JÁCHYMOV: HEAVEN OR HELL?

CONTRASTING HISTORICAL NARRATIVES ABOUT JÁCHYMOV, CZECH REPUBLIC AND ITS RADIOACTIVE ELEMENTS

By

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Chapter 1: SITUATING THE DISCOURSE

The small town of Jáchymov, Czech Republic is nestled in the Krušné Hory, which is literally translated from Czech to English as the “Cruel Mountains”, but known in English as the Ore Mountains. The town is located in the northwest of the country close to the German border. My first journey to Jáchymov was for a school-sanctioned trip in 2006. My classmates and I were told that it was a very historically significant town in northern Bohemia; that it was founded as a silver mining town and was the birthplace of the English word “dollar.” They also explained that in addition to touring the town’s museum, we would meet some survivors of one of the many “concentration camps” that existed in the area in the early days of the Czechoslovak communist regime. This statement piqued my interest, as I had never heard the term concentration camp used in any other context then referring to the Nazi regime’s use of them during World War Two. I was eager to learn more about Jáchymov, which seemed to be a place ripe with history and intrigue. In the end I made two trips to Jáchymov: the aforementioned school sponsored trip in 2006 and a second trip in 2010 to gather research data for this thesis. As both prelude and introduction to my thesis, I offer two impressionistic accounts of these visits.

Jáchymov 2006

In order to get to the town, one must travel by car or bus from the city of Karlovy Vary, also known by its German place name of Karlsbad. Karlovy Vary is home to around 53,000 people, which is a fairly large city by Czech standards, and is world renowned for its luxurious mineral spas and international film festival, in addition to producing Becherovka, a famous Czech herbal liquor. Because of all of these interesting attributes, Karlovy Vary
attracts many tourists and a great deal of foreign investment, especially by Russian nationals who invest in the city’s real estate market. It is commonplace there to see restaurant sandwich boards advertising the daily specials in Czech, Russian, German, and English.

In Karlovy Vary, there is a central city bus station, where you can catch a bus to the small town of Jáchymov. After stopping at a few industrial towns along the major highway leading out of Karlovy Vary, our bus made an uneventful turn onto Highway 25. This road led us into a heavily forested area. Tall deciduous and coniferous trees lined the two-way road; an abrupt transition from the industrially-scarred landscape that made up the scenery on the bus trip thus far. A picturesque stream along the side of the road added to the naturally soothing ambiance of the forested drive. To the left, I noticed a crumbling old factory abruptly cut into the landscape and illuminated by sunlight breaking through the low hanging forest canopy. Further examination revealed that not only was the factory no longer utilized, it had also been ravaged by a fire that had left it seemingly unsalvageable. Slightly put off by the scene, I quickly refocused my attention on the beautiful, natural landscape that surrounded me and seemed to be beckoning our vehicle farther and farther into what was becoming a deep valley. Small blotches of sky began to break up the wall of trees as we headed down into the valley.

As we approached our destination, the town of Jáchymov, I began to notice structures placed unnaturally amongst the forested landscape, but instead of dereliction, my eyes were met by a mixture of very modern structures juxtaposed against a breathtakingly beautiful building that harkened back, with its neoclassical façade, to a forgotten era. Its art nouveau-style signage simply said, ‘Radium Palace’ (Figure 1). My eyes took in several nearby
structures, all occupying finely manicured grounds. Brandishing names like Agricola, Běhouek and Curie, these buildings exhibited several different genres of architecture (Figure 2). Soon we reached a bus stop near the roundabout at the epicenter of these structures. This was one of two bus stops in the small town of Jáchymov and was simply labeled “Jáchymov – Spa.”

I could not help thinking that I did not expect to be greeted with such a luxurious, and in some respects modern, built landscape in a town that had been described to me as a historic mining town that was also home to several concentration camps. Where were the remnants of the old mines? Where were the guard towers and barbed wire I had come to associate with concentration camps? I was also somewhat perplexed by the subtext of the sign that read “Jáchymov Spa”, which proclaimed it to be “The First Radon Spa in the World” (Figure 3).

Subsequent questions flooded my mind as we turned off the roundabout onto a road that led us up the valley to the other side of Jáchymov. Initially I saw additional evidence that led me to believe this was a tourist town – souvenir shops, a gas station, and a small pizzeria - but as we continued beyond the first 40 yards of roadway, a very different Jáchymov began to take shape. The opulent-looking buildings diminished and the town buildings became progressively smaller, older, and more derelict as we traveled uphill on the valley road. Many of the houses lining the street appeared to be in a state of disrepair, exhibiting shattered windows and crumbling facades (Figure 4). Several also had faint, almost illegible, old German signage on them that reflected their former uses and owners (this area being part of the old German Sudetenland region from which the German-speaking population was
expelled after World War II). On the left, a modern-looking apartment building broke the string of old buildings. A few people stood outside the building, some of whom looked to be Roma. On the right side of the road, two older women dressed in clothing that suggested they were sex workers smiled at the passengers on the bus. Farther on the left was what appeared to be an old abandoned school and schoolyard, devoid of maintenance or care.

The dereliction worsened the farther we traveled from the Spa grounds. While a few homes along the way seemed to be well kept, the vast majority exhibited neglect and signs of squatting. Only one or two businesses appeared along this main road through Jáchymov, occupied by single professionals (lawyers, accountants) consulting by appointment only. On the left, we approached a small building with a single broken window covered by plywood spray-painted with a sign that said “Brazil Bar” – I was later informed that this was not a bar, but a brothel (Figure 5). A dingy storefront to the right exhibited the advertisement of a prominent Czech bank no longer open for business. Farther up the road and also to the right, I saw a grey building with large letters reading “Hornický Dům” or “Mining House” scrolled across the front in stylized letters from the mid-1950s. Above the main entrance was a sign that said “kino,” or movie theater, but the structure looked to be in a state of irreconcilable disrepair. All of the windows were broken and trash could be seen pouring out of the casements (Figure 6).

Beyond the Hornický Dům, two structures caught my eye – an impressive church with a tall cathedral tower next to a beautiful older building, also with a tall tower, both of which seemed very well kept. The bus continued towards these structures until it stopped at yet another bus stop, labeled “Jáchymov”. The second building was Jáchymov’s “radnice”
or “town hall”, which houses the town’s Welcome Center. Next to the town hall and farther away from the church, was another old, well taken care of building labeled “museum” (Figure 7). Located diagonally in relation to the town hall, were three old buildings that looked as if they had been ravaged by fire and were for sale (See Figure 8). On the hillside above these buildings I saw a very tall tower, presumably used for mining and seemingly in operation and maintained (Figure 9).

We disembarked the bus and were directed into the museum. Our guide explained that the museum building was the town’s former mint, founded in the mid-1500s, and has since gained notoriety as being the birthplace of the dollar. The structure was quite small and contained exhibits of the types of minerals found within the town’s mines, the history of mining and minting, traditional life and farming in Jáchymov, as well as a small display on other industries that once existed in Jáchymov, including a tobacco factory, and a factory that utilized uranium ore to create a dye for glass. This exhibit also included a small amount of information on the Spa I had encountered when first entering the town. The information available stated that this Spa was founded in the early 1900s and utilized radon in its therapeutic treatments. The exhibit also contained photos and items from the Spa.

We quickly walked through these exhibits, as the main purpose for our visit that day was to visit a new addition to the museum that had been unveiled only a short time before we arrived. This exhibit was an exposé of the town as it appeared between 1948 and 1962 when it was part of an industrial uranium mining complex run by the Czechoslovak government that used both civilian and prisoner labor to extract and refine uranium ore that was sent to the Soviet Union. This activity was extremely clandestine at the time it was carried out, and
continued to be kept secret and not widely acknowledged even after it was closed in the early 1960s. The uranium mines and their use of forced labor have only recently been acknowledged by the Czech government. The exhibit detailing this dark period in Jáchymov’s past included the stories of prisoners who were forced to work in the mines with little protection for 16 hours a day, and then housed in inadequate and oftentimes dangerous buildings. They were also underfed and subjected to life-threatening physical abuse by prison guards (Figure 10).

Our school had arranged for us to meet two of the former prisoners who mined uranium at Jáchymov during this time. These men were members of an organization known as the Konfederace politických vězňů (Confederation of Political Prisoners or KPV), which stages events and works to ensure that the exploitation of prisoners that took place in Jáchymov never be forgotten. They described how they came to be detained by the Czechoslovak government and detailed their horrendous experience of working in the Jáchymov mines and living in what they referred to as “concentration camps.” While talking about their time in Jáchymov, they continually emphasized the fact that they considered themselves to have been ‘political prisoners,’ unjustly arrested and sequestered by the communist government of Czechoslovakia. These former prisoners led us through the exhibit and gave up first-hand accounts of the horrors they experienced, making the exhibit very emotional and impactful.

After completing our tour of the exhibit, we were loaded back onto a bus with our two guests and driven out of town until we reached what appeared to be an old factory. We disembarked and entered an old industrial complex currently located on the grounds of a
decommissioned automotive factory and a functioning prison. After a short distance, our bus stopped in front of a decrepit and nondescript tower. We exited the bus and were told by our guests that this structure is referred to as the “Tower of Death” (Figure 11). The facility was used during the uranium mining period as a place where raw uranium ore was sorted, milled and loaded into crates to be placed in trains that departed daily for the Soviet Union. Our guests explained that the facility had come to acquire the unofficial name “Tower of Death” because many people working there acquired terminal cancer by inhaling large amounts of radioactive dust created during the refining process.

During our ride back to Prague, I ruminated over the town from which we had come and the stories I had heard. I was struck by the fact that Jáchymov appeared to be a divided town, with one seemingly prosperous half sustained by medical tourism and the other half a place of dereliction, illicit activities, and the painful memory of exploitation and death at the hands of the state. I became curious about what this strangely divided town really represented. How did the town’s inhabitants feel about the town’s past, about its apparent present division, and about its future?

This curiosity about Jáchymov lingered in my mind and motivated me to seek more information. A simple Internet search of the word “Jáchymov” directed me to a number of websites, many of which were not translated into English and most of which were overwhelmingly related to the Radon Spa. This was intriguing, as I had been completely unaware of the Spa prior to my first visit to Jáchymov. The Spa’s official site primarily featured the its business activities, and made frequent reference to “therapeutic water,” a term for the radon infused water, pumped to the Spa via a pipeline originating deep within a
decommissioned uranium mine found beneath the town and used for the treatment of patients. The Spa also showcased its stay rooms and the natural beauty of Jáchymov and its surroundings, showing images of picturesque landscapes and people recreating. In addition, the Spa dedicated one of its website pages to the history of Jáchymov, as well as an explanation of how the Spa itself is situated within that history.

Few other websites gave any historical information about the town. I also retrieved a few semi-scholarly articles during my brief Internet search. All were composed for and presented at a conference that took place in Jáchymov in 2009 entitled “European City Seminars 2009 – Postindustrial Urban Space.” The articles addressed Jáchymov’s Spa, but were more focused on explaining why Jáchymov, a town with such an interesting and rich history, appears in such a derelict and forgotten state, save for the Spa grounds. They all attempted to explain why Jáchymov, which once housed great wealth and grand renaissance buildings, appears abandoned and forgotten in the present. These articles are relatively brief, but contain a great deal of information on how various recent demographic, economic and political shifts within both the Czech Republic and the world have impacted the town and have led to its present mixed appearance and reputation (Bădescu, & Kovácsová, 2009, Teampau, 2009).

Jáchymov 2010

I returned to Jáchymov in 2010 with the goal of researching Jáchymov’s complicated past, as well as its seemingly divided present, more thoroughly. In particular I wanted to gain an understanding of how the town remembered its past, especially with respect to its
involvement with uranium and its progeny, radon and radium; and to identify what kind of narratives about that past are presently deployed as the town struggles to define its identity and place in a post-socialist and post-industrial Czech state. I hoped to speak with both residents and officials to hear their firsthand accounts of their lives in Jáchnmov, and how the town may have changed over the last few decades. I was curious to know what they felt was the reason for Jáchnmov’s declining state and whether they thought the Spa, which appeared to have a strong association with and presence in the town, seemed to be helping Jáchnmov and its reputation. I was also interested in hearing the residents’ views of the KPV and its activities, including the highlighting of abuses committed by the former communist government via the organization’s ceremonies commemorating those who were forced to work and suffer in Jáchnmov’s former uranium mines and concentration camps.

Four years after my initial trip to the small town of Jáchnmov, I found myself once again on the same bus ride up Highway 25 from the city of Karlovy Vary, this time accompanied by a translator, Lenka Novakova, and a full research agenda. Jáchnmov appeared exactly as I remembered it, the beautiful buildings and well-manicured grounds of the Spa standing in stark contrast to the rest of the town, which appeared nearly abandoned and in a state of disrepair. After disembarking the bus at the stop in the derelict part of town, my translator Lenka and I walked down the main road back towards the Spa. It was a beautiful day. Birds were chirping, the sun was unabated by clouds, and the temperature was just about perfect after a harsh Krušné Hory winter. That being said, the only sounds I heard other than the chirping birds was the faint metallic noises coming from the mining tower above the town and the occasional passing hum of a sport touring motorcycle passing
through town. There were no signs or sounds of people on the streets. Behind us stood the Church of Saint Jáchymov, constructed in 1500, which as a historic monument seemed well maintained in comparison to the surrounding buildings. Situated prominently upon the open grass area in front of the church were various large stones, each engraved with the name of one of the dozen or so work or ‘concentration camps’ that marked the Jáchymov area from 1948 to 1961. These monuments had been placed here through the efforts of the KPV (Figure 12).

We made our way down the road in the direction of the Spa, passing by the crumbing facades and broken windows of abandoned buildings, glancing carefully from time to time into half opened doors that revealed barely visible interiors carpeted with heaps of trash (Figure 13). Every door and window seemed forbidding. We both had the feeling that someone or something that could cause us harm might emerge at any time from these derelict structures (Figure 14). I thought about the information I had retrieved regarding the town’s present bifurcated appearance and continued to think about why the majority of the town appeared in such a desperate state.

A pleasant break from my racing thoughts came when we stumbled upon two Czech boys, around the age of 11, who were selling rocks on the side of the road. Lenka bartered shrewdly with the young businessmen over a particular rock they said was special, and ended up paying around 10 crowns (approximately 50 cents) for it. As we left, the boys told her that it was special because it “glowed in the dark.” While I doubted the validity of the boys’ claim
that the rock could glow\footnote{Contrary to popular belief, radioactive elements themselves do not emit visible light (energy). Radioactive elements do release energy during the decay process, though this energy is not within our visible spectrum. In order to create visible light, radioactive elements require interaction with other types of matter.}, I did not dispute that the rock collected within the town most likely contained radioactive elements which are commonly and falsely depicted in popular culture as being luminescent.

I was reminded that for the past century and into the present, radioactive elements such as uranium and its progeny, radon and radium, appear to have played an integral role in defining the town of Jáchymov. And this, accordingly, would become the central focus of my field inquiries that summer. Through my interviews with different people and organizations associated with the town, it seemed as though these elements were assigned the role of either heroes or villains, who brought either fame or infamy to the small mountain town. Each conversation uncovered yet another story of how uranium and its progeny, either directly or indirectly, initiated major transitions in the town’s economy, demography, and reputation -- regionally, nationally, and globally.

Among the several narratives I encountered of the town’s history as it has related to uranium, the most prominent seem to be the two contrasting narratives recounted by the Spa and the KPV. One reason for this might be that both the Spa and KPV are relatively large organizations with the means to promote themselves. The impression I got from town residents, however, is that they feel they have little say over the narratives promoted respectively by the Spa and the KPV, and seem very unhappy with both of these contrasting depictions. In fact, many people I spoke to within the town held little regard for either the
Spa or the KPV, claiming that neither has attempted to improve the current state of the town, and that both have actually contributed to Jáchymov’s continued decline.

Geographer Doreen Massey reminds us that while it is true that the past influences the present, it is also important to realize that the present interprets the past in order to legitimize a particular understanding of the present in a battle to define what is to come in the future (Massey, 1997). As I regarded the Spa and KPV’s relatively contrasting historical narratives, and the apparent irrelevance of these narratives to the concerns of the town’s residents, I began to suspect that the narratives they were publicizing about Jáchymov were constructed primarily to support each organization’s present initiatives and future goals.

The Spa wishes to project an almost romantic image of Jáchymov’s past and to portray itself and its ‘therapeutic water’ as the constant and dependable defining presence within the town for over a century. The narrative places great emphasis on the Spa being an integral part of the town’s former fame and success, and points to the fact that the Spa’s unique radon treatments continue to be in considerable demand, attracting tourists to Jáchymov who seek the purported medical benefits of these radioactive therapies. In this narrative the town’s long association with uranium and its progeny is treated positively; and the radon spa in particular is portrayed as the almost naturally dominant asset of the town, essential to Jáchymov image and survival, both now and in the future.

The KPV, on the other hand, seems to concentrate on narrating a particularly negative history of town, focusing its efforts on the Jáchymov area’s history between 1948 and 1962 as an industrial uranium mining operation that utilized the labor of political prisoners of the
former Czechoslovak communist government, and on the horrific conditions of work in the mines and life in the concentration camps. In this narrative, the association of the town with uranium and its by-products has a strongly negative connotation tied to the prisoners’ contracted cancers and other disorders from their extended exposure to uranium, the brutally abusive conditions under which they labored, and the political injustice of their confinement, not to mention the fact that the ultimate fruit of their labors was utilized to produce destructive atomic weapons in the Soviet Union. Through the KPV’s construction in Jáchymov of monuments and the staging of widely publicized events such as “Jáchymov Hell”, the organization strives to create a permanent, tangible reminder of the suffering and terror imparted by the former communist government. Through this narrative Jáchymov has become a place that people can associate with these horrendous actions; but it also has made the town a destination, almost a place of pilgrimage, to which people may journey to witness for themselves the evidence of these wrongdoings.

The efforts of these two entities to advance their own agendas through narratives and display can be viewed in the context of a tourism and museum literature that highlights the invention of place to attract the tourist “gaze”, and how such narratives and displays are reconciled with reality (Urry, 1995; Pearce, 1992; Hodgkins and Radstone, 2003; Ashworth and Graham, 2005). The conflicting narratives produced by the Spa and the KPV about Jáchymov also seem to be mirrored directly onto the town’s bifurcated built landscape. Though I do not wish to argue that these contrasting narrations of Jáchymov and its radioactive amenities or ‘disamenities’ are necessarily the direct cause of the town’s currently bifurcated landscape, I would suggest that the bifurcation of the town into two
distinctly dissimilar landscapes is exacerbated by these contrasting representations of the town by intensifying the root causes of how they came into existence in the first place.

In the chapters that follow I look deeper into the past and present condition of Jáchymov and the ongoing discourse that has arisen over the town’s place identity and future prospect. In chapter two I detail the town’s historical background, focusing in particular on the last century when the town came to be associated with uranium and its byproducts of radium and radon, and on the events that are believed to have precipitated Jáchymov’s decline over the past forty-or-so years. In chapter three, I lay out in detail the contrasting narratives produced about Jáchymov by the Spa and the KPV respectively, and how these narratives are manipulated to market or “brand” the town in support of the present and future goals of each. I also juxtapose theses narratives and interpretations of Jáchymov’s history against the views and opinions of local authorities and residents. I conclude in chapter four by examining how and why the KPV and Spa have acquired the authority and means to not only interpret the meaning of Jáchymov’s past, but to also decide what this small mountain town will represent in the future. Furthermore, I examine the forces responsible for the bifurcated landscape of the town that mirrors so well the contrasting narrative images of the town promoted by the Spa and the KPV.
Chapter 2: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The aim of this chapter is to provide a relatively brief sketch of the history of Jáchymov beginning with the founding of the town and proceeding to the present, but placing special focus on Jáchymov’s long association with uranium and how that association has brought both approbation and disdain towards this small mountain town. Although it may seem extremely contradictory to present a rather “objective” historical narrative to begin a thesis that seeks to examine and contrast two constructed historical narratives about the town, it is useful as a starting point to have some knowledge of what has happened within the town through time in order to assess how prominent narratives about the past tend to emphasize or omit certain important events in Jáchymov’s history. Having a background that relays the complexities of this particular town also reveals the contextual bias of the contrasting narratives that will be presented.2

Silver mining town

Jáchymov, or Sankt Joachimsthal (Saint Joachim’s Valley) as it was christened, has a long association with mining. The town was founded by Count Štěpán Šlik as an independently governed silver mining town in 1520. Eventually, Jáchymov fell under the

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2 The material presented in this chapter is compiled from various books and articles written about the town and its history, as well as from archival sources and from interviews conducted with town officials and residents. I have attempted to construct from these sources what I believe it to be an accurate and well-balanced depiction of what took place in Jáchymov since its founding, while being fully aware that all source materials are produced within the larger social construct of a particular place and time and therefore inherently contain a certain degree of subjectivity (Chhabra 2008, Foucault 1984). As a result, the historical sketch presented here could itself be viewed as being a constructed narrative, though in the words of Joseph Freeman, “The best we can say of any account is not that it is the real truth at last, but that this is how the story appears now.”
auspices of the powerful Hapsburg Monarchy and became the home of a Hapsburg royal mint. Coins produced in Jáchymov were called “thalers” after “thal,” the German word for “valley” found within the town’s name. Historians in the area maintain that the word eventually came to be spelled and pronounced as “toler,” which they say is the origin of the word “dollar”. At one time, the population of Jáchymov was second only to that of Prague because of the extensive silver mining that took place there.

The mineralogist and physician Georgius Agricola traveled in the 16th century to Jáchymov and many other mining towns located in the Ore Mountains to study and improve mining techniques, as well as to assess the physical health of mining communities. In 1556, Agricola published *De Re Metallica* or “On the Nature of Metals,” which detailed the art of mining, refining, and smelting metals. This work included several woodcuts that depict mining operations in Jáchymov. Agricola was also interested in the health of the mining communities, in particular, the physical effect of heavy and dangerous labor on the miners. This interest motivated him to study the ailments of miners. He alluded in his writing to a common and deadly ailment of the lungs he observed amongst Jáchymov’s miners, which he referred to as “mountain sickness”. At that time the disease was not properly understood, but by the late 1800s it began to be diagnosed as lung cancer (Kabat, 2008:112).

Jáchymov’s silver deposits began to play out around the turn of the 18th century, after which the town’s mining industry turned to other minerals found in the surrounding mountains, such as cobalt which was used to color paint. Also around that time, German Chemist Martin Heinrich Klaproth identified the element uranium after dissolving pitchblende in nitric acid and neutralizing the solution with sodium hydroxide. Pitchblende,
which until that time had no obvious use, was available in great supply in the Jáchnov mines, and once practical uses were found for the newly discovered element, the town’s future began to look brighter (Figure 15).

**Uranium and growth during the 1800s**

Uranium mined at Jáchnov was first used in the 1800s to dye glass crafted by the skilled Sudeten-German glassmakers who called this part of Northern Bohemia (now located in the Czech Republic) home (Emsley, 2001:477). There was even a factory located where the spa in Jáchnov now stands that produced uranium dye used to color ornate glass (Figure 16). The uranium dye gave glass a yellowish-greenish color that glowed in the dark when illuminated with ultra violet light (Figure 17). In later years these pieces were tested using a Geiger counter and found to emit a significant but harmless level of radiation (Betti, 2003:114-5). Many other industries also sprang up within the town throughout the 1800s. A large state-run tobacco factory employed hundreds of area workers. Several other small manufactures sprang up, to produce gloves, toys, suitcases, and soap. A civic brewery established in Jáchnov gained a great deal of notoriety around the area.

Amongst all of this growth, tragedy struck when a fire in 1873 nearly destroyed the entire town. According to historian Oldřich Ježek, “the town lost its original likeness, characterized by houses with fortified walls and high saddle roofs” (2000). Despite this tragedy, 5,000 people living in 600 residences still called the Jáchnov area their home in a census taken in 1891. By the end of the 19th century, the town boasted 30 food stores, 20 restaurants and taverns, and several dozen-trade shops operated by bakers, shoemakers, and
carpenters. There were also social clubs for professional, cultural or sport activities. Jáchymov became accessible by rail in 1896, allowing people to travel easily to and from the area. Prosperous times seemed to have arrived in Jáchymov, though it was not until new uses for uranium and its progeny were discovered that the town came close to regaining the prominence and almost “El Dorado-like status” it had enjoyed in the 16th century as a silver mining town and mint. (Hornátová et. al., 2000:30).

In the late 19th century, Antoine Becquerel, and Pierre and Marie Curie, discovered uranium’s radioactive attribute. When uranium ore decays, one of the products created is another radioactive element called radium, which was first discovered by Marie Curie in pitchblende from Jáchymov. After her discovery, Curie began promoting what she believed to be radium’s health benefits, referring to radium as “a benefit for humanity.” Radium was soon thought to be capable of curing anything from bronchitis to arthritis, from asthma to back aches (Mullner 1999:30). This very rare element was found in abundance in Jáchymov’s mines, as well as in the natural springs that flow through these mines. A New York Times article from November 1921 entitled “Jáchymov District Mines Good for Twenty Years to Come” underscores the global importance of Jáchymov’s radium endowment. The article cites a U.S. Department of Commerce representative as saying, “Although the radium production in the United States is greater as to quantity, the ores of Jáchymov are richer in quality.” Jáchymov’s endowment of this high quality, newly valued commodity led to another economic boom in the town’s history (Radium in Czechoslovakia…, 1921).
Rise of the spa industry

In 1905, a retired miner in Jáchymov started a small business in the basement of his family’s bakery that offered therapeutic baths using water infused with what was then known as “radium gas,” gathered from a nearby flooded uranium mine known as Werner. The miner began using the water from the mine after noticing that miners who worked in the knee high water that filled the mineshaft felt as though the joints in their legs were relieved of pain (Bláha, Personal Communication, 2010). To obtain water for each bath, the miner journeyed to the mine with a watertight barrel on his back, which he filled and brought back (Figure 18). This small business idea quickly grew, and in 1912 the world’s first radon spa appeared in Jáchymov to accommodate the upper crust of society eager to experience the health benefits of the new radon treatments. By 1913 the Spa was attracting 2,500 guests a year. Among its celebrity visitors during the first half of the century was the first president of Czechoslovakia, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, Madame Marie Curie, and King Faud of Egypt. The success of the Spa elicited a boom of local entrepreneurship among town residents, who profited from renting rooms in their homes to those coming to the spa for treatments (Ježek, Personal Communication, 2000).

This prosperity was curtailed by the First World War, during which the annual number of visitors dropped to less than one-third of pre-war totals. The defeat of Germany and Austria-Hungary in 1918 brought further change. Jáchymov became part of the newly

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3 The water was actually infused with the gaseous element radon. Radon is a product of the radioactive decay of the radium. As radon had not yet been classified during the first few decades of the 20th century, it was simply referred to as “radium gas.”
formed, multi-ethnic Czechoslovak state, which had a very large impact on the town’s identity and industries.

**Sudetenland Germans and the Czechoslovak State**

Until 1918 Jáchymov was known as Sankt Joachimsthal and had a strongly German identity. The town is located in what was known as the Sudetenland, a heavily German-settled area along the Czech borders with Germany, Poland and Austria. Quite suddenly, people who had been identified for centuries as being Germans, and who had lived their lives under the authority of Germanic states, found themselves within Czechoslovak territory and subject to the authority and laws of the new Czechoslovak government. The names of cities were changed, and though Sudetenland Germans were allowed to establish some sort of self-governance within their territory, Czech officials were given leadership positions. Approximately 90% of the population of Jáchymov was registered as having German nationality (Burachovič, Personal Communication, 2010) And like many ethnic Germans living elsewhere in the Sudetenland, residents of the town felt a great deal of animosity towards the Czechoslovak government. Encouraged by a resurgent Nazi Germany on the other side of the border, many began to push for the separation of the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia (Glassheim, 2005:176).

Many of Jáchymov’s prominent industries that had previously belonged to the now defunct Austria-Hungarian Empire were transferred to the authority of the new Czechoslovak state. These state-run industries included the uranium dye factory, the mines, and the Spa. All were sold by the state to private companies, which proved to be both good and bad. The
sale of the Jáchymov mines proved beneficial. The company that bought the mines modernized many aspects of the operation. This included the construction of several miles of high-tension electrical lines and a distribution network that extended to the town, which up until that time had relied on an inadequate thermal power station. On the negative side, the Spa was purchased by a British entrepreneur who promptly drove the establishment into such a financial ruin that it was forced to close all but one of its buildings. This downturn ended only after the Spa was re-purchased by the state and improvements were made.

The improvements made the Spa prosperous again. People from all over the world were again arriving in Jáchymov to partake in the Spa’s special radium treatments. Unfortunately, this success was short lived as the Sudetenland was transferred to Germany in 1938 in the wake of the Munich Agreement. This led to a substantial decline in Jáchymov’s population as ethnic Czechs fled the area, which was soon followed by the economic dislocations of the war years.

**World War II and uranium’s new strategic importance**

During the period immediately following the war, the town was relatively empty. While some of the population decline may be attributed to war casualties, the absence of the majority of Jáchymov’s residents was due to a Czechoslovak government decree that forced ethnic Germans to leave the country. Known as the “Beneš Decree,” this ruling was issued by President Edward Beneš in May of 1945 and ordered the involuntary deportation of the majority of the Sudeten-Germans as punishment for their support of the atrocities committed by Nazi Germany during the war. This “retribution relocation” process was at times very
violent. Some Sudetenland Germans were shot and hung as part of the process of carrying out this decree. The Sudetenland Germans had lived in the area for hundreds of years, and had no other family or friends to turn to for help outside of Czechoslovakia (Frommer 2005) (Figure 19).

World War Two had other drastic effects on Jáchymov. Shortly after “Little Boy” and “Fat Man” were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945, Soviet Army forces occupied Jáchymov, knowing full well that the town possessed the richest and most well-known uranium mines in continental Europe. As reported by General Boček, Chief General of Staff of the Czechoslovak army, “From their questions, it became apparent that their [the Soviets] interest in our [Jáchymov’s] uranium mines was strong” (Zeman & Karlsch, 2008:70). Jáchymov’s uranium was of strategic importance to the Soviet Union, which made it imperative that the post-war government of Czechoslovakia be sympathetic to Soviet interests. Czechoslovakia became the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in February 1948 following a coup d'état in which Communists backed by the Soviet Union took control of the country. By September of 1945, Red Army soldiers controlled the uranium mines at Jáchymov. Workers who wished to enter the town’s mine pits required a special pass and were subjected to a body search. Uranium ore mined at the site was not allowed to leave the premises (Ježek, 2010).

The Soviet-Czechoslovak Agreement

In November of 1945, the Czechoslovak government signed a secret agreement with the Soviet Union that gave the latter exclusive access to the uranium mined at Jáchymov.
Interestingly enough, the treaty itself did not reference its subject, which was the uranium at Jáchymov, but appeared to be more of a political treaty. The treaty was primarily negotiated on the Czechoslovak side by Prime Minister Zdeněk Fierlinger, who had considerable connections and sympathies with the Soviet leadership in Moscow. The agreement was concluded without the knowledge of the parliament and the only Czechoslovak representatives present at its signing were Zdeněk Fierlinger, Jan Masaryk, and Hubert Ripka. Fierlinger was serving as Prime Minister, Masaryk, son of the first president of Czechoslovakia Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, was Foreign Minister and Ripka served as Minister of Foreign Trade (Zeman & Karlsch, 2008).

The Czechoslovak government realized that they had a very valuable but finite resource, and because no world price had been set for uranium in the years following World War Two, the government felt it was free to set a market price that took into account both the cost of production and the need to ration the resource to prolong its profitability. The price the government attempted to set was considerably higher than that for uranium being mined in the US and the Congo, but the Czechoslovaks felt confident that Moscow would accept their price. Much to their dismay, Soviet officials were very displeased with this number, insisted that the price of uranium should be no more than the cost of taking it out of the ground, and sent the Czechoslovaks back to Prague to face the insurmountable task of extracting ever-increasing amounts of uranium from Jáchymov’s mines at below cost to be shipped to the Soviet Union (Zeman & Karlsch, 2008).
A new labor force

This large undertaking required the importation of a sizable, new and relatively cheap workforce to carry out the hard labor of mining uranium ore. Civilian laborers constituted a large portion of the workforce, but the government also exempted young able-bodied German men and women from the Beneš decree and allowed them to remain living in Jáchymov as long as they worked in the mines (Burachovič, Personal Communication, 2010). In addition, German prisoners of war (POWs) held by the Soviet Union were transported to and forced to work in the mines at Jáchymov.

Word that German POWs were being used to extract uranium at Jáchymov travelled quickly across the nearby German border, causing protests from international human rights organizations. Under pressure, the Soviet Union suspended the use of German POWs at the site and negotiated their release back to Germany, leaving the Czechoslovak government to pursue other avenues to secure the large amount of labor needed to run the mining operations. While the policy of the Czechoslovak government was to allow only trusted party members to live in border regions, an exception was made for Jáchymov in order to recruit Czechoslovak civilians to the region to work in the mines. The Czechoslovak government, led at that time by President Klement Gottwald, advertised high wages and promised eventual ownership of land, dwellings, and places of business to able-bodied individuals willing to work in the mines (Burachovič, Personal Communication, 2010). These tempting incentives

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4 Mr. Burachovič’s mother, an ethnic German, agreed to work in Jáchymov’s uranium mines to be able to stay with her Czech husband (2010).
5 Historian and longtime resident of Jáchymov Oldřich Ježek said that even though World War Two ended in 1945, he still felt as though Jáchymov continued to be a war zone as it was riddled with Russian-speaking Soviet soldiers in addition to German-speaking prisoners of war; Mr. Ježek had come to associate both languages with the occupation and war he detested so greatly.
brought a sizable number of workers to the town, who were housed along with their families in homes abandoned by the town’s former German residents, though many of these buildings were given over to the administrative activities of the mines. Jáchymov was considered a secret zone (Tomáš, Personal Communication, 2010). To enter the town, individuals were required to have the highest security clearance, which was particularly difficult for many to secure (Tomáš, Personal Communication, 2010). This security regulation prevented many workers from settling in Jáchymov itself. Instead, Czechoslovak authorities constructed a series of quickly and poorly constructed “panelova” or Soviet block-style housing in the neighboring market town of Ostrov. This town was also given schools, shops and health centers that catered to the mines’ workforce. Many of these amenities and conveniences did not exist in Jáchymov (Tomandl, Personal Communication, 2010).

Even with the influx of civilian mine workers, the mining operation still lacked an adequate workforce. To increase productivity the Soviet Union offered to transport Bulgarian miners to the region. The Czechoslovak government considered this an unacceptable arrangement, as they felt that Bulgarian workers under Soviet supervision within their borders would be a threat to Czechoslovak sovereignty and might lead to the Jáchymov mining operations falling completely under Soviet control. The government therefore began searching for other means of supplementing their civilian workforce. In 1947, Czechoslovak authorities began to consider the use of prisoners at the Jáchymov area mines to solve their labor problem.

In 1948 the first prisoners of the newly christened Czechoslovak Socialist Republic were transferred to Jáchymov and its surrounding towns. These individuals were forced to
work at the most undesirable tasks within the extraction, processing and transportation aspects of the uranium mining operations. From 1948 to 1962, approximately 65,000 prisoners of the communist regime were sent to the area to perform forced labor in the uranium mines (Zeman & Karlsch 2008).

Many of these prisoners worked in close proximity to uranium, often with no protection from the radioactivity being emitted from the mines. Indeed, the lives of prisoners at Jáchymov were extremely difficult. These prisoners were referred to as ‘Mukl,’ an acronym for “muž určený k likvidaci” which translates from Czech to English as “a man destined for liquidation.” The continued existence of these ‘muklove’ was viewed by the government as a direct threat to its authority. The treatment these individuals received was a reflection of the government’s desire to rid itself of these risks to the regime. When they were not working, the prisoners were held inside one of 18 prison camps built in and around Jáchymov between 1949 and the early-1960s (Figure 20).

Conditions in the camps were far below adequate, offering the prisoners little shelter from the harsh climate of the Ore Mountains. Prisoners’ boots would freeze to the ground as winter temperatures plunged to well below zero, forcing them to develop strategies to keep themselves warm at night in their uninsulated cells, such as curling up so tight that their

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6 Many prisoners were aware of the potential dangers of radiation exposure. Former prisoner Leo Žídek said he knew of uranium’s insidious properties because he had heard Marie Curie’s early death was attributed to excessive exposure to radiation. Former prisoner Josef Kyzcka was released from working in the mines after eight years because his exposure to radiation had left him with twice the normal amount of white cells. The doctor at the prison gave him 2-3 years to live if he left the mines. Mr. Kyzcka met the doctor again in 1989 and told him “hey you don’t know how to count.” The doctor asked Mr. Kyzcka what he was referring to and Kyzcka said that the doctor had given him 2-3 years to live back in the 1950s. To that comment, the doctor replied, “Be happy that I cannot count well.”

7 In addition to Jáchymov, prison camps were established in nearby cities such as Horní Slavkov, Ostrov, and Eliáš.
bodies could be completely covered beneath the small-sized blankets they were issued (Kyczka and Mandrholec, Personal Interview, 2006). Their daily breakfast ration consisted of a little bit of black coffee which they called ‘mud’. For lunch they were given about 20 spoonfuls of soup in a small enamel cup. For dinner, they would have ‘mud’ again. They also received about 15 decagrams (about .33 pounds) of bread per day. On Fridays they would receive three tiny potatoes and coffee.8

During the early 1960s, the majority of the ‘political prisoners’ working against their will at Jáchymov were released via a presidential pardon. Though these individuals were no longer incarcerated, they continued to be blacklisted by the regime. This meant they were considered to be criminals on probation. If these people were to commit even the most minor offense, receive a speeding ticket for example, they would be arrested again. Former prisoners were also prevented from holding anything but the most menial employment, since the government regarded them as untrustworthy and had the final word about where and in what field people might be employed. Even though they were released from what they described to be the “hell” of Jáchymov, these individuals remained under watchful eye and were restrained by their government as to where they could live and what they could do for a living (Mandrholec & Žídek, 2010, PoliticalPrisoners.eu, 2011).

The mining activity in the Jáchymov area continued after the prisoner labor was pardoned, but ended in the early 1960s with the exhaustion of the uranium supply. Many residents left town and moved to the nearby cities of Ostrov and Karlovy Vary, which offered

8 In a personal interview, former prisoner Josef Kyczka stated “When I was locked up I was 92 kilograms (200 pounds)… Three months later I was 61 kilograms (135 pounds), what a diet!”
more modern amenities and conveniences than Jáchymov had to offer. Since the government viewed the town primarily as a mining operation, few resources were ever dedicated towards making Jáchymov into a community. Since other uranium mining towns, such as Příbram located southwest of Prague, continued to produce considerable yields after Jáchymov’s mines were depleted, many miners moved to these towns to continue their work.

**Jáchymov After Uranium Mining**

The cessation of mining in the Jáchymov area enabled the Spa to reclaim its former prominence as the primary economic force in the town. Now under control of the state, the Spa became known as the “Czechoslovak State Radium Spa, Jáchymov”. It took quite some time for the Spa to resume its role as a major health and tourist destination, but the Spa did manage to start attracting a sizeable number of guests in the 1960s (Ježek, 2000). A substantial renovation of one of the Spa buildings, known as ‘Praha,’ increased the Spa’s capacity to almost six hundred guests. The Spa also became the sole owner of the former ‘Svornost’ uranium mine located at the opposite end of town, from which a pipeline was constructed to carry water from deep within the mine to the Radium Palace. The grounds and other buildings were also refurbished, all of which required a sizable investment by the Czechoslovak state. In 1975, the state funded and constructed an additional building to the Spa complex, the “Akademik Běhounek Spa Hotel.” This building had a more modern appearance and provided an additional 160 rooms for guests receiving radon treatments.

In addition to the Spa regaining some of its former glory, many of the other tourist activities were revived. The town’ once famous ski jump was restored, the area’s first ski lift
was constructed, and the town advocated for the construction of a funicular to transport tourists from Jáchymov to Klínovec, the highest peak in the Ore Mountains. In addition, the mining infrastructure was gradually dismantled; mining heads and structures were destroyed, mine pits covered, and the remnants of the former prison camps demolished. Vacation cottages were constructed, which attracted a modest number of tourists.

While the end of mining in Jáchymov lifted the ominous veil of barbed wire from the area, enabling the Spa to restart and tourism to return to the town, the rest of Jáchymov slipped quickly into its new role of being just another sparsely inhabited border town, robbed of its valuable natural resource, and left without a means to employ those who remained. Jáchymov was downgraded from its once strategic importance in the eyes of the Czechoslovak government, and came to resemble many other towns in Northern Bohemia that had experienced the extraction and depletion of their valuable, underground resources during the years following World War Two. Like Jáchymov, brown coal mining towns, such as Most and Cheb, endured large-scale environmental and economic disturbances that negatively affected their demographics and status within Czechoslovakia, and harmed the health of the population (Jrabek, 1997:217).

In Jáchymov, the only remaining economic driver other than the Spa was Škoda, a Czech automotive manufacturer, which turned Jáchymov’s main street into an experimental trolley bus test track. This span of mountain road was ideal for road tests as it was steep and at times treacherous. Škoda constructed a manufacturing plant in Ostrov, a larger town situated about 15 minutes from Jáchymov, which employed a considerable workforce. Škoda deemed this location more ideal that Jáchymov, as Ostrov was left with a considerable
amount of housing and residential comforts after serving earlier as a living space for civilian uranium miners and their families. Ostrov was also better connected to the rest of the country via rail and improved roads. Development in the Jáchymov area had, in contrast, been stifled by the dramatic demographic transitions and limited access to the area imposed by uranium mining. Furthermore, though Jáchymov had once enjoyed railroad connections with neighboring metropolises, these lines were all decommissioned once mining had ceased. The roadway leading through the town was rough and at times converted, as mentioned above, to a test track, making any large-scale transportation to and from the town difficult. The enforced seclusion of the town during the uranium mining era was now relegating this once booming, strategically important town into irrelevance.

In addition to repairing and augmenting the Spa, the state funded other ventures in Jáchymov. In the 1960s, the state financed the renovation and transformation of the 16th century micovna into a museum that highlighted the town’s 16th century mining industry as well as traditional clothing and farming practices of the region. In the 1980s, the state funded the renovation of the historic “Hornícký Dům” or “Miner’s House” building located close to the mincova at the opposite end of town from the spa grounds. This renovation endowed the building with a restaurant and one of just two “top of the line” movie theaters in all of Czechoslovakia. Though this may seem comical to some, other outcomes of Czechoslovak central planning, particularly those that sought to solve perceived “social problems”, have had very significant and devastating effects for countless individuals, families and

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9 Czech Historian Tomáš Dvořák, who was born in Jáchymov, told me his father was one of those in charge of the renovation of the “Hornický Dům” and laughed as he relayed the ill-thought-out government “central planning” decision to put one of two high tech theaters in the entire Czechoslovak state in a town with such a small population (Personal Communication, 2010).
communities. The group impacted most significantly by these policies was the Roma people; a cultural group that had lived and wandered in what was then known as Czechoslovakia for hundreds of years and subjected to continuous prejudice and disdain (Kaldova, 1991).

Around the time Jáchymov was struggling to recover from the dislocations caused by the cessation of uranium mining, the Czechoslovak government was undertaking a centrally planned campaign to assimilate and settle thousands of Slovakian Roma into Bohemia and Moravia. To accomplish its goal of relocating and settling Slovakian Roma, the Czechoslovak government passed a law, known as “Law 74”, which essentially deprived the Roma people of the right to live nomadically, making it obligatory for those within the Czech lands to live a sedentary lifestyle (Kalvoda, 1991:97). Because Jáchymov and Czechoslovakia’s border regions had recently experienced significant out-migration, the empty homes of the border villages presented an ideal space for the Czechoslovak government to resettle many Roma families in the 1960s and 1970s. The dramatic relocation of the Roma people initiated by “Law 74” did not have the desired outcome. Many residents of Jáchymov repeatedly blame the majority of the town’s hardships on the Roma people who were relocated to the area in the 1970s. Residents state that the buildings in town are in such a sorry state because Roma people squat in them, abuse them until they are unlivable, and then move onto another vacant building to repeat their pattern.¹⁰

¹⁰ One resident cited the case where an old, historic home was horrifically damaged because the Roma people squatting inside lost control of their indoor camp fire and fled, letting the fire grow to an unmanageable and destructive size before it could be extinguished (Personal Communication, 2010).
A world-wide scare about the dangers of radon gas in the 1980s brought yet another blow to the reputations of Jáčymov and its spa. Several high profile stories about the dangers of indoor radon were published around the world. In particular, there was a study published by the U.S. Public Health Service in the 1970s that detailed the discovery of high levels of radon in a Florida housing unit built with materials made from uranium mine tailings (Hanson, 1989:7). In 1984, considerable further attention was directed towards the dangers of indoor radon exposure when a worker at a Pennsylvania nuclear power plant set off radiation monitors when entering the plant. Because the radon content of his home was so great, he had carried a sizeable amount of radon gas on his person after leaving his house (Harvard Health Letter, 2007:4). During the years that followed, several other high profile radon-related stories were published, which brought about a mass fear of this “colorless, odorless killer” (Murphy, 2005). People all over the world began testing their homes for radon and spending thousands of dollars installing equipment to remove the radioactive gas.

Several areas in the Czech Republic have considerable amounts of radon in the soil. According to the Radon Programme of the Czech Republic, Jáčymov’s soil and buildings contain a large amount of radon (Thomas, Personal Communication, 2010). The radon levels were so bad when measured in the late 1970s, the only school in the town had to be closed.
down as it was deemed a danger to children’s health. The children were sent to neighboring Ostrov to receive their education.\footnote{Former resident and historian Tomáš Dvořák said that he and other children from Jáchymov were taunted by children in Ostrov who told them that they were glowing from the large amount of radioactivity they had been exposed to in Jáchymov (Personal Communication, 2010).}

While it was widely known by the Czechoslovak government that Jáchymov and its homes were heavily contaminated with dangerous ionizing radiation as a result of high radon concentrations, little was done to educate and help Jáchymov’s citizens rid their homes of this hazard (Tomáš, Burachovič, Personal Communication, 2010). The government tired to lower the amount of radon in homes, albeit unsuccessfully. The high concentration of radon in homes was officially blamed on the fact that several of the homes in Jáchymov contained entry passages to old silver mine shafts (Grulich, Personal Communication, 2010). One such example is an old home located by the town’s mincovna (now the museum) that literally had a 40 meter long, horizontal mine shaft dug into the mountainside that started in the back hallway (Figure 21). These shafts were constructed by people who wanted to keep their private mines and potential fortunes a secret from the rest of the townspeople during the town’s silver mining boom. Authorities believed that these shafts were allowing radon gas to seep into homes, creating dangerously high levels of ionizing radiation.

To solve this problem, the government awarded each effected household a predetermined amount of money to help defray the cost of closing off the entrances of these shafts with several meters of concrete. This initiative placed a great deal of faith in the citizens of Jáchymov to use the money they were given to actually pay for this construction. In fact, many people simply built a brick wall across the front of the entrance and kept most
of the money for other purposes. Rather than mitigating the amount of radon in the homes, this initiative actually had the opposite effect, as the closing off of these mine shaft entrances increased flooding and water that contained radon was absorbed into the walls of the town’s buildings (Anonymous Residents of Jáchymov, Personal Communication, 2010).

As this first initiative to mitigate the high concentration of radon gas in Jáchymov’s buildings failed, the government proposed another solution to help homeowners remove radon from their homes. This initiative was to encourage homeowners to invest in a sump pump, a device designed to remove water from a building’s basement. Authorities also published pamphlets on how homeowners could modernize their homes to protect them from radon (Figure 22). In general, citizens’ responses to these solutions were lukewarm, with many saying they were not prepared to pay for either the initial investment in a sump pump and basement draining system or the continued costs of paying for electricity to run the pump. Citizens also said that they did not like the noise of the pump. Around Jáchymov, the costs of radon mitigation seemed to outweigh the benefits, and many did not see radon as being a problem.12

### Jáchymov’s Shift to Privatization

In 1989, a series of peaceful protests known as the Velvet Revolution brought an end to the communist Czechoslovak state. Several radical reforms were swiftly implemented, which overturned many of the economic, political and social institutions that had been staunchly upheld over sixty years of communist rule. Politically, the country transitioned

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12 A lifelong resident of Jáchymov said, during an interview, that the oldest woman in Jáchymov lives in the house with the most radon, in addition to observing that people get sick when they leave Jáchymov, not while they are living there (Personal Communication, 2010).
from an authoritarian regime to a more democratic form of governance. In 1990, the country held free legislative elections for the first time since the former communist government took power in 1948. The outcome of these elections led to the removal of the communist party and the rise of more centrist political groups that were formed after the revolution.

Economically, Czechoslovakia adopted a free market economy, and private property ownership returned after the new government recognized the right to own land as a basic human right. Property expropriated by the state during the mid-20th century was quickly repatriated to those who owned the property when it was taken, though only if it was taken by the state after 1948 (Strong, Reiner & Szyrmer, 1996).

These dramatic transitions had intense and lasting effects on the small town of Jáchymov. The town of Jáchymov consistently has not been represented in Czech government and therefore, the town’s interests are not being represented on a national level. No residents of Jáchymov have ever won a seat in parliament and the residents do not foresee anyone in the town as running for office in the future. Representatives from the 1st parliamentary region, of which Jáchymov is part, hail from other towns and keep their communities’ interest in mind when supporting and voting on legislation. Jáchymov’s currently depressed economic status, to be discussed later, prohibits the town from hiring lobbyists in Prague to represent their interests within national politics (Grulich, Personal Communication, 2010).

This lack of political support and influence is one reason why the national government extends only a meager annual budget to Jáchymov. The town’s budget, the
amount of which was determined by the size of the town’s population and not its needs, is
about 45 million crowns (approximately 2,338,758 USD) a year (Bronislav Grulich, Personal
Communication, 2010). The nearby city of Ostrov, with a population of around ten thousand,
gets the majority of the state funding in the area. Eighty to ninety percent of Jáchnov’s
yearly budget goes to everyday services and operating costs, which leaves little money that
can be dedicated to improving the current derelict state of the town. Because the town has
historic significance within the Czech Republic, Jáchnov receives approximately 50,000
USD a year for historical restoration and maintenance. The majority of this money is
dedicated to the upkeep of the historical Saint Jáchnov Church. The leftover money is used
to maintain roads, as the harsh mountain conditions wreak havoc on the town’s transportation
routes (Grulich, Personal Communication, 2010).

Economically, the post-1989 shift to free-market capitalism impacted the town of
Jáchnov in a negative way. The purchase of many of the town’s run-down properties by
outside speculators, who then failed to improve them or pay taxes has contributed to the
town’s poor physical appearance and diminished tax base. Another detrimental effect was the
establishment in border towns like Jáchnov of foreign companies that manufactured cheap
goods, which could not be produced in their home country for environmental reasons. One
example of this is a German company that established a small factory just outside the town to
manufacture a product deemed too environmentally hazardous to manufacture in Germany.
One day, there was a fire huge in the factory that was incredibly difficult to extinguish due to
the hazardous chemicals inside. Because the company’s administrative offices had been
abandoned at the time of the fire, intentional arson by the company’s owner is suspected, but
since the German company still technically owns the building, it is legally impossible for the
town to reclaim the property to make it commercially useful again (Grulich, Personal
Communication, 2010).

Despite these hardships the town lives on. Founded as a major silver mining town in the 16th century, Jáchymov has once again gained fame due to its natural amenities when at the turn of the 20th century it became the birthplace of radium. Since then, the town of Jáchymov and its radioactive elements has had many reputations, both as a healthful, natural oasis endowed with healing water and home to the world’s first radon spa, and also as a pernicious, reproachful place where people suffered and died while incarcerated under the former Czechoslovak communist government. Presently, Jáchymov is a forgotten town on the decline as it is bereft of any noticeable industry and has been labeled within popular discourse as marginalized, save for the portion of Jáchymov occupied by the Spa. The town’s scenery and reputation appears to exemplify both the affirmative and healthy image of the spa and the devastation and misery of the uranium mining of the 1950s which in part led to the town’s present marginalization.
Chapter 3: CONTRASTING NARRATIVES

The Konfederace politických vězňů (Confederation of Political Prisoners or KPV) and the Léčebné Lázně Jáchymov (Therapeutic Spa of Jáchymov) have each incorporated Jáchymov’s long and robust history into their own publicly-stated narratives about the town. While both associate themselves with Jáchymov and its past, each has produced its own version of the town’s history, and these adaptations are drastically different. The KPV focuses on publicizing a largely negative and highly politicized history of the town that emphasizes the forced labor by the Czechoslovak government of falsely accused political prisoners in Jáchymov between 1948 and 1961. The Spa, on the other hand, wishes to project a more romantic image of Jáchymov’s past while portraying the company and its ‘therapeutic water’ as the constant and dependable defining presence within the town for over a century. These narratives are produced for external consumption; both are intended to draw attention to the town and to promote tourism (although in very different ways); and both are designed to support each organization’s present initiatives and future goals for the town of Jáchymov.

The KPV

The KPV was created in the early 1990s following the Czech Republic’s democratic transition. Initially created as a political party, the primary goal of the KPV was to outlaw the communist party and bring to justice those who committed abuses against Czechoslovak citizens on the behalf of the communist government. While its attempts to become a political party and outlaw the communist party failed, the organization continued as a large advocacy organization dedicated to commemorate those who suffered under the communist
government by creating memorial sites and organizing commemorative events. The membership of the KPV consists largely of former “political” prisoners of the Czechoslovak communist government. In my interactions with KPV members, I learned that these individuals were in fact detained for a variety of reasons. For example, KPV member Zdeňek Mandrholec was a teenager when the communist party took over. He and his friends detested this transition and decided to plot against the government. When the police caught wind of the plot, Mr. Mandrholec and his co-conspirators were swiftly arrested, interrogated, and imprisoned (Personal Communication, 2010). Another member of the KPV, Josef Kyzcka, initially moved to Jáchymov on his own free will to work in the uranium mine as a civilian. While working one day, an old friend of Mr. Kyzcka’s who had emigrated out of Czechoslovakia after 1948 surprised him by asking him to deliver a letter to his family. Knowing that this would be considered sedition, since the friend had emigrated because he did not support the communist government, Mr. Kyzcka refused to do deliver the letter and the friend left. Unfortunately, the Czechoslovak government somehow found out that this exchange had occurred, and even though Mr. Kyzcka did nothing for this individual, the police arrested, interrogated, and imprisoned Mr. Kyzcka (Personal Communication, 2010).

In order to achieve their goals, members of the KPV have spent a considerable amount of time and effort creating memorial sites and organizing commemorative events that serve to remind the public of the abuses the former communist government committed against its citizens. Members of the KPV also spend a substantial amount of time educating younger generations about the evils of communism by taking groups to sites where they were formerly imprisoned to describe the injustices perpetrated against them, so that people who
had never lived under communist rule that the country might never fall under this ideology again. While the organization has memorials and events throughout the Czech Republic, many of their memorials and events are focused on the Jáchymov because of its uranium mines and large prison camps.

The main annual KPV event organized in the Jáchymov area is called “Jáchymov Hell.” This annual, two day event happens around the end of May or early July, and is designed to serve as a get together for former political prisoners and their supporters to commemorate the prisoners who suffered and died working in the mines throughout the Jáchymov area. Attendees meet in Karlovy Vary and are driven around on a chartered bus to different locations, including the nearby towns of Horní Slavkov and Ostrov. The event is known as “Jáchymov Hell” because the state-run company that administered the uranium mining activities throughout the area was headquartered in Jáchymov.

The two day event, which I witnessed in the summer of 2010, ends with a mass at the historic Saint Jáchymov Church, after which everyone gathers outside for a ceremony to remember those who suffered and died. Members of the Czech military show their respect by placing ceremonial wreaths at the KPV memorial outside the church while the military band plays both patriotic and somber songs (Figure 23). Following the military’s portion of the memorial service, prominent local and national political leaders give speeches that express their sorrow and respect for the suffering of those imprisoned by the communist government. The politicians frequently state that the Czech Republic can never return to the way it was during Communist rule and that younger Czech generations need to be educated about the abuses of the former Communist government so that the horrible atrocities that the
“Jáchymov Hell” event commemorates can never happen again. In 2010, speakers included the Mayor of Jáchymov, the Mayor of Boží Dár, the region’s Member of Parliament, and Prague’s Member of Parliament. In an interview, members of the KPV disclosed to me that the current Mayor of Jáchymov does not approve of the “Jáchymov Hell” event because he is affiliated with Social Democratic Party, the most dominant left-leaning party in Czech Republic. (Personal Communication, 2010)

While the Mayor’s affiliation with the Social Democrats may be one reason why he disapproves of the event, another plausible reason might be the amount of negative attention the event brings to Jáchymov on a national scale. Because of the high concentration of important political figures who attend the KPV event each year, national news stations take notice and broadcast stories about the “Jáchymov Hell” event and the town. For some people in the Czech Republic, this may be the only time they ever hear anything about the small Ore Mountain town, and the annual news stories focusing on the “Jáchymov Hell” event undoubtedly leave them with a less than positive view of Jáchymov.

In the churchyard of historic Saint Jáchymov, where the finale of the “Jáchymov Hell” event is held, there are a series of stone statues labeled with the names of the various prison camps that were located in and around the city of Jáchymov. This memorial was installed as a result of efforts made by the KPV. The positioning of this memorial in the town’s treasured historic churchyard is indication of the considerable KPV influence wielded by the organization. This memorial is also the starting point of the “Jáchymov Hell Nature Trail”, a tourist attraction which leads hikers to various sites around the town and countryside to view the remains of the notorious camps and uranium mines. Information about this
memorial nature trail, as well as other publicity about Jáchymov’s uranium mining period, is readily available in the town’s Information Center.

Other prominent memorial sites constructed by the KPV are located outside Jáchymov. One of the best-known is “Věž Smrti” (Tower of Death), which is situated between Jáchymov and the nearby city of Ostrov (Figure 11). This building was constructed in the late 1940s as a processing facility for the uranium mined in the Jáchymov area, and was in operation from the late 1940s into the early 1960s. Věž Smrti also served as the transportation depot from which the powdered uranium was loaded into boxcars bound for the Soviet Union. The facility is referred to as the “Tower of Death” by the KPV as the building has a tall tower and several workers and prisoners who worked at the facility either died at the site or as a result of their tenure laboring at the site. This high death rate was attributed to the sorting and grinding of uranium ore that occurred at the site. Workers and prisoners ground the sorted uranium ore by hand without safety equipment, which resulted in the inhalation of radioactive particles. The inhalation of radioactive particles likely caused terminal health issues for the workers and prisoners, including lung cancer.

The KPV worked with the legislature to include this site on the country’s historical register. The organization has plans to turn this facility into a permanent memorial site and museum that will showcase the lurid and somber aspects of the area’s history associated with uranium mining. While the KPV pushed to create their memorial and museum at the “Věž Smrti,” the communist party, still active in Czech Republic, tried to have the old, condemned building torn down. The action on the part of the communist party was understandable since they knew that this building was physical evidence of the abuses that had occurred, and
would become increasingly symbolic if it were transformed into an anti-communist memorial and museum in the hands of the KPV with the support of the current Czech government.

The KPV has worked to create memorials similar to the “Tower of Death” around the Czech Republic. One example is the recreation of a prison camp near the old uranium mines at Příbram, located south of Prague. The “Vojna Memorial” is a replica of the prison camp that once held inmates who were forced to work in the uranium mines that serves as an impactful reminder of the suffering of those held there. Barbed wire surrounds the perimeter of a complex that consists of desolate barracks and ominous watchtowers. Over the entrance of the recreated camp, there is a sign that reads “Prací ke svobodě” or “Work to freedom,” which is eerily similar to the phrase “Arbeit macht frei” placed on signs over the entrances to a number Nazi concentration camps during World War Two. In the coming years the KPV hopes to re-create at least one of the prison camps that were scattered across the Jáchymov area. This memorial would be an addition to the other memorials constructed in and around the town after 1989.

One of the former uranium mines in the Jáchymov area has been reopened for tourist purposes, and members of the KPV volunteer at the site to take visitors on guided tours of the mine. The volunteers describe in detail their backbreaking and dangerous labor, as well as the torturous living conditions they endured, all the while reminding visitors that it was the former communist government that perpetrated these evils against them. The mine also showcases old mining equipment, including a small and rusty car that tourists are told was packed with workers to take them town into the cold and dangerous bowels of the mines (Figure 24).
In 2006, the KPV worked with the Karlovy Vary Historical Society to create an exhibit in Jáchymov’s Museum to showcase the imprisonment and maltreatment of prisoners under the communist government. An exhibit such as this can be extremely powerful, given the general public’s known tendency to perceive the images depicted in museum exhibits as genuine, (Hodgkins & Radstone, 2003), a fact not lost on the KPV which makes use of its events, museums and exhibits to give legitimate cultural and political authority to the narrative it seeks to promote (Pearce, 1992 via Chhabra, 2007). The exhibit consist of photos, letters, newspaper articles, and formerly confidential government documents that have been collected and displayed to narrate the horrors experienced by the prisoners incarcerated and forced to work in the uranium mines around Jáchymov. Prominent items in this exhibit include: reproductions of the death certificates of prisoners who were killed at the Jáchymov camps by guards, a large black and white photo depicting a large sickle and hammer with a haggard and abused looking man affixed to it with barbed wire (Figure 10), a miniature model of the prison camps in and around Jáchymov, as well as personal correspondences between prisoners and their families. The exhibit frequently and pointedly refers to the prison camps overseen by the communist Czechoslovak government as “concentration camps,” and quotes by well-known Czech intellectuals denouncing communism are prominently displayed around the room. This exhibit clearly relays to visitors that this period of Jáchymov’s and the Czech Republic’s history was extremely negative.

Since the fall of communism in 1989, the KPV has been establishing a narrative about the importance and history of the town that focuses on highlighting the time when the town became the center of a state-run, industrial uranium mining complex that unjustly
exploited prisoner labor to extract the large amounts of uranium need to fulfill the 
Czechoslovak government’s commitment to the Soviet Union. The organization at first 
concentrated their efforts on publicizing this particular time period in Jáchymov to highlight 
the abuses of the former communist government with the ultimate goal of outlawing the 
communist party. Later their mission focused more on remembrance through special events 
and tourist attractions. The efforts of the KPV altered both the reputation and built landscape 
of Jáchymov, constructing monuments and hosting well-publicized events that have turned 
the town into a symbol of communist oppression and injustice, worthy of the epithet 
“Jáchymov Hell.” Should the KPV’s future plans for the town come to fruition, its notoriety 
as a museum of political abuse and shame will be furthered by the reconstruction of one of 
the area’s former prison camps as an inescapable reminder of Jáchymov’s dark decade and a 
half.

The townspeople appear to be somewhat less than comfortable with the vision of the 
KPV, and do not appear to feel as though their interests are best represented by the KPV’s 
narrative of the town. Many lifelong residents of Jáchymov seem to disapprove of the KPV’s 
organized events and the activities held in Jáchymov and feel that the organization has placed 
the spotlight too strongly on a particularly short time and regrettable episode in the town’s 
past, and that this emphasis distracts from what the town might aspire to be. They feel as 
though the efforts of the KPV have brought too much negative press to the town which has 
no present or foreseeable benefits for Jáchymov and those who lived there (Anonymous 
residents of Jáchymov, Personal Communications, 2010).
**Therapeutic Spa Jáchymov**

Therapeutic Spa Jáchymov has also played a major recent role in relaying and interpreting Jáchymov’s past, present and future. This institution is situated on the southern end of Jáchymov, and occupies a significant part of the town. The Spa is the biggest industry and largest employer in the town, attracting approximately 20,000 paying guests each year. While the Spa likes to cite this impressive figure, many people living within Jáchymov report that the spa actually has a low occupancy rate and is in fact struggling to attract patients (Anonymous residents of Jáchymov, Personal Communications, 2010). The Spa grounds have been successfully renovated in recent years to present a strikingly luxurious contrast to the surrounding dereliction. Thought the Spa in its current state has existed for approximately eighteen years, the complex and its unique radon treatments came into being at turn of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. The Spa goes out of its way to highlight its past, marketing itself as the first radon spa in the world. It boasts of its long history within the town of Jáchymov and of the remarkable ability of the town’s radon water to produce ‘healing effects’ in its patients. The Spa seems to carefully balance its promotional image as both a historic and established spa, while also being scientifically sound and modern enterprise.

The well-publicized founding story of the Spa relates how a miner opened a small bath spa in the basement of a bakery after seeing his fellow miner’s knee and joint pain improve after wading in the water that collected on the floor of a particular uranium mine called “Svornost” located at the northern end of Jáchymov. The radon infused water quickly gained notoriety as a health cure, and led eventually to the establishment of the luxurious spa complex in Jachymov, known as the “Radium Kurhaus”, with its wealthy and famous clientele. Other spa houses and private bed and breakfasts were built gradually, and by the
1930s up to nine thousand spa guests a year visited the Spa to utilize its curative radium water. (Bláha, Personal Communication, 2010) The narration of the Spa’s history continues by stating that the Spa underwent a few bad years during “the time period after World War II” as it was “adversely influenced” by the boom in uranium mining, which harmed the town’s reputation as well as its appearance, defamed the Spa, and undermined its pivotal role in the town’s economic well-being. With the discontinuation of the uranium mining in the early 1960s, the narrative celebrates the restoration of the Spa once again as the number one interest and economic focus of the town. As it fell under the auspices of the state, Jáchymov’s radon spa became one of many state-run spas in Czechoslovakia that treated citizens with a set catalogue of treatments, save for the institution’s unique radon baths. During the socialist era, the Spa was enlarged in 1975 with the opening of the modern Akademik Běhounek Spa Hotel and again seventeen years later with the Curie Spa Hotel (Léčebné lázně Jáchymov, 2011).

The triumphant ending of the narrative relates how, after the Velvet Revolution in 1989, the Spa was privatized and assumed its current identity as the joint-stock company, Léčebné lázně Jáchymov a.s., and how the new ownership undertook the long, arduous and expensive process of restoring, renovating and technically enhancing the Spa facilities to attract customers in the open market. Today, the Spa attracts not only Czechs whose treatments are sometimes paid for by the Czech government health plan, but also Germans looking to partake in the Spa’s unique treatments for a price dramatically lower than similar radon treatments administered in German spas. In recent years, the profile of the Spa’s clientele has expanded to include customers from the Middle East who travel to Jáchymov to
undergo this particularly unique form of treatment. In effect, the Spa narrative paints a rosy picture of Jáchymov’s future as a center of the growing global phenomenon of ‘medical tourism’ -- the practice of traveling abroad to receive medical treatments at a cheaper price than, or to undergo treatments that they may not be able, in the home country. (Turner 2010, 2011)

The Spa specializes in treatments for joint disorders, diseases of the peripheral nervous system and of the spine, skin diseases, and symptoms of diabetes or gout. It also provides care for patients who are post-operative, or who suffer from traumatic incidences. Patients are given one radon treatment every 24 hours by medical health professionals. The Spa’s traditional radon treatment consists of the patient lying in a bathtub specially designed to be filled from the bottom. If the radon-infused water were to fall from an elevated spigot to the floor of the bathtub, as with traditional bathtubs, there is a risk that this disruption would cause the radon to escape into the air and could cause potential harm to the patient and attendant if they were to inhale the radioactive element. Once the tub has been filled, the patient is then instructed to remain motionless for 20 minutes, so as to not disturb the water (Figure 25). The water temperature cannot exceed 37 degrees Celsius or else the radon gas would escape. After 20 minutes, the patient is instructed to get out of the water and leave the room immediately, because after about 20 minutes, the radon in the water will begin to be naturally released from the water. Each room is also equipped with a powerful air pump system that filters the radon out of the room (Dráska, Personal Communication, 2010)

This treatment exposes the body to low doses of alpha radiation, which are not strong enough to penetrate a piece of paper. The alpha radiation is absorbed through the skin and
stimulates inactive parts of living cells that are able to seek out defective cells and either heal or eliminate them, which is why the treatments are effective at treating degenerative disorders. The Spa also claims that the treatments can relieve a patient’s pain by lessening inflammation as the radiation helps rid the body of free radicals. The Spa uses low doses of radiation for medical purposes in compliance with regulations set forth by the Czech Republic’s State Office for Nuclear Safety. (Bláha, Personal Communication, 2010)

Léčebné lázně Jáchymov goes to great lengths to market its radon treatments as safe and health enhancing, most likely to counteract the negative popular reputation the gaseous element acquired after many governments and organizations around the world alerted people to the cancer-causing dangers associated with exposure to radon (EPA, 2011). The Spa’s promotional materials and website attempt to address what the Spa regards as an “unreasonable apprehension about the health risks of radon”, arguing instead that radon is “genial healer” rather than a “radioactive killer” (Léčebné Lázně Jáchymov, 2011). The spa assures potential guests that any concerns they may have about radon exposure are “absolutely unnecessary.” The institution’s promotional team has also created a friendly radioactive atom named ‘Radonek’ who serves as the Spa’s mascot and offers helpful tips about the Spa and entertainment for children at official Spa events (Figure 26). The promotional materials offer assurances that patients are monitored by physicians for any potential health risks throughout their stay. To add legitimacy to their treatments, the Spa refers frequently to the testimonials of repeat customers who have returned to the spa for ten, twenty or thirty years which is evidence of the radon treatments’ safety and effectiveness (Bláha, Personal Communication, 2010).
The Spa offers other programs and procedures that promote wellness beyond the popular radon treatments, such as salon services, massage, and acupuncture. While the majority of the clients are older adults and seniors, the spa is making an effort to attract a younger clientele, including couples and children. To do so the Spa orients its advertisements to the “tourism” theme, promoting the natural beauty of the area and encouraging Spa goers and their families to mix treatments with the healthy enjoyment of Jáchymov’s outdoor areas by hiking, biking, and skiing. The Spa’s promotional materials portray the town of Jáchymov as a mountain oasis, blessed with remarkably therapeutic waters, and as a great place for couples and families to visit to increase their wellness in luxury and comfort (Léčebné lázně Jáchymov, N/A) (Figure 27).

The Spa fervently believes that the images deployed in its promotional materials are having a positive effect on the reputation of both the Spa and the town (Personal Communication, 2010). These materials take the form of paper brochures, compact disks, an Internet website, and online videos; and are available in several different languages. The Spa also publishes a quarterly newsletter that showcases the activities of the Spa and occasionally the town of Jáchymov. The Spa is also prominently showcased in publicity materials co-financed by the European Union and the Karlovy Vary Region under the title: “Jáchymov and Environs – Mountains, Spas, Nature”. A book entitled “Jáchymov – City of Silver, Radium and Therapeutic Water,” was also published by the Spa in 2000. This book, which was compiled and written by the Léčebné lázně Jáchymov and lifelong Jáchymov resident Tomáš Ježek, contains a short yet thorough history of the town, with the Spa and its past, present, and future liberally interspersed throughout the text of the book, thus asserting and
affirming the vital role of the Spa in the town for over a century. The book is written in a scholarly and authoritative style, but mostly focuses on the lighter aspects of the town’s history and only briefly nods to more tragic times in Jáchymov’s past, such as the uranium mining after World War Two. This historical narrative is available in all stay rooms at the Spa resort, and has been translated into several different languages. Copies have also been distributed to libraries across the Karlovy Vary region. The Spa clearly is actively engaged in publicizing a version of Jáchymov’s history which legitimizes its presence in the town and complies with the idyllic image of the town and its surroundings desired by the Spa for the purpose of attracting more clientele.

There is widespread feeling among town residents, however, that the economic benefits of the Spa’s presence are of little matter to the town. Most of the patients visiting the Spa stay exclusively on the grounds and are unlikely to spend much money in the town itself. Moreover, the Spa generates few employment opportunities for town residents. The Spa hires primarily educated workers, the likes of which do not normally live in Jáchymov. One resident informant stated that the spa had given her teenage child a summer job to act as an aid for one of the facility’s disabled patients, but was quick to add that positions like that are few and far between (Anonymous resident of Jáchymov, Personal Communications, 2010). Several townspeople asserted their belief that the spa is failing, and that they did not expect it to survive much longer within the town (Personal Communications, 2010). Residents also were also convinced that the Spa does not contribute much to the town economically, nor does the Spa do much to improve the derelict condition and negative reputation the town has acquired over time. (Personal Communication, 2010).
The Spa and its place in the town’s history are also depicted in the Jáchymov Museum and Information Center. The museum has an exhibit on the Spa, showcasing the various instruments used over time in the Spa’s treatments and the fame the Spa has brought to Jáchymov. This exhibit is much older than the nearby KPV display, reflecting the fact that its content was deemed acceptable by the former Czechoslovak communist government state. The exhibit about the Spa is placed amongst and seamlessly integrated with exhibits depicting many other highlights of the last two centuries, including Jáchymov’s uranium glass and tobacco industries. Publicity materials published by the Spa itself are also on display in the Jáchymov Information Center.

Though Jáchymov has been in existence since the 16th century, the town only recently gained its reputation as a destination for spa goers. Founded at the turn of the 20th century, Jáchymov’s Radon Spa rose quickly to prominence both locally and internationally. When these predominant discourse regarding the town’s endowment of uranium ore shifted unfavorably during the 1940s, so did the reputation of the town, and the Spa activities were discontinued until the 1960s when they were re-established under government auspices. After the Velvet Revolution in 1989, the Spa was privatized and investors contributed a great deal of capital to restore and enhance the facilities in order to make the spa competitive in the new capitalist marketplace. The Spa’s radon treatments set it apart from other competing spas in the area and the ability to claim the title of “world’s first radon spa” was deployed to give it an edge in the global market for medical tourism.

To legitimize its position as the key economic asset and hope for the town’s future, the Spa actively publicizes a narrative of Jáchymov’s past that caters to such assertions, often
omitting less than favorable periods and events in the town’s history. The Spa also works to promote the town of Jáchymov in a way that is attractive to potential patients, relaying images of a serene town surrounded by natural beauty, which are not actually very representative of the town’s current depressed state. These efforts to gloss over the derelict physical appearance of much of the town, along with the fact that the Spa is unable or unwilling to provide significant employment and economic benefit to large parts of the town’s population, casts doubt in the minds of many residents on the veracity of the Spa’s narrative about its role in the town’s past and future (Anonymous residents of Jáchymov, Personal Communications, 2010).

The conflicting narratives produced by the Confederation of Political Prisoners and the Therapeutic Spa of Jáchymov about their past and present associations with the town of Jáchymov and its natural endowment of uranium appear to have been constructed as a means to legitimize their respective political (in the case of the KPV) or entrepreneurial (in the case of the Spa) goals and to secure their vision of what they believe Jáchymov is to be known for in the future. These contrasting narratives also seem to be mirrored directly onto the town’s built landscape, and explain in part why the town presents itself so differently depending on from which end of the town a visitor might enter. While these contrasting narrations of Jáchymov and its radioactive amenities or ‘disamenities’ may not be the direct cause of the town’s currently bifurcated landscape, the strategic narratives being crafted by the KPV and Spa seem to be exacerbating the bifurcation of the town by emphasizing such contrasting visions of Jáchymov’s past, present and future.
Chapter 4: JÁCHYMOV AS COMMODITY AND SYMBOL

Over the past two decades, the Therapeutic Spa of Jáchymov and the Confederation of Political Prisoners have been working to promote their agendas within and around the town of Jáchymov. The Spa has renovated and improved their facilities creating a beautiful section of Jáchymov that emanates health, luxury and affluence. In its promotional materials, published both nationally and internationally, the Spa portrays the town as a place of healing and relaxation, where natural beauty awaits all who come to the town to stay and recreate. Furthermore, the promotional materials narrate a rich and romantic history of Jáchymov, highlighting the more jubilant and prosperous periods of the town’s past while omitting darker times. Throughout the Spa’s interpretation of Jáchymov’s past, present, and future, the radioactive elements of uranium and its progeny radium and radon are depicted as a great amenity that has brought success and fame to a remote mountain town. Radon, in particular, is consistently represented by the Spa as positive and health-enhancing, as is evident in such catchy phrases in the promotional pamphlets as “Radon: The healing source deep from the earth,” and “Radon is energy, energy is life.” This positive depiction of Jáchymov has been carefully crafted to enhance the Spa’s image as it embarks on a new and updated branding campaign designed to set it apart from other competing spas in the Czech Republic, as well as the considerable number of other radon spas around the world.

The KPV has likewise demonstrated an ability to interpret Jáchymov’s landscape and reputation in support of its own political goals, and in ways strikingly different from and counter to the efforts of the Spa. Through its work over the last two decades, the KPV has turned the town of Jáchymov into a living memorial to those who suffered and died while
unjustly held captive by the Czechoslovak communist government and forced to labor under deplorable conditions. Through memorials, museums and events, the KPV has transformed the town into a popularly understood symbol of the corruption and brutality of the former regime. They have successfully petitioned the government to add sites like the “Tower of Death” to the country’s historical register and plan to recreate former prison camps around the Jáchymov area to retain physical reminders of the abuses perpetrated by the communist regime. Throughout the KPV’s interpretation of Jáchymov’s recent past, present, and future, the radioactive elements of uranium and its progeny radium and radon are depicted as a great disamenity that has brought pain and suffering not only to the town of Jáchymov, but to the whole world. Members of the KPV tell stories of how they were subjected to dangerously high levels of radiation while working in the uranium mines and their ancillary processing facilities, and how prisoners acquired health problems during or after their tenure at the Jáchymov camps due to their exposure to high levels of radiation. Both the KPV and the Spa hope to bring attention and tourism to the town of Jáchymov, albeit of a very different kind.

The efforts of the KPV and Spa to achieve their contrasting goals appear to have been mirrored on the small mountain town, which presents a built landscape that simultaneously appears to be well-maintained and opulent, but also overwhelmingly neglected and derelict. This is not to say that the dereliction is directly the work of the KPV, but the negative image of the area being portrayed by this group is certainly reinforced and perhaps enhanced by the appearance of the desolation that characterizes a large part of the townscape. In contrast, the relatively neat and prosperous looking part of town in the vicinity of the Spa campus appears
to be more in line with the narrative presented by the Spa, but is actually quite limited in its extent and impact – a fact that is quite readily apparent to many residents of the town.

Jáchymov’s overall state of decline and marginalization can be mostly attributed to the policies implemented by the government over the last half century. The impacts of these policies left the town without any kind of broad-based means to be successful in the post-1989 democratic and capitalist restructuring of Czechoslovakia, or later Czech Republic. The branding of the town in a post-1989 economy have largely defaulted therefore to the efforts of the KPV and the Spa, whose efforts have unfortunately failed to coincide with the needs of the small number of residents in Jáchymov who seem to have any interest in thinking about the aesthetics and meaning of the town. Jáchymov’s impotence in regards to assuaging its current marginalization has allowed entities that possess both political and economic support, like the KPV and the Spa, to remake the image of the town in ways that serve their own interests.

How have the efforts of the Spa and the KPV exacerbated Jáchymov’s physical dereliction and economic marginalization via their campaigns to label Jáchymov as either ‘heaven’ or ‘hell?’ The Spa’s impact on the town’s landscape is evident via its efforts to renovate and enhance its assets, which have improved the appearance of the one part of the town set to receive medical tourists. Through its monuments and memorial sites, the KPV has also altered the landscape, and hopes these alterations will continue in a more dramatic way with the reconstruction of former prison camps and additional museums designed to bring a different kind of tourism to the area.
Through their creation of different narrative images, the Spa and the KPV are engaging in what might be called the “place marketing” of Jáchymov. Place marketing has been defined in the literature as “the practice of applying brand strategy and other marketing techniques and disciplines to the economic, social, political and cultural development of cities, regions, and countries” (Bellini, Loffredo & Pasquinelli, 2009:90), and has been a popular perspective for examining the use of specially filtered imagery and narrative of the kind deployed by Therapeutic Spa Jáchymov to promote places as positive and inviting (Urry, 1995). Conversely, negative images of the kind deployed by the KPV may also be created in order to legitimate and market certain ideas of what a particular place represents.

Destination images, both positive and negative, have been known to generally fall into three categories: (1) organic images that are embedded over time, based upon ‘the totality of what a person already knows or perceives about a destination… From newspapers, radio, and the TV news, documentaries, periodicals, dramas, novels, and non-fictional books and classes on geography, (2) induced images formed by exposure to a destination’s projected image and (3), a modified induced image based upon the interactions of visiting the destination with existing organic and induced images. (Gunn, 1972 via Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2010:20-1)

In the case of Jáchymov, organic images held by outsiders and tourists are highly dependent on the reason for their visit, since most visitors come as medical tourists or as curious patrons of or participants in the KPV’s exhibits or events. Modified induced images of the town occur when tourists and guests of the Spa or KPV arrive in the town and are
forced to reassess their previously held projected images with the revised image they gain by
witnessing the area first hand.

When I first visited the town on a trip organized in cooperation with the KPV, my
projected organic images of a town were based on my knowledge of the town’s horrific
recent past as a “concentration camp” in which political prisoners were imprisoned, abused,
and forced to work in the uranium mines under extremely unsafe conditions. With these
images in mind, I expected to see something of a likeness to Auschwitz, but was instead
confronted with a bifurcated town that displayed a tremendous amount of decay and poverty
juxtaposed to luxury. I was left with a modified induced image of the town that was more
complicated and reflected both the realities of its industrial past and economic
marginalization and the opulence of its specialized medical tourism trade. Had I instead come
to town as a guest of the Spa, my encounter with the other Jáchnov, assuming that I had
actually ventured out beyond the premises of the Spa, would presumably also have cast my
original organic perception of the place into confusion and doubt, and presumably might
have led to a new, more nuanced modified induced image.

But why is it in the interest of the Spa and the KPV to create these “organic”
specialized images of Jáchnov, which require such a great deal of time, effort and capital to
produce? The answer may lie in the idea that this town, though separate from the Spa and
KPV, is essential to them in that it is the specific place or stage on which the drama of their
individual narratives play out. Geographically bound entities like the Spa and the KPV have
an interest ‘in defining their discourses of inclusion and exclusion that constitute identity’
and calls upon their affinity with a place or, at least, their representations of places, which they in turn use to legitimate their claims to places (Ashworth & Graham, 2005:3).

The Therapeutic Spa Jáchymov has created a positive image of its facilities and the Jáchymov area, which it projects through its far-reaching publicity materials to attract patrons who will pay for treatments and other amenities, such as lodging, fine dining, and outdoor recreation opportunities. Up until the 1990s, the Spa was financed and maintained by the Czechoslovak state, which ran the institution in the same way it did other spas in the country, offering primarily medical services and little to no luxury services. In addition, the living accommodations at the Spa were quite spartan, offering what was needed but not desired. The Spa was sold to private investors during the swift privatization of state-run enterprises that followed the country’s transition to a capitalist economy. Investors knew they had purchased a facility that had solid structures and the right to dispense its unique radon treatments, but lacked the individuality and amenities needed to truly thrive in the new competitive, consumer-driven market. Private investors made a large investment in capital totaling over five million USD, and the Spa underwent a massive renovation to set the institution apart from competitors by updating the Spa’s treatment centers and living accommodations, and also restoring the Spa to what it looked like at its founding in the early 1900s, as a place of luxury and opulence albeit with a modern twist (Léčebné Lázně Jáchymov, 2011) (Figure 28).

The Spa’s owners realized that the institution’s connection to a town with such an interesting history, including the story of how it became the world’s first radon spa, was something that could set it apart from other spas in the area. Therefore the Spa’s connection
with historical Jáchymov pervades their promotional materials, which consistently include a summation of the romantic history of the town that focuses on the town’s founding as a prominent silver mining town which appeals to historically-inclined potential clients, the folksy story of how the spa came into existence in Jáchymov, and the town’s special historic role in playing host to radon treatment enthusiasts from around the world. By making these associations, the Spa is insinuating that as an institution it has withstood the test of time, and is ideally situated in the place where the first breakthroughs in discovering the benefits of radon treatment took place, were developed, and continue to the present time (Figure 29).

According to Urry’s ‘Tourist Gaze,’ (1995) the best images to attract tourists are those which “separate them off from every day and routine experiences” and involve “forms of social patterning, with a much greater sensitivity to visual elements of landscape or townscape than is normally found in everyday life” and allow this “gaze to be endlessly reproduced and recaptured” (133-34). The promotional materials being published by the Therapeutic Spa of Jáchymov project an image of Jáchymov that is highly idealized in a way that suits the Spa’s goals, which are to bring customers to relax and rejuvenate in an historic and natural oasis.

Like the Spa, the KPV has also invested considerable time and effort in destination image creation. The initial aspiration of this organization was to become a political party. Though the organization ultimately failed to gain the support needed to see this ambition come to fruition, it continued to promote the goals detailed in its political platform, which were to eliminate the communist party and educate people on the wrongdoings of the former regime so that these injustices would never be repeated. Through the construction of various
memorials, hosting an annual commemorative event known as “Jáchymov Hell” which draws national attention, and leading specialized “education” tours to the town throughout the year, the KPV has turned Jáchymov, as a place, into a symbol of the abuses and injustices perpetrated by the Communist government. The shocking name “Jáchymov Hell” sends a clear and concise message as to how the KPV wants the town to be perceived (Figure 30). The KPV also co-sponsors a nature trail in the area that goes by the same name, “Jáchymov Hell,” and leads hikers to locations where former prison camps and worksites one stood. All of these events, activities, and memorial sites serve to commemorate, and in a manner even recreate, a particularly dark period in the town’s history. This is a negative image that many residents of the town, as well as the staff at the spa, would rather not see publicized so heavily.

The negative image of Jáchymov being created by the KPV is at odds with the representation that some believe would be better suited in attracting the business and investment that the town so desperately needs (Grunlich, Personal Communication, 2010). Although such a thing would never be formally said, the current derelict and undeveloped condition of much of the town plays into the imagery deployed by the KPV in that the townscape provides a suitably depressing setting to showcase physical evidence of the terrors endured by Czechoslovak citizens under the former regime. In a sense, the KPV has turned the town of Jáchymov into a kind of an interactive museum, where visitors can see, touch, and experience the horrors and eventual impact of the worst activities of the former regime; and this type of experiential education makes a lasting impression (Figure 31). Jáchymov, at the hands of the KPV, has become a solitary symbol of all the past injustices suffered by
people in the Jáchymov area and elsewhere in Czechoslovakia under the communists, -- “a link between the past and future… to satisfy the eternal demand of the people for the translation of their collective force into symbols” (Sert et al, 1993:29) (Figure 32).

However, what about the common denominator between these two narratives, namely the town of Jáchymov, whose townspeople seem to disagree with the narratives and practices of both the Spa and KPV? The activities of the KPV are viewed by residents as being detrimental to the reputation of the town. They believe that the KPV is highlighting a very short and dark period of the town and the organization’s activities are overshadowing Jáchymov’s more romantic history (Grunlich, Residents of Jáchymov, Personal Communication, 2010). The Spa publicizes this more idealistic history, though the residents of Jáchymov seem to dislike this company as well because they believe it does nothing to improve the town outside of what the Spa owns. What power, if any, does the town have to define itself, or at least see that its interests are being taken into consideration when others are publicizing the town on such a large scale? Unfortunately, the town administration lacks both the economic means and political influence which has afforded the Spa and KPV the ability to market Jáchymov in a way that serves their own purposes.

REVOLUTION PRODUCES A NEW DISCOURSE

How have the Therapeutic Spa of Jáchymov and the Confederation of Political Prisoners (KPV) gained both the means and influence to determine the meaning and reputation of Jáchymov? Furthermore, why has the town itself become so marginalized and left without the means to control its own reputation on a large scale?
To answer these questions, one must go back to the Velvet Revolution of 1989, an event which brought about sweeping and dramatic changes. Tensions between the citizens and the state had been lying below the surface for decades before over poor living standards and economic stagnation and the lack of individual civil rights, but protests were considered threats to the state’s authority and were swiftly and thoroughly suppressed by the government. Beginning in the mid-1980s however, Mikhail Gorbachev's introduction in the Soviet Union of the policies of Glasnost (openness) and Perestroika (restructuring), combined with the concurrent protests and revolutions occurring in neighboring Poland, Hungary, and East Germany, began to spark peaceful protests and strikes in Czechoslovakia that quickly led to the fall of the communist government in November of 1989 (Wolchik, 1990:413).

Elections in June of the following year reaffirmed the people’s desire to transform Czechoslovakia into a democratic and capitalist country. Many new political parties were established, such as the Confederation of Political Prisoners, but only a few gained the support they needed to be included in the June 1990 elections. The results of the elections reflected the population’s disdain for the communist party, which received only 18% of the vote, and support for the resurgence of inter-war period political parties such as the Social Democrats, whose ‘Civic Forum’ coalition received over 50% of the total vote (Wolchik, 1990:415).

The newly formed government was charged with the task of rebuilding the country’s economy, as well as reestablishing political and economic ties with other countries. The newly elected leaders worked to rapidly liberalize and privatize their economy. Companies
that were once owned by the state, such as the Therapeutic Spa of Jáchymov, were swiftly auctioned off to the highest (Czechoslovak) bidder(s), and the process of transforming these firms into enterprises that were able to compete both within competitive national and international market economies began. The investment of large amounts of capital on the behalf of the new owners of these private companies was necessary in order for them to survive in a highly competitive, increasingly globalized economy. That investment also gave them considerable influence over government and government programs. The owners of the newly privatized spa in Jáchymov found themselves, accordingly, in a position of considerable power and influence, which allowed them considerable latitude in setting the course of their own enterprise and in determining its relation to the local community.

Simultaneously, Czechoslovakia’s government was navigating a new political system which required the functional cooperation of both nascent and established political parties. Parties realized that in order to stay in power, they would need to make significant progress in meeting popular expectations of a free and prosperous post-communist Czechoslovakia. In addition, they had to actively participate in elections to gain and retain supporters, which required parties and coalitions to set themselves not only apart, but above, other parties competing for power. Political parties typically employ many techniques to gain the favor of voters, including advertising and promotion, holding rallies and attending mass meetings and events.

While not strictly a political party, the Confederation of Political Prisoners was a potent political force, with a consistent and determined message which often attracted the media as well as politicians, many of whom seemed to enthusiastically support the KPV and
their mission. It is almost as if the politicians attending the KPV’s events are using them as a means to promote themselves and their parties. As mentioned earlier, the national government recently named the KPV memorial site, the “Tower of Death,” a historical monument that can never be torn down. This was approved by the government after the KPV lobbied to have it preserved just as rumors arose that the communist party was trying to have the structure condemned and torn down. The political support received by the KPV over this issue is evidence of the considerable political influence to which this organization can lay claim. Government support has given this organization the permission to create several permanent memorials throughout the Czech Republic, including within and around Jáchymov. The KPV has also attracted a great deal of media coverage, in part due to the presence of prominent politicians at their events, which has also given them the kind of exposure that has increased their ability to influence individuals all over the Czech Republic. An organization like the KPV could not have existed in the country prior to 1989 as its message would have posed a direct threat to the former government. The political transition that occurred after 1989 enabled the formerly powerless members of the KPV to pursue their goals within the emerging discursive formation created by the new country’s nascent power structure.

The Czech Republic’s transition to democracy and free market capitalism was highly beneficial to both the Therapeutic Spa of Jáchymov and the Confederation of Political Prisoners. After 1989, these organizations were provided with considerable economic and political support which enabled them in pursuit of their respective goals to influence both their images and surroundings. However, what became of the town of Jáchymov? What
affects did the economic and political transition have on the town and why does it currently seem as though the town is unable to improve its currently derelict state or influence its image on a large scale? Unfortunately, Czechoslovakia’s shift from a totalitarian regime with a centralized economy to a democracy that liberalized the country’s markets had undesirable effects that contributed to Jáchymov’s desperate state.

The causes of the decline and marginalization of Jáchymov can be explained by the many policies implemented by the government over the last century, including the expulsion of its residents after World War Two, the creation of an environmentally devastating uranium mining enterprise that exploited prison laborers, and the forced settlement in Jáchymov of Roma families who had no interest in making the town their home. It is arguable that these policies were very harmful to the town, but central planning was also occasionally kind to Jáchymov. The state controlled Škoda automotive company named built a manufacturing plant in the Jáchymov area, and Jáchymov itself was utilized as a test track for the company’s trolleybuses. This brought jobs to an area that had few employment opportunities left after uranium mining ceased. Additionally, the state invested in adding a new hotel to the state-run spa complex and also financed significant renovations to the Horníký Dům or “Miner’s House” in the 1980s, giving this remote and sparsely populated area one of two high tech movie theaters in the entire country.

While the economic and political transition that began in 1989 proved to be beneficial to a few enterprises within Jáchymov, such as the Spa, the transition produced less than optimal effects on the town itself. The privatization of homes and businesses after 1989 was poorly planned and implemented. Many of the unoccupied homes in town were in such
deplorable states that the local authorities were forced to part with the properties at extremely low prices. Buyers were awarded the town’s abandoned and neglected properties under verbal agreements that they would be renovated, though most buyers turned out to be merely real estate speculators who had no intention of investing addition capital to improve their properties. The speculative activity attracted few buyers, but instead of cutting their losses, investors simply kept the properties but avoided paying taxes knowing that the town lacked the resources to take them to court over delinquent taxes. While the town has the right to expropriate tax delinquent property, Czech law requires the town to pay the landowners up to 2 million CZK (approximately 104,000 USD) for each expropriated house – money the town simply does not have (Grulich, Personal Communication, 2010).

In a post-communist economy the town of Jáchymov proved, with the exception of the Spa, unable to attract committed investors who might bring jobs to the town’s economy. This lack of attractiveness could be attributed to many things. Jáchymov lacked factories which could be used to produce goods, possessed a much-reduced population following the cessation of mining, and had no ability to quickly disseminate products with the decommissioning of the town’s railroad and suffering a major highway bypass that left the town with only a poor-quality transportation link to the regional hub of Karlovy Vary. This lack of production infrastructure was a severe drawback to anyone wishing to compete in the new, fast-paced market economy then emerging in the Czech Republic. Jáchymov received no new investment after 1989, with the exception of the Spa and the state support given to the historical Saint Jáchymov Church and the old Royal Mint, which currently houses the town’s museum.
The Czech Republic’s political transition did little to improve the declining town of Jáchymov. The town receives barely enough money for basic maintenance of mountain roads, let alone enough money to invest in improving the aesthetic appearance of the town or make infrastructural improvements. Thusfar, Jáchymov residents have not shown the interest or motivation to campaign to hold national office, nor does the city have the financial means to buy representation via a lobbyist in Prague, so the interests of the town are rarely voiced clearly at the government level. Without the necessary tools to successfully navigate the rapid and drastic economic and political transformations of the past couple of decades, the town has seen its fate determined largely by the Therapeutic Spa of Jáchymov and the Confederation of Political Prisoners, which have used their newly found economic success and political influence to shape Jáchymov in ways that support their respective agendas.
EPILOGUE

Presently, Jáchymov is a forgotten town on the decline as it is bereft of any noticeable industry and has been labeled within popular discourse as marginalized, save for the portion of Jáchymov occupied by the privately owned Léčebné Lázně Jáchymov. The town’s built landscape is extremely disparate and appears to embody both the healthy and luxurious air of the Spa as well as the devastation and misery of the uranium mining of the 1950s, which in part led to the town’s present marginalization.

This disparate appearance has been intensified since the early 1990s due in part to the promotional efforts of the town’s Radon Spa and the KPV, two influential entities that have incorporated Jáchymov’s long and robust history into their own publicly-stated narratives about the town. While both associate themselves with Jáchymov and its past, each has produced its own version of the town’s history, and these adaptations are drastically different. The Confederation of Political Prisoners focuses on publicizing a largely negative and highly politicized history of the town that emphasizes the forced labor by the Czechoslovak government of falsely accused political prisoners in Jáchymov between 1948 and 1961. The Therapeutic Spa of Jáchymov, on the other hand, wishes to project a more romantic image of Jáchymov’s past while portraying the company and its ‘therapeutic water’ as the constant and dependable defining presence within the town for over a century. These narratives are produced for external consumption; both are intended to draw attention to the town and to promote tourism (although in very different ways); and both are designed to support each organization’s present initiatives and future goals for the town of Jáchymov.
By creating historical narratives and images, the Spa and the KPV are actively “marketing” the town of Jáchymov in a way that serves their own purposes. Marketing of places can come in many forms, though for the Spa, the distributions of aesthetically appealing promotional materials seem to dominate their marketing strategy. The promotional materials being published by the Spa project an image of Jáchymov that is highly idealized in a way that suits their goals, which are to bring customers to relax and rejuvenate in an historic and natural oasis. The KPV has also branded the town through their work to create events, activities, and memorial sites, which have turned Jáchymov into a solitary symbol of all the past injustices suffered by people in the Jáchymov area, and elsewhere in Czechoslovakia, under the communists.

While the narratives and representations of Jáchymov crafted by the Spa and KPV appear to be the most predominant within popular discourse, many engaged residents of the town seem uncomfortable with these two disparate narratives. The activities of the KPV are viewed by some residents as being detrimental to the reputation of the town. They believe that the KPV is highlighting a very short and dark time period of the town, and that the organization’s activities are overshadowing Jáchymov’s more romantic and varied history. The Spa publicizes this more idealistic history, although it makes every effort to feature itself as the most prominent part of the narrative. Nonetheless, the residents of Jáchymov seem to dislike this company as well, mainly because they believe it does little to improve the town outside of what the Spa owns. Unfortunately, the currently marginalized town and its engaged residents seem to lack both the economic means and political influence which might allow them to market Jáchymov in a way that directly serves the town’s interests – most
importantly the improvement of Jáchymov physical appearance, local economy, and reputation.

While the Czech Republic’s transition to democracy and free market capitalism have produced less than optimal effects on the town itself, this transition was very beneficial to both the Therapeutic Spa of Jáchymov and the Confederation of Political Prisoners; entities who have great interest in narrating a particular history of Jáchymov and incorporate this particular view of the past into their own publicly-stated narratives about the town. Up until the 1990s, the Spa had been financed and maintained by the Czechoslovak state, which ran the institution in the same way it did other spas in the country, offering primarily medical services and few to no luxury services. The Spa was swiftly privatized after the country’s transition to a capitalist economy and investors endowed the institution with a large amount of capital. This tremendous investment has made the Spa attractive to patrons, who in turn have brought more capital to the institution which allows it the means to influence the appearance and reputation of Jáchymov.

The democratic revolution allowed previously disenfranchised individuals, such as those who formed the KPV, the ability to pursue their goals. While not strictly a political party, the KPV evolved into a potent political force with a consistent and determined anti-communist message which often attracted the media as well as politicians, many of whom have seemed to enthusiastically support the KPV and their mission. The KPV has used this sway to transform Jáchymov into a symbol that they can utilize to showcase the injustices of the former government, therefore garnering animosity towards former, present and future members of the communist party.
By examining the case study of Jáchymov, Czech Republic, this work addresses the way in which shifting political, economic, and social tides can produce various historical narratives and interpretations of memory. These pasts are constructed by various entities which have gained power, influence and legitimacy on behalf of the existing overarching system in power. These narrations are oftentimes crafted to support the viewpoints of these favored stakeholders who have benefited from the existence of a particular power structure, such as in the case of the narrations presently produced by the Spa and KPV. Power transitions also disenfranchise other entities, leaving them without the means or influence to assert their status within the system, such as in the case of the town of Jáchymov. As a result, bodies that benefit from the system have the influence and authority to mold these marginalized entities into a means to achieve their ends, such as in the case of the Spa and KPV and their contrasting interpretations and promotion of Jáchymov’s past, present and future. Sadly, the wishes of the disenfranchised bodies are oftentimes not taken into account as the primary motive for these constructed narratives is to relay a story that benefits those empowered by the present power structure. The construction of historical narratives by dominant power structures for their own purposes, a process highlighted in the preceding case study, has occurred throughout the era of mankind. Regardless of any assertions present-day power structures have in regards to the objectivity of the narratives they relay, it is important to realize their versions of the past are fraught with inclusions and omissions that are carefully constructed and interpreted to reinforce the dominant power structure and the entities that benefit from this system.
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Interviews


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Appendix: METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

In-person interviews provided much of the qualitative data utilized in this thesis and were conducted from Friday, May 28th, 2010 to Wednesday, June 2nd, 2010 and again on Monday, August 23rd and Thursday, August 26th, 2010. Interviews were both scheduled and spontaneous with some being conducted a formal fashion while others were informal. Though I have a basic knowledge of the Czech language, I did not feel comfortable conducting interviews without a translator present. Lenka Novaková was referred to me by an acquaintance, Lenka Šunová, who I met while studying abroad in Prague in 2006. She is a native speaker of Czech and is fluent in English. Lenka recently moved back to the Czech Republic from Scotland and is living in the Southern Bohemian city of Volyně. Previous to her experience acting as my translator, Lenka had no knowledge of Jáchymov’s history, though she was familiar with the plight of the former industrial cities of Northern Bohemia as her grandmother lived in Cheb. All of the interviews began with an introductions and an overview of my research interests regarding the town of Jáchymov summarized on the study’s Research Participant Information and Consent Form, which was approved by the Institutional Review Board (Protocol Number SE-2010-0275), which states the following:

“The researchers wish to investigate how the town of Jáchymov, given its tumultuous history, has sought to capitalize on its past associations with uranium and its by-products. In particular, the researchers would like to be made aware of how the residents of Jáchymov remember, understand and utilize their town’s past to shape Jáchymov’s post-1989 development. Interviews with will take place in the company of Ms. Lenka Novaková, who will be translating for Ms. Wirka. With your permission, a digital recording will be made of your participation. At your request, the researchers are willing to pause the digital recordings at any time during the interview. These interviews will be approximately one hour in length. Katherine Wirka and Ms. Novaková will be the only individuals listening to these recordings. Ms. Wirka will retain the tapes in order to transcribe the interviews.”

Generally, I utilized the ‘snowball’ sampling technique to secure interviews. For example, I reestablished contact with a member of the Confederation of Political Prisoners who contacted other members of the KPV to secure additional interviews. I also cold called various representatives from organizations of interest, such as the Spa, the Museum, and Karlovy Vary Region Historical Society, who connected me with individuals who had something to contribute to my research. For example, after hearing about my research topic, Dr. Draská at the spa referred me to a lifelong resident and historian of Jáchymov, Tomáš Ježek, who afforded me a great deal of historical information. Additionally, contacts such as the Spa Director insured that previously unresponsive contacts, such as the Mayor of Jáchymov, replied to my inquiry and agreed to an interview.
My interview schedule, including the dates, locations, participants, and interview questions, has been detailed below.

**Friday, May 28th (Jáchymov Area)**

Jáchymov Hell and interviews with approximately 5 members of the Confederation of Political Prisoners (including Leo Žídek)

- Could you tell me more about the events and memorials the KPV holds and helped fund in Jáchymov?
- How does your organization feel the events and memorials are viewed by those within and outside Jáchymov (do people seem to be interested, supportive, accommodating, etc.)?
- How has Jáchymov changed throughout the years?
- How do you feel about the town’s current derelict state?
- What do you feel is the relationship between Jáchymov and its uranium now that the town no longer mines the elements and only uses what remains in the Radon Spa?
- How would you like Jáchymov to be remembered and interpreted to the world today?

Interviewed Mayor Horník of Boží Dar and an anonymous member of Czech Parliament

- Do you feel uranium and its byproducts have played a significant role in the history of town?
- What are your feelings about Jáchymov’s radon spa? Museum?
- What are your feelings on the event and nature trail called “Jáchymov Hell”?
- Why does the majority of Jáchymov appear to be in a derelict state?
- Have you identified the main causes of the dereliction? Have you identified any solutions to enhance the town’s reputation and appearance?

**Saturday, May 29th (Jáchymov)**

Jáchymov Hell and interviews with 2 additional members of the KPV

- See questions asked at Jáchymov Hell event, Friday, May 28th.

Toured Barbora Uranium Mine, Interviewed tour guide (anonymous)

- Do you feel uranium and its byproducts have played a significant role in the history of Jáchymov?
- Was uranium mining helpful or harmful to the reputation and health of the area?
- How would you like Jáchymov to be remembered and interpreted to the world today?
Interview with Dr. Draská (Head Physician at the Spa)

- Please tell me more about the radon treatments at the spa. Procedures? Scientific backing?
- What benefits do you feel the radon treatment imparts on patients & spa-goers?

**Sunday, May 30th (Jáchymov & Karlovy Vary)**

Tour of Jáchymov Museum with Jan Nedvěd of Karlovy Vary Historical Society (Mr. Nedvěd helped create the KPV related exhibit in Jáchymov’s museum)

- What are the prominent narratives being produced about Jáchymov’s history?
- Which of these narratives do you feel is the most accurate?
- What would you think Jáchymov should be known for historically, presently and in the future?

Interview with Mr. Nedvěd and 3 employees of the museum/lifelong residents of Jáchymov

- How did you come to live in Jáchymov?
- How would you like Jáchymov to be known for and remembered?
- What do you feel about the Spa?
- What do you feel about the KPV?
- Why do you think Jáchymov is in such a derelict state?
- Do you think anything can be done to ameliorate this dereliction? If so, what can be done to positively redirect the town’s decline?

Interview with the Pinč family (3 people) in their home

- See interview with Mr. Nedvěd and 3 employees of the museum/lifelong residents of Jáchymov on Sunday, May 30th

Interview with Stanislav Burachovič, Ph.D., Director of the Karlovy Vary Historical Society

- What are the prominent narratives are being produced about Jáchymov’s history?
- Which of these narratives do you feel is the most accurate?
- What would you like Jáchymov to be known for historically, presently and in the future?

**Monday, May 31st (Jáchymov)**

Interview with Director of the Spa, Dr. Edward Bláha, and the Mayor of Jáchymov, Bronislav Grulich
Questions for Dr. Edward Bláha

- Could you provide me with some general information about the spa? History? Demographics of clientele? Occupancy rates?
- What type of relationship does your spa has with the town of Jáchymov?
- Do you think the spa’s relationship with the town is translated both within and outside Jáchymov?
- How does the Spa want Jáchymov to be remembered and interpreted to the world today?

Questions for Mayor Bronislav Grulich

- Do you feel uranium and its byproducts have played a significant role in the history of the town?
- What are your feelings about Jáchymov’s radon spa? Museum?
- What are your feelings on the event and nature trail called “Jáchymov Hell”?
- Are there any other sights you feel are currently important and significant in the town?
- How would you like Jáchymov to be remembered and interpreted to the world today?
- Why does the majority of Jáchymov appear to be in a derelict state?
- Have you identified the main causes of the dereliction? Have you identified any solutions to enhance the town’s reputation and appearance?

Interview with Tomáš Ježek, historian and longtime resident of Jáchymov

- Why did you come to Jáchymov?
- How would you like Jáchymov to be remembered and interpreted today?
- What do you feel about the Spa?
- What do you feel about the KPV?
- How has Jáchymov changed throughout the years?
- What do you feel about the town’s current derelict state?
- Do you think anything can be done to ameliorate this dereliction? If so, what can be done to positively redirect the town’s decline?
- What do you feel is the relationship between Jáchymov and its uranium now that the town no longer mines the elements and only uses what remains in the Radium Spas?

**Tuesday, June 1st (Karlovy Vary)**

Interview with two members of the KPV, Mr. Zdeněk Mandrholec and guest

- See questions from Jáchymov Hell, Friday, May 28th
Wednesday, June 2nd (Karlovy Vary)

Interview with the Regional Land Registrar of Karlovy Vary, Mr. Libor Tomandl (Grew up in Ostrov, close to Jáchymov)

- Could you show me all of the maps you have of Jáchymov that show land parcels?
- I understand that a great deal of the Jáchymov area was subsumed by the state after 1948. How was this land privatized after 1989?
- I heard that the land in Jáchymov was sold off at a low price because the property was rather deteriorated and that this land was purchased by foreign land speculators. Could you tell me what you know about this?
- I heard that there has been talk of having the town buy the neglected properties in town so that the town’s leadership might be able to renovate these homes and enhance the image of the town. Could you tell me a little more about this process?
- Are there any other unique issues regarding land ownership that you feel has dissuaded people from purchasing houses and living in the town?
- What do you feel is the relationship between Jáchymov and its uranium now that the town no longer mines the elements and only uses what remains in the Radium Spas?
- You were born and raised in nearby Ostrov - what are your opinions and thoughts of Jáchymov in terms of its past, present and future?

Monday, August 23rd (Prague)

Interview with Josef Thomas, National Radiation Protection Institute (Retired)

- Could you tell me a little bit more about the medical basis for the Léčebné Lázně Jáchymov’s radon treatment? Do you believe the treatments are safe and work?
- Could you tell me a little more about the uranium mining that occurred in the Jáchymov area after World War Two? What environmental and health impacts resulted from this mining?
- Could you tell me about the radon risks that presently exist in Jáchymov? What measures have been taken to mitigate radon in buildings and homes? Do you think residents are aware of the risks associated with radon exposure?

Thursday, August 26th (Brno)

Interview with Tomáš Dvořák, Ph.D., historian at Masaryk University (Brno), former resident of Jáchymov, and author of several articles and books about uranium mining in the Jáchymov area after World War Two
Could you tell me a little more about the uranium mining that occurred in the Jáchymov area after World War Two?

- How would you like Jáchymov to be known and remembered?
- What do you feel about the Spa?
- What do you feel about the KPV?
- Why do you think Jáchymov is in such a derelict state?
- Do you think anything can be done to ameliorate this dereliction? If so, what can be done to positively redirect the town’s decline?

Data Analysis

All of the interviews were digitally recorded. In addition, I took paper notes. After all of the interviews were transcribed and organized, I began to look for similarities in the opinions and views of the interviewees. Furthermore, I examined the material for any patterns that may exist in the information and the way it was delivered.

The individuals I interviewed from the Confederation of Political Prisoners (KPV) seemed to disregard many of my questions and rather wished to speak of their experience being arrested, interrogated and imprisoned. Representatives of Léčebné Lázně Jáchymov appeared to stick to the official statements that are found on the institution’s website, and avoided potentially controversial questions. Residents of Jáchymov and the experts who worked in the area during the communist period seemed to make unsubstantiated claims, such as the residents’ comments that the spa was failing, and experts claims that the government was aware of the dangerously high concentrations of radon in the town’s buildings but destroyed these records so they would not have to pay for extensive mitigation installations.

Positionality and Additional Narratives

Based on my previous experiences with and impressions of the town and the Confederation of Political Prisoners, I recognized two clear narratives being created about Jáchymov’s history and its varying associations with uranium and its progeny. These prominent narratives were being crafted by the Léčebné Lázně Jáchymov and the KPV. Based on my observations and research, I chose to concentrate my efforts on interviewing members of the KPV, associates of the Spa, professionals and scholars familiar with the area, and a small sampling of individuals living in Jáchymov. Due to limitations of time and finances, I was unable to interview a larger sampling of residents and those holding administrative positions within the town. A large number of the residents in town appear to be Roma which I know most likely have a very different narrative about Jáchymov than the ones presented in this work. This is one of several other potential narratives of Jáchymov missing from my work as I did not have the ability to speak with particular individuals nor did I have the connections required to secure interviews with those creating these alternative narratives.