscription, the ego-documents indicate uncertainty and curiosity during the voyage. Though the journey to Norway and along its coast was dangerous, the tourist trope was already in operation. Oldřich Svoboda (1921–1996), from the town of Třebíč in Moravia, took part in this first group and vividly described in his diary the ambiguity between fear and touristic excitement on board the ship bound for Oslo:

> Our escort consists of 7 ships. A searchlight is flashing in the distance, illuminating the sea. It's a great spectacle. But then a cannon shot rang out, a second and a third, and the air shook with the distant cannonade. There was alarm and panic on our ship. Everyone puts on life jackets. In a moment, all is quiet. Half an hour later, it is again. Then a thunderclap, the whole sea was flooded with the glow of a rocket, a second, a third, a fourth. – Alert, everyone below decks. We're waiting. For what? – We're going to sink. With God.

The ship did not sink, and the days that followed were filled with joy:

> I'm walking on deck, it's a beautiful sunny day … The beautiful sunset, low over the horizon, the golden glow in the sea, the snow-covered Danish islands, the black forests, the coastal rocks, but most of all the sea – the sea, so much praised, painted, the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. (Svoboda 1988)

Trondheim was the main hub for further redistribution. The vast majority were sent to work in northern Norway. The three largest concentrations were in the cities of Mo i Rana, Narvik, and Trondheim, but many were also used in the province of Finnmark. They were assigned to companies from the Reich that had signed contracts with the OT. Some companies also brought in workers from abroad. The company Funke & Co. from Saxony built railroads for the OT in Austria and Russia. When it began work on a railroad in Norway, it transferred some of its Czech workers north. The Czechs' construction work consisted mainly of fortifications and bunkers, but also airfields, roads, and railroads. All of these tasks involved hard work in polar conditions. A small but unknown number worked in OT camps. Josef Hofman (1921–2000), from Černice in northern Bohemia, worked with

compatriots repairing clothing and shoes for the OT in Skippagurri on the Finnish border (Hingarová and Maršálek 2022, 6).

The Czechs were often skilled workers (Hingarová and Maršálek 2022, 113–35). OT regulations treated them as if the Protectorate had been incorporated into the German Reich. Material provisions, wages, and social benefits were supposed to be at the level of German workers. Outside of working hours, they could leave their camps and move about fairly freely. Ego-documents reveal a lot of socializing with the local population. The (limited) freedom to take photographs has left thousands of images representing the unity of the group and testimony to their touristic behavior. Many written and photographic testimonies reveal numerous love affairs with Norwegian women. Jaromír Šimr (1923–) reported in an interview in 2022 that his local girlfriend eagerly pursued the love relationship and pointed out that this was typical in remote areas (Šimr 2022). Numerous pictures show their fascination toward the exotic Sámi population (Hingarová, Hætta, and Lindi 2024).

Nevertheless, discontent prevailed. The Czechs accused the OT of not treating them equally with German workers and wrote to the Nazi authorities about the matter. The food was unsatisfactory and often referred to as pig food. Jan Šefl (1922–2014) mentioned that he begged the local population for food, while Josef Lébl reported that he would work longer hours to obtain larger supplies (Frøland et al. 2021, 142). After arriving in Narvik in January 1943, Oldřich Svoboda wrote in his diary: "What annoys me most is that the Germans here get double rations, cigarettes, wine, liquor, you name it. A complete mess." After a few months he received none of these goods (Svoboda 1988). In retrospect, Karel Jirgl (1920–2007) painted a grim picture: "The camps were hungry, cold, infested with disease, lice, bedbugs, and the food was mostly stew made of half-rotten cabbage or carrots" (Jirgl 1990–2000). The uninsulated barracks were often cold and lacked space, making individual life and simple practical matters such as drying clothes difficult. Many became injured or ill from the working and living conditions (Opl 1953).

Unfulfilled expectations fed the experience of victimhood. Oldřich Svoboda reported in June 1943 that no cars appeared to bring his work crew back to the camp after 12 hours of hard labor on a faraway mountain construction site. His diary reads: "With the memory of home and loved ones, we fell asleep on the slightly cold ground under an

Figure 11.1: Unprepared for the Arctic workplace in northern Norway. Czechs building ground infrastructure around Kirkenes in 1943. Courtesy of the Noráci photo collection, Charles University. All rights reserved.

overcoat." (See Figure 11.1.)They did not sleep long because it rained all night. His reaction reads: "What would my mother say if she saw me here? Or my friend Anna. Sleepless, dirty, ragged, this is the office job I was promised. Bastards!" (Svoboda 1988). Discontent led Czechs to desert as early as 1942, but mostly in 1944–1945. We have registered 57 people who successfully fled to Sweden and several hundred who resisted returning to Norway after a vacation in the Protectorate. Many of them failed and were imprisoned before being sent back to even harsher forced labor. This was the case of Rostislav Holub (1923–1995), from Skalka in Moravia, who went into hiding in the Protectorate in 1943 but was arrested after an informer betrayed him. He was returned to Norway, where he worked until the end of the war. When individuals deserted, the OT withdrew leave for other Czechs. Such collective punishments increased discontent among the workers (Hingarová and Maršálek 2022, 128).

Conditions deteriorated throughout 1944 as resources became increasingly scarce but improved when Norway came under the authority of the British-led Allied Land Forces Norway (ALFN) in

1945. Josef Hofman was still in the northernmost region with a Czech group when Germany surrendered. After reaching the boat that would take him south, he enjoyed the abundance of food on board. He arrived at a camp that had been reorganized to facilitate repatriation. Czechoslovaks who had served in the Wehrmacht were brought together with Czechs who had done forced labor for the OT. Hofman stayed in the camp until July 1945 with about 100 compatriots and found the food satisfactory. Karel Jirgl reported that the Czechs spent much of their time in sports, dances, socializing with the locals, and hiking in the northern midsummer. Those who gathered in cities like Trondheim and Narvik took part in the Norwegians' freedom celebrations. Forty Czechs married Norwegian women while awaiting repatriation. Rostislav Holub did not. He had fallen in love with a local girl but, although she wanted to go to Czechoslovakia with him, he decided to end the relationship. He could not, he later said, imagine her on a farm in Moravia (Hingarová and Maršálek 2022).

The repatriation went smoothly. The ALFN worked with the Norwegian Ministry of Social Affairs, but as early as May 1945 the Czechoslovak exile government sent officials to help organize the process. The Czechs were gathered in six camps around the country before being brought together at the main repatriation center in Oslo. The move to Czechoslovakia took place in two waves. The first included 280 people who had been gathered in the three southern camps. They left Oslo in July in almost daily batches on American planes to Brussels and were then transported by truck to a former concentration camp near Verdun. They then left Verdun by train via Munich to reach the Czechoslovakian repatriation center in Pilsen on August 2. There they received a modest transportation allowance to reach their homes. The 700 or so Czechs gathered in the three northern camps left Oslo on August 27. Together with Red Cross representatives and Czechoslovak repatriation officers, they boarded a ship bound for Bremen. From Bremen they went by train to Pilsen. A group of 14 people, who had been impatiently awaiting repatriation during the long wait in Oslo, had accepted a Soviet offer to travel via Finland and Moscow together with 1,600 Soviet POWs. According to Jan Pták (1921–2008), they spent a month in a guarded prison camp 800 km east of Moscow in deplorable conditions. They arrived in Prague on August 16 via Minsk and Warsaw (Hingarová and Maršálek 2022, 195).

Unlike many Polish forced laborers and prisoners of war who refused to return to Soviet-controlled Poland, no Czechs refused repatriation to a still free Czechoslovakia. A few Norwegian wives arrived in Czechoslovakia with a last repatriation group in November, but most arrived in the following years after having given birth in Norway.

The Czechoslovak government began informing families about the return of former forced laborers in July. The families had prepared for the return of their sons, and many had maintained some form of contact after their sons' conscription (Hingarová and Maršálek 2022, 190–93). Miroslav F. (1922– unknown) reported that he was well received:

> On returning home, after dinner, a toast is made to a happy reunion and good health. Then there is a photo and stories about Norway. The next day the neighbours invited me for lunch, where they again asked me about the experiences of the last 3 years. But I turn on the radio instead. The memories are some happy, but also some bad. (Miroslav F. 2001)

In conclusion, we suggest that narrative tropes formed a group identity among the Czech cohort even during their displacement in Norway. It consisted of young men who were forced into new conditions and new impressions. They shared common experiences since conscription, while insecurity and fear brought them together during travel and displacement. For many it was their first experience outside Czechoslovakia, for some even outside their village region. Sailing at sea for the first time was a common experience. They had been transported together in groups, and they worked and lived together in groups during their deployments. Spread over the northern half of Norway, they shared space with their compatriots, but those who were stationed near the largest cities had their own Czech barracks. A few of them, such as Jaroslav Malý (1922–1971), who had graduated from a business school in Prague and spoke German, were assigned to report from several construction sites and served as liaison informant among the Czech accumulations (Hingarová et al. 2023, 35). Obviously, group identity and shared narratives took shape through oral communication.

Although dissatisfied with working conditions and provisions, they used their freedom to enjoy the tourist aspect of the expulsion. They bought postcards and souvenirs, which were also sent home by the military post, suggesting that they wanted the landscape of their locations to be the image that would take root at home. The field post system was indeed subject to censorship, which obviously influenced

Figure 11.2: Czechs having fun in a forced labor camp in Trondheim. The relaxed atmosphere helped them to cope with hardships and homesickness. Private collection, Czech Republic. All rights reserved.

their expressions and phrasing, but countless accounts, photographs, and artifacts suggest that the touristic mode was genuine. The ambiguity between the tropes of victimhood and hardship on the one hand and the enthusiastic tourist mode on the other, which was already in operation during the journey to Norway, prevailed. We assume there was a psychological link between the tourist tropes and homesickness experienced. We also suggest that the joyful and expectant three months between the German surrender and repatriation must have had a significant impact on memory. (See Figure 11.2.)

Postwar memory and memorialization

Although 500,000 Czechs were subjected to transnational forced labor, public memory in Czechoslovakia ignored their collective experience for decades after the war. From 1948, the communist regime deliberately silenced their memory, but not even the preceding Nuremberg trials prompted the media to draw public attention to their experience.

The victims themselves rarely spoke publicly about their experiences. For a long time, even the tiny *Noráci* group had no interest in bringing their common experience into public memory.

Why did the *Noráci* not engage in public remembrance even before the communist coup? We agree with Reissman (1993) that people tend to find it difficult to express traumatic experiences in language because of a lack of words. We suggest, however, that the absence of words was related to the fact that this cohort of young people was moving on. The vast majority had returned to their homes, families, and workplaces to pursue family life, work, and education. Some had found their homes and villages destroyed, and some, like Miroslav Marek from Vraný nad Vltavou near Prague, had found new opportunities with their forced labor wages. His return was not a happy one, as his mother and sister had reported him missing and claimed his inherited property. He therefore decided to start a new life in the Sudetenland (from where ethnic Germans had been expelled) and used his savings to buy a small farm in the border region of Karlovy Vary (Marek 2021). In agreement with Jarská (2010), we assume that Marek and others simply did not have much time to engage in memorialization, even if they had the vocabulary to express it publicly.

Even the sharing of memories between generations within the family seems to have been moderate. Josef Lébl's eager and vivid narration to his daughter, described in the introduction, was not so common. Unlike Lébl, Zdeněk Opl (1922–1987) was reluctant to share his experiences with his family. According to his two sons, he "never told us about his stay in Norway. Apparently, he did not want to ruin our childhood with memories of the war and experiences of forced labour." Jaroslav Buchtík's son (1920–1997) claimed: "My father remembered the time in Norway with pleasure, he never mentioned anything negative … In fact, he did not talk much about that time." Only a limited number of memories were passed on, leaving out the hardships. Although the limited generational sharing of memories could be understood in traumatic terms, descendants tend to interpret it as highly rational: their fathers wanted to protect them from unpleasant feelings (Hingarová, Maršálek, and Vlk 2021). Nevertheless, the ambiguous experience revolving around the narrative tropes of hardship and tourism persisted. This is best expressed by Jan Benc, the son of Jiří Benc (1922–1995), who reported on his father's memoirs: "It was remarkable that the unpleasant experiences of hard winter months

Figure 11.3: Czechs socialising with local women in Skibotn. Private collection, Czech Republic. All rights reserved.

and hard work were overshadowed by pleasant experiences such as the midnight sun and almost four months in Norway before his return" (Hingarová et al. 2023, 87).

Importantly, the public silence did not end the wartime narrative networks among the Noráci. Those who lived in the neighborhoods met regularly, and many others corresponded by letter about their shared experiences. Jaromir Šimr recalled in 2022 that he had met some 20 or 30 *Noráci* compatriots in Prague, probably in 1947 (Šimr 2022). However ambiguous their shared experience, it was engraved in their memories and provided a solid foundation for the maintenance of personal ties. Love affairs and the touristic imaginary were a recurring narrative trope in their early exchanges (see Figure 11.3). Emil Mynář (1922–1986) wrote to a former fellow forced laborer:

> I too am more in Norway than here at home. Believe me, I have received several letters from the boys and almost all of them write the same

> thing. None of them can get used to it here. Everyone is drawn back to the Scandinavian country or to a Norwegian girl. (Mynář 1945)

Many hundreds of love relationships were formed during the expulsion, and about 70 children were born after the war. The early exchanges, whether oral or written, told of a shared memory that preferred the tourist trope to the victim trope. They even seem to have fueled a desire to return voluntarily to Norway to maintain old friendships. Several corresponded with Norwegian friends as they built new lives in Czechoslovakia.

This networked commemoration before the communist takeover in 1948 clearly falls under Assmann's notion of communicative memory. A potential for public discourse did exist, however, as the Czechoslovak government began to record individual citizens' claims against Germany prior to the Paris Reparations Conference in late 1945. Zdeněk Kunštátský (1921–2005) and 60 compatriots filed a claim for unpaid wages in September 1945. They had been recruited to work for a German company and had not been paid for five months (Kunštátský 1945). The government received a quota of reparations, but the outstanding wages were never paid before the communist government abruptly ended the compensation schemes started by the previous government.

The communist takeover in 1948 had several inhibiting effects on the commemoration of the *Noráci* experience. First, the government maintained a public silence on Nazi forced labor expulsions because it did not want to challenge the privileged victimhood of the communist resistance (Thonfeld 2011). The Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters, founded in 1953, did not include forced laborers, unlike resistance fighters, political prisoners, and soldiers who had served in the Czechoslovak exile army. Although its press occasionally allowed forced laborers to recall their experiences, it is illustrative that after Zdenek Opl (1922–1987) filed a 30-page account of his experiences in Norway in the municipal archives in 1952; it was later destroyed by the local authorities (Hingarová et al. 2023, 19). The academic publications by the historians Zdeněk Konečný (1967) and František Mainuš (1970), which elaborated on Czech forced labor in Germany and the Protectorate, did not challenge the prevailing silence either.

Second, the government cut off the possibility of maintaining close ties with friends and relatives in Norway. Jaroslav Malý met his future

wife Ellen Romsloe in Narvik in 1943. They married shortly after liberation and moved to Czechoslovakia before the coup in 1948 after a few years in Sweden. Their hopes of visiting relatives in Scandinavia were soon dashed. After Jaroslav's death in 1971, Ellen wanted to return to Norway, but her children were not allowed to join her. She never visited Norway before her death in 2013 (Hingarová and Maršálek 2022). Before the communist coup in 1948, however, several Norwegian women had returned to Norway after divorce or the death of their husbands, and several more were actually allowed to return during communism. We also observed a dozen people visiting former Norwegian friends during the political thaw in the mid-1960s, when the government issued travel permits in exceptional cases. Jaroslav Buchtík visited a former Norwegian friend with his wife in 1965, while Vladimír Herec (1921–unknown) was allowed a ten-day visit with his wife and son in 1966. Soviet intervention in 1968 ended the thaw and the visits.

Statements by *Noráci* descendants suggest that communist constraints allowed the ambiguity of tropes between victimhood and tourism to prevail. It is not entirely clear how the generational shift affected the balance between the dominant memory tropes, but there is much evidence that the descendants' affinity with Norway was strengthened. Rostislav Holub's son Antonín vividly recounted an experience with his father at an international cycling race in Czechoslovakia:

> In Bukovec, there's a long, steep hill that the cyclists had to ride up. Dad and I were waiting halfway up the hill. When we saw the cross in the Norwegian colours and the words "Norway" on the riders' jerseys, I shouted as I ran up the hill alongside the riders. Dad kept his dignity, stood calmly and waved. We shouted "Long live Norway" in Norwegian and the Norwegian riders waved back. I could see the tears running down my father's cheeks. (Hingarová et al. 2023, 39)

Holub's daughter Milada Svozilová recalled:

> As children we knew that daddy had been in Norway. For a long time we even bragged about it. We thought he was there on holiday. It was only after he had a stroke that he occasionally shouted. "Don't hang him," he said. He had experienced something there with the Russians. The memories kept coming back. Sometimes he jumped out of bed and shouted that he wanted to go home. (Hingarová et al. 2023, 31)

Her father had witnessed the brutal killing of a Soviet POW and apparently suppressed the trauma, which could indicate that Rostislav Holub had long suppressed his victimhood while narrating the tourist trope.

The political thaw saw another innovation in 1965, when Adolf Šutera (1922–1999), who had been stationed in the Narvik area, organized a first informal reunion as part of the official twentieth anniversary of the victory over fascism. One hundred and ten people attended in the small Moravian village of Lysice. Šutera's motivation is not entirely clear. He had made no previous efforts to commemorate but it seems that he had no political ambitions. We therefore see this meeting as a spontaneous gathering of a loose network of acquaintances, constrained by the communist discourse of remembrance. Nevertheless, this network compiled a first short list of former forced laborers used in Norway and, not least, established a common consciousness to maintain and expand the network of remembrance.

It was not until May 1985, on the fortieth anniversary of the liberation, that the *Noráci* met again, in two sessions. This was initiated by two short newspaper appeals by non-*Noráci* organizers, inviting former forced laborers who had been at the OT transit camp at Schlachtensee. Because the camp also housed people who had been used elsewhere than Norway, Adolf Šutera therefore decided to hold a separate meeting for the *Noráci* in the small Moravian town of Svitavy. Around 100 people attended each of these meetings, but many more joined by correspondence, bringing the *Noráci* list up to 700 names. After the meetings, more members of the group apparently tended to engage more actively in collective remembrance, including in public. This coincided with the retirement of the cohort, giving them more time. However, although censorship at both meetings forced them to conform to communist rituals and rhetoric, a close reading of the transcripts suggests that speakers attempted to weave their own contradictory experiences into the dominant communist discourse. One semi-veiled message was that forced laborers were victims of fascism, and that many were also involved in workplace sabotage. Another was that the similarities between Czechoslovakia and Norway were stronger than official communist foreign policy rhetoric claimed (Šutera 1985). This suggests some agency in breaking constraints to make room for their own narratives.

Although more informal gatherings were organized in the late 1980s, the shared memory of the Norwegian forced labor experience

Figure 11.4: Noráci gathering in Czechoslovakia in 1990 to commemorate their experiences of forced labor in Norway. Noráci picture collection, Charles University. All rights reserved.

never transcended the character of communicative memory before the Velvet Revolution of 1989 destroyed the dominance of the communist memory regime. It is symptomatic of the situation under communism that the organizers of the 1985 *Noráci* meetings completely failed to attract the interest of the regional and national media.

It was only in the 1990s that memorialization gradually developed into cultural memory. The fall of communism and its regime of remembrance was the basic prerequisite, but several forces beyond the narrative network of the Noráci cohort contributed to this change. The establishment of the Czech Union of Forced Labourers of World War II as a nationwide interest group in 1990 was important (Figure 11.4). Its aim was to raise public awareness of the victims of forced labor and to improve health care for its members. It played a key role in the Czech Republic before the German government and industry formally established a compensation fund for victims of the Nazi forced labor program in 2000. It maintained liaison with the Czech–German Fund for the Future, which was set up in 1998 to register compensation claims and transfer individual payments. The scheme paid out 38,000

Czech claims in 2003. Only a fraction of the victims was still alive, and next of kin were not allowed to file claims if their husband or father had died before February 1999 (Zloch 2017), which explains the low number of claims. Nevertheless, the compensation scheme brought the experience of forced labor to the attention of the Czech public, and formal agencies and institutions were established to commemorate and remember the victims. Eyewitness accounts were submitted, and historians began to research the Czech experience of forced labor from new perspectives and evidence (Pažout 2004; Kokošková, Pažout, and Sedláková 2011).

The *Noráci* network played an active role in this overall transformation, although we do not know how many of them were involved in the Association of Second World War Forced Labourers. The network assisted claimants, although the compensation fund received only 239 claims from claimants who had been deployed in Norway or Finland (Hingarová and Maršálek 2022, 222). It also honored deceased friends by providing evidence of their forced labor deportation. Adolf Šutera organized another Noráci meeting in 1990. By 2005 there had been 12 more meetings, usually attended by around 50 people. A Noráci secretariat with an archive was established in 1992. Members of the group, most of them retired, encouraged each other to write down their memories and share them with the public. Some wrote short articles in newspapers (Jirgl 1990–2000) and others in regional historical magazines (Pátek 1993), while some published their stories in books (Mejzlík 1997; Šefl 2007). Oldřich Svoboda wrote a 25-page narrative about his experiences in northeastern Norway, but never managed to get it published. His grandson later told an interviewer that Svoboda "talked a lot about his experiences as a forced labourer at the end of his life and was eager to have it published" (Hingarová at al. 2021, 31). Jan Šefl also gave an interview about his experiences for the public collection Memory of the Nation. Indeed, the Noráci archive, the archive of the Union of Forced Labourers of World War II and the archive of the Czech–German Future Fund contain numerous written memoirs and newspaper cuttings. Paradoxically, the *Noráci* strengthened its memorialization when most of its members had died. Since the 1990s, their descendants have increasingly taken over memorialization, another feature of cultural memory (Assmann 1988).

During the period of cultural memory, in the context of the public discourse on compensation, the victim trope seems to have become

somewhat more prominent in memory narratives. Karel Jirgl's newspaper story, presumably from 1995, illustrates this. He emphasized that the Czechs had had to sacrifice much of their youth, and many even their health and lives. They "shed blood and sweat for German interests … It was a piece of a ruined life, a lost youth living in miserable conditions far from home" (Jirgl 1990–2000). Unsurprisingly, trauma, health problems, and misery were highlighted in the compensation claims. The electrician JS (b. 1923, anonymized) described his experience as three years of slavery in harsh polar conditions, from which "I got a permanent inflammation of my stomach and duodenum. To this day I am on a diet" (JS 2001). The carpenter AK (b. 1922, anonymized) had suffered a spinal cord injury with brain damage during his Norwegian deportation. His modest statement reads: "I am not going to write any more, I just want to say that it was said that those who suffered serious bodily injury with permanent disability as forced labourers might have their compensation increased." He had lived on a modest Czechoslovak disability pension and a modest income beyond that: "I could not work as a carpenter and did not earn much working in the factory. My pension was calculated on that basis" (AK 2001). Not surprisingly, the tourist mode was not a constitutive part of the claims. The compensation discourse of the mid-1990s seems to have tipped the balance of the dominant memory tropes in favor of victimhood.

Conclusion

In contrast to Jarská 2010 and Thonfeld 2011, who studied the large number of Czech forced laborers who worked in the German war economy, this chapter has examined the much smaller group who were brought to Norway. A first finding is that their shared experience of forced labor displacement was transformed into a shared memory even before repatriation. In Czechoslovakia, a postwar collective memory settled as enduring communicative memory (Assmann 1988) within families and informal networks. The communist memorialization regime disallowed this communicative memory to transcend into cultural memory until its fall in 1989. We have observed moderate agency among the group to create space for their collective memory in communist public discourse, but this largely failed. Although reunions of the cohort have taken place at irregular intervals since 1990, and

indeed strengthened group identity, it was the German compensation program for Nazi forced laborers at the turn of the millennium that brought *Noráci*'s memory into the public sphere and transformed it into cultural memory (Assmann 1988) in the Czech Republic. By this time, most of the *Noráci* cohort had passed away and the commemoration taken over by their descendants.

Searching for narrative tropes in the ego-documents of the forced laborers and their descendants, we found that even during their time as forced laborers they did not perceive their situation only in terms of misery and victimhood. The *Noráci* also perceived themselves as tourists. Victimhood and tourism formed the core narrative tropes, thus creating an ambiguity in the group's collective memory even before repatriation. This ambiguity between the tropes of victimhood and tourism persisted in Czechoslovakia during the period of communist communicative memory. Nevertheless, within families the descendants were fed more with the joyful tropes of the tourist mood than the traumatic trope of misery and hardship. Not surprisingly, however, we observed a shift in favor of victimhood as the German compensation scheme for former forced laborers from Central and Eastern Europe was established. The German compensation scheme also had an impact on the character of memory.

The ambiguity between the tropes of victimhood and tourism testifies to Gatrell's (2007) point that "historians of war and population displacement need to look beyond the mountain of misery on the balance sheet … It is simplistic to accept the tragedy of displacement at face value." We accept that there may be other groups with parallel experiences during the forced labor program. We do, however, acknowledge the horrors produced by the Nazi racial machinery in general and suspect that they would not be easy to find. Memory studies of forced displacement during other wars or deep conflicts may reveal parallel, if not equivalent, memory tropes.

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