

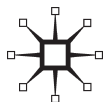
# Rethinking Ethnography in Central Europe



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Edited by  
*Hana Cervinkova, Michal Buchowski, and  
Zdeněk Uherek*

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RETHINKING ETHNOGRAPHY IN CENTRAL EUROPE

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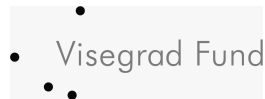
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## CHAPTER 4

# Pavlivka Iodine Spring Water: Transnational Entrepreneurship in Post-Transition Contexts

*Zdeněk Uherek and Veronika Beranská*

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Transnational migration and transnational entrepreneurship are increasingly important aspects of the contemporary world, whose spread is perhaps surpassed only by the growth of electronic communication (Giddens 2002). Despite their global dimension, transnational migration and transnational entrepreneurship are also firmly grounded in local experience and contexts in which they take on diverse and sometime unexpected forms. In the case of Central Europe, these transnational phenomena are deeply influenced by international state linkages from the socialist past (see Hüwelmeier, chapter 3, this volume), which are being reinvented today by people who often have little personal experience of them.

In this chapter, we would like to focus on a group of immigrants to the Czech Republic who are of Czech origin, but who were born in the Ukraine not far from the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. The group moved to the Czech Republic in 1991 and their members soon acquired Czech citizenship. We have been studying their life history for more than 20 years and followed the story of their complicated integration process—the process of learning how to live in the Czech Republic and, importantly, how to live in the world of the market economy. This integration process continues now with the second generation of these immigrants.

In this chapter, we will focus on one particular family and their business ambitions. We will show how, in their business activities, family members utilize their family's experience of the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe, associated folk prevention practices against radiation, and their social contacts in the country from which originally migrated. We focus on their story, which we see as the symbolic journey of many post-socialist immigrants from the former Soviet Union to Central Europe, and their path from socialist to "neoliberal" business activities. Through this account, based on our longitudinal ethnography of migrant families living in the Czech Republic, we want to illustrate how people with fluid social statuses and complicated identities navigate the global challenge of living lives in changing political systems and uncertain economic conditions.

### **New Migration Systems and Old Migration Bridges**

The period of postcommunist transition, with its changes to the political system and the introduction of economic "shock therapy"—which included decentralization, privatization, elimination of the system of central planning, and the introduction of the principles of the market economy and neoliberal policies (Rothstein 2004; Buyandelgeriyin 2008)—also created a new Eastern European migration system (Massey et al. 1998). The system is based on specific principles of international relations and international economic exchange, and reflects the growing permeability of the state frontiers as well as the existence of social institutions facilitating international transfer. People who migrate taking new routes nevertheless logically utilize their knowledge, experience, influential connections, and material resources gathered over their lifetime, and sometimes those inherited from their ancestors, reaching back to the socialist period, as well. Therefore, while the Central European postsocialist migration system seems to be quite new, some migration bridges have carried over from the socialist period. This is true, for example, for the frequently utilized bridge between the Czech Republic and Vietnam, which was opened in the 1960s; the migration bridge between the sub-Carpathian Ukraine and the Czech Lands (i.e., Bohemia, Moravia, and Czech Silesia) that goes back to the interwar period (Uherek et al. 2006, 2008a, b); and also the bridge eventually utilized by the family from the Chernobyl region, who form the focus of our chapter, established originally in the 1860s when peasants and craftsmen from the Czech Lands resettled in Ukraine in search of affordable farming land (Valášková et al. 1997).

International migration shares many common traits all over the world. Economic migration is explored with the help of the whole range of methodological instruments that enable comparison between single cases. Using comparative measures we can, for instance, assume economic migration from the Ukraine to the Czech Republic is an example of an East–West migration model. However, ethnographies of the transition period suggest that market rules and the neoliberal economy do not work the same everywhere. Following Michael Burawoy and Katherine Verdery (Verderey 1996; Burawoy and Verdery 1999) we can state that transition from socialism did not lead directly to Western-type capitalism but instead created a new social environment built on global, European, and local values, norms, social institutions, and people’s skills and knowledge. The study of these original and unrepeatable social and economic forms, and their global influence, is the primary task of post-transition anthropology in and of Central and Eastern Europe.

### **The Ukrainians and Compatriots from Ukraine in the Czech Republic**

The compatriot migrations constitute a specific phenomenon of the transition period. The nationalization of cultures and newly emerged possibilities of amelioration of the quality of life and economic conditions triggered the movement of hundreds of thousands of Germans in Romania, Hungary, Ukraine, Russia, and Kazakhstan, and thousands of Jews and also some Poles in those countries. They began to move to the countries of origin of their ancestors—to Germany, Israel, Poland, and to other developed countries or countries in the Western part of the world, including Central Europe. Czech minorities in eastern and southern countries also strove to return to the country of their ancestors. One of the largest groups of migrants from Ukraine to the Czech Republic were residents from the vicinity of the Chernobyl power plant, who moved for health reasons. About 2,000 people arrived at the beginning of the 1990s and settled in different areas in the Czech Republic. British sociologist Claire Wallace referred to the postcatastrophe movement of people from the Chernobyl area as “ecological migration” (Wallace and Stola 2001). The community was predominantly of rural origin; roughly a quarter comprised university-educated people and half were people with a secondary-school education. The Ministry of Interior of the Czech Republic ensured that the group had the possibility of moving into renovated flats and helped at least one family

member find work, which nevertheless often did not correspond to their qualifications. Their lack of language skills and different behavior patterns prevented them from finding good jobs for many years (Valášková et al. 1997).

Adapting to employment that required lower qualifications, and to a lower-class environment, was a traumatizing experience for many of these migrants, and it slowed their integration into the Czech society. This migration group, which is distributed all around the Czech Republic, continues to meet whenever possible, which reinforces their former status and values from their birthplace. Some of them compensate for the loss of social position by sharp criticism of the Czech society. If we were to apply Hofstede's concept of culture shock (Hofstede et al. 2002: 20–27), in the case of numerous well-educated families the period of (honeymoon) euphoria arising from the new situation ended relatively soon after their arrival, and the stages of disorientation and then irritability were long and deep (Hofstede et al. 2002: 23). This was also the case for Vjenceslav<sup>2</sup> and his family.<sup>3</sup>

### **Vjenceslav and the Obstacles to Him Doing Business in the New Milieu**

Vjenceslav was a member of one of the privileged, successful, and well-situated families from Kiev. He had university education and, at the time of the existence of the Soviet Union, he was a high-ranking military officer. After resettling in the Czech Republic, he stayed with a part of his family in a small town located not far from the capital city of Prague and the regional capital of Hradec Králové. He assumed that his status and education would help him in obtaining quality position, but he was mistaken. He and other family members ended up as construction laborers and experienced deep frustration.

Compensation for their lost status was evident first in their private life: an emphasis on cleanliness and the furnishing of the flat, and on the children's results in school; an enormous interest in education and developing skills of children was very common in this group of migrants. Gradually, some family members managed to compensate at least partially for the loss of status. Vjenceslav could never return to serve in the military, but after some time he moved from being a laborer to a bouncer, and later to work in a security company, where he continued working until his retirement. He came to the Czech Republic with the intention of setting up a business but had to wait for an opportunity for 11 years.

The neoliberal postcommunist economy formally welcomed new businessmen but usually it did not offer assistance in acquiring the necessary knowledge for running a business, or facilitate access to business activities. In the chaotic business milieu, enterprises could usually be launched if people had access to sufficient money to cover legal and logistical services, or if they had previous experience or the assistance of social networks comprising acquaintances, former schoolmates, or other families. We follow Dita Čermáková, Soňa Schovánková, and Klára Fiedlerová in identifying a common trait of the majority of businessmen, namely “a certain quantity of social capital based on personal informal networks” (Čermáková et al. 2011: 445). The saying that Czechs are a nation of schoolmates illustrates the situation well. Due to this specific economic and cultural trait, it is very difficult for a lone foreigner without the required social capital to launch a business in the local milieus of small towns and villages.<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that it is not only corruption as “an indication of the lack of the institutionalisation of capitalism and democracy in transition societies” (Wallace and Haerpfer 2000: 1), but predominantly the opaque legal and social context that contributes to the specific impermeability of the local environment. To overcome this barrier, immigrants to the Czech Republic often specialize in one specific branch of economy—the same as that engaged in by their compatriots and relatives.

Immigrants from the Ukraine do not have a clearly assigned business area. They usually sell their labor power in the fields of construction, mechanical engineering, agriculture, and the food industry, often through the illegal or semilegal *švarc* (or *Schwarz* [black]) system (Drbohlav 1997; Uherek et al. 2008; Drbohlav and Džúrová 2013), occupations that do not lead to an increase of social status for a university-educated family. The family of the former military officer from Kiev, Vjenceslav, like many others, could hardly enter the network of a business economy surrounded by employees just like themselves. Thus Vjenceslav, who could not find any supportive network, had to work for a security agency until his retirement.

### Business Activities and Individual Experience

It took almost 11 years before Vjenceslav could take the first steps to establish his business. He was helped by his son, who in the meantime had finished studying at the law faculty in the Czech Republic and acquired knowledge of how to start a company. The crucial question for any businessman is the choice of the field of business and Vjenceslav

decided to found his business on his most striking experience before coming to the Czech Republic—the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe.

During our research in the Ukraine, in the villages affected by the Chernobyl catastrophe, we were able to verify that people continue to be confused by what had happened. A high mortality rate, low life expectancy, particularly malignant tumors attributed to radiation—these are elements of fear and push factors, which stimulate the population in these areas to emigrate (Valášková et al. 1997). On the other hand, habit, owning property in the contaminated zone, and additional allowances for staying in an area where increased radioactivity is assumed—the so-called funeral allowances—are the pull factors, which encourage people to stay. People produce statements that indicate resignation, but at the same time they are naturally interested in how, with the least investment possible, they can best improve their situation and protect their health (Phillips 2002; Beranská 2013: 268). Immigrants from the Chernobyl area to the Czech Republic have similar experiences; they and their children suffered from various chronic problems, malignant tumors, particularly problems with an enlarged thyroid gland, for a long time after their exposure to radiation (Nesvadbová and Rutsch 1995; Nesvadbová et al. 1996). Apart from other measures, Ukrainian physicians prescribed increased doses of iodine for them. Therefore, in the Ukrainian villages in the Chernobyl area, we find a generally held conviction that it is iodine that effectively eliminates the negative results of increased radioactivity, a belief that generated increased demand for this substance that eventually led to shortages of its availability in the area.

Iodine is mined in several places in the Czech Republic, including areas where spring water with increased iodine content can be found—a naturally iodinated mineral water. Thus the knowledge from the Chernobyl area inspired Vjenceslav's business efforts in the Czech Republic. But the Chernobyl experience could not have direct effects on his business in the Czech Republic. Czech society is aware of iodine's beneficial effect, but it does not attribute great significance to this knowledge. There are also many other substances with which water can be enriched, such as iron, magnesium, or other minerals that appear in Czech mineral waters. The possibility of purchasing and consuming iodinated water could therefore be of interest to Czech consumers, but was not in itself sufficiently inspiring as an incentive to buy the product. On the other hand, for members of a community that suffers from problems of radiation, including long-term problems with the thyroid gland, the phenomenon of iodinated water takes on a different and

more intense meaning. For the majority society in the Czech Republic, the main marketing thrust is that drinking iodinated mineral water resolves problems with being overweight, while for people resettled from the Chernobyl area iodinated water predominantly means elimination of problems caused by increased radiation—a strong incentive, which does not interest the majority of Czech society unaffected by the Chernobyl catastrophe. For respondents from the area afflicted by the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe now living in the Czech Republic, iodine, its presence, and the possibilities of its increased consumption, including information concerning deposits of iodine and the location of iodinated mineral springs, was of great interest. Respondents who had entrepreneurial ambitions also noted that existing sources of iodine in the Czech Republic are not sufficiently utilized.

In the Czech Republic, a large number of strong companies control the market for mineral waters. Trade in mineral waters is lucrative there. A new brand of iodinated water could certainly appear on the market, but it would hardly arouse great interest, perhaps only among the compatriots from the Chernobyl area living in the Czech Republic, and that would be too small and scattered a group to ensure commercial success. In planning their business, our respondents therefore gradually focused on the possibility of exporting iodinated water to Ukraine.

They based their marketing concept on the claim that iodine in the Czech Republic is not only accessible but also of higher quality than that found in Ukraine. They stress the advantages of the Czech iodinated water, which consists in providing consumers with iodine in a safe form (that does not clash with other substances) and as a table food supplement, while the iodine concentrate, they claim, evaporates, since a characteristic of this element in its solid state is sublimation.<sup>5</sup> By putting the iodine concentrate into table water, the producers thus ensure regular intake without the need to provide and deal with the concentrate.

### **Transnational Entrepreneurship in the Czech: The Ukrainian Way**

As already mentioned, it is a widespread conception among the resettled Ukrainians in the Czech Republic that regular intake of iodine is very important, particularly in the areas affected by the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe, because it can ameliorate illnesses of the thyroid gland. Vjenceslav therefore expected consumer demand for iodinated water without taking into consideration the changing conditions and the time

that had passed since the Chernobyl catastrophe. However, he did not have enough know-how to start his own business. His son, who had completed his legal training and, unlike his father, had sufficient credit rating in the Czech Republic (the father was already of pension age), and helped his father to start the business. Thus the father, along with his son and several other relatives, founded a Czech company named Český jod spol s.r.o. (Czech Iodine Co., Ltd), whose object of activity was the production and sale of food products, letting and management of their own real estate, and technical tests and analyses.<sup>6</sup> The representatives of the company, three family members, are each based elsewhere. One lives in Prague, another in Milovice, and the third in Jaroměř; they thus connect with an imaginary triangle the three towns where we find communities of people resettled from Ukraine.

The company was officially founded on April 15, 2002, and is headquartered in the Czech Republic, the district of Prague 6. This is, however, only a correspondence address. The company never regularly mined or produced mineral water in the Czech Republic. In their search for a market for their mineral water, the family of immigrants to the Czech Republic utilized their own contacts in Ukraine. Vjenceslav based his business plan on the importance of the product in his country of origin, utilizing his personal credibility, which he retained in Ukraine and which he failed to bring with him to the Czech Republic. The Czech firm he founded thus became a partner of a brewery in the little town of Pavlivka in the Volhynia county of Ukraine that produces beer and mineral waters.<sup>7</sup>

In the implementation of the business plan of iodinated mineral water, it became clear that to transport water from the Czech Republic to Ukraine would not be profitable, and the company could not secure such transport. The company's shareholders therefore decided to produce the water in the Ukrainian Pavlivka Brewery. They only transport the iodine extract from the Czech Republic to Ukraine, where it is added to water, which originates in Ukraine. The water is also bottled there and uses the trademark Iodanka, which is the trademark of mineral water of the Pavlivka Brewery that has been produced since 1998.<sup>8</sup> Based on personal accounts, the Volyn Oblast (Volhynia Region) seemed to be a good consumer of the iodinated water.

While the water is produced only in Ukraine, up to 2012 it was also mentioned on the company's Czech Web pages. The Web site of the company provided the reader with a detailed description that draws attention to the beneficial effects of the water, including for illnesses of the thyroid gland, and gave further advice on health and ecology in



the Ukrainian language. In the Czech language, there was only a short note on the water next to the name of the company, and a reference to it helping to maintain a slim figure. In 2014, the Web pages added advertisements for the water in Ukrainian, Russian, and English, with texts giving more general information about the health benefits of iodine.<sup>9</sup>

When we asked Vjenceslav why the company does not distribute the iodinated mineral water in the Czech Republic too, he replied that production in Ukraine is easier for him and he is not sure how much interest exists for this product in the Czech Republic. He mentioned a similar firm in the Czech Republic in Luhačovice, which added iodine to the water, which, however, went out of business.

### Conclusion

The case described is an example of a transnational business realized under the specific post-transformation conditions of the Central and East European economy. It is an illustration of transnational trade activities, which, on the one hand, cross the borders of the state and the European Union and, on the other, indicate the limits of a small supranational business in the Central and East European region. The business could be seen as an expression of immigrants' effort to integrate in the new host society, and the new market economy milieu, while it is realized through networks and discourses partially built in the socialist past and partially accommodated to new conditions.

In 1991, when he moved from Ukraine to the Czech Republic, Vjenceslav wanted to overcome two insecurities: the insecurity of the effects of the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe and the insecurity of economic and political development in Ukraine. He intended to transfer in space not only his body but also his social status, abilities, and beliefs, and to integrate them into new conditions of the capitalist state and market economy. This intention appeared to be unrealistic. Migration of bodies follows different rules than migration of statuses, skills, and education. The status of a high-ranking Soviet army officer from the Ukraine cannot be replicated in the Czech Republic, where the military—including army officers—do not have a good reputation,<sup>10</sup> and the former Soviet army is considered an army of occupation and an institution exercising the power of the communist regime. Vjenceslav's prestigious former qualification became totally useless, his credibility dubious, and his education incompatible with the new setting. He transferred to Czech society only his body and his ability to do unqualified work, while his status, prestige, and skills were continually honored

only among compatriots in the Czech Republic and among majority inhabitants in the area of origin.

Vjenceslav's case confirms "the conventional wisdom that labor migrants from non-EU countries tend to cluster in the 'lower' labor market segments[,] often taking marginal low-skilled, low-paid, and low-prestige jobs" (Leontiyeva 2010: 18). It also exemplifies how the complications related to the transfer of status through space and time in postsocialist countries are frequently a cause of nostalgia, "an emotion that emerges again and again in accounts of the post socialist world" (Heady and Gambold Miller 2006: 34). Vjenceslav's communication with the majority inhabitants in the Czech Republic assumed a new quality only when mediated by his son, a young lawyer educated in the Czech Republic, who built up his status in the new conditions in the destination country. His case supports our experience that the second generation of this ecological migration is relatively successful in the Czech milieu (Valášková et al. 1997). Differences between this type of migrant and the majority population are quickly overcome when it comes to school children, but only partly and with difficulty among adults (Uherek 2009: 290).

The example takes into consideration human health and people's need to improve it. A means for this venture is developed in the newly inhabited destination, while the possibility of its application is found in the source country. The founders of the iodinated water project had already lived in the Czech Republic for 11 years when they finally founded the company. Despite that, their efforts to do business could not succeed in the Czech Republic. Instead, their knowledge of the context and discourse allowed them to conduct business on the territory of Ukraine and not of the Czech Republic, that is, once again, in their source country.

Our example of conducting a business selling mineral water demonstrates not only how hard it is to implement a business plan considering the difficulties of orientation in a new local discourse, but also how hard it is to penetrate the Czech market with a new plan if it is not implemented within the ethnic economy—"the schoolmate network" to which we referred at the beginning of the chapter—or in connection with existing global customer demand. We could also find examples of businesses run by immigrants who started new companies in the Czech Republic, but these too are often somewhat paradoxical in nature. Examples include a small Russian furniture company working almost exclusively for Russians in Prague, with all material, tools, and equipment being transported from Russia, which seems quite uneconomical

to outside observers. Similarly, we could name a Ukrainian businessman operating restaurant services who had the whole restaurant building sent in a container from the Ukraine. The recruitment of employees from the ranks of compatriots sometimes seems similarly paradoxical, as the labor force can be recruited in the Czech Republic. These phenomena show the complicated routes to integration, and the barriers immigrants encounter after passing through state frontiers. Our case shows us that the most important factors influencing the decision making of migrants include the circumstances of the migration, barriers in the labor market, the abilities and experiences of the individual acquired in the country of origin and the target country, and the social networks created throughout the immigrant economy. Migrants who come from countries where they had already gained experience of doing business, or where conducting business was normal, are in a different situation from migrants who come from countries with no experience of private business and who have to go through a difficult process to arrive at a decision to set up a business due to the barriers they encountered in the labor market. This applies to examples that are not confined to the ethnic economy and explains the differences among particular national groups of immigrants setting up businesses in the Czech Republic, which were identified by Dita Čermáková and her research team (Čermáková et al. 2011). Once Vjenceslav and his relatives encountered difficulties in entering into the primary labor market, the business project offered them an alternative solution of starting a transnational business.

Transnational trade and transnationalism follow the process of economic diversification in postsocialist states. The immigrant economy forms interesting transnational ties, whose effects may have both positive and negative consequences. The ethnographic example, which was the subject of this chapter, also relativizes the concept of the postsocialism in general. It shows us that the epoch of postsocialism is not simply a period of time span but also involves social memory and experience. Some generations in the Czech Republic intensively live postsocialism in their everyday lives, especially those whose personal lives were seriously impacted by the social changes of 1989/90, while younger generations never experienced this period, to which they lack ties.

### Notes

1. The chapter was created with the support of the EÚ AV ČR, v. v. i. RVO: 68378078.
2. All names of interviewees used in the article are pseudonyms.

3. Vjenceslav and his family were contacted soon after their arrival in the Czech Republic in 1991, and then several times during the 1990s and 2000s. The last contact with the family was in 2013.
4. Inverse examples, however, are also described in the anthropological literature. Maruška Svašek, for instance, analyzed the social situation in a Czech village where a Dutch foreigner successfully expanded his business (Svašek 2008).
5. That is, the evaporation of a solid substance without transition to a liquid state; this process is observable with the naked eye: if you leave iodine in the air, in a few hours everything in the area is covered with a yellow tinge.
6. See: <http://www.detail.cz/firma/26692929-cesky-jod-spol-s-ro-irska-796-1-praha-6/>, accessed July 17, 2014.
7. For more about the brewery (JSC Pavlivka Brewery), see: <http://www.bpart.kiev.ua/eng/cat2004/?s=1&i=153>, accessed July 17, 2014. See also (Pro nas 2013): <http://navolyni.com/projekt.php?projekt=mineralna-voda-yodanka-pavlivska&m=1>, accessed July 17, 2014.
8. Source: *Ukraine Today*. Catalogue of leading enterprises of Ukraine. <http://www.rada.com.ua/eng/catalog/13987/>, accessed May 22, 2014.
9. See Jodanka Pavliška: <http://jodanka.com/uk>, accessed July 17, 2014.
10. For more on this see, for instance, Červinková (2006).

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