

Matěj Spurný

Making the Most of Tomorrow



A Laboratory of Socialist
Modernity in Czechoslovakia

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PREFACE: COAL UNDER THE PAVEMENT

From a distance, the city, cobbled together from prefab concrete panel buildings, looks a bit as if someone had built it out of match-boxes. It is shot through with a regular grid of wide streets along which cars drive with ease. A church, separated from the town by a four-lane motorway, quietly looks on from a distance as people live the future they dreamt of. Instead of a church, an eighteen-storey tower now dominates this once regional metropolis, today a city of 60,000 people. It is the headquarters of a mining company. Everyone who visits the city quickly understands that something extraordinary has taken place here and may perhaps still take place. But what, actually? And why?

It is good to begin the account just outside the prefab concrete city, on the north slope of Hněvín Hill (399 metres above sea level). It was here that the royal borough of Most was founded in the Middle Ages. Today, below the hill there is only a lake. Its shimmering waters mercifully conceal an extraordinarily dramatic story of Czech history after the Second World War.

A human settlement was wiped off the face of the earth here. Another town of the same name was built on greenfield land a few kilometres away. One of the most valuable historic towns of north Bohemia vanished. Gothic and Renaissance monuments, the houses of burghers, convents and monasteries, churches, three town squares, stately buildings and boulevards – all gone. All of them were demolished and carted away as part of the worthless overburden. In compensation, a rationally organized city was built, the kind that not only Czech modernist architects and urban planners dreamt of. It was a city that was meant to open the way for people to a life with dignity.

The reasons seem obvious. The main reason was the ‘black gold under the town’. Coal, thanks to which Most had become rich and grown, now, after the Second World War, in the years of single-mindedly

building a ‘fuel energy base’, became fatal for the old town. Mining was moved from deep shafts to the surface, from the outskirts of the town right into the streets at its centre.

But to be satisfied with an answer like that would mean accepting the logic of the engineers of the state-owned company called Severočeské hnědouhelné doly (SHD – North Bohemian Lignite Mines). From their point of view, the existence of a coal seam under the city did not raise the question of what to do. Rather, it was in itself the answer: mine it. As a historian, not as a mining engineer, I start from the premiss that coal under the pavement of a historic town can be dealt with in various ways, and therefore that the story of the old Most could have developed in a number of ways. I am convinced that inquiring into the roots and circumstances of the decisions that determined the story of this town after the Second World War has not lost any of its urgency today. What at that time actually justified swapping a whole historic town for coal? Was it the context of the former Sudetenland, the local sense of uprootedness and lack of a real home? Was it the Utopia of progress and a life with dignity for everyone? Or was it rather a special form of the technical thinking of engineers, which reduced the world to economic indicators? What was particularly Communist and what was universal about the modernist discourse of the 1960s and 1970s? Can one find similar stories in the East and the West? During those three decades, when the destruction of one city and the building of another were under consideration and were then eventually carried out, was there a substantial change in the predominant way people thought about their environment, and about the meaning of the signs of being civilized and everything that belongs to a life with dignity? What aspects of the *Sinnwelt* (mental world or symbolic universe) of that time were reflected in the officially approved narratives about the fate of the city of Most and what was reflected in critical journalism and art?

We won’t find the answer either below the surface of the lake, where the old houses once stood, or amongst the concrete walls of

the new city. We have to travel back a few decades into the past and try, by following traces in the sources, to understand the *Sinnwelt* of the time, which was created by stories like the one of Most. And that is the aim of this book. It does not seek merely to tell the story of one north Bohemian town in the times of state socialism. It is about more than events that are several decades remote in time and about more than a single town. It is about understanding the world we live in and help to shape.

The Story



Where is Daedalus, so that he could search, cry out, and lament?
Daedalus is not here; for decades now he has been standing at the steam hammer in the Louny workshops, making insulators in a porcelain factory, and has already somehow forgotten a bit about his wings. His son has set out alone, without him; he didn't need him; he listened only to his own voice, which invented wings for him, so that he reached the centre of his will and mastery, of seclusion and joy, his own heart. And maybe it was Daedalus who followed him with a sigh; maybe with a bit of envy, maybe with a knowing smile or sadness, which you will scarcely drive out even with a gulp of fire in your throat, gasping at a recollection. Daedalus was not here; he couldn't see that broken trunk, those wings broken apart, those bare bones, stripped of flesh [...] And after that blow the mountain did not even shudder.

(Emil Juliš, 1969¹)

1 From Emil Juliš, 'Ikarova proměna', in idem, *Pod kroky dýmů*, Most: Dialog, 1969, pp. 11–13.

It is reasonable to see the history of old Most as evidence of the self-destructive power of modern humankind. But it is also fair to see it as an example of the willingness to take a laboriously made, but already worn out, human creation and to sacrifice it to the newly built, better, and more rational world that is supposed to emerge on its ruins. It is fair to tell it as a story about pride coming before a fall, or as a modern variation on the theme of rising from the ashes. Though the history certainly contains a hint of both myths, of Icarus and the phoenix, it is wise to free oneself of these preconceived notions and to seek to become acquainted with the circumstances and environments in which the drama of the city took place. In other words, it is more useful to search for the answer to the questions of what kind of town old Most was, what the relationships were amongst coal mining, society, and politics in north Bohemia, what ideas guided the actors who played the key roles in taking decisions about the fate of the town in the 1950s and 1960s, and how its story was projected into the lives of the people who were at home there. The aim is not to confirm one's initial admiration or disgust, nor to make sure the story makes a simple point, but to seek to reconstruct what was probably the most dramatic period in the history of Most in its broader contexts, both with its contradictions and with its ambiguities.

OLD MOST

I do not wish to describe in detail, nor can I, the history of old Most (Brüx in German, Pons in Latin), from its foundation in the first half of the thirteenth century to the demolition of the last house just before the spring of 1987. Yet to grasp the context of the destruction of the town, one must get an overall idea of the historic traces that the old town represented, and of the state of the town in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when its fate was decided.

The history of the town of Most was, from its royal founding in the early thirteenth century, carried along by a principle that endured in different versions until the twentieth century. That principle was the interest of the powers that be in the existence of the town and its exact form. Most was founded as a royal borough at the impetus of King Wenceslas I (*reg.* 1230–53) of Bohemia, who, considering the strategic position and economic potential of the settlement, decided to build a new power base at the foot of Hněvín Hill in north-west Bohemia. Old Most was built on an urban plan with predominantly rectilinear divisions, though, owing to the shape of the terrain and the rapid growth of the town in the thirteenth century, this concept was not entirely adhered to. The interest of the powers that be in the existence of the town played an absolutely fundamental role also in one of the most difficult moments of its existence, the period after the fire of 1515, which in the course of two hours had destroyed almost all of Most. The rebuilding of the town was supported by King Vladislav II (Vladislav Jagiellon, *reg.* 1471–1516), and even the pope, Leo X (*reg.* 1513–21), contributed to it. It was at this time of unique restoration that most of the historically valuable buildings of Most were erected – the Renaissance houses of burghers and mainly the Deanery Church of the Assumption, an exceptional work of Gothic architecture and one of the largest churches

in Bohemia – and these remained until the last third of the twentieth century.²

Apart from the monarch's, and then the State's, interest in the town, its development was determined from the beginning also by the mining of minerals in the Ore Mountains (*Krušné hory*) in the last two centuries, mainly brown coal (lignite), which existed even under the town of Most. The desire to mine intensified considerably in the second half of the nineteenth century, at a time of revolutionary changes in technology and the operation of capitalism. New actors entered into the planning of the town and its immediate environs. Their plans, needs, and opportunities opened up completely new and in some respects contradictory prospects, ranging from dynamic expansion to the complete elimination of the town. As we shall see in some detail, the life of the town and its people began largely to be subject to the needs of the market for coal. The existence and appearance of Most was thus again fundamentally influenced by a growing power, this time economic (which can reasonably be talked about in a special sense also in the period of state socialism).

The city did not of course comprise only a power structure beyond individual people, even though such structures have played an extraordinarily more important role in the history of Most than in other towns in the Bohemian Lands (Bohemia, Moravia, and Austrian Silesia). Here too, the people who have lived in the town have determined the particular form of its life and architecture. It is in this connection that we encounter the second distinctive factor that helped to determine the life of old Most – namely, heterogeneity. This consisted in a social diversity that had been present from the beginning, and helped to shape the town, both in the linguistic sense (of ethnicity) and – at least in the key period of the boom and

² Karel Kuča, *Města a městečka v Čechách, na Moravě a ve Slezsku*, 4, Prague: Libri, 2000, pp. 161–201.

renewal of the city in the fifteenth and the sixteenth century – in the religious sense.

Most was from its beginning not only a royal borough but also a place with an intensive religious life. The Ves Svatého Václava (Villa s. Wenceslai, Wenzelsdorf), one of the core settlements of the future town, had not only the first church on the territory of the future Most, but also had a commandry of the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre and then the Knights of the Cross with the Red Star. Gradually churches and convents of the Order of St Mary Magdalene and the Minorites were built in the town, and, in the eighteenth century, a Piarist *collegium* was established. During the Hussite Wars (c.1419–34), Most was a bastion of Catholicism. It defended itself against a Hussite siege and, apart from the commandry of the Knights of the Cross with the Red Star, it was not destroyed. In the late sixteenth and the early seventeenth century, however, thanks also to the influence of the neighbouring land of Saxony, Lutherans dominated here for a while.³ The struggle between the Lutherans and the Catholics left its mark on the long drawn-out construction of the central ecclesiastical building in Most, later known as the Church of the Assumption (kostel Nanebevzetí Panny Marie) or the Deanery Church. In the late Gothic style, it has an extraordinary design, with a remarkable interior that was, for its time, aesthetically modern.⁴

It is exceptionally difficult to determine the ethnic composition of the Most population before 1848. Indeed, in a certain sense it is impossible, even though Czech and German historians have for decades been happy to do so in the interest of justifying one claim or another. Until the mid-nineteenth century, ethnicity (*národnost* in Czech, *Nationalität* in German) was not important for individual or collective identity. Consequently, we now have little evidence

³ Kuča states that ‘Lutheranism [...] completely prevailed in about 1590’. Kuča, *Města a městečka*, p. 174.

⁴ For more on this, see the ‘Reconciliation’ section.



1. The town of Most in the troubled times of social protests as a still mainly German town. Sternegasse in the 1930s.

of it, unlike religious affiliation. The history of Most was, however, clearly shaped both by people whose mother tongue was Czech and by people whose mother tongue was German. As a royal borough, Most was not founded in connection with the German settlement of the borderlands of Bohemia. But, beginning in the fifteenth century at the latest, the German language was making itself felt both in official records and amongst the population thanks to the influence of Saxony and, eventually, also the Lutheran Reformation. In the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth, Most was linguistically a German town. Czech influence began to increase only in connection with the development of coal mining, when workers were recruited from more distant regions. This trend initially tended to change the ethnic structure of the countryside; the town itself remained mainly German (even in the 1880 census, ninety per cent

of the people of Most declared German as their ethnicity, and in 1910 the proportion was eighty-five per cent).⁵ Though this situation changed quite fast between the two world wars (in the 1921 census, already 9,261 people out of a population of 27,230, that is roughly one third of Most, stated their ethnicity as Czech, and in the 1930 census, 9,740 people out of a population of 28,212 did so),⁶ by the Second World War, the vast majority of the Most bourgeoisie (that is, the stratum of owners of land and of houses) was German. Social divisions and conflicts thus to a certain extent overlapped with ethnic composition (though besides Czech miners and German ‘coal barons’, there were of course German miners and, less numerous, members of the Czech middle and upper-middle classes).

The situation changed radically shortly after the end of the Second World War in May 1945. Only a few hundred Germans remained in the town, most of them badly needed miners and specialists, together with their families. The pre-war structure of Most society had thus changed definitively. Unlike regions with continuous settlement, a sudden secularization took place here: religious life and, with it, the perceived reason for the existence of historic Church architecture almost completely vanished after 1945. In addition to the returning Czech inhabitants who had left with the German occupation, and newcomer Czechs from the interior, settlers also came here from afar, and would have a hard time becoming accustomed to life in an industrial and urban environment. Thousands of them would also leave in the coming years. Most and the Most district would never become their true home.⁷

But this history comprises more than just discontinuities. Even after the end of the Second World War we can trace continuities,

5 In 1880, Most had a population of 10,136, of which 1,026 were Czechs. In 1910, out of population of 25,577, only 3,965 were Czechs, and 21,267 were German. Kuča, *Města a městečka*, p. 164.

6 Ibid.

7 For more on this, see the ‘Alienation’ section.