

National identity in the exhibition of the Silesian museum: A case study based on the methodology of dispositive analysis

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National identity in the exhibition of the Silesian museum: A case study based on the methodology of dispositive analysis

This study presents research on the exhibition Encyclopaedia of Silesia at the Silesian Museum in Opava. The aim of the research was to identify the form of Czech national identity that is constructed and reconstructed by this exhibition, by focusing on the elements and narratives through which Czech national identity is presented and constructed. It also examines whether these elements replicate the prevailing ideas and stereotypes related to this identity in society. The research takes the form of a case study based on dispositional analysis, and showed that the narrative of Czech national identity appears in the exhibition. This confirmed that national identity can emerge not only in national museums but also in other types of museum – in this case a regional museum in which national and regional identities are intertwined.

Keywords: national identity, museum exhibition, case study, dispositive analysis, Silesian museum

Introduction

Contemporary museums fulfil important social functions. They not only take care of cultural heritage but are also involved in educational processes aimed at a wide range of visitors. They have a role in the processes of construction and reconstruction of identities, not excluding the identities of the visitors themselves. Visitors' concepts of identity can be confirmed, supplemented, reconstructed or challenged by museum exhibitions. In the current changing times, national identity is a widely discussed topic.

The research focuses on the analysis of the exhibition of the Silesian Museum in Opava, Czech Republic. The approach is based on the assumption that national identity can be constructed and reconstructed in exhibitions in various types of museums, including those that are not considered national museums. Along with this was an assumption that national identity can also enter into a relationship with other identities in an exhibition. The first hypothesis underpinning this study is therefore that in a regional museum national identity can enter into a specific relationship with regional identity.

The second hypothesis assumes that the image of Czech national identity that the exhibition constructs will most likely correspond to the dominant societal discourse that shapes the ideal-typical image of Czech national identity in Czech society and the associated expectations in the

form of characteristics and core elements of Czech identity. The study aims to explore these theses in more depth.

The aim of the research was to find out whether Czech national identity is constructed and reconstructed in the exhibition of the Encyclopaedia of Silesia and, if so, what form it takes and through which elements it is shaped. The research was conducted as a case study over the years 2019–2021.¹ The research process had several phases, and used dispositional analysis as a methodological approach to exhibition analysis. Thus, in addition to the research findings themselves, the study also provides an example of the application of this methodology in practice.

Aim of the research

The aim of the research was to determine the form of Czech national identity constructed by the Encyclopaedia of Silesia exhibition at the Silesian Museum. In the research I was interested in the elements and narratives through which Czech national identity is presented and constructed in the exhibition and whether these elements copy the dominant ideas and stereotypes related to this identity in society.

Research questions

- What form of Czech national identity is constructed and presented in the exhibition Encyclopaedia of Silesia?
- What form do the narratives related to national identity presented in the exhibition take?
- Through the lens of which social actors is the nation viewed in the exhibition?
- Which museum exhibits participate in the construction of Czech national identity and how?

Research design

The study was qualitative, anchored within the paradigm of social constructivism, and conducted in the form of a dispositional analysis of the museum exhibition. Dispositional analysis² is a useful tool for researching practical aspects of museum exhibitions, enabling research to be conducted on various research levels, paying attention to the exhibition itself, its architecture, its exhibits and other accompanying materials, exhibition scenography and the narratives that the exhibition constructs and presents. All the elements of the exhibition, and thus the museum itself, are considered by dispositional analysis in a broad context which is conditioned by the form of the discursive reality itself. Since dispositional analysis sits within the field of discursive methodology, it is also possible to pay analytical attention to societal discourses that are related to the phenomenon presented in the exhibition – that is, to discourses that have an impact on the forms the exhibition and its narratives take.

¹ The study is based on the results of research conducted as part of my dissertation, which was completed in 2022.

² I describe the process of dispositional analysis as applicable to museum exhibition research in KOLAŘÍKOVÁ, Veronika. Museum exhibition in the context of dispositive analysis. In: *Muzeologia a Kulturne Dedičstvo*, vol. 10, 2022, Is. 3, pp. 5-31. doi: 10.46284/mkd.2022.10.3.1

Discursive level of the research

With dispositional analysis, it is important to pay attention to the discursive dimension of the study and the discursive anchoring of the phenomena under analysis. In this study, the discursive level was twofold.

First, it was necessary to identify what the discursive dimension of Czech national identity is – or rather, to identify what the typical model (in Weber's sense) of Czech national identity constructed and reconstructed in current Czech society looks like.

The second discursive dimension involved viewing this phenomenon in its regional context. The discourse of Czech national identity is influenced by regional socio-cultural specifics, as well as by local forms of identity. This is all the more true when considering exhibitions in a regional museum, such as the Silesian Museum. By its very definition, the museum focuses primarily on describing and presenting the region, and thus on constructing and reconstructing regional identity. This does not mean, however, that national identity is of no importance here. National and regional identities share common elements and can form a specific relationship with each other, which was confirmed in the research findings.

The discursive level of Czech national identity

According to the 2021 Population Census, 83.8% of all persons who completed the voluntary question on nationality and at the same time declared only one nationality (6,033,014 persons) declared themselves to be Czech, 5.0% (359,621 persons) declared themselves to be Moravian and 0.2% (12,451 persons) declared themselves to be Silesian.³ However, it cannot be said that national identity has the same meaning for all people. Czech national identity is discursively anchored and constantly constructed and reconstructed by a variety of elements, social practices, structures and functions. The form that Czech national identity takes and the elements through which it is constructed and reconstructed in Czech society was the subject of my study *Czech national identity and the elements through which it is constructed*,⁴ where you can find deeper analysis.

The discursive level of Silesian regional identity

Regional identity is a type of collective identity that is linked to a specific territory, its symbolism (landscape and natural specifics of the territory, graphic symbols such as signs and flags, the name of the territory) and specific characteristics of a social nature (cultural heritage, architectural elements, human activities, manners and customs, religion, ethnic composition, etc.).⁵ Regional identity, as well as national identity, is connected to collective memory related to local traditions and dialects, as well as to the expected character traits of local inhabitants. Šifta and Chromý talk about regional identity and regional consciousness, which is based on

³ Czech statistical office. *Sčítání 2021 (Národnost)*, accessed 20 May 20th, 2022, <https://www.czso.cz/csu/scitani2021/narodnost>.

⁴ KOLAŘÍKOVÁ, Veronika. Czech national identity and the elements through which is constructed. In: *Czech-Polish Historical and Pedagogical Journal*, 2020, pp. 66–96.

⁵ Cf. ŠIFTA, Miroslav & CHROMÝ, Pavel. Symboly a identita regionu: analýzy a vnímání přírodních symbolů oblastí s intenzivně přeměněnou krajinou v Česku. In: *Geografický časopis*, 2014, pp. 401–415; SEMIAN, Michal. Region ve své komplexitě: diskuze konstruktivistických přístupů. In: *AUC Geographiac*, 2016, pp. 179–188; ŠRAJEROVÁ, Olga. *Historické a aktuální otázky vývoje národnostních vztahů, kultur a identit v národnostně zmišované oblasti Slezska a severní Moravy*. Opava: Slezské zemské muzeum, 2015.

a person's identification with the territorial community and region in which they live.⁶ Thus, the region is understood not only as a territorial unit, but also as a unit of social organisation which, as a social construct, functions as an instrument of collective identification of people who construct and reproduce that unit.⁷

Historically, Silesia was a territorially variable region characterised by its ethnic and cultural plurality, with a population that was not only Czech (the Czech population was a minority in Silesia until the 1920s) but also significantly German and Polish, with a proportion of other national groups, especially Jews. A specific characteristic of Czech Silesia was that it was an area strongly interwoven with a land identity. The importance of land identity has been great throughout history. Linguistic specifics, along with cultural and social specificities, had already led to attempts to recognise Silesians as a distinct national group before World War I. At the same time, however, there were disputes among patriots about the ethnic character of the Silesian population, with both sides considering their own people to be autochthonous and the others to be later immigrants.⁸

Research process

The dispositive analysis of the exhibition involved several phases, therefore data collection was carried out within several different research samples. The first phase consisted of an analysis of contemporary social discourse related to Czech national identity based on an analytical investigation of the literature and research surveys. It identified the elements involved in the construction of Czech national identity in the Czech environment.⁹ These elements became the basis for the development of an analytical coding key which, by categorising the elements involved in the construction of Czech national identity, enabled this identity to be both described and further explored. This was done in the following analysis of the museum exhibition by paying greater attention to the elements, their character and, especially, their presence or absence in the exhibition.

The key phase of the research was based on a dispositional analysis of the Encyclopaedia of Silesia exhibition, which, with its exhibits, represents the main research sample and thus the main source of data. For the purpose of the analysis, a comprehensive archive of data was first created, including photo documentation of the exhibition and exhibits, museums texts and large-format photographs, including other materials (printed guide, annual reports and the museum's website). Data was collected in the exhibition in 2019.

From the standpoint of dispositive analysis, when analysing museum exhibitions and their meanings, it is necessary to pay attention to the analysis of social structures – under which we can imagine the exhibition itself, which appears to visitors as an external objectified structure – and the discursively anchored theme of the exhibition, including the discursive anchoring of the given theme in society (in this case we are talking about an ideally typical form of Czech national identity). Analytical attention must also be paid to the analysis of social actors. Social actors are primarily represented in this study by the authors of the exposition. Dominant social discourses in society are not the only influence on the form of the exhibition: the main influence comes directly from the employees of the museum, who themselves may be influenced by

⁶ ŠIFTA & CHROMÝ. *Symbols a...*

⁷ ŠRAJEROVÁ. *Historické a...*

⁸ KOLÁŘ, Ondřej & JANÁK, Dušan, et al. *Polská a německá menšina ve Slezsku a na severní Moravě*. Opava: Slezská univerzita, 2019, p. 13.

⁹ For more information see KOLAŘÍKOVÁ, Czech national...

various social discourses. As part of the discursive analysis, it was therefore necessary to pay attention to them and their motivations when creating the exposition. Interviews and written communication with museum staff were an integral part of the data collection, which took place between 2019 and 2021. There were repeated interviews with museum historian Ondřej Kolář and the author of the libretto and the exhibition design, Pavel Šopák, An interview was conducted with Kamila Poláková, Deputy for Professional Activities of the Museum and information was obtained from curators who participated in the creation or revision of the exhibition, who were asked to fill in a questionnaire or participate in a semi-structured interview (Ondřej Haničák, Denisa Hradilová, Jiří Juchelka, Marek Pietoń, Sylva Pracná, and Miroslava Suchánková).

Data archive: introduction of the analysed exhibition

The Silesian Museum is the oldest public museum in the Czech Republic, founded in 1814,¹⁰ and the third largest museum in the country. The museum manages 37 buildings, dominated by the Historical Exhibition Building from 1895 which, since 2012, has been hosting an exhibition called Silesia. The museum received the Gloria musaealis award¹¹ in the same year for the exhibition and the reconstruction of the Historical Exhibition Building. The exhibition consists of three units: Nature of Silesia, Encyclopaedia of Silesia and History of Silesia. In relation to national identity, the cultural and historical section of the Encyclopaedia of Silesia is the most significant. It offers the widest range of topics that refer to both regional and Czech history, culture and everyday life, as well as customs and holidays.

The exhibition is shaped in the form of a glossary of concepts typical of Silesia – keywords representing typical Silesian phenomena. The concept for the exhibition was authored by Pavel Šopák, who wanted to go against the Hegelian model of developmentally conceived exhibitions when thinking of the concept of the new exhibition. Instead, he proposed the concept of alphabetically organised encyclopaedic keywords in which no keyword and its associated phenomenon would be preferred over another, and which together would compose a picture of Silesia and its typical phenomena.¹² The intention behind sorting keywords in this way is to encourage visitors to play with concepts, ideas and associations associated with the displayed exhibits.

According to Šopák and Kolář, the aim was to select keywords that are characteristic of the region and its lifestyle (Silesia, Mining), as well as more general keywords (City, Church) that represent certain spheres of cultural, social and public life during different periods. After naming all keywords, the curatorial teams worked on individual sections of the exhibition and soon the idea of a dynamic exhibition emerged – an exhibition whose keywords would continuously change and be updated. And so, in 2017 the first major transformation of the exhibition took place and new keywords were added. Partial transformations occurred in 2019 and subsequently in 2021. At the time of data collection the following keywords were present in the exhibition: Architecture, Housing, Theatre, Photography, Communication, Church,

¹⁰ In 1814 the museum was founded as the Gymnasium Museum in Opava. The name was changed to the Silesian Museum after 1989. For more on the history of the museum, see ŠOPÁK, Pavel (ed.). *Muzeum českého Slezska: Slomíková příručka*. Opava: Slezská univerzita, 2014.

¹¹ Czech Association of Museums and Galleries. *Národní soutěž muzeí Gloria musaealis: Přehled oceněných projektů 2002-2018*, accessed October 30th, 2020, https://www.cz-museums.cz/UserFiles/file/2019/Gloria/Vysledky_GM_2002_2018.pdf

¹² ŠOPÁK, Muzeum českého..., p. 88

Landscape, Forest, City, Hospital, Trade, Families, Glass, Death, Silesia, Textile, Mining, Organ, War and Village.

The exhibition is systematic, using the order of exhibits according to themes. The exhibition combines dominant formalist elements (showcases with exhibits) and contextual elements (e.g. reconstruction of twentieth-century housing). Museum texts are placed within the section of a given keyword and there is also textual information for each keyword on a touchscreen computer, but this mostly copies the museum texts rather than supplementing and developing them in depth. In contrast to the Czech-language descriptions of the exhibits and the exhibition texts, the computers also offer texts in English, German and Polish. A printed guide is also available in these languages.

The visitor route, which in the context of dispositional analysis can be perceived as a non-discursive practice, is clearly defined in the exhibition. The visitor enters the exhibition and must traverse the entire exhibition from beginning to end: there are no intermediate exits or shortcuts. One advantage of this design is that, thanks to the exhibition's thematic ordering, visitors can pay attention only to the topics that interest them. Another advantage is the possibility of easily incorporating new research findings or discoveries from archaeological research, as well as new collections and topics that the curators deem appropriate to add. There is also the possibility of displaying exhibits for a limited period of time if they cannot be displayed for longer due to preventive conservation. In this way, the exhibition can be kept up-to-date, alive and thus attractive for repeat visits.

From a museological point of view, an exhibition divided into several keywords is a challenge that brings not only the mentioned advantages but also possible risks. For example, in order for any renewal to function as intended, the exhibition concept as a whole must be kept in mind when updating the keywords – otherwise, there is a risk that the narrative will dissolve into little eloquent units that work separately but not together. Unfortunately, that is what happened in this exhibition. Visitors may find it difficult to interpret such an exhibition, as they cannot rely on a comprehensible narrative that guides them through and gives context to the presented phenomena. In the past, the exhibition included a basic narrative guide provided by a timeline (panel display) which presented the history of Silesia from prehistory to the twentieth century. However, this part of the exhibition was closed down and the space made available for short-term exhibitions.



Fig. 1: Entrance to *The Encyclopaedia of Silesia* exhibition in *The Silesian Museum* exhibition. Introductory text panel and large-format photographs of the landscape and the city of Opava. The rear display case on the left contains a model of a timbered house. Photo by V. Kolaříková.



Fig. 2: Entry to the part of the exhibition with the keyword *Village*. A display case with folk clothing and a large-format photograph of village housing. Photo by V. Kolaříková.



Fig. 3: Entry to the part of the exhibition with the keyword *Landscape*. A large-format photograph of the restored pilgrimage church of Saint Mary, the Help of Christians (Zlaté Hory) and a display case with religious objects: a prayer book, a rosary, pictures of Saint Mary, commemorative mugs from pilgrimage sites, etc. Photo by V. Kolaříková.

The data analysis procedure

All the data were analysed using MAXQDA software, which is suitable for analysing interview transcripts and other texts (text panels in the exhibition, annual reports and other documents) and visual material (photographs of exhibits and exhibition scenes). Exhibits, as types of materialisations, were analysed both as separate objects and as parts of exhibitions and narrative exhibition units. Attention was paid to the description of the materialisations (type of exhibit, material, etc.); their location in the exhibition; and their function, meaning and social context, including their position within the discursive level.

The data were repeatedly searched, rethought and coded over time. I also returned to the data in light of the interviews conducted over time and the new information gained from them. The coded data was then sorted into categories. The individual codes and the resulting categories were continuously compared with the categories of the coding key,¹³ including discursively anchored elements of Czech national identity, so that the presence or absence of these elements in the exhibition could be determined. The form of the resulting research categories shows that the presence of some categories resulting from the dispositional analysis corresponds to the categories or subcategories belonging to the coding key. But at the same time, and this is important, space was also left for the emergence of completely new categories.

¹³ The theoretical background devoted to the elements of the Czech national identity, which became the source for the creation of the coding key, I devoted here: KOLAŘÍKOVÁ, Czech national...

Thus, the coding key was a functional coding tool that provided the research with a foundation based on already established data, the analysis of which created a discursive framework for the research, but one with sufficient flexibility to search for possible additional categories.

The categories revealed by the analysis were then sorted into subcategories, which were named and assigned to main categories. The resulting main categories were given names which accurately represented their informational content. In summary, the dispositional analysis revealed several key categories and elements in the exhibition that construct and present Czech national identity through specific exhibits, museum texts and their associated narratives.

Final categories

The research uncovered five main categories: Czech Village and its Traditions, Significant Historical Periods, German and Polish Influences, Religion, and Industrialisation and Modernisation of Society. An overview of all categories and their subcategories is presented in Table 1.

Tab. 1: *Elements Contributing to the Construction of Czech National Identity in the Encyclopedia of Silesia*

Category name	Subcategory name					
Czech Village and its Traditions	Traditional crafts	Agriculture as a traditional source of livelihood	Czech rural landscape	Rural living and folk architecture	Traditional folk costume	Czech language
Significant Historical Periods	Earlier history	Austro-Hungarian Empire	First Czechoslovak Republic	The period of normalisation and the prism of communism	(Separate)	Czech Republic
German and Polish Influences	Polish influences	German personalities	German cultural influences (music and theatre)			
Religion	Objects related to the Catholic Church	Sacred architecture and places of pilgrimage				
Industrialisation and Modernisation of Society	Development of medicine and psychiatry	Mining	Leisure time	Modern trade	(Modern)	City

Research findings

Although on a cursory visit to the museum it may seem that the presence of the concept of national identity in the exhibition is only slight and there is no separate keyword in the

exhibition that deals with the issue of nationality,¹⁴ the research results show that the exhibition does open up the topic of Czech national identity, despite the fact that this was not the main curatorial intention. The answer to the main research question is thus clear: an image of Czech national identity is constructed by the exhibition, even though it does not create a unified national narrative that is explicitly presented to visitors, for example, through accompanying texts or repetitive displays with labels explicitly depicting the issue. References to Czech national identity appear in the exhibition as segments intertwined with the individual exhibition keywords rather than as a single coherent and clearly presented continuous narrative. This is related to the intentions of the creators of the exhibition, who tried, successfully, to break up the classical chronological national narrative. According to Kolář, the aim of structuring the exhibition in this way was to defy the classical linear narrative of Czech history and to show the phenomena of the region and different periods more selectively. It was not only an attempt to break the chronological national narrative, but chronological narratives in general. This does not mean, however, that such an exhibition cannot contain an overarching narrative that links all the presented keywords through an intertwining context. Indeed, an overarching narrative was part of the original conceptual intention of the exhibition, although unfortunately it was ultimately not fulfilled. As Šopák himself pointed out, in contrast to the original intention, the exhibition gradually began to take shape in a non-conceptual manner, with each curatorial team working on its keyword independently. This is evident in the form of the narrative, which is fragmented into several separate parts.

Despite this, references to Czech national identity shape the national narrative, which turns to the history of the nation, to the Czech – or often Czechoslovak – past, and to the everyday life of people in the past. Revealing the level of Czech national identity and its interpretation in the exhibition depends to some extent on the viewers themselves. As Šopák also pointed out in a research interview, national identity is part of the exhibition:

but it is exclusively the activity of the viewer: for example, the keyword language [which was present in earlier iterations of the exhibition] was implicitly linked to national identity, but I, as the author, do not have to say to the viewer: see, here lies identity – it is up to the choice, to the completion or retelling of the story of history by the visitor himself.¹⁵

Despite all this, thanks to the analytical work, we can discern in the exhibition the elements and related narratives through which Czech national identity is constructed, reconstructed and presented.

¹⁴ As Kolář pointed out, the discussion about whether nationality issues should be addressed in a separate keyword was opened in 2018. However, finally, a keyword related to the topic of nationality or considered Germanness did not happen. Kolář sees the importance of such a keyword especially with regard to visitors who do not come from the region and thus do not have much insight into local history. The keyword could help them to understand the phenomenon that in the past the boundaries between the ethnicities/nationalities Czech / German / Polish were not completely clear in the region, where these identities were intermingled. Haničák also sees the future existence of the keyword Nationality as an important possibility, as he believes the keyword would provide an opportunity to show something quite important for the region: “*Four nationalities meeting in such a narrow space, I don't think there is a similar situation in the Czech Republic and its history. Also, national frictions and rivalries were one of the basic drivers of human events and historical realities of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. And this, I think, should be demonstrated somewhere in the exhibition. So I think that should be the subject of some future revision of the exhibit, this should be there.*”

¹⁵ This and other passages from interview transcripts have been translated from Czech into English.

The Czech village as the basic starting point of Czech identity

The image of Czech national identity constructed by the exhibition is based on a number of elements that have long been involved in the creation of Czech identity and its perception by the public in contemporary social discourse. The narrative of Czech national identity is divided into several key narratives in the exhibition which correspond to the analysed research categories. The dominant narrative line associated with Czech identity is the theme of the Czech village. The exhibition builds on the historical representation of the village with its idealistic landscape character, dominated by references to the late eighteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century. It thus draws logically on the so-called era of Czech national revival. Although the Czech national revival as a theme is not explicitly named, the exhibition builds on it in its romanticising images and reconstructs an image of national identity by idealising the Czech village, its beauty and historicity.

In the context of the historical narrative of Czechness, the exhibition presents the Czech village with its landscape. The landscape can be understood as a factor influencing people's livelihoods through agriculture, hunting and processing wood from the forest. The Czech Republic is one of the ten most forested European countries. Forests currently cover a third of Czech territory; roughly 75% of them are commercial.¹⁶ And it is precisely the topic of forests that forms the basis of this category. The landscape can be also understood as a place of spiritual consolation – pilgrimage sites and spas, or spaces suitable for leisure and tourism.

The Czech village category is closely connected with the theme of architecture, especially folk architecture, which is presented by original wooden buildings. The key exhibit is a model of a timbered house made of wood and straw from the nineteenth century; its construction refers not only to typical building materials but also to craftsmanship. The model is connected to the phenomenon of Czech national identity, also thanks to the fact that the phenomena of material culture, which typically include village houses and folk clothing, began to be widely used in the nineteenth century in the construction of national identity and are still part of the construction of this identity today. The village house was presented together with folk culture at the time of the rise of nationalism at a number of ethnographic exhibitions (e.g. the General Land Centennial Exhibition in 1891 or the Czechoslovak Ethnographic Exhibition in 1895) and later also at folklore events and celebrations that played an important role in the construction of the idea of the nature of Czechness and in the process of acquiring this identity. As Pavlicová¹⁷ points out, in the social appeal to folk traditions, we see revivalist, awareness, educational and aesthetic functions, but at the same time cultural-political or political functions can be associated with it. We are thus witnessing the process of construction of national traditions and symbols that have retained their meaning to this day. It is interesting that in many places today these constructs are built completely artificially and detached from their original historical tradition. As an example, Woitsch¹⁸ describes a developer's construction of timbered houses in the area of northern, northeastern and central Bohemia which are used for by tourists who are lured to these places by fictional advertising about a typically Czech cottage. The myth of the traditional or folk Czech cottage, deeply rooted in Czech society, is more of a construction than an accurate

¹⁶ ANDĚRA, Miloš & SOVÁK, Jan. *Atlas fauny České republiky*. Praha: Academia, 2018.

¹⁷ PAVLICOVÁ, Martina. Folklor a folklorismus v historické a sociální perspektivě. In: *Lidové tradice jako součást kulturního dědictví*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2015, p. 198.

¹⁸ WOITSCH, Jiří. Ta naše chaloupka česká? Proměny mýtu lidové architektury. In: *Dějiny a současnost*, 2008, pp. 30–33

reflection of reality. According to Woitsch,¹⁹ there is basically no such thing as a typical Czech cottage. Since the end of the eighteenth century, regionally varied architectural types of country house have appeared and, in addition, various pan-European approaches to traditional village building culture have been intermingled. Therefore, it is not possible to claim that there is, or ever has been, such a thing as a typical Czech cottage. Nevertheless, the village house became a symbol of Czechness, thanks to the fact that it symbolised the life of the rural population and its culture. In the era of a gradually modernising society – and especially in industrialising cities – the village became the city's idealised and supposedly harmonious opposite. The attention of revivalists was mainly devoted to the traditional and pre-industrial ways of life of rural people. The villager was perceived as the custodian of the Czech language,²⁰ and thus as a *true Czech*.

Another important topic which falls under the Czech village category is traditions. Traditions are presented by folk costumes and traditional local crafts, which are presented in a wide range of exhibits. With these examples, the exhibition contributes to the construction of one of the typical Czech self-stereotypes – the idea of golden Czech hands²¹ (i.e. Czech manual skills reflected in crafts). It also presents everyday life as a representative element of the Czech Republic and its culture, although this presentation is carried out with an emphasis on the area of Czech Silesia.

The exhibition also works with the concept of the village in relation to the Czech language, thus building on the ethno-cultural concept of nation anchored in the cultural and geographic environment of Central Europe. This is based on the standard notion that Czech national identity is linked to language, culture and common history, rather than to the state and its territory.²² The exhibition presents books by important Czech authors, books about gardening, poems by P. Bezruč, printed materials written in Czech and theatre posters. One noteworthy example is the poster for Smetana's opera *Prodaná nevěsta* (The Bartered Bride), which was performed in Prague as the first Czech national opera in 1866 and then in Opava in 1919. Theatre that is also linked to language had a specific significance in the past for the development of national identity.

Until the seventeenth century, theatre in Czech lands, understood as a fiction taken from everyday reality, was performed only occasionally. Since it reflected people's social life, their work and the rhythm of nature, folk theatre became a welcome and expected social event, a celebration. Thanks to the gradual professionalisation of the European theatre, a higher theatrical culture began to emerge, and the theatre increasingly began to turn to profit. Theatre

¹⁹ WOITSCH, Ta naše chaloupka..., p. 30.

²⁰ By the end of the eighteenth century, Czech countries were part of a large German cultural region. The inadequate status of Czech language became a symbol of the obstacles to the vision of a modern society of equal citizens. New intellectuals felt a sense of injustice that led to a desire to fight for linguistic equality. However it was not easy to elevate the Czech language to an official language. At the end of the eighteenth century, Czech was the language of villagers, not the language of science, art, bureaucracy or nobility. The Czech revival was thus based on the folk environment. Rather than military leaders or politicians, it was driven by new young scholars (e.g. philosophers and artists) who, in the process of finding their place in society and their identity, began to turn precisely to national identity, represented by the Czech language. For deeper analysis of the connection between Czech language and identity, see KOLARÍKOVÁ, Czech national..., p. 77.

²¹ More about this Czech self-stereotype cf. KLEPETKO, Roman. Současná role národní identity, aneb proč (ne) stavíme národní památníky. In: *Kulturní studia*, 2014, pp. 64–79; LABISCHOVÁ, Denisa. Češi, Slováci a jejich sousedství: Identita – stereotyp – historické vědomí. In: *CIVILLA – odborná revue pro didaktiku společenských věd*, 2013, pp. 46–54.

²² Cf. HROCH, From ethnic...; KOHÁK, Domov a...

gradually became a commodity and in the nineteenth century. In Czech lands, however, this development was delayed, and in the eighteenth century folk theatre culture still flourished, especially in villages.²³ But professional theatres also developed, especially in cities where theatres and theatre associations were mainly run by Germans and plays were usually performed in German.²⁴ The fact that, in addition to theatre plays written in Czech, we also find posters for Polish and German plays in the exhibition demonstrates the multicultural character of the society of that time and the fact that Czech was not the dominant language of culture. The exhibition in the accompanying texts points out that the Czech-speaking theatre was mainly supported by association activities. In the multicultural environment of German, Polish and Czech theatre, Czech professional theatre began to fully develop only after 1945. The exhibition also focuses on puppet theatre, depicting scenes from Czech folklore and fairy tales – for example, the archetypal figure Hloupý Honza (Dull Johnny), the devil (a typical character of Czech fairy tales), and a kingdom with a dragon.

Exhibitions, national identity and the way presenting *Czech* history

The concept of Czech national identity, and thus the ideal typical model of Czechness in the narrative of the exhibition, takes the form of a Czech person who uses the Czech language and resides in the picturesque Czech landscape (especially the rural landscape), and is thus a holder of Czech history and tradition. This is a Czech who is part of Czech history, which, however, if we look at the problem through the rhetoric of modern nationalism, is not in fact only *Czech* national history. However, the exhibition does not elaborate on this issue and does not in any way problematise the continuity of *Czech* history.

Earlier history appears only marginally in the exhibition, through only a few exhibits that are not united by a narrative line (medieval halberds, spearheads and arrowheads, a European chainmail shirt from the fifteenth/sixteenth century, etc.). Within the section on Dynasties, the topic of the Přemyslid Dynasty is briefly outlined in the text on a computer screen. However, the exhibits themselves do not open up their story. The exhibit does not mention Great Moravia or refer to the Hussites – a pre-Protestant Christian movement, despite these belonging to an era that many researchers suggest that are important for Czech people.²⁵ The Battle of White Mountain is not to be found in the exhibition either. The only reference to the time after this battle is the exhibited book *Temno (Darkness)* by Alois Jirásek; however, it does not open any narrative and is rather randomly placed in a bookcase representing the style of living in the 1960s.

Other periods that are anchored in social discourse as key stages of Czech history are the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867–1918) and the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938). The visitor passes through both periods in the exhibition as periods presented through Czech optics. Apart from the presented figures (such as architect Leopold Bauer or Field Marshal Eduard von Böhm-Ermolli of the Austro-Hungarian Army), several exhibits referring to the Austro-Hungarian Empire period are more related to people's everyday lives than to the representation of the monarchy or its political consequences – despite the fact that the Austro-

²³ KOPECKÝ, Jan. České lidové divadlo v kontextu evropské divadelní kultury. In: *O barokní kultuře: sborník statí*. Brno: Universita J. E. Purkyně, 1968, pp. 105–114.

²⁴ HAVLÍČKOVÁ, Margita, PRACNÁ, Sylva, & ŠTEFANIDES, Jiří. Německojazyčná městská divadla na Moravě a ve Slezsku (1733–1944). In: *Theatralia*, 2010, pp. 47–71.

²⁵ Cf. HOLÝ, Malý český...; ŠUBRT, Jiří & VINOPAL, Jiří, et al. *Historické vědomí obyvatel české republiky perspektivou sociologického výzkumu*. Praha: Karolinum, 2013.

Hungarian Empire represented a revolutionary time in terms of national identities.

In earlier times the nationalist principle was not applied: it was not part of social reality. However, as Gellner points out, this has started to change due to the modernisation of society.²⁶ Following the Vienna Arrangement (1815), a political system organised on nationalist principles was not immediately established because dynastic interests, religion and territorial continuity were prioritised over ethnicity and language. However, the social conditions established by modernity began to open the door to nationalism. During the time of Austria-Hungary, nationalism began to assert itself and national identities began to take shape more significantly, which also affected Czech national identity. By 1914, the inhabitants of Western and Central Europe took nationalism for granted and in 1918 nationalism manifested itself as a principle of political legitimacy. Nevertheless, the segment of the exhibition presenting the time of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy does not address questions such as the construction of national identities or the associated phenomenon of nationalism as a separate topic. Probably also due to this, the given historical period is not presented in the exhibition in relation to the stereotype of the 'German oppressor', but rather presents the period as an obvious part of Czech history.

The period of the First Czechoslovak Republic (1918–1938) is presented in the context of the prevailing social discourse as the Golden Age. According to Kohák, the perception of the First Czechoslovak Republic as a good era in Czech history is typical for the Czechs.²⁷ It is depicted through an idealised image of a time when people living in cities wore flashy clothes and hats, visited the theatre, shopped and listened to classical music. The period is treated as a common part of history, without explaining the deeper context of the times and the events taking place then. The exhibition does not refer to the phenomena that accompanied the establishment of an independent republic and does not open the topic of the Czech National Revival, nor does it say anything about T. G. Masaryk (the first President of Czechoslovakia), which is relatively atypical for a Czech museum. The issue of a possible Czechoslovak identity is not discussed here either. The topic of Slovaks is not treated at all, and no distinction is made between Czechs and Slovaks as potentially distinct national groups. The period is present in the exhibition rather as a self-evident part of history. There is no explanation of the deeper context of the given time and its events. The period is encountered in the exhibition through various themes and exhibits. A targeted conceptual narrative is not constructed here. Despite the incomplete narrative, the visitor can form an idea about the First Czechoslovak Republic and everyday life in those times. They can obtain information and form impressions here which can follow on from their preconceptions. Rather than breaking the stereotype of the ideal of the First Czechoslovak Republic, these stereotypes are replicated here.

Fashion, which is part of the narrative of the First Czechoslovak Republic, is also discussed in the context of the later Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, where the museum text points out that the textile industry in Silesia collapsed during the Second World War. In this way, the exhibition corresponds to the stereotype associated with the perception of the Protectorate as a time of decline in Czech history.²⁸ However, this is only one of the few references to the negatives associated with inter-national coexistence in a time of growing influence of nationalism.

²⁶ GELLNER, Ernest. *Nacionalismus*. Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury, 2003.

²⁷ KOHÁK, Erazim. *Domov a dálava: Kulturní totožnost a obecné lidství v českém myšlení*. Praha: Filozofia, 2009, p. 197.

²⁸ More information in ŠUBRT & VINOPAL, *Historické vědomí...*

The so-called prism of communism is also part of Czech collective memory.²⁹ The establishment of the communist regime in February 1948 is perceived negatively by roughly a third of today's Czechs, who also consider the occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968 as a negative event in Czech history.³⁰ The period of normalisation is not part of the museum's narrative and the exhibition does not focus on presenting it, although exhibits referring these times can be found in the exhibition. The most noticeable example is in the part of the exhibition presenting life in the 1960s. In the staged living room there are artificial carnations, already almost iconic in Czech society, a copy of the newspaper *Rudé Právo* (*Red Lam*) from 1969 with the headline "Documentary reportage from the August days of 1969".

The exhibition even lacks a narrative devoted to the establishment of the independent Czech Republic (1993), which is analytically interesting. The existence of the Czech Republic is assumed a priori in the exhibition, as if the Czech nation had always existed here and therefore there is no need to return to the events of the Czech Republic's establishment as an independent nation-state. This also supports the ethno-cultural concept of the nation, which the exhibition reconstructs by placing more emphasis on common culture, history and language, rather than territory, in the context of Czech national identity. At the same time, these phenomena show us that methodological nationalism is still a common part of the creation of museum exhibitions, or at least it is in this particular case. But it is not too surprising. Museums are national institutions that direct their research towards national history, national territory, its cultural heritage and collective memory. Dealing with how to present national identity in today's postmodern age is a difficult task, and for many museums this task remains a challenge. The Encyclopaedia of Silesia exhibition, or rather its curators, did not set themselves this goal. It will therefore be interesting to see what form this topic will one day take if it is added to the exhibition.

Czech–German relationships in the exhibition

The exhibition also constructs narratives concerning other national identities. The role of minority identities is always interesting in the context of the construction of national identity, since the presence of foreign nationalities in the nation-state plays a role in the construction of the image of the nation. Specifically, the exhibition pays attention to German and Polish identities, although the latter to a lesser extent. Exhibits connected to these two identities most often refer to important German or Polish figures, objects connected with theatre and other social phenomena (pottery, mining). German and Polish identity is intertwined with the identity of a Silesian – a person living in Silesia at a given time who is presented as a Silesian in the museum narrative, regardless of their ethnicity. Thus, the typical identity within a given

²⁹ ŠUBRT & VINOPAL, Historické vědomí...

³⁰ Institute of sociology. Czech Academy of Science. *Tisková zpráva Občané o osobnostech, obdobích a událostech česko-slovenské historie od vzniku ČSR po současnost – březen 2018*, accessed 2018, https://cvvm.soc.cas.cz/media/com_form-2content/documents/c2/a4607/f9/pd180509.pdf

territory – land identity³¹ – at a particular time is brought to the centre of attention. Here, land identity partially displaces national identity or merges with it in a specific way.

An important element of the exhibition is the way it tells the story of the past coexistence of these ethnic/national groups in Silesia. The region of Czech Silesia has been struggling with the multicultural nature of the population since the Middle Ages, when, in addition to the Czechs, there was a significant German and Polish population whose number increased due to economic migration in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.³² It is therefore not surprising that the exhibition pays attention to these national minorities. It is rather surprising that the topic of Czech–German–Polish relations is not summarised in a specific accompanying text in the exhibition.

The exhibition presents a number of important German figures³³ who lived in the region of Silesia. However, it is important to note that many of them were born during the Austro-Hungarian era, and therefore to speak of their identity as having a German or other self-conscious national identity is misleading. Nationality, or rather ethnicity, at that time did not have the same categorising character as it does today. In the beginnings of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, their status affiliation was more important for people's identity. At the same time, social status was often connected with the language that the representatives of the given social groups spoke. Some of the personalities that the exhibition presents also came from Jewish families. This makes the effort to declare the national identities of the personalities in the exhibition more difficult. It is therefore difficult to retrospectively determine the nationality of the personalities presented in the exhibition. This is doubly true for the region of Opava and Těšín, which were the regions of Silesia that were nationally (ethnically) quite mixed and where regional (land) identities often prevailed over national ones even at the time of the national revival. In the area of western Silesia, as Kolář points out, there were more distinct nationalities; there, people with German roots generally considered themselves unequivocally German. But it was not like that everywhere.

The exhibition focuses on presenting the everyday life of the people who lived in this area not just side by side but together; they influenced each other culturally and their coexistence was in most cases without conflict, unproblematic, commonplace and enriching. This differs from the typical museum narrative presenting these relationships through moments of conflict, as is common in the stereotypical interpretation of Czech–German relations within Czech national discourse. I perceive this fact as important and evaluate it positively. In addition to its educational potential, a narrative conceived in this way also offers the opportunity for members of the German or Polish minority living in Silesia and, by extension, in the Czech Republic to identify with the exhibition and its national narrative.

³¹ The concept of land identity is linked to the Silesia province in a specific way. In the context of the Czech Republic, land identity was historically linked (or in the minds and the concept of identity of some residents it is still linked) to the historical political units of the Czech lands – i.e. to Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia, which today form the Czech Republic. But historically these separate areas fell under the lands of the Czech Crown, as lands subordinate to the Czech king. Land identity in this case emphasises the historical continuity and the right to self-governance of these historical lands, rather than being concerned with the national dimension. Within the framework of the Silesian land identity (or we can also say province identity) we are talking about identity linked to the historical political whole of Silesia – that is, with an area that could have been inhabited by people of different nationalities at the time and yet shared the Silesian land identity.

³² KOLÁŘ, Ondřej & JANÁK, Dušan, et al. *Polská a...*, p. 5.

³³ We can mention names such as painter Adolf Zdravil, psychiatrist Ignác Tiefenbach, architect Leopold Bauer and more.

It would be interesting if the exhibition treated this topic up to the present day. However, it does not deal with the current national or ethnic minorities living in Silesia, which is consistent with the fact that the exhibition narrative itself does not focus on presenting the present. However, the museum makes up for this by having previously staged several temporary exhibitions on the topic of national minorities living in Silesia. It is necessary to add to the narrative of Czech–German relationships that in 2021 a revision of some keywords of the exhibition took place. As part of this revision, the keyword War was completely updated. On the basis of archaeological research carried out by the museum staff, the Second World War, which was not previously represented in the previous iterations of the exhibition, was introduced under this keyword. Thus, one of the narratives of the exhibition has been significantly transformed but its development would have to be mapped out in a new study.

Religion as an important part of the museum narrative

Although the Czech Republic is one of the most atheistic countries in Europe today, religion has played a significant role in the national identity of Czechs.³⁴ Many Czech traditions and other cultural elements are linked to Christianity as the dominant religion. It can therefore be assumed that religion is still important to the Czechs, at least as part of their history. Perhaps that is why the religious theme is strong in the exhibition. Christianity, specifically the region's dominant Catholicism, appears throughout the exhibition and is mainly situated under the keyword Church. In addition to religious objects and sacred buildings, the exhibition also presents places of pilgrimage as an important part of local history. The number of pilgrimage sites in Czech lands increased during the nineteenth century, and Silesia was no exception. In this century, as the accompanying exhibition text points out, the rise of romanticism began to see the human heart behind the landscape motifs. The landscape became a place of spiritual consolation for man. Pilgrimage sites are examples of places of memory. According to Hroch, the most ancient layer of the place of memory includes mythological sacred places and, under certain circumstances, also religious places of pilgrimage.³⁵ Among the elements that construct the Czech national identity, places of pilgrimage thus have their inherent place in the exhibition.

The extent to which the theme is represented in the exhibition shows that Catholicism was of great importance to the region in the past. At the same time, it is worth noting that the Reformation and Protestantism are not themes within the museum's narrative, which makes it distinct from the dominant narrative of Czech national identity in which the narrative of Protestantism, the Reformation and the Hussites has been strong since the time of Palacký and was subsequently also significant during the First Czechoslovak Republic. Although the museum's narrative turns quite strongly to the time of the First Czechoslovak Republic, the

³⁴ More information on the religious beliefs of the Czechs in LAUDÁTOVÁ, Marie & VIDO, Roman. *Současná česká religiozita v generační perspektivě*. In: *Sociální Studia*, pp. 37–61, 2010.

³⁵ HROCH, Miroslav. *Národ jako kulturní konstrukt?* In: *Lidé města*, 2005, p. 11.

theme of the Hussite Nation³⁶ is not included. The fact that Catholicism was dominant – and held its position even in times when the Protestantism prevailed in many other places in Czech territory – is due to the circumstances of the region at the time. Kolář describes them in a research interview as follows:

Historically, there were also some effects of the Reformation in Opava region in history. There were quite intense riots and clashes between Catholics and Protestants in the time before the Battle of White Mountain. Then came the recatholisation and it can be said that the Catholic religion, especially in Opava and western Silesia, held its position here for quite a long time. Here, even the time of some national consciousness struggle in the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century was very much based on the Catholic background. And at a time when the age of majority Czech nationalism was already defining itself anticlerically against the so-called Austro-Catholicism, the Catholic Church still had a big role here during the First Czechoslovak Republic. The Czech nationalism or Czech patriotism here in the Opava and Bílovec region was very much tied to the Catholic Church. And the Catholic religion was also connected with identity in the Hlučín region. It was part of Prussia from 1742 to 1920, i.e. part of a majority Protestant country. So Catholicism was preserved there as such a distinctive part of the regional identity [...] basically as a counterbalance to the Prussian Protestantism and the Prussian threat. People clung to Catholicism as a proof of loyalty both to the Church and to the Austrian state. In doing so, they were also setting themselves against the Great German mindset from the local political scene.³⁷

Modernisation of Czech society as an important narrative of the exhibition

Unsurprisingly, the national question is also linked to the narrative referring to the modernisation of society. The transformation of traditional society and its transition into a modern one was triggered by industrialisation, which brought about a change in social structures that led to the emergence of nationalism and thus to a focus on national identities. The development of industrial society is reflected in the exhibition within a number of themes. These include coal mining, for which the region was known and which the exhibition focuses on both through exhibits (e.g., a miner's sledgehammer, a miner's hammer, a casting spoon, an ore cart from the nineteenth century, poems by P. Bezruč, etc.) and narratives shaped around them.

³⁶ As ŠUBRT & VINOPAL, *Historické vědomí...* pointed out the period of the Hussite Wars (15th century) and the personality of Jan Hus is an important part of the Czech national memory. This period is considered by some people to be a famous moment in Czech history, but from the point of view of other aspects, it is also perceived by the Czech public as a period with a negative meaning. It can thus be a relatively controversial period of Czech national memory. According to Hroch, Malečková and Kohák (cf. HROCH, Miroslav, & MALEČKOVÁ, Jitka. The construction of Czech national history. In: *Historiein*, 1999, pp. 103–112; KOHÁK, Domov a...) Hussites as a part of the national past were constructed by Palacký, who with his four-volume work *Dějiny národu českého v Čechách a v Moravě (History of the Czech nation in Bohemia and Moravia)* significantly contributed to the construction of the Czech national identity, and who made it a monument to the great deeds of the ancestors. The Czech national revival highlighted Hussiteism as a time of national awareness and consolidation of the population, which symbolised the struggle of the population against an external enemy, the fight for freedom (see RAK, Jiří. *Bývalí Čechové... (české historické mýty a stereotypy)*. Jinočany: H & H, 1994).

³⁷ This and other passages from interview transcripts have been translated from Czech into English.

The extraction of a particular mineral resource is strongly linked to the national identity of a given country and its inhabitants, as it is linked to the geographical character of the landscape. It defines the ownership of a particular mineral resource, and thus influences the livelihoods of the local population and their overall way of life, including their living conditions (the level of poverty of a given location and the socio-economic status of individual inhabitants). In the Silesia region, not only coal but also shale, iron ore and stone were mined. In the nineteenth century, the Ostrava industrial agglomeration was established which, as the museum text in the exhibition points out, was the only one in the territory of the then Czech Republic. This event significantly influenced the shape of local life through the emergence of cheap workers' accommodation and subsequent workers' colonies near the factories (the workers' colonies are presented in the exhibition with large-format prints and museum texts), as well as impacting the environment through pollution, devastation of the landscape, and so on. Mining is not only a feature of a certain regions and countries but also a component of an area's collective identity and an element of people's collective memory. As Kolář mentions in a research interview:

When you say Silesia, a lot of people first of all think of mining, heavy industry and things related to it. [...] It's something that evokes a lot of nostalgia nowadays. Let's say it is a bit idealised.

Another important theme is the emergence of leisure time and the phenomenon of tourism, which is accentuated in the exhibition as a typical Czech and, in practice, German phenomenon (exhibits such as a twentieth-century hiking stick, a compass, and membership cards of the German tourist association). The boom of tourism and the establishment of tourist associations in our territory, including Silesia, occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century due to the shortening of working hours and the related development of leisure time, as well as the development of railway transport (also mentioned in the exhibition), which enabled the masses to travel relatively cheaply. In the twentieth century, tourism gradually became a popular activity and people from lower social classes began to spend their leisure time in nature and in the mountains.³⁸

The development of modern trade was also important. This is presented in the exhibition through a representation of a grocery store from the urban periphery at the beginning of the twentieth century. In addition to household goods, the exhibition presents common groceries and sweets produced by the local brand Fiedor the store as well as goods imported from the colonies which customers were enticed to buy using metal advertising signs. Advertising posters depicting scenes from the tea colonies had a significant role in the presentation of foreign cultures and can continue to do so today as exhibits. They encourage visitors to consider that some raw materials are not produced by the nation states themselves and therefore need to be imported. They also create and communicate an image of other countries and the people who live there.

The exhibition also presents international metric conventions related to trade, which can also point to the distinctiveness of different national cultures that hold different metric systems. The need to unify the system of weights and measures was triggered by the development of industrial production and increasing international trade. As the accompanying text reminds

³⁸ POKORNÝ, Vojtěch & ŠOPÁK, Pavel (eds). *Paměť krajiny: České Slezsko 1750–1950*. Opava: Slezské zemské museum, 2020.

visitors, Austro-Hungarian Empire adopted the new system of weights and measures in 1875 on signing the International Metric Convention in Paris. The existing weights and measures were thus replaced by new ones, which were adopted by a number of other countries. The metric system can thus be a symbol not only of difference but also of gradual process of convergence.

Modern trade has been intrinsically linked to the development of the modern city, with this subcategory forming the thematic counterpart to the category of the Czech Village and its Traditions. In addition to rural buildings and folk costume, the exhibition also focuses on urban architecture and the clothing of city residents, which creates a contrast to the rural way of life. The theme of the modern city is also an important part of the construction of Czech identity. This was pointed out in a research interview by Denisa Hradilová, the curator of the exhibition's keyword City, who also thought about its national dimension when working on the project:

I chose hats from the mid-nineteenth century, not hats from the time of the first Czechoslovak Republic, of which we have more, but which already follow the international aesthetic line. The same hats were worn in England, for example. I chose hand-knitted gloves made of yarn, and gloves made of machine tulle, but with hand embroidery. Alongside this I have placed two Balkan style handbags, which are probably imports, as a point of interest. Evening dresses present an attempt to follow the latest trends in Silesian conditions. I think they are really beautiful and the fight between the official trend and the local rendition is magical. The national dimension lies in the understanding of uniqueness in all forms. Difference and uniqueness is part of the national image, but one cannot grasp it by looking at our two showcases in the Silesia Exhibition. One has to go to several museums across the country and only then will the national identity become apparent.

This category also includes the issue of how the scientific disciplines of medicine and psychiatry were constituted. Psychiatry and medicine are represented in the exhibition by the keyword Hospital and represented by important figures (psychiatrist Ignác Tiefenbach), events (the establishment of the first general public hospital in Opava) and exhibits related to this topic (e.g., weighing scale, a syringe, an anatomical model of a human being, etc.).

The exhibition and its relation to the present

The contemporary twenty-first century is only marginally represented in the exhibition and there is no narrative dealing with the present day. The only exception is the keyword Mining, where the accompanying text draws attention to the negative consequences of mining related to pollution and devastation of the landscape.

When thinking about the exhibition and considering the missing topic, we should not forget the fact that the exhibition is arranged as a glossary elaborating upon important keywords relating to Silesia of important keywords of Silesia, not as a narrative that aims to explain Czech history and its chronology or its present form. Nevertheless, it is interesting that the curators did not pay more attention to topics connected with the recent past and present. There are several reasons for this. According to Kolář, the exhibition focuses more on the presentation of everyday human life than on political events and milestones, which were more the focus of some earlier temporary exhibitions. According to him, the aim of the exhibition is

to offer visitors a place to relax and an insight into timeless phenomena, rather than to present difficult and controversial topics. On the one hand, this is understandable, especially given the museum has other places where difficult historical topics are dealt with (e.g., the Second World War Memorial in Hrabyně). On the other hand, certain controversial topics do appear in the exhibition, and it is questionable whether it is appropriate for (post)modern museums to avoid interpreting them. Examples of exhibits that potentially relate to controversial topics in a given exhibition include a patch with the letter N used to identify the German inhabitants of post-war Opava; the Ahnenpaß (“ancestor pass” documenting Aryan lineage) of Karl Schinzel; and the figure of Leopold Bauer, who was a Nazi sympathiser, which the exhibition does not mention at all. Regarding today’s presentation, there is another level of the problem, which was reflected by Kamila Poláková when she pointed out that the museum’s previous collection activities did not focus much on the present. This has started to change recently, and the issue of building collections related to the present is a current issue of museum policy. It is thus possible that even recent historical events and the present will be more involved in the exhibition in the future.

The exhibition without a narrator?

According to Poláková, the exhibition was not designed to have one narrator who would guide the visitor through a coherent first-person narrative. She noted that the connecting element of the exhibition could be the figure of a Silesian, but not one particular Silesian assigned to a particular century because the centuries and time periods are intertwined and mixed, both across the exhibition and within the keywords.

Even an exhibit itself can be a narrator of the story of its time, which the curators are naturally aware of. Hradilová pointed this out in the context of the exhibited textile collection. According to her, one of the narrators of the narrative of the keyword City is the Silesian manufacturer whose work is presented in the form of the exhibited dresses. The artefacts, in the form of dresses, point not only to themselves as elements of human labour but also to their owners and the very time of their lives. As Hradilová expressed it, “Textiles themselves are narrators of their time; they say more about people than it might seem at first sight.”

Despite the fact that the curators and other museum staff have different views on who is the narrator of the exhibition’s narrative, the analysis of the exhibition has reached a certain generalisation. The exhibition views the nation and its history through the lens of members of mainstream society and their everyday lives, rather than presenting the history and experiences of elites, such as national revivalists or political officials. An exception to this is the presentation of the lives of important figures of the region (mostly artists, scientists, architects or businessmen). However, in the context of the exhibition’s rhetoric, their lives are presented through their contribution to the region and everyday life in it – that is, as a natural part of it, not a specific singularity. Life in the region and its history are shown through the lens of the Czechs; with regard to the theme and aim of the exhibition, it is the lens of the Czechs living in the area of Bohemian Silesia. And it is the voice of the Silesian (and, more generally, the Czech) that narrates the exhibition’s story – a voice that does not guide the visitor through the exhibition as a continuously progressing plot, nor even appears as an explicitly present narrator. But this narrator is nevertheless implicitly present in the exhibition. It should be added that this narration tends to be produced from a male perspective, since it is more often men whose fates the exhibition presents.

In the context of the analysis of the exhibition, we must not forget the active role of the visitor, as Šopák emphasised in an interview. According to him, it is possible to perceive the narrator of the museum narrative to be the “present individual who accepts the past selectively, but with the adventure of knowledge that is revealed to him spontaneously.” In Šopák’s rendition, the narrator is the visitor himself, who (as constructivist theories of learning point out) is always an active actor participating in the process of constructing the meaning of the narrative of the exhibition he visits.

Final discussion

The research found that although the museum staff did not explicitly attempt to create a national narrative, such a narrative is present in the exhibition and speaks more-or-less clearly to museum visitors through the individual exhibits and exhibition situations. The research confirmed the hypothesis that Czech national identity can be constructed in a regional museum, given that the examined exhibition was significantly intertwined with national identity. It also confirmed the hypothesis that the notion of national identity constructed by the exhibition would largely correspond to the dominant social discourse. However, it also turned out that the exhibition was capable of breaking down some discursive stereotypes, as was the case, for example, with the topic of Czech–German relationships.

This fact emphasises the importance of museums and their activities not only in confirming reality but also in the construction and reconstruction of reality. Such endeavours should be based on scientific activity and research, and people should be able to access information about new discoveries and analyses of phenomena not only through scientific publications but also through the activities of museums, including exhibitions. In the context of the present research topic, it is worth paying deeper attention to visitors’ reactions to and interpretations of the exhibition, and the various ways they perceive the exhibition and its narrative. This topic is worthy of a separate study, for which the results of the present research could form a suitable background.

It could also be interesting and useful to examine the form the national narrative takes in other Czech museums and their exhibitions, including the National Museum. It should be mentioned that the National Museum was closed for reconstruction during most of my research period. Now, the opportunity for comparison is mainly offered by two exhibitions at the National Museum: the History exhibition and the History of the 20th century exhibition. The latter was under construction at the time of my research and subsequently opened in 2021. Unlike the Encyclopaedia of Silesia, this exhibition:

brings the history of the Czech lands between 1914 and 2004 closer to the visitors [...]. The History of the 20th century exhibition also provides an insight into the changes in Czech and Czechoslovak politics. It represents key figures, as well as fundamental decisions of power that influenced all sections of the population. The exhibition is chronologically divided with emphasis on the historical milestones of 1918, 1945 and 1948.³⁹

Apart from noticing the difference in the intention to present political history and events, it is interesting to observe how some of the exhibits have the same meanings and discursive

³⁹ National Museum Website. *The History of the 20th century*, accessed July 17th, 2023, <https://www.nm.cz/en/program/families-and-children/history-of-the-20th-century>

background in both exhibitions. It is worth mentioning the tourist stick with tourist stamps from the 1920s to 1930s which are also used to present the theme of the democratisation of leisure time in the Opava and Prague museums. With regard to famous national figures, both exhibitions feature B. Smetana and his opera *The Bartered Bride*. Similarly to the Opava exhibition, the Prague exhibition also includes a tableau showing a typical grocery store from the end of the First Czechoslovak Republic. There is a cash register, a measuring scale, food cans and branded Czech products. The exhibition also presents another typically Czech phenomenon, brewing, which is not represented in the *Encyclopaedia of Silesia*, although in Opava does have a historical tradition of brewing. Another tableau similar to one in Opava recreates modern living rooms from various years of the twentieth century, specifically from the 1920s and 1930s, as is the case with the stylised living rooms presented in the *Encyclopaedia of Silesia*.

Even just outlining the similarities of the two exhibitions terms of how they relate to Czech national identity, it is evident that future research could offer a number of interesting findings that would discuss not only the similarities of these two and other museums but also their possible differences and potential developments in current trends in museum exhibitions.

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