

Abstract

Česká Kamenice is a middle ages town dating from the end of the 13th century located on the crossroads of long distance trade routes from Central Bohemia and Upper Lusatia. The surrounding countryside was colonized by the Markvartice clan shortly before this time, in the second half of the 13th century, and they became the tenants of Šarfenštejn (Ostrý) castle near Benešov nad Ploučnicí. At that time the town belonged to a group of smallest serfdoms in Bohemia and during the middle ages did not overstep regional importance. In addition, the town was desolated and burnt down to its foundations several times in the first half of the 15th century.

The second half of the 15th century held conditions for the future blossoming of the town. After Luther's reformations started in the 16th century, Česká Kamenice was already a busy town slowly growing behind its own walls and absorbing cultural influences. Many houses of the townsfolk and the newly built Town hall bear a renaissance facade, a new tower was built for St. Jakub's church with the rest of the middle ages church significantly reconstructed in late gothic and renaissance styles. The establishment of the Česká Kamenice region enhanced the growing importance of the town, which was then in the hands of Vartenberk who built the new chateau on the southern walls. To the contrary, the castle established during the wars in the first half of the 15th century on nearby Zámecký Hill, lost its importance and was laid waste.

The hopeful development of the town was initially disturbed by conflicts with the reigning Vchynsky clan (Kinsky) from Vchynic and finally by the Thirty Years War. Soldiers of the domestic as well as enemy armies occupied the town and the chateau, the habitants being forced to convert to Catholicism. But the damages were not insurmountable and the Kinsky clan, understanding local conditions, kept to its Česká Kamenice domain. The Kinsky clan organized and founded the textile and glass industries but heated arguments continued to rage with the town. However, their interest in the economical fruition of the region and their mutual wider outlook stood firmly behind the further growth of the town and subsequent cultural boom ensuring that Česká Kamenice, at that time, did not become a stagnating local township. Contemporary baroque devotion was expressed through the building of the St. Mary's Pilgrims Chapell undertaken in 1736.

The period after 1848 brought Česká Kamenice's habitants not only the end of bondage and serfdom but also the development of industry. Production, restricted initially by having only the river Kamenice as its energy resource, was further developed after the building of the Czech Northern Railroad from Děčín to Rumburk. The first train to use the railway arrived in the town in 1869. Franz Preidel's cotton mill was the most important factory in Česká Kamenice and the surrounding region. Franz Preidel also lead the

town holding the office of mayor several times and contributed to development as well as social projects through the donation of large sums of money. But the industrial boom also had its drawbacks; many valuable historical houses disappeared from the town center and were replaced by modern buildings.

The establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918 was not welcomed by the mostly German population of the town. Czech-German relations were at the time already the subject of political dispute, which further intensified after the end of the reign of the multinational Habsburg monarchy. Representatives as well as inhabitants of the town became part of the new republic under aversion. With an even greater dislike, they were forced to follow the language and cultural regulations of the Czechoslovak government which placed three million Czech-Germans in a national minority group. Of all the political parties present at that time, the restorative German National Socialistic Movement used mutual, national intolerance and the economic crisis felt during the 1930's which fell especially hard on local industries in the cleverest way. Resultantly, the inhabitants of the town welcomed heart and hand entry into Sudetenland, under the Third Reich lead by Adolf Hitler.

The initial euphoria from "releasing Czechoslovakia" quickly changed to hardened totalitarian and wartime reality. Nazi offices restricted individual cultural as well as political life and the economy was completely subjected to the needs of the war. Only new armament factories, of which the "Weser" Flugzeugbau G. m. b. H. Company in Rabštejn was the most important, were set up in the town and its surroundings.

The end of the war and re-establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1945 brought the almost entirely German population expulsion from their homes. But the expectations of the many Czech settlers who came to replace the Sudeten Germans were not fulfilled. The short-lived democracy was taken over three years later by forces who had been quietly disseminating fear and violence from the first after-war weeks to also hold absolute power in Česká Kamenice.

After February 1948, the town fell on years of cultural and political darkness which also impacted upon the buildings which were continually neglected. Insensitive approaches by local offices led to the removal of the local museum and the demolition of many historical homes. But even though there were many problems connected to the government centred economy, the original industrial character of the town was kept and many original factories were operating under newly assumed names. Česká Kamenice's hospital also achieved fame at that time.

A completely different evolutionary period fell upon the town after the fall of the communist totalitarian regime in 1989. Releasing political life, renovating the town's autonomy and a revival of free cultural exchange was accompanied by the closing of many original industrial factories, sharply increasing

unemployment. But even so, the town donates a large amount of financial support towards the renovation of its landmarks and has started to care for its own cultural roots broken by the post-war upheaval.