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ACTIVITIES SUPPORTING THE AWARENESS OF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CREATING AN IMAGE OF A TOWN¹

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Abstract

Societies as well as individuals are members of some group or groups, observe similarities and differences, perceive time continuity and/or identify with the environment. What is more important, they can be emotionally linked to a cultural, ethnic, religious or other tradition or group.

In contrast to rural existence, life in a town is socially and culturally much more differentiated; people participate in activities of various interest groups, clubs, religious or national organizations, cultural, sport or alternatively-oriented associations which, with their sub-cultural manifestations, participate more or less in activities of the town.

Keywords: *identity, mental memory, development of the town*

The cultural potential of a society involves not only various material and spiritual values but also, in a broader sense, its objective (phenomenal) and socio-cultural surroundings. The way of life (festal and everyday life) of the inhabitants is influenced and formed by their surroundings. At the same time, these surroundings are reshaped and influenced by people with their various social activities, requirements, and interests. People expect the following from their surroundings:

- identification with the place where they live;
- fulfillment of the need to belong somewhere, to feel affection for the place where they live, its traditions, history and culture;

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- security in the material, social and emotional sense;
- human surroundings and quality of life;
- possibility of communicating socially and of gaining some knowledge.

Nowadays, we prefer new possibilities of interpersonal communication. They are connected with the disappearance of borders and the overcoming of distances that help us to gain new emotional experiences and knowledge. We are overloaded with information and influenced by homogenization – not only with technical homogenization but also with spiritual homogenization. Surroundings, culture, fashion, entertainment, food, etc., are also homogenized (Petrušek, 2007). Such globalizing surroundings, complexity of cultural trends and aspects force scientists (especially social and cultural anthropologists, philosophers, sociologists, ethnologists, historians and psychologists) to think about the sense of the existence of national, regional, local, urban and rural cultures; about the importance of preserving and developing the cultural heritage, identity and humanization of the surroundings and society.

According to Petrušek, abandonment of tradition, one's own history, culture, and identity is not a step which "society can afford without any risk... Each generation has some problems with its tradition; each generation ignores or even despises some aspects of tradition" (Petrušek, 2007, p. 316-317).

Experience and knowledge, coming from history, warn us that loss of identity always means a fast or slow end of a community, which is usually followed by gradual dissolution into foreign cultural surroundings. A community without identity and its own history (more precisely, a society which is unable to express its identity through cultural expression), trying to enter into European integration processes, is sentenced to the above-mentioned dissolution (Hajko, 2005).

Societies as well as individuals are members of some group or groups, observe similarities and differences, perceive time continuity and/or identify with the environment. What is more important, they can be emotionally linked to a cultural, ethnic, religious or other tradition or group.

The identity of an individual is created and developed in a cultural and social-historical context and area. Memory of history and symbols connected with identity provide awareness of the line joining us with our ancestors and awareness of our development in time (Bačová, 1996).

In contrast to rural existence, life in a town is socially and culturally much more differentiated: people participate in activities of various interest groups,

clubs, religious or national organizations, cultural, sport or alternatively-oriented associations which, with their sub-cultural manifestations, participate more or less in activities of the town.

In this paper, I concentrate on activities of two interest groups – "*Friends of the Pustý hrad Association*" and "*Sport Fans of the Pustý hrad Association*" (Pustý hrad means Deserted Castle or Desolate Castle) and how their activities help to create awareness of the historical background and image of the town of Zvolen. I will show activities of these two groups for the town and its inhabitants. These activities focus on creating and propagating the historical feeling of "Old Zvolen," alias the "Deserted Castle." At the same time, I will try to find the answer to the question of whether the inhabitants of the town are aware of the historical background of Pustý hrad and, if so, how they perceive this historical background. I will try to analyze which visions, strategies and activities toward stronger regional and historical identity will be planned and organized in the future by the town for its inhabitants.

In this paper I use information from interviews with respondents, observations, questionnaires, the regional press, photo documentation, strategic plans of town development and the results of a public questionnaire made by the Zvolen Town Hall focused on the development of tourism in the town.

The town of Zvolen is situated in Central Slovakia and was a royal town in history. This year, we are celebrating the 765th anniversary of its foundation. The first reliable document of the independent royal town of Zvolen is the royal charter of King Belo IV of December 28, 1243, reinstating Zvolen's town privileges. The town has approximately 45,000 inhabitants. The town has always had a very favorable location and represents an important national and international railway junction.

Pustý hrad alias Old Zvolen Castle

Old Zvolen Castle (Vetero Zolium), called, since the 19th century, the Deserted Castle², is situated above the town on the confluence of the Hron and Slatina Rivers. In the 12th century, Old Zvolen Castle was the seat of the royal "komitat," that is, a territory extending over the whole area of today's Central Slo-

² The ruins of the Deserted Castle belong to the Slovak cultural heritage thanks to their historical and architectural importance.

vakia. Although the castle is located very high above sea level, its foundation before the 13th century is indubitable (according to the latest research) (Zvolen, 1993).

The location of the town and royal “komitat” was not chosen by accident, but it was a question of a reasonable choice. The advantageous strategic-geographic location and the continuity of an ancient Slav settlement played an important role in the choice of Zvolen as an economic, administrative and military center in the later colonization process (Hanuliak, 1998).

Pustý hrad (the Deserted Castle) creates the typical panorama of the town. Between 1241 and 1255 a large fortification – refugium was built. Since then, the castle’s area of 7.6 hectares³ has remained the same; all the buildings were constructed within this fortification. The ruins show that there were actually two castles (the Upper and Lower Castle) which were only 1 kilometer apart and were not built at the same time. In the first half of the 15th century, the importance of Pustý hrad faded away a little after the construction of the new Gothic castle right in the town. The towers, palaces and bastions of the castle served only as living quarters for the numerous troops of Ján Jiskra of Brandýs. At the time of the conquest of the castle by Ján Huňady the castle buildings were destroyed by fire (1452) and since then Pustý hrad has been in ruins. It has been slowly disappearing from the mental memory of the inhabitants.

The first systematic excavation work in Pustý hrad was realized between 1886 and 1889. Since 1992, the archaeological research has been renewed.⁴ The present archeological research is also closely connected with the presentation of the revealed architecture.

Characteristics of the group

The “Friends of the Pustý hrad Association” (the Association) was established in 1998. The main goal of the Association is the preservation and systematic publicity of their historical cultural heritage – the castle called Pustý hrad.

Activities of the Association are focused on the following:

- cooperation and support by organizing archeological works;
- protection of the area of the castle against vandalism;

³ The Deserted Castle is one of the largest castles in Europe; e.g., the Castle of Spis has only 4.95 hectares.

⁴ Preservation of the castle of Pustý hrad is systematically financed within the framework of the budget of the town of Zvolen.

- publicity of the castle in different ways (more or less traditional);
- cooperation with the town of Zvolen and other organizations on the realization of events connected with the castle;
- presentation of the results of the archeological research for their preservation and for public interest

The group and the urban community

One of the main goals of the Association is better publicity for the castle and organization of traditional and alternative events which should support historical awareness (not only of the inhabitants of Zvolen) and increase interest in this town. The interest of the people is an important factor in their participation, although their interest is mostly only latent. The Association prepared two multimedia CDs⁵ about the history of the castle. The CDs were distributed to elementary schools, where they serve as a teaching aid for regional history.

The Association also organizes many events for the public – regular lectures on Pustý hrad (its history, archeological research and discoveries); literary and art competitions connected with the castle; a regular climb on the castle hill in September, etc.

The urban community and Pustý hrad

Group climbs to historical, symbolical or memorial places play an identification, cultural-social, educational and memorial importance in Slovak history, e.g., a climb with Štúr and his followers on Devín hill (in 1836), on Kriváň hill (in 1846); a climb within the framework of an international youth meeting on Rysy hill;⁶ ascent to the monument of M. R. Štefánik in Bradlo, and a climb on Sitno hill are well-known.

In the first weekend of September, a regular climb on the hill of Pustý hrad takes place in the town of Zvolen. It is a socio-cultural and hiking event connected with the end of the archeological season on the castle. It is organized by the town of Zvolen in cooperation with the Association and other socio-cultural and sport organizations. The year 2007 saw the 15th annual climb to the castle. Mostly inhabitants of Zvolen but also people from all over Slovakia who

⁵ The first CD (2000) is focused on the history and research of Pustý hrad. The second CD (2002) is an extended edition in English and German with more information about the town and its surroundings.

⁶ In the period of socialism, a climb on Rysy Hill was organized in 1913 as a memorial to V. I. Lenin.

are interested in history and hiking participate in the climb. The above-mentioned event is enriched by a performance of historical sword-play, musical groups or theater.

A Ride through History on bicycles is organized by the “Sport Fans of the Pustý hrad Association.” The 6th annual ride started in different places representing the countries of the Visegrad Four (the Castle of Spiš in Slovakia, Slavkov near Brno in the Czech Republic, Wisla in Poland, and the Visegrad Castle in Hungary) and finished in the town of Zvolen and at the castle. Billboards in the town contained the message: *“Greetings from and to Pustý hrad through Poland, Moravia, Hungary and Slovakia are sent by the team of cyclists who represent the town of Zvolen and Pustý hrad.”*

Responses of participants in the climb prove that people feel the need to identify with the place where they live and feel affection for this place and its history.

“I am an old Zvolen inhabitant and Pustý hrad is a significant piece of history of our town” (male, 1930).

“It is awareness of our history. I live in Zvolen and therefore I feel proud of Pustý hrad and also of Zvolen Castle” (female, 1961).

“I visit the castle not only during the organized climb. I prefer to be here when there are not so many people. Once we heard a lecture by Dr. Hanuliak. It lasted maybe two hours and I got so much information. I find the castle a cultural attraction today” (male, 1975).

“I was at the castle as a pupil. There was only a grassy hill and nothing more. Now, it is totally different. I like to walk here with my family and have a barbecue with the children” (female, 1970).

In the mental memory of the inhabitants of Zvolen, the Deserted Castle is connected with various events and activities that publicize it. There are also ecumenical masses besides the above-mentioned sport, hiking and cultural events. There are also informal club evenings, meetings of friends and colleagues with a guitar. Sport competitions and history contests are organized for children (called “International Children’s Day on Pustý hrad”; the sport competition is called the “Key to Zvolen’s Fortress”).

Town strategy and cultural-historical awareness of the inhabitants

Regardless of the aim of the visit to the castle (historical, sport, hiking, cultural, social, etc), it is important that Pustý hrad is an integral part of the men-

tal memory of inhabitants of the town of Zvolen, as is shown in a questionnaire realized by the Town Hall in 2005. The questionnaire helped to prepare marketing strategies for the development of tourism in the town.

One of the questions in the questionnaire: What is most interesting for tourists in the town and in its surroundings? The order of places was following:

1.	Zvolen Castle
2.	Pustý hrad (the Deserted Castle)
3.	Spas of Sliač and Kováčová
4.	Square of the Slovak National Uprising
5.	The Môťová dam
6.	nature in the surroundings
7.	Kráľová – ski center
8.	Wood and Forest Museum
9.	J. G. Tajovský Theater
10.	Evangelical Church and Catholic Church
11.	Borová hora Arboretum

One question in the questionnaire was open and many respondents wrote many interesting tips for tourists, but mostly they think that what is most interesting for tourists are historical sites. The Gothic Zvolen Castle, part of the national cultural heritage, is in first place along with the Slovak National Gallery, and the castle of Pustý hrad is in second place.

Another question in the questionnaire requested tips and comments for better development of tourism in our region. The respondents suggested better publicity for town and cultural sites. The inhabitants expressed greater interest in more cultural events connected with the history of the town.

One of results of the questionnaire is that the inhabitants of Zvolen consider their town as quite attractive for tourists. They consider the historical sites, theater, music and folkloric events as the most attractive. At the same time, the inhabitants expressed only average satisfaction with the level and choice of cultural activities in the town. It is necessary to use the cultural-historical potential of the town more efficiently, to emphasize better publicity for the historical sites and cultural events, and to support the interest of the inhabitants in their historical and cultural heritage (Košťalová, 2006).

The above-mentioned fact is included in the program of economic and social development of the town of Zvolen, which determines the goals and development priorities for the town. Support for activities aimed at education of the inhabitants concerning the town/region and its cultural-historical and natural heritage is one of the priorities. The document also defines strong and weak aspects of the town. On one hand, the fact that the town of Zvolen is a place with a rich history and cultural heritage is a strength. On the other hand, a weakness is that the inhabitants lack a feeling of civic responsibility, which is connected with low participation in the activities and administration of the town. According to results of the document, strategy for the preservation of the cultural heritage and a system of educating people to be proud of the town and region are also missing (PHSR, Enclosure 2 – Analysis).

Visions of further development of the town, incorporated in complex long-term suggestions, should tend to develop an awareness of the historical background and help build a feeling of identity with the town. The “Old Zvolen” Project offers several ideas connected with publicity of the history of the town and Pustý hrad: foundation of an archeological open-air museum, lighting of the area, construction of a cable railway, building of an observation tower, etc., which can emphasize the historical and cultural importance of the town’s heritage. The castle of Pustý hrad, or rather Old Zvolen Castle,⁷ exists in the mental memory of the majority of the inhabitants of Zvolen, thanks to the above-mentioned activities and events and contributes to creating an emotional membership, identity and affection toward the place where they live.

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In conjunction with Grant Project 5RP she has also studied gender questions, especially in regard to women in civil and political life. Teaching: University teaching and, recently, referee of the Museology and Cultural Heritage study programs and the European Cultural Studies program of the Faculty of Humanities of Matej Bel University.

⁷ Many inhabitants of the town and also members of the Association prefer the name Old Zvolen Castle because the castle is not “deserted” or “desolate” any more.

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