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Multicultural Small Town at the Czech-German Border – A Visit to Cheb

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Standing on the historic market place of Cheb, a city in Western Bohemia, one could go South, West or North and they would cross the German border. The geographical closeness is reflected in the architecture of the buildings, which is reminiscent more of Nuremberg or Bayreuth, than Prague or Budweis. In building No. 14, the City Hall, we ask mayor Jan Svoboda how the the close border effects life in his city:

“The proximity to the German border is one of of our city’s strengths. However, at the same time it is also its greatest weakness. It is a good thing if tourists come here to shop, to work or to invest. But it is bad if they are sex tourists or customers of the Vietnamese market. Demand drives supply. So more tourists means more production of products of doubtful origin, more copyright violations and so on. That’s the bad thing about being a border city.”

On the way out of the City Hall we see some Vietnamese waiting in front of the “Office for the Self-Employed”. Inside the dispatching seems fast. Almost every other minute a new Vietnamese inhabitant enters the building and waits a few minutes before entering the office. Some minutes later he or she leaves. Routine. A majority of these Vietnamese entrepreneurs are young, mostly in their twenties and thirties. It is likely that many of them work as vendors on the very same market which the mayor described just minutes before as a hatchery of crime. Others might be owners or employees of the Vietnamese owned stores, which increasingly spread over the city centre. In the few minutes we observed the scene, not a single Czech businessman came to renew his papers. An unusual scene in a country where less than three percent of all inhabitants are foreigners!

Demand from German day-tourists for inexpensive clothing, cigarettes, alcohol and other commodities is the most important reason why the fairly small and remote city of Cheb has become home to the largest Vietnamese community in the Czech Republic. According to the official data the percentage of Vietnamese with permanent residence status is not higher than three percent. Yet everyone agrees that only a small fraction has permanent residence status. Unofficially, even the employees of the city administration admit that up to a fifth of Cheb’s 30 000 inhabitants might be Vietnamese.

Cheb began to develop into a hub of the border trade only after 1990, when the borders were opened and private business became legalised. However, the Vietnamese presence in Cheb goes back to the 1980s. At this time, the first Vietnamese came to the city as so-called “contract workers”, who were loaned out by the Vietnamese Socialist Republic to labour off the country’s dept towards socialist Czechoslovakia. With the beginning of transformation

these contracts were cancelled and the factories began to lay off the foreign workers. In need of a new existence, the industrious Vietnamese began to sell products of Asian origin on the streets. Soon they were joined by former contract workers from Eastern Germany, who had come to Czechoslovakia in the early 1990s to avoid being deported back to Vietnam. Around 1994, the city began to rent out the vast premises of the former military barracks “Dragoun” to a Vietnamese company. This was the birth of the “*Dragoun Bazar*”, at that time probably the largest Vietnamese market in the country.

Parallel Worlds (1)

With the notable exception of mayor Svoboda, almost all Czechs interviewed describe the relation with the Vietnamese as being “completely unproblematic”. In the interviews people made clear that they appreciate that Vietnamese, in difference to Roma (the city’s second largest ethnic minority), behave inconspicuously, are economically self-sustaining and “never demand anything.” At the same time the persons interviewed sketched out the picture of a city where the majority and minority live almost completely parallel lives. Even though people are in daily interaction with Vietnamese, whom they meet on the street, as shop owners, or neighbours, the interactions among adults nevertheless appear quite restricted. The situation is different in regards to the fast assimilating children from Vietnamese families, who are known in the entire country for their impressive performance in the local schools.

One reason for the much more limited social contacts between adults is the very limited language skills of most Vietnamese. Another one is the extreme workload of the Vietnamese families, where both partners often work seven days a week. Not surprisingly, there is often simply not the time to become engaged in the city’s social and cultural life. These factors might at least partly explain why all our Czech interviewees described the Vietnamese community as being “very closed”.

There is quite a mystery about this “closeness”. Due to his position, the city’s privy councillor Václav Sykora says that he had quite often had the opportunity to take part in negotiations between the city and the Vietnamese representatives. He adds: “At least in times of peace. There were also “times of war”, when the Vietnamese bosses avoided any contact with city hall.” Despite of these meetings, Mr Sykora says that he gained only very limited insights into the community’s internal structures. Mayor Svoboda is less cautious with his words. He describes the Vietnamese community in the city as being divided up by two clans: “One is the group that controls *Dragoun*, the other one has its basis in *Svatý Kříž*.” Administratively a part of Cheb, this hamlet right next to the border crossing has become over the last few years known for its gigantic Vietnamese market, which is today larger than the *Dragoun Bazar*: “Of course the two clans compete with each other. To this point, there haven’t been any visible fights or any violence. But we should be prepared that this might happen.”

The fear of such conflicts and the sale of imitated trademark products is not the only reason why Mr Svoboda perceives the Vietnamese presence in his city rather negatively: “The city has now decided to sell the Dragoun premises. This means that the market will soon cease operations. The Vietnamese bosses accuse us with the ruin of the lives of 300 or 400 families.” To explain what he means, Mr Svoboda shows us the headline of a recent newspaper article - “Man didn’t survive fall out of window.” He tells us that the Vietnamese bosses would claim to the city that the Vietnamese man killed himself because of the expected closing of the market:

“This man who jumped out of the window has lived here for ten years. In these ten years he could have earned 10 – 15 million Czech crowns. So he would have enough to live, even if the market will be closed. However, he could not save this money, because he had to give it to the boss of the Vietnamese market. He also had to pay the Czechs who take care of his children and to pay those Czechs from whom he rented his flat. In the end little of his money remained. The poor guy worked the entire time for other people who extorted him to the extreme. It is very unfair to say now that it is the fault of the city.”

Parallel Worlds (2)

The wide premises behind the gate to the “*Dragoun Bazar*” make the impression of a “town-within-the-town”. Most of the commercial activities happen not inside the impressive yet rundown barracks buildings from Austrian-Hungarian times, but in open market stands. They stand in two endless lines on both sides of the street, which runs from North to South through the entire area. Apart from of a group of elderly Germans, who had entered the area at the same time as us, there are only a few more visitors strolling through the area on this rainy November morning. Since most sales are made on summer weekends, many of the Vietnamese vendors will, after the end of the Christmas business, go back to Asia for a couple of months.

“*Adidas*” and “*Puma*” shoes, “*Nike*” t-shirts, cosmetics, and “*Holiday Fantasy*” towels - we are surprised to observe how much the products offered by each stand resemble each other. Strange as well how openly the sale with imitated products is taking place! The vendors address us friendly: “*Schuhe, schöne Schuhe. Boty.*” Their language skills clearly indicate, that most of the costumers are from Germany. However, even though we try both in German and Czech, our first attempts to start a conversation fail due to the lack of language skills. Later we met Tuong, who had come to Cheb already six years ago. He tells us very openly about his life and translates our questions to his colleague:

- We are here to ensure that our children will get a good education. This is the most important thing for us. But it is hard, because the business is getting more complicated
- Do you think that the market will be closed?
- I don't know.
- What will you do if this happens?
- We will see.

Back at the entrance gate we try to contact the management of “*Lanzaro s.r.o.*”, the Vietnamese company that rented the “*Dragoun*” from the city. The friendly Czech security guard is sceptical about whether the company's management would be willing to meet us, as unannounced visitors: “The deputy is not even here. The boss will hardly meet you just like this.” Only after mentioning that we have already interviewed the mayor, he decides to give it a try. After two minutes he is back: “Follow me.”

The company's meeting room is on the second floor. It is furnished with a leather coach, comfortable arm chairs set around a coffee table. The interior is decent, yet free of any exorbitant luxury. A Czech secretary offers coffee. The friendly Vietnamese might be in his forties. He greets us with a handshake. He says that due to negative experiences he had in the past with Czech media he would prefer to not tell us his name. But if this is really the head of

“Lanzaro s.r.o.”, we have to assume to talk with Mr. Ěang, who is known by the people in City Hall also by his Czech alias “Honza”. Despite of the presence of his translator, our conversation partner speaks with us in fluid Czech. This is not surprising, since he had first come to Czechoslovakia in 1980 and has been living for 13 years in the city of Cheb. Having in mind the current tensions about the future of the “Dragoun”, we ask our conversation partner how he perceives the attitude towards the Vietnamese community:

- The cooperation with the city is good. The city helps us and our community. Our people are satisfied, especially because we can secure a good education for our children here.
- Many people told us that the Vietnamese would be a closed community...
- ...but that is only one side of it. We want to live here. Every family tries to build contacts. The second side: Czechs would also need to show interest.... Oh yes, we are closed, but...they need to come and ask....”

The big boss has only limited time for our unannounced visit, but suggests that we could continue talking to the translator. The translator tells us that he came to Czechoslovakia in 1976. He is proud of his intimacy with his second home country: “You are too young to remember. How much was a roll during socialism? 20 hellers! And a beer? 3 crowns and fifty *hellers*” He continues to tell us about Lubomír Štrougal [Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia (1970-1988)], Alexander Dubček and about his time as a contract worker in a factory at the other end of the Czech Republic: “I had good friends there, very good friends. If I would go back to Valašsko (Moravian Wallachia), I would just have to go to the pub. Everyone knows me.” His monologue doesn’t give us much opportunity for questions. We try nevertheless: “How do you see the future of Dragoun?”

“The future of Dragoun? I see it clearly...But let me first finish telling you about Czech grammar. It is very difficult, you have to declinate every word. Mám kamarada (I have a friend), ty máš kamarada (you have a friend), on má kamarada (he has a friend), máme kamarada (we have a friend), vy máte kamarada (you have a friend), ony mají kamarady (they have a friend).... “

The Local Economy

Like many other cities in the *Sudetenland*, Cheb never managed to reach the population size it had before the expulsion of its former German population (45 000). In the opinion of the mayor, it is a major disadvantage of Cheb that few of its inhabitants are deeply rooted: “Czech-speaking families came here only as late as 1918, and most of the people came later than 1945. There are no roots, because the roots are German. This is *Egerland!*”

Does a city like Cheb gain economically from the influx of the Vietnamese, which everyone we met described as extremely industrious people? There seems to be no clear opinion on this among the majority population. The strikingly divergent opinions among the town’s Czech inhabitants seem to depend very much on our interviewees’ own economic standing. On the one hand side, there is a significant group of people who profit financially from the Vietnamese presence. This is most clearly the case in respect of the large number of women who work as nannies for Vietnamese families. Maybe less visibly the same is true for the owners of real estate, who rent out or sell flats to Vietnamese. Some of the people interviewed mentioned also the fact that the market would allow poor people to purchase

decent clothing at very good prices. However, as demonstrated by these remarks of mayor Svoboda, this positive perception is not undisputed:

The Vietnamese are very, very industrious and work all round the clock. They have ruined the prices here. This has ruined a number of Czech businesses who sell similar products. After the revolution there were about ten shoe-stores in Cheb, now there is maybe one left. On the market had been a cloth store. It is also gone. We have here about thousand places where the same kind of products of doubtful origin are sold. Alcohol, cigarettes, shoes, CDs, clothes and all for ten percent of the usual price. It is simply impossible to compete with this kind of competition.

We confronted the gentlemen of “Lanzaro s.r.o.” with this perception of their impact on the city. Not surprisingly, they see things quite differently and complain that Czechs are “not be used to so much competition”:

But competition is a healthy thing. Now it is better, but in the beginning people were often still thinking very much in the socialist way.

Quite reasonably, they also point to the fact that the market would offer different products and target other clients than the Czech businesses in the old town: “Thanks to the market, tourists come to the city. They spend not only money here, but go later into restaurants and cafes in the historic centre.”

Another important economic aspect concerns the city’s tax base. In the relatively highly centralised Czech Republic, most taxes are collected by the state and later divided among local and regional entities. The main criterion for the distribution is population size. Since most of Vietnamese have no permanent residence status, they do not count when the money is divided. For this reason, the city profits only in a limited way from the ethnic economy (for example through state transfers to the schools, which are based on number of pupils), even though this economy might contribute significantly to the local tax revenue. Nevertheless to get its slice of the cake, the city decided to charge annually the exorbitant amount of 30 million Czech crowns (about one million euro) for the rent of the “Dragoun” premises. As admitted by the city’s privy councillor Václav Sykora, this sum represented a very significant contribution to the municipal budget: “The city’s annual budget is about 800 million Czech crowns. However, we can freely dispose only of a small portion of this money. Thus such an additional sum significantly widens the possibilities of the town to operate.”

The city’s decision to demand its share of the cake is not free of ambiguity. Mayor Svoboda and other people within the city administration bemoan the lack of transparency and the high degree of exploitation within the Vietnamese community. However, the city makes use of these dubious structures. It does not rent out single market stands to individual Vietnamese vendors, but accepts “Lanzaro s.r.o.” in the position of an intermediary. This decision helped the bosses to establish themselves as the only links between the official city and their ethnic community. Would the city been able to extract such an enormous sum out of the local ethnic economy without the help of these questionable business partners?

A City of wunderkinds

As it is the case in most other Vietnamese families, Tuong, the communicative man we met earlier on the market, works seven days a week from the morning to the evening. The same is

true about his wife. Back in Vietnam it would be the grandparents who take care of the children. Lacking these extensive family structures the Vietnamese families in Cheb began to employ Czech women as nannies. In many cases the responsibility for the children is transferred at the early age of six weeks. Seeing their parents only in the evening, the children grow mainly up in a Czech-speaking environment. The education in Czech families is a very good preparation for the schools, where Vietnamese make up about ten per cent of all pupils. One of the nannies interviewed for this article saw it as a sign of her good work that her Vietnamese children now refuse to eat the “monotone and unhealthy” Vietnamese cuisine. Yet the strikingly successful assimilation has obviously also its problematic sides, which might become more visible when the Egerländer with the Asian faces grow older. Meanwhile the Vietnamese community has become aware of this and has installed an afternoon school in the trznice of Svaty Kriz, where the children can learn Vietnamese.

In elementary school 5, the percentage of Vietnamese is around 20 percent. We ask some of the teachers about their experiences with the Vietnamese children:

“There are no problems at all with them. The opposite in fact. As Czechs we sometimes feel really ashamed. The Vietnamese need five minutes for the same exercise most of the Czech children will not finish in half an hour. Even their knowledge of Czech is superior.”

The astonishment for the performance of the Vietnamese children is a city-wide phenomenon. In the city library, we are told by vice director Marie Mudrová that the Vietnamese children would be the most trusty readers of Czech classics: “Our library tried to reach out to the Vietnamese community. So we included Vietnamese books. However, the Vietnamese parents have no time to read and their children have no interest in them. They just want to read in Czech. It is not a rare picture that such a child lends two or three classics at once, meanwhile the Czech children do not even touch them.”

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