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The Cultural House in Ostrov and Its Relation to Czech Secession Style

Dita Dlugosova-Knappova

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Architecture in the former Czechoslovakia was heavily dominated by Soviet influence after the Communist Coup in February 1948. The research presented in this paper focuses on a building called the Cultural House, which was created during the worst times of political repression in the 1950s in a small town of Ostrov, located on the Czech western border with Germany. (Fig.1) It is in my opinion that for the Cultural House in this town, Czech architects were able to integrate their Austrian and Czech teachers' ideas from the pre-World War II period and mixed Secession styles with Socialist Realism, in part because of the lack of control in this town from the central government in this short time period from 1947 to 1960.

The town of Ostrov has two parts: the Old Town, (*Stare Mesto*), established in the fourteenth century, and the New Town, (*Nove Mesto*), built in a very short time between 1947 and 1960. The context of the New Town's origin is closely connected with the post-Second World War period in Eastern European block countries. The main reason for its development was the discovery of the world's largest sources of uranium in the nearby town of Jachymov. The New Town is a complex garden town that was established as a housing estate for the Jachymov's Uranium Mines concern. Political prisoners were sent to the newly formed forced labor camp in the town of Jachymov to work the mines. The periphery of Ostrov was built to house the prison guards along with their families and then later the incoming miners. As the demand for housing rose, the New Town was expanded and later other people settled there. In twelve building stages that spanned almost thirteen years, this town provided homes for nearly 16,000 inhabitants.

The architectural project I researched was constructed and supervised by the Jachymov's Uranium Mines concern. The principal architect was Jaroslav Krauz (1918 – 1991) and the most visible non-residential building that grew under his leadership was the Cultural House, the focus here. Although the official artistic style at that time was Socialist Realism, nicknamed *Sorela*, and scholars tend to interpret the style of the Cultural House as the *Sorela* style, in my opinion Krauz's project is probably one of the last examples of the Vienna-inspired architecture to be built in Czechoslovakia.

The Cold War period in Czechoslovakia was dominated by the dictate of the unprecedented political and cultural link between Prague and Moscow and the cult of Josef Stalin. As defined by *Webster's Dictionary*, Socialist Realism was a "state-approved artistic and literary style in the Soviet Union and Eastern European satellites and it served as propaganda for the political leaders. It combined Stalin's taste for anything bombastic and monumental with the celebration of an idealized vision of the life and industriousness of the workers."¹ While the architecture of the Socialist Realism style is still extant in the former Soviet-block countries, the paintings and sculptures of this cultural movement with its typical features of the Socialist Realism's hybrid character are long gone, either destroyed or stored out of the public sight. As the Czech

¹ *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* (New York: Random House, 2001), 1811.

scholar Pavel Opocensky points out: “This new style was designed to unify culture, causing embarrassment occasionally even at the time of its origin.”²

After the Second World War there were efforts to change the look of the architecture in Czechoslovakia, but at the beginning of the 1950s the influence of the Soviet Socialist Realism was strong and forceful. Czech architects were trying to include national and folk motifs in their designs. Paul M. White comments: “To overcome the uniformity in building design, the author (artist and architect) emphasizes the importance of individual finishing touches using synthetic or local materials.”³ Although the return to classicism was the only overall principle of the production, the struggle for picking up on the national or local motives stayed and to certain extent is visible in the building of the Cultural House.

Although many Soviet advisors were present in order to supervise the uranium mining at the time in Jachymov, they did not impose control on the design of Ostrov and the Cultural House. Their main concern was the extraction of uranium. Therefore, the architect Krauz and his co-workers were not carefully supervised and this gave some freedom to their ideas. This freedom allowed them to draw from the traditional folk architecture and mainly national Czech, pre-World War II architectural traditions, in particular Modernism. Modernism as an architectural style was a taboo by the 1940s. The prominent protagonists of Socialist cultural politics called it “the symptom of the past liberal and monopoly capitalist era,” and any suggestion of styles from behind the Iron Curtain or from the past was censored.⁴ This parallel with the previous traditions was only noticed later, and probably resulted in the firing of the architect Krauz whose life after this date has not been recorded.

The construction of the Cultural House in Ostrov did not begin right away since the priority was constructing housing for the guards and the new settlers. After the government of the Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union signed a classified covert agreement about mining which authorized the export of uranium ore to the USSR in November 23, 1945, the Czechoslovakian Ministry of Industry established the Jachymov’s Uranium Mines the following year.⁵ The growth of mining in this area was rapid. It was in the fifth building stage of this town when the construction of this pivotal building began in May 1, 1954 when the foundation stone was laid on the new plaza.⁶ It took exactly one year to finish. Although the city went through many political changes since 1955, the architecture of the Cultural House is still there in its initial form.

Cultural houses were a common element of towns in Czechoslovakia. Built during the Communist regime, their original purpose was to provide a space for social gatherings of the citizens. During the mid-fifties the Communist party created entertainment centers as Renee Neu Watkins has documented.⁷ Communist rejection of any religion prohibited

² Pavel Opocensky, *Catalogue to the Exhibition of Czechoslovak Socialist Realism 1948 – 1958* (Prague: Galerie Rudolfinum, 2002), 3.

³ Paul M. White, *Soviet Urban and Regional Planning: A Biography with Abstracts* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980), 45.

⁴ Paul M. White, *Soviet Urban and Regional Planning: A Biography with Abstracts* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980), 45.

⁵ Lubomir Zeman, *Novy Ostrov: Soubor tradicionalismu 50. let 20. stoleti* (Ostrov: Mestsky Urad, 1998), 3.

⁶ May 1st has been celebrated as the Czech National Labor Day and it was the symbolic date of completion for the Cultural House and its festive opening.

⁷ Renee Neu Watkins, trans., *The Ideal Communist City* (New York: George Braziller, 1968), 96.

citizens to visit churches and synagogues of their cities. Therefore, social centers or cultural houses became then a necessity during this time. They had to accommodate a large number of people. Besides offering theatrical performances and movie showings, cultural houses also were sites for people to congregate on state approved holidays. For this reason they were usually established on large plazas in the centers of these towns. These national holidays either commemorated the liberation of the Czechoslovakia by the Red Army in 1945 or celebrated its partnership with the Soviet Union. Celebrations were mandatory and people could get arrested if not attending.

The cultural houses have been the centers of social life since the early years of the Socialist revolution. Just as the Greek temple was the first public building of antiquity to reflect a fully conscious architectural typology, so was the cultural house during Communism, and it served the same function. This Cultural House was built on the principles of the Greek temple that subordinate a whole group of spaces to a single comprehensive structural order. Although it was planned to correspond with its surroundings, the Cultural House contrasts with its neighborhood. With its central placement in this town, it dominates the entire spatial composition of the New Town and gives an orientation to all views of the environment around it. It serves as an orientation point for the citizens.

The two story rectangular building is divided into a main central part with a large entry, and two side wings each with a minor doorway. The central entry portico with the columned loggia that extends over the two stories gives the building a monumental effect, and the design of the façades with the use of flattened and supportive pilasters also gives it order. The capitals on both pilasters resemble the design of Egyptian columns. Secession style drew from Egyptian culture among other style.

On the first floor behind the entrance hall is a theater, which also serves as a cinema. It is decorated with linden tree leaves, the Czech national tree. The left wing of the first floor was originally used as a study room with a library and an auditorium. The right wing was used for various club rooms with a billiard table and a children's theater. From the entrance hall one can go upstairs to the second story where there is located a foyer with loggia. To the left is a ballroom and on the right is located a canteen. In the basement there used to be workshops for craft clubs and work rooms of the former state approved Club of the Czechoslovakian Youth.⁸

The interior columns relate to the architecture of the Cultural House. Here, inside the Cultural House, are found the personal touches of the architects and designers who did not forget the styles of the pre-Second World War period. In the main hall pilasters are decorated with *stucco lustro*, which its imitation of veined marble.⁹ (Fig.2) In the Cultural House the interior designer used red colored *stucco lustro*. The stairs have a railing with a motif of stylized lyres. (Fig.3) They are covered with metallic artistic bars with decorative rosettes and leaves. The ceiling in the main hall is framed with jagged stucco bands. Ceilings of the second floor are covered with stucco frames with a set of small decorative bars. There still exist functioning original chandeliers of great value

⁸ CSM, the *Ceskoslovensky Svaz Mladeze* was a Club for Czechoslovakian Youth, a Communist organization.

⁹ *Stucco lustro* is also called *scagliola* or imitation marble.

made according to design of the architect Krauz who clearly emulated the principles of the Austrian Secession.¹⁰ (Fig.4)

Jaroslav Krauz was a student of the great Czech architect Josef Gocar (1880 – 1945) of the pre-Soviet period and he did not keep his admiration for his mentor a secret. Gocar belonged to the artistic-intellectual elite of the First Czech Republic era (1918 – 1939) in Czechoslovakia and he was persecuted after 1948 by the Communist government. Gocar had studied under a Secession architect Otto Wagner (1841 – 1918) in Vienna at the turn of the century and Wagner's influence was passed on to Krauz, who applied many of Wagner's and Gocar's ideas to the planning and decoration of the Cultural House. Krauz uses Gocar's flattened pilaster order in the façade. (Fig.5) Also the colorfulness of the façade comes from the general principles of decoration of the national style of the First Czech Republic. The limestone on the Cultural House has soft tones of ochre and cream white color. Terracotta accents are found on the street level of the building, on the cornice and the capitals of the pilasters. The pre-World War II style used ochre and muted white and terracotta hues and was applied, for example, by architect Pavel Janak (1882 – 1956) before World War II on a Crematorium in the town of Pardubice. Many details exhibit the enduring influence of the once popular Secession style in Czech before World War II.

The architects and artists working in Ostrov were forced to work for a sinister patron as prisoners, but nevertheless, they tried to build a livable town. The Socialist Realism in Ostrov then needs to be evaluated separately from the official architectural style, because the architects and artists were students of more progressive professors of the pre-Communist period. This attention to detail is remarkable and heroic especially in light of the knowledge that the political prisoners from the uranium mines were responsible for a large part of the construction of the Cultural House and the housing development in this town. They were organized under the so called “*Muklprojekt*”; “*Mukl*” is a short for “*Muz Urceny K Likvidaci*” translated as “a man designated for liquidation,” a term that was used by the Communists to mark political prisoners between 1940s and 1960s. The *Muklprojekt* gathered student-prisoners, skilled artists from the uranium mines and the neighboring forced labor camp Vykmanov. Some names are known. For example, two men Bocek and Liesner were painters and were given tasks such as executing proposals for artistic details and creating individual elements of the decoration following designs probably originated by architect Krauz. They worked under the leadership of Jaroslav Slesinger.

Sculptor Jaroslav Slesinger (1911 – 1955), a graduate student and a political prisoner, was responsible for a multi-figure sculpture that is housed in the central frieze of the Cultural House. (Fig.6) It represents a female reaper, a miner and a male student, the three important archetypal figures of the former Czechoslovakian Socialist Republic. The idea for this work was ordered from the headquarters of the mining concern, but the design and the construction was Slesinger's work. Lubomir Zeman explains the style of this piece: “The sculptural work was influenced by the period's tendencies of monumentality, realistic display of optimistic work themes, family and joyful life.”¹¹ To

¹⁰ These chandeliers were made in Kamenicky Senov, a town located in Northern Czech famous for glass manufacture.

¹¹ Lubomir Zeman, *Novy Ostrov: Soubor tradicionalismu 50. let 20. stoleti* (Ostrov: Mestsky Urad, 1998), 269.

free himself from the work in the mines, Slesinger agreed to create a propagandistic artwork. After twenty five years, Jaroslav Slesinger died in prison of uranium exposure.

Other typical agitprop artworks were executed on the second floor of the Cultural House above the entrances to the ballroom and the canteen. Traditional paintings on glass that record the mining activity of Jachymov were created by academic sculptor Vaclav Lokvenc (b. 1930). During the recent attempts to preserve the interior, elaborate paintings of the “May jolliness” of an unknown artist were uncovered.¹² These are located in the central part of the first floor’s hall. (Fig.7)

The quality and value of the architecture of the Cultural House are seen as remarkable, in part because building in Czechoslovakia from the 1960s to the 1980s abandoned craftsmanship in favor of cheap materials. Jiri Kotalik, the former mayor of Ostrov, writes in his letter in 2002 to his fellow citizens, “This is why...the quality and the values [of the architecture of the Cultural House] are in the world’s context remarkable; the potential [of the architecture] is hidden...”¹³ The increasing European populations, the need to re-build quickly twice in the century, after two world wars, and the development of materials and technology which made it necessary to favor cheap mass production methods and prefabricated building on a large scale. It is these factors which brought about a transformation in the building after 1950 and killed forever the building and architectural styles founded on craftsmanship and aesthetics.

The building of the Cultural House, along with the rest of the town of Ostrov, serves as a memento of the horrific events that resulted in the forced labor of these political prisoners. The town is an inheritance that current and future Czech generations must confront. People view the Cultural House within the context of Socialist Realism, but the architecture here should be seen with respect to the social and artistic development in Central Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. The ideological battles inside Czech inter-war avant-garde had an impact on post-1948 art and architecture in this country.

From today’s perspective this architecture needs to be viewed as a commendable compromise between Soviet Socialist Realism architecture and Czechoslovakian pre-World War II national architecture. It also should be looked at as a controversy of the architects and mainly the artist-prisoners who were stripped of respect and human rights and were forced to create propagandistic art against their principles. It is an inheritance that despite its horrific history is sought after today, because of the housing shortage in the Czech Republic, and because of its testament to the dissidents who died here. Currently, the UNESCO organization is interested in adding Ostrov to the list of valuable historical places as a unique example of this period in the European history. Virtually no one has published information on this topic in English and the little that has been written is in the Czech language.

¹² The so-called “May jolliness” is one of the festivities that the Czech nation celebrates as a part of a traditional welcoming of spring. Since the Red Army partly liberated Czechoslovakia from Nazism in May 1945, the Communists also added to this old tradition the celebration of the Soviet Union. It was much politicized and people would be questioned if they did not attend these festivities.

¹³ Jiri Kotalik, *Letter to the Citizens of Ostrov* (Ostrov: Kulturni Dum, 2002), 1.

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IMAGES:

Fig.1 The Cultural House, Ostrov, Czech Republic

Fig.2 Pilasters, the Cultural House, Main Hall

Fig.3 Railing, the Cultural House, stairs

Fig.4 Chandeliers, the Cultural House, designed by Jaroslav Krauz

Fig. 5 Façade, the Cultural House

Fig.6 *Reaper, Miner and Student*, Jaroslav Slesinger, the Cultural House, roof

Fig. 7 *May Jolliness*, the Cultural House, miro