Myths about the Church of St. John of Nepomuk in Vrchní Orlice: (Dis)continuity of a Place without Inheritors

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Abstract

The article investigates the contemporary narratives surrounding the Church of St. John of Nepomuk in Vrchní Orlice (Hohen Erlitz), a site marked by displacement, destruction, fragile local memory, and precarious identity since the end of World War II. Drawing primarily on interviews conducted between 2022 and 2024, this qualitative study focuses on the "myths" that emerged, often incidentally but repeatedly, during explorations of the site's atmosphere, memory, and potential new functions for the church. The concept of "myth" is employed to capture the processes of balancing personal and collective experiences, addressing gaps in memory, and negotiating identities and belonging. Following the participants' reflections and a comparison of the field data with the existing literature, we propose the concepts of *liminality*, *haunted landscapes*, and *adopted heritage* as key tools for interpretation.

Key Words

hauntology, Hohen Erlitz, liminality, memory, post-displacement, Vrchní Orlice, the Church of St. John of Nepomuk

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The now-defunct village of Hohen Erlitz[1]/ Vrchní Orlice is today marked only by a few houses and the Church of St. John of Nepomuk. The place is photogenic, romantic, abandoned, characterized by the discontinuity of local settlement, fragile local memory, and a precarious identity. After World War II, the village underwent significant transformations and extensive demolitions, and today it is a sparsely-populated recreational area. The very features that make the location attractive to tourists also pose limitations on local life and on sustainable care for the site.

This paper focuses on the "myths" surrounding the unique genius loci of Vrchní Orlice, as testified to by contemporary participants and as we recorded them between 2022 and 2024 while working on a project that included a theoretical-empirical qualitative analysis of the symbolism, context, and potential future redefinition of the "empty" church in Vrchní Orlice. The specific research aims of our article are as follows: first, to analyse the symbolic and physical forms of Vrchní Orlice, paying attention to the relationship between its past and present; second, to summarize and interpret the contemporary "mythical" narratives which address its distinctive *genius loci*; and third, to compare the gathered data with the theoretical concepts of liminality, haunted landscapes, and adopted heritage.

Notes on Method and Research

The research was conducted between August 2022 and October 2024. It consisted of long-term engagement with the field and included informal conversations with various types of participants, as well as the study of chronicles, recorded oral histories, and other documents. The primary data collection tool was the semi-structured interviews conducted between August 2023 and August 2024. The sampling structure was determined progressively, with the core group of participants selected to include individuals with different types of strong personal connections to Vrchní Orlice. The sample was further expanded using the snowball method.

It soon became clear that very few people are connected to Vrchní Orlice; they are at least loosely aware of each other, but do not constitute a homogeneous community. This article is based on 13 interviews with individuals who either live now or have lived in the area permanently, or who repeatedly spend shorter periods there, and/or are connected to the place through their origin, long-term work, or leisure activities. Among the interview participants were, for example, a descendant of the forcibly displaced German-speaking inhabitants of nearby Neratov, a descendant

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1   Also Hohenerlitz, Hohenörlitz, or Hoch Erlitz.

of Greek immigrants, a local historian, a cottage owner, a cultural event organizer, a municipal councillor, and others; typically, each individual embodied several of these characteristics at once.

The project was carried out in accordance with the ethical code of the Czech Association for Social Anthropology. Participants provided written informed consent. The interviews were conducted by Barbora Motlová, were recorded with permission, and transcribed for subsequent analysis; in one case, only written notes were taken, and in several instances, participants chose to share certain information off the record. To protect privacy, all data have been anonymized—given the very small circle of people connected to the location, even those participants who agreed to be named have been anonymized. For several potentially sensitive statements, we do not provide even a pseudonymized identification as, due to the limited pool of possible participants, it would still be possible to deduce the speaker's identity from contextual clues.

The interview questions focused on topics such as notions of home, local identity, the *genius loci*, and the exploration of the possibilities and limitations regarding new functions for the church. To maintain an open approach to the topic, we used grounded theory as a methodological framework, although we apply it somewhat loosely for the purposes of this paper: we use it as a starting point for data analysis while remaining aware of its limitations (particularly its tendencies toward positivism and reductionism) and we do not, for instance, aim to construct an axial causal model. This analysis seeks to interpret how contemporary participants relate to Vrchní Orlice through symbols and social actions. It is evident that the deeply intertwined, symbolic and physical aspects of the place play a significant role; both must be taken into account.

The diversity of experiences and perspectives within the "group" of participants is notable. While recurring motifs and principles can be identified in the data, the specific attitudes, visions, and symbolically significant narratives cannot and should not be reduced to a single, unified perspective. It is also important to note that we did not interview every person who interacts with the local geographical and social space (some declined, others did not respond to our requests), and therefore our analysis is only a partial sketch.

The decision to conduct this research arose for both authors from a shared experience of the site's powerful, distinctive atmosphere. Barbora Motlová knew Vrchní Orlice from childhood trips with her grandfather, but then lost contact with the place for a long time, while Jana Karlová visited it for the first time only a few years ago. Our own relationship with the location evolved as we moved from a more superficial perception to a deeper famili-

arity with this subject, leading to a more detailed, complex interpretation of its symbols and meanings. Aware that our process is less about objective induction and more about abductive reasoning, we have sought to reflect on and revise our preconceptions and strive for insight into the experiences of others. The place and its stories have left a lasting impression on us.

Vrchní Orlice with and without people

In the interwar period, Vrchní Orlice was part of a self-sufficient, prosperous region with resources, crafts, industry, and agriculture. The village itself had operations for processing wood and leather, textile and glass production, an inn, a distillery, a blacksmith, a mill, and a sawmill with a turbine; agricultural production was becoming more efficient. Before World War I, a railway connection from Letohrad towards Kladsko had been planned but was not realized due to political changes (Hendrych 1987: 225–240). Since 1926, a bus line on the Žamberk–Kunštát route transported passengers and mail daily, and that same year, Vrchní Orlice was connected to the telephone network; in 1939, a post office was established (Zerbs 1971: 13). Since 1781 there was an independent school in the village (Jirák 1932: 23; Zámečník 2003) as well as many associations and a library by the end of the 19th century (Zerbs 1971: 8–9).

Fig. 1 Hohenörlitz im Adlergebirge 1926, postcard. Source: private archive.

Vrchní Orlice was part of the Erlitztal microregion, the valley of the upper course of the Wild Orlice River. According to Burda and Rezková (2013: 46), there were 26 villages in this region, which was relatively homogeneous in terms of economy, culture, and ethnicity. While at the beginning of the 20th century their total population exceeded 4,000, since 1950 it has fluctuated around 500.

The area is characterized by a combination of relative isolation from the interior, harsh living conditions, and rich natural resources. By the 19th century, local crafts were gradually transformed into a local industrial zone of glassworks, wood processing, and paper mills, including a now-defunct system of waterworks (Burda – Rezková 2013: 37–46; Jirák 1932: 23). It is necessary to note that not everyone here lived easily in what was a prosperous area overall. The demographic curve of Vrchní Orlice, like that of Erlitztal as a whole, shows a declining trend throughout the 20th century (Burda – Rezková 2013: 46). Some moments are well-illustrated by chroniclers' records: an entry from 1896, for example, states that due to economic downturns, some farmers sold their properties in Vrchní Orlice and emigrated to America (Zerbs 1971: 9). The chronicle entries list achievements and progress, but also speak of harsh weather, difficult living conditions, the need to work hard even in old age, and poor families' dependence on state or municipal support (Jirásek 1917: 184, 188; Zerbs 1971: 8; Weiss 1939: 162, 138; Jaksch 2017: 31).

The whole Erlitztal area was typically Catholic, and families were often large. The predominant language was a specific local variant of German. In the testimony of Rudolf Jehlička from nearby Podlesí near Bartošovice/ Schönwald, it is evident that negotiating identity could be complicated here:

> "*My mother was German, my father half Czech* […] *When I started school at six* [at the German school in Neratov]*, I didn't speak* [standard] *German at all – we spoke the* [local German] *dialect at home.* […] *The whole class laughed when I said something.*" (Jehlička – Marková 2015; see also Kubišta 2008)

The notion of a sharp boundary between Czechs and Germans, whereby local inhabitants would not fit into the category of Czechness, is problematic, not least due to mixed marriages. Even at the beginning of the 1930s, identification in terms of the concept of *Deutschböhme*, tied to the local variant of German and a specific "Czech" territory, was common (Hoření 2024: 148–152; Seidl 2020: 21–25). As the interwar years progressed, Czech-German nationalist tensions increased, and national identity gained importance

(Eriksen 2012; Barth 1969). A representative of the forcibly displaced German population later described the situation after 1918 as follows:

> "*Shortly after the end of the war … the national pressure on the German population began. In the originally German territory, Czech became the official language.* […] *A severe blow to the inhabitants came in 1921 when the former two-class elementary school with 55 pupils was downgraded to a one-class school.*" (Zerbs 1971: 9, 12)

Tensions and conflicts culminated in 1938. A key event, symbolically referenced for a long time, was 25 September 1938,[2] when Henlein supporters fatally injured Czech warden Josef Navrátil in Vrchní Orlice (Trojan – Vaňourek 2010: 21).

Fig. 2 School year 1922/23 in Vrchní Orlice. Source: private archive.

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2   Near the former school, a memorial was erected in 1946 with the inscription: "Here, during a time of heightened threat to the Republic, on 25 September, 1938, JOSEF NAVRÁTIL, aged 28, a member of the financial guard and the 'State Defensce Guard', was treacherously shot by a German murderer. LET US NOT FORGET!"

Given the multiple changes in the political structures, the power structures, and the many historical blind spots, it is not easy to reconstruct how individual people acted, what their attitudes were, and with whom they identified. What is certain is that local attitudes and identities were not entirely uniform – yet after World War II, the principle of collective guilt was applied to the local population. The end of the war and the early post-war weeks had the nature of a transitional (liminal) period between the collapse of the old system and the establishment of the new one. Centralized state power institutions were not yet functioning; Soviet troops, released prisoners, captives, and Czech partisan paramilitary units passed through the area, assuming the roles of judicial and repressive bodies in the name of post-war retribution (Trojan – Vaňourek 2010: 223). For Vrchní Orlice, we find almost no detailed texts or eyewitness accounts from this time. On 26 May 1945, Heinrich Pohl was murdered by the Revolutionary Guards, while Anna Pohl was abducted and went missing ever since; on 7 June 1945, Soviet soldiers shot Anton and Franz Neumann, while Josef Jaschke was murdered by a Czech group; and during the transport in August 1946, Klemens Feichtinger disappeared (Trojan – Vaňourek 2010: 203–204; Zerbs 1971: 10).

Alongside many tragic stories from neighbouring villages (Neugebauer 2016: 50–55; Rolletschek – Knoblich s.d.: 5–6; Trojan – Vaňourek 2010: 201–204), there are also gestures of humanity. For example, the aforementioned Rudolf Jehlička recounts how he and his father escaped from being given a beating after which several "convicts", who did not escape, died. The Jehličkas were lucky enough to meet a partisan who, though he did not know them personally, helped them upon learning that he came from the same place as Mr. Jehlička's father (Jehlička – Marková 2017; see also Trojan – Vaňourek 2010: 201).

After the local community underwent the tragic events of 1945, only fragments of stories, some names, professions, and the origins of the displaced remain, as well as death dates and the national or state affiliations of the murderers of several local residents. More often, we know collective numbers rather than specific details of the fates of individuals (Neugebauer 2016: 50–55; Trojan – Vaňourek 2010: 201–204). From the collection centre in Králíky we have the records of 150 people from Vrchní Orlice who were forcibly displaced[3] to Germany in July and August 1946. There is no record that any local families were allowed to stay in Czechoslovakia – for example, due to mixed marriages (Dvořák 2012; Spurný 2011).

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3 To discuss the issue of the terms displacement/expulsion/expatriation, see, for example (Blažek –Zeman 2013: 70–71; Staněk – von Arburg 2005: 466–467).

The emptiness of the depopulated village deepened over time. After the state coup, Vrchní Orlice was included in the so-called border zone, an area where entry and permanent residence were permitted only to "reliable persons" with a special permit (Kovařík 2005: 686–687; Mašková 2015: 31). Targeted reforestation began, along with the demolition of buildings deemed unsuitable: in 1948–49, demolition orders were issued for the liquidation of 17 structures in Vrchní Orlice (Burda – Rezková 2013: 105; Kovařík 2006: 66). The Church of St. John of Nepomuk[4] was also under threat, as official interpretations viewed church monuments as alien, inappropriate symbols of German Catholic culture which did not align with the new political projects (Brichová 2006). New settlers often viewed the original buildings pragmatically, as easily accessible sources of building materials. We have not found information explaining why this church was spared during the extensive demolitions. The explanation could be similar to the reasons the Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in nearby Neratov was spared: either the demolition would have been costly and was not an absolute priority, and/or someone stood up for the church at a decisive moment.[5]

The adjacent cemetery, however, was damaged; some small sacred landmarks disappeared from the landscape, as did the stone bridge with the statue of St. John of Nepomuk (Mašková 2015: 36; Topinka 2005: 552–554; Zámečník 2003: 10). Local identity and socio-cultural memory (Karlová 2013; 2014; Kreisslová – Nosková – Pavlásek 2023) vanished along with the original inhabitants, who carried their bond to the place with them for a long time. The relationship to their symbolic, imagined home and the longing for return, unlikely within the span of a human lifetime, is illustrated by the song *Mei Staadla* (also *Mei Därfla* or *Heimatlied*), sung at remembrance gatherings:

> "*Deep in the valley, among the mountains, lies my beloved, beautiful home. Green meadows, green fields, surrounded by green forests. […] As long as my heart still beats warmly, I will not forget you […] how beautiful it is all over the world! But it is most beautiful at home in*

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4 The cruciform church from 1712 was dedicated to St. John of Nepomuk. It is noteworthy that this likely occurred several years before his beatification (Oppeltová 1993–1995; Přívratský 2014: 7–8; Staněk – von Arburg, 2005: 466–467; Zerbs 1971).

5 A demolition order for the Neratov church was issued in 1960 and again in 1973. Thanks to the intervention of heritage conservationists, the funds allocated for the demolition were exhausted during the relocation of the local Rococo staircase (Valenčík s.d.).

> *my green Orlice valley.* […] *when the beautiful dream ends, I will be buried at home, near my green mountains, near my village.*"[6]

A similar sentiment is conveyed in this interview statement: "*It's a beautiful part of the country, but it lost a lot because of the war. My family lost their home.*" (P1)

In Vrchní Orlice, the economic, social, and familial ties which had been built up and had lived for several centuries suddenly disappeared (Topinka 2005: 536–585). Local knowledge of the landscape and of adaptive strategies, especially agricultural ones, were lost. The recycling, demolition, or appropriation of the original homes were a significant part of post-war changes and, beyond the mere destruction, can also be understood as acts of reclaiming space (Ćwiek-Rogalska 2020a: 45):

> "*Fifteen kilometres from the border, there was supposed to be nothing, just like in the south and west. So they started systematically demolishing houses, dismantling the better ones for materials. One Czech or Slovak eyewitness told me that around 1952 they tore down the school, dismantling it brick by brick. So the grand houses disappeared.* […] *When they gradually expelled the Germans from the other side, from what is now Poland, they stopped demolishing and started resettling, but by then, only small cottages remained.*" (P2)

While towns and industrial areas with larger Czech minorities were resettled more easily, Vrchní Orlice, with its hilly, mountainous location, less-fertile soil, and harsh climate, was not attractive (Špačková 1981: 11; Topinka 2005: 536–585). The newcomers had highly diverse life experiences, customs, and skills which, together with post-war policies including efforts to eliminate the formation of potentially cohesive religious communities, complicated the chances of establishing roots in the area (Portmann – Pažout 2017: 91). Most homes were resettled by Czechs from nearby villages – colonists came, for example, from Pěčín and Kunvald, as well as from the regions around Pardubice and Hradec Králové.

A sizable group consisted of Slovak re-emigrants from Romania, who, according to Marie Špačková (1981: 9), were completely illiterate, dependent on state social support, and did not stay long. Before them, in September

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6 The author of the song is Julius Pausewang (1859–1938) from Mladkov/ Wichstadtl (Verein der Adlergebirgler, undated). Our translation is based on a transcription into standard German by Johannes Urner, an amateur historian from Bartošovice/Batzdorf. For an audio recording, see for example Wagner (2014).

1949, 86 refugees from the Greek Civil War had been placed in Vrchní Orlice. Once again, we lack detailed testimonies directly from the area about this. In nearby villages, officials from the National Defence Fund and the State Farms and Forests enterprise expelled the remaining German residents in September 1949, including "nationally reliable" individuals from mixed marriages, to make room for the immigrants – some of whom were reportedly already standing on the doorsteps of their allocated homes (Burda – Rezková 2013: 100). A Greek agricultural cooperative briefly and unsuccessfully existed here, with farms in Trčkov, Vrchní Orlice, and Červená Voda.

> "*First of all, they didn't know how to work with animals or farms because many came from wastelands or even cities. And secondly, it's warmer where they came from, but here it was cold, so a few houses burned down because they lit open fires, not knowing how to heat with stoves. When things calmed down in Greece, most of them moved back, just a few stayed behind here and there.*" (P2)

The exodus of the newly-arrived, but still uprooted settlers, along with the failure of the Greek cooperative, was also connected to the liquidation of industrial plants, insufficient infrastructure and supplies, a significantly declining standard of living, rising social problems – and, overall, unfulfilled hopes. Declarations about supporting the borderlands were largely symbolic, especially in the case of the Žamberk district (Topinka 2005: 99–105).

By the end of the 1960s, according to eyewitnesses, the interior of the Church of St. John of Nepomuk still retained its predominantly Baroque furnishings. The atmosphere of the period is illustrated by the fact that the relatively good condition of the building was due in part to priest Josef Dostál. In 1957, he was convicted of "conspiring against the Republic"; after returning from prison, he could not work as a priest, working instead as a labourer and bricklayer, eventually even passing his bricklaying exams. From 1968, he was allowed to serve as the priest of Rokytnice v Orlických horách parish, which included Vrchní Orlice (Svědectví 1995: 59). Among other things, Dostál tried to maintain the monuments entrusted to his care: "*As I say, keeping them in a state of decay.*" (P2) A 1982 encyclopaedia still mentions the Baroque furnishings in the church (Poche 1982: 278), but interviews suggest a sudden change happened already in the early 1970s. At that time, Dostál no longer had enough strength to work; he stopped holding mass there and closed the building, which paradoxically accelerated its destruction. The church attracted vandals, scrap collectors, and adventurers – whom we will discuss further:

> "*Then within half a year, you'd come back and… The organ was smashed, thrown on the ground. Cows were in the church. The lead pipes were crushed and taken, the pews smashed, the altar destroyed. Just something insane.*" (P3)

That disrespect seems to be a symptom of a place lacking care and supervision, influenced not just by the officially declared, often-practiced opposition to faith and to the German roots of the site, but also by pragmatic "gold-digger" attitudes. It is worth noting that both destruction and deliberate looting were also part of the post-revolution era, especially pronounced in the 1990s: "*Different people who somehow found out about the church and came here. You'd even see license plates from Hradec Králové or Prague on their cars.*" (P4)

In the 1960s, despite repeated state efforts to prevent it, the empty houses in Vrchní Orlice became weekend cottages, makeshift havens of personal freedom and private ownership (Bělovský 2009: 439; Holý 2010: 157). Some cottagers are more sensitive to the specific *genius loci* and, even if they do not live in the locality permanently, can become initiators and participants in identification processes (Chromý 2003: 173; Schindler-Wisten 2017: 18). "*I've started to consider it more of a home lately. Because… I've been going there since I was 14.*" (P3) Some settle in their weekend homes long-term; some strive to save the identity-forming architectural and urban elements of the depopulated localities.

> "*I knew this place from hiking and it always resonated with me. Not only is it truly a romantic place, a beautiful setting, but also spiritually: I've always felt the atmosphere here, the peace, and the presence of a good force… I used to come here regularly with a friend, while he was still visiting Bartošovice, to make repairs. He was from Prague. We tried to save it here, glazing the windows, and so on.*" (anonymized)

Rescue projects require cooperation, often even with long-term residents or, for example, with the descendants of displaced Germans (Cejplová – Šimáková 2021: 99–118). Until 2020, repairs to the church were mostly carried out through self-help and donations from the Czech and German public, later with the help of grants. Since 2012, the church has been under heritage protection, and in 2021, it was transferred to the ownership of the municipality of Bartošovice v Orlických horách, where extensive restoration works have begun. Even after modifications, the church retains a raw atmosphere and is almost devoid of interior furnishings. Reaching agreement on what the church should look like and what purpose it should serve is relatively challenging due to the involvement of various parties with different priorities.

Fig. 3 Vrchní Orlice, Church of St. John of Nepomuk.
Photo by Barbora Motlová.

At the end of this chapter there are figures which we consider to be clear illustrations of the physical depopulation, the loss of local culture, and the memory of Vrchní Orlice. According to the 1930 census, the village had 203 inhabitants. Based on 2021 data, within the cadastral area of Vrchní Orlice (which is larger than the former village) there are 19 recreational properties, three residential houses, and three permanent residents registered in one of them (Český statistický úřad 2021). According to our count, based on a comparison of historical and current maps, there are today 11 structures on the original sites – cottages, cabins, and the utility buildings of an agricultural homestead.[7] Both observations and interview data as of 2024 confirm three permanent residents and several seasonal visitors (P8). The area today serves mainly recreational purposes and officially belongs to the municipality of Bartošovice v Orlických horách. There are no facilities, services, or job opportunities. The church is freely accessible and is occasionally used for municipal and

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7 It was necessary to precisely define the boundary between Vrchní Orlice and the neighbouring village of Hadinec. In collaboration with a German amateur historian, we determined, based on the Císařské povinné otisky stabilního katastru [Imperial Mandatory Prints of the Stable Cadastre] (1840) and other historical maps that the boundary follows the old trade route from Neratov to Rokytnice v Orlických horách, which is today marked on maps as a blue tourist trail.

cultural events, with weddings held here sporadically. Several individuals and civic initiatives, especially the Neratov–Kopeček Association, are involved in projects around the church alongside the municipality of Bartošovice. The Chemin Neuf community has also been active here for a long time. The common goal of these stakeholders is to foster cultural, spiritual, and civic life, though agreement on specific approaches is not always straightforward.

Given the secularization of society, the absence of a local community, the location's relative inaccessibility by public transport, and the proximity of the more prominent Neratov church, it is clear that this building will no longer fulfil its original ecclesiastical and community function. The broader project from which this paper originates, therefore, focused on questions about the symbolism and potential redefinition of what is today an "empty" sacred site (Motlová [forthcoming – Diploma thesis]). Unintentionally, this led us to peculiar, fragmented stories speaking of the emptiness and devastation of this place – and it is precisely to these stories that we now turn.

Census Year	1850	1869	1880	1890	1900	1910	1921	1930	1939	1945	1947	1950	1961	1970	1980	1991	2001	2011	2021	2024
Number of Inhabitants	355	325	291	278	252	245	239	203	240	240	37	.	28	3	.	.	.	1	3	3
Catholic Denomination			.			245	239	202				.		.						
German Linguistic/ National Identity			279			226	224	193				.		.						
Number of Houses		78	78	62	60	59	61	58			59	.	1	.	.		4	3	3	3

Liminality through the eyes of tourists and locals

The *genius loci* (Norberg-Schulz 1994) of Vrchní Orlice is both fascinating and unsettling. The church and the remnants of other structures suggest that this "empty" place was once inhabited and claimed by people. The readability of further signs confirming this depends greatly on the observer's attentiveness:
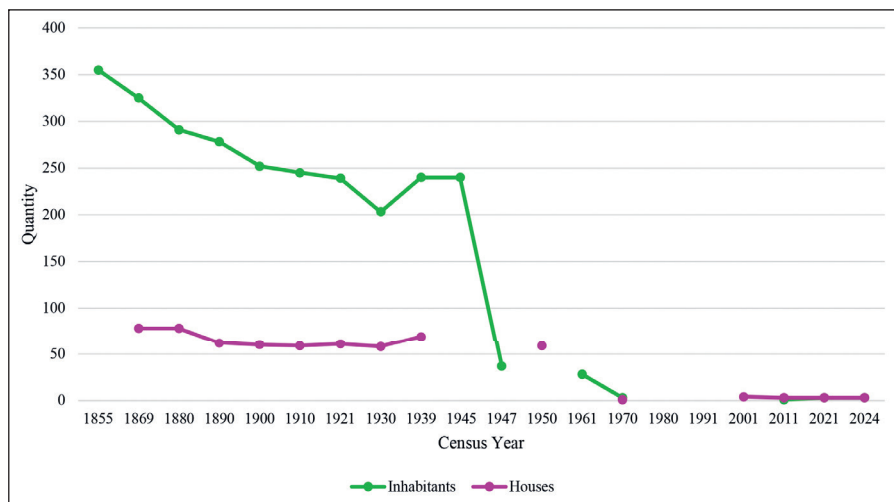
Table and Chart 1: Development of Inhabitants and Houses Number in Vrchní Orlice.[8]

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8   The statistical data for Vrchní Orlice are presented without including the neighbouring municipality of Hadinec/Otendorf. We base this on the following sources: *Zevrubný popis rozdělení země království Českého* 1855: 259; *Seznam míst v království Českém* 1878: 426; *Special-Orts-Repertorium von Böhmen* 1885: 570; *Statistický lexikon obcí v Čechách* 1920: 129; *Statistický lexikon obcí v zemi České* 1930: 398; Český statistický úřad 2011; Český statistický úřad 2021; interview with the mayor of Bartošovice. Friedrich Zerbs (1971: 13) provides totals for the years 1939, 1945, and 1947. Due to the absence of other sources, we adopt these, although we consider them likely to be overestimated (1971: 13). Data on religious affiliation are only available for some years. If the source records a dot instead of a number (indicating that the data are unavailable), we retain it. The categories of linguistic and national identity are defined differently in each census:
1880: Language of public communication of the population: 279 German, 1 Czechoslovak
1910: State citizens by language of communication: 226 German, 0 Czech-Moravian-Slovak, 0 other. *Foreigners: 19*
1913: Language of communication: 285 German, 0 Czech
1921: Nationality of Czechoslovak citizens: 1 Czechoslovak, 224 German. *Foreigners: 14*
1930: Nationality of Czechoslovak citizens: 1 Czechoslovak, 193 German. *Foreigners: 9*
1945: An unspecified number of foreign labourers were present in the village but were not included in the total figure (Zerbs 1971: 13)

in the middle of meadows there are rows of the trees which were once planted at the borders of agricultural plots, and the stone walls were built from rocks cleared from the fields. In the spruce forest, fruit trees bloom in spring.

From the perspective of visitors, the place is perceived as beautiful and magical, with a strong and captivating spiritual atmosphere. In contrast to nearby, more touristy Neratov, visitors[9] often emphasize the tranquillity, silence, and simplicity here. A positive tone is typical: "*I feel peace and hope here*" (entry in the visitor book, 25 August 2024); "*Beautiful church, raw but kind atmosphere, authentic and full of energy. Thank you for keeping it open*" (entry, 3 May 2024). Many express personal emotional attachment, returning repeatedly, though these visits are usually short and temporary. Explicit references to the complex past appear rarely and tend to remain in the background: "*You are a witness to hard times*" (undated entry from 9 or 10 August 2024). Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the absence of the vanished village, though rarely verbalized, contributes to the power of the *genius loci*. The darker, haunting aspects of the story sometimes become the main theme of media articles – often vaguely sensed, speculated upon, or adopted from the histories of surrounding villages and the broader region (Záleský 2017; Koutek 2023). The raw, romantic atmosphere attracts photographers, filmmakers (Strach 2018; Menzel 2006), and other artists (Píša 2022; Tylšová 2022).

Even people with a strong, long-term personal connection to the site referred to its powerful atmosphere through various metaphors in interviews: P4 says that "*it gives you goosebumps*," P3 speaks of a miracle: "*You can hear the angel there*," and P5 of existential questions: "*It makes you reflect on life. You can't lie to yourself there*." Some approach the place pragmatically and with a sense of everyday normalcy, yet they still show respect, often expressed as dissatisfaction with tourists who lack reverence for the site (especially P10, P11).

In trying to capture the atmosphere in more detail, various formulations emerged, highlighting the merging of opposites: the sounds of nature which are audible thanks to the silence; listening to the silence; a church/home without people; the destruction of beauty; grandeur and intimacy; despair and hope; gloom and warmth/safety; sadness and beauty (P2, P4, P7, P8, P10, P12, P13). Everyone, in some way, thematized the emptiness: "*My first association is displacement or wasteland*" (P12); "*It cannot come back to life when no one lives here*" (P9); "*A peaceful place where you can reflect*" (P7).

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9 Based on a content analysis of the church's visitor book (analysed for the period January–August 2024), compared with random encounters and interviews with tourists. We are aware that this method is more likely to capture predominantly positive feedback.

> "*The nostalgia of those past times, it's connected to a sense of anticipation about what's next, because people used to live there. The village was big, it had a school, a pub, everything. And then came the dark times when people were driven out, and Vrchní Orlice became a sad place, and as a result came the price of hatred. […] The place stopped living. It became a kind of wasteland, yet it never lost its beauty.*" (P10)

In an effort to interpret this material and find its overarching categories, it is possible to connect these internal contradictions to the concept of liminality. Victor W. Turner uses the term to describe a transitional moment of transformation between two states. This is a time and space that escapes normal rules and experiences. Liminality opens possibilities that are otherwise incompatible in ordinary life; it is an opportunity for creation and destruction alike; it is often a brief, chaotic moment that brings new impulses, distance, reflection, and change into everyday life (Karlová 2024; Turner 1979: 465–469; Turner 1969; Turner 1967: 93–111). As a dynamic counterpart to routine, order, and social structure, liminality is a significant aspect of human experience. However, long-term life in ambiguity and chaos is problematic – and here we sense a key difference between the perspective of tourists, who are pleasantly fascinated by the emptiness of Vrchní Orlice, and "locals" who are, in one way or another, trying to integrate it into their everyday lives.

At this point, we include a poem by Jan Píša, *The Church in Vrchní Orlice*.[10] It has long been displayed inside the church and seems (to us) to summarize both the liminal atmosphere and the reflections that will follow later in the text:

"*In places*
where graves are dying
the crippled church with a chestnut cane,
guards the valley,

in that silence so deep,
like when wet snow falls,
/like when your father dies/,

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10 The note on when the poem was written reads 12 July 1995 – Vrchní Orlice. The poem (Píša 2022) and its audio recording (Orozovič 2021) are also available online. Jan Píša is a teacher, poet, painter, illustrator, and initiator of community life in Vrchní Orlice (such as the *Mezi horama* exhibitions, among others). Translation to English by Jan Suk.

you gaze into the windows,
where no lights will shine again,
'cause someone once grew proud
and let the St. John's wort wither.

Pews and the pulpit outline on the wall remained,
and the mute throat of the belfry
and the reproach
that you weren't faithful.

It is good to pause here.
It is good to share who you are
and…

The empty slab on the altar
the hooks from the Way of the Cross
will help."

Fig. 4 Vrchní Orlice, Church of St. John of Nepomuk.
Photo by Barbora Motlová.

Hauntology

Liminality is an important motif in numerous studies on borderland, displaced, and transforming groups and localities (Hoření 2024; Metyková – Vacková 2024: 141–142; Wyss 2023; Ćwiek-Rogalska 2020a). Some studies concerning regions which have undergone radical, forced demographic changes place the theme of liminality, drawing on Jacques Derrida, within the broader interpretive framework of the haunted landscape (Hoření 2024; Ćwiek-Rogalska 2020a; del Pilar Blanco – Peeren 2013; Derrida 2006). A common feature of displaced places is a doubt or perceptual crisis brought about by the tension between what can be observed and what (disturbingly) can be sensed or intuited without being directly seen. These experiences are often difficult to name more specifically. The liminal character of the perceptual crisis also casts doubt upon otherwise ordinary, unproblematic things.

In the case of the displaced borderland, motifs of once-functional, violently-interrupted processes of incompleteness emerge (Ćwiek-Rogalska 2020a: 29; del Pilar Blanco 2012: 1–29) – as already evident in the citations above. Speakers in many places explicitly touched upon the unsettling tones of the local atmosphere: "*a sad landscape*" (P13).

> "*…it breathes on you – a kind of mysterious past. No one speaks, no one clarifies that past, it's only the present, unfortunately. But maybe that's for the better, because we only see what we see. Maybe what we want to see.*" (P6)

Here we want to emphasize that speakers struggled to express ambivalent emotions (warmth and unease, a sense of familiarity and gaps in their memory tinged with a difficult past). "*Those who are sensitive, they can feel it. Maybe not directly… like, what went on there.*" (P4) "*You can feel how people left, and then history went its own way.*" (P7)

In this displaced area, repeatedly unsuccessfully resettled and politically unstable, much information is now inaccessible. Eyewitnesses have disappeared, and documents are lost or fragmentary. Some stories persisted latently for quite some time, but for various reasons, they were ignored, or it even seemed better to deliberately forget them, and thus they never became part of shared narratives. Today, after many decades, they are usually completely lost.

> "*Once we wanted to go* [to Vrchní Orlice], *like with Mom, you know, and she said: 'Kids, go there yourselves, I didn't experience anything*

> *nice there, I don't have any good memories.' She went with us once,*
> *maybe twice.*" (P6)

The concept of *hauntology* is interesting in drawing attention to less conventional perspectives and "narrations that are not mainstream" (Ćwiek-Rogalska 2020a: 28). In our efforts to understand local identity, atmosphere, and to think about the future of the place, we repeatedly, though only marginally, encountered disjointed, fragmented stories which dealt with themes of emptiness and devastation. Nearly 80 years have passed since the expulsion, and its consequences vary in severity and intensity across different displaced localities. Each place frees itself from this "emptiness" in different ways and with varying degrees of success (Hoření 2024: 152–155; Ćwiek-Rogalska 2020a: 28). In the case of Vrchní Orlice, we consider the relationship between a difficult past, the accidental or intentional loss of memory (Łukianow 2023: 400–401; Connerton 2008), and the persisting, unsettling emptiness to still be strong and evident, though not necessarily fixed.

"Myths": Adopting the place along with its disquieting emptiness

A common feature of the stories we heard is the interweaving of individual and collective memory on the borders of the blank, empty spaces of a difficult past. The central themes are emptiness and destruction, with perpetrators who are invisible. We encounter either passive expressions like "[it's because of] *the surrounding indifference*" (P1), "*it all got looted over time*" (P8), or figures who resemble spectres more than real people: anonymous scrap collectors and vandals, pioneers, workers of the Unified Agricultural Cooperative (JZD), gold diggers and treasure hunters, soldiers, Satanists, tramps, weekenders, Poles, Russians, Soviets, Roma – all nameless, faceless characters who leave behind devastation and then vanish without a trace (see also Burda – Rezková 2013: 70). All the stories we heard deal, in parallel, with the same questions of emptiness and devastation, pointing to various explanations and answers to the question of who bears responsibility.

> "*Here at the pub, those tractor drivers from the former state farm*
> *used to boast about what they got up to … how they'd run around*
> *the church in the priest's vestments and such. And they'd chase each*
> *other in the church and scare people who came in. And those tractor*
> *drivers – when they were out in the fields, they'd whistle at each other*
> *using the organ pipes.* […] *Some vandal threw a statue into the river*
> *… in Niemojów, Poland, they have it in the church there as a sacred*

Virgin Mary, claiming it floated down the river. The local sacristan told me that and showed it to me." (P2)

Another speaker dates the destruction of the church to the 1970s and, when asked who was responsible, also blames the JZD. She then continues with several related stories. Given the relatively recent date and the small population, it might not be impossible to find more specific information about the local tractor drivers. This "blank space" seems to belong to those deliberately forgotten.

Absurd, eerie, almost horror-like motifs are characteristic here. The concepts of liminality and hauntology allow us to highlight how these stories cross the boundaries of the normal and the acceptable: the scene as a whole, as well as its individual settings and events, deviates from everyday experience. These stories confront serious rules which are usually tied to strong emotions and sanctions. The narratives unfold in hints, indirectly, and with a considerable amount of ambiguity.

"*Someone, some vandal, cut off all the iron from the crosses. The pedestals are still there, but even the cemetery was subjected to scrap metal collection, even though for people of all skin colours the grave-yard was a sacred place – but they took it anyway.*" (P6)

"*In later years, adventurers, or rather thieves, kept coming, treasure hunters who dug around, even digging up the dead in the graves and in the tombs. I had to throw human bones back in several times… They were looking for gold, or money, or some jewellery that might've been buried with the dead. It was terrible. Later they even started stealing the headstones, the sandstone and the marble slabs…*" (P3)

Based on disturbing signs of emptiness and destruction, speakers infer what might have happened. Stories involving direct encounters with the destroyer are rare. When they do occur, the figure is an anonymous one who does not speak, appears for a moment in a horror-like context, and leaves chaos behind: "*When you enter the church, on the right side there's a triple grave. […] And that grave was open, and a man was sticking out of it. I saw that … everything was thrown about.*" (P4)

Similar stories are more common and seem to reflect personal experiences with a haunted place rather than shared narratives:

"[In the church] *there are two tombs, they were often open. We'd always cover them with the slab. Then again the slab would be pushed*

aside, someone had been digging there. And some remains, a few bones, nothing else, it was filled with dirt again, right, and maybe those bones weren't even from those graves – someone might've tossed them in. The treasure hunters were digging nearby. Not directly in the graveyard, but in the church." (P2)

We did not identify any significantly publicly-shared narratives. Some stories are more widely accepted, for instance, those about the JZD workers (P2, P3, P4), the gold diggers and scrap collectors (P2, P3, P4, P6, P8, P13). One version that is becoming more common today is this:

"*Beautiful organs that had a certificate saying they wouldn't be requisitioned even for wartime use, they survived the war. Then the pioneers played siege-the-castle games there, won, and stuck the pipes into the meadow, tossed the statues into the stream.*" (P10)

Whenever destroyers are given more specific features, they are always characteristics of "the others," those with whom "we" share no connection. There is a wide range of unique variations featuring different portrayals of the culprits of destruction:

"*How many times did you have to chase off the gypsies, or they were throwing planks from the rafters from the tower? It was terrible.*" (P4)
"*The Poles were looting it. Not so long ago, they even stole the columns.*" (P13)
"*The school still stood until the Russians came – they just finished tearing it down. They needed building materials.*" (P5)
"*We came into the church. There was a bonfire. A dead rabbit. They were clearly doing some kind of satanic ritual.*" (P3)
"*Black candles and detailed stuff. Various symbols. Some skull was etched onto… various symbols. That's what they left behind.*" (P2)

The figures of tramps, adventurers, weekenders – and generally, "locals" – are ambivalent in the stories. Sometimes they are protectors, other times destroyers; sometimes used to describe one's own role, sometimes sharply contrasted against "the others," who lack connection to the place and with whom the speaker does not relate:

"*One weekender hid* [the painted panels dismantled from the church interior during renovation] *up in his attic and then gave them to me so we could put them back.*" (P2)

> "*A lot of the small items were stolen by weekenders. In lots of cottages, you'll find those cast-iron crosses from graves or roadside shrines out in the fields.* [Then lists specific interior parts of the church.] *And then they say they just found them somewhere.*" (anonymized)

> "*The tractor drivers were bringing him tombstones from cemeteries*" (anonymized).

Even after follow-up questions, the stories are difficult to date; we never got more precise than an estimate of the decade in which they happened. The narratives fill in the past from the end of the war up to the early 21st century, often operating on the edge of memory and forgetting: many have a possible or highly probable link to specific historical events. Yet for some reason, we are always lacking the ability to verify them. Direct testimony is rare; immediate participants are often no longer alive. The process of forgetting is largely connected to the troubled history of the place and is, in some cases, deliberate (Łukianow 2023: 400–401; Connerton 2008): "*It's still very much alive, I can't name names.*" (anonymized)

Other times this is due to chance: through the contacts between current and displaced "locals," there once existed a chronicle listing the original inhabitants of Vrchní Orlice along with chronological photos. It's now missing, again expanding the blank spaces in the local history. "*They made us a chronicle, but we lent it to someone and we don't know who. Such a shame.* […] *We can't even remember the names of those Germans.*" (anonymized)

We do not dispute the wildness of the events which happened in the borderlands. Much like in the case of the church in Neratov where, based on several sources (e.g., Oppeltová 2004; Galle 2018; Neugebauer 2018; Neugebauer 2016: 50), one can state with reasonable certainty that on 10 May 1945 a soldier in a Soviet uniform hit the church with a rocket-propelled grenade and caused the roof to catch fire, historical accuracy is no longer the most crucial point here. This is more about a ritualized mode of storytelling that interprets both historical events and the current nature of the place.

With an awareness of these limitations, we refer to these stories as "myths" in the sense of identity-forming, orally-transmitted narratives that connect the past with the present and, in some way, touch on times and events that lie beyond the bounds of ordinary personal experience. These stories are fragmentary, not very old, and their collective sharing is still very limited. They do not meet the usual characteristics of urban legends or modern myths (plot, structure, speaker's distance from the story, folklore tradition), but their contact with the uncanny brings them close (Janeček 2020; Brun-

vand 2003). We especially wish to emphasize that the way this text uses the term "myth" does not fit most classical anthropological interpretations. We see it as a useful way to describe the creative balancing act between "objective" reality and "narration/fiction," which allows us to approach "what is essential in reality" (Boskovic 2002: 134; Ricoeur 1981: 281–296).

The "myths" of Vrchní Orlice bridge empty, problematic places, embedding personal experience and memory into a broader context (Łukianow 2023: 399), enabling an acceptable way of dealing with the past (Metyková – Vacková 2024: 137–138; Holý 2010: 117–138; Weinstock 2004). It seems that only through this processing, through framing it in a wider, comprehensible whole of the world and of history, does the liminality of the haunted landscape become bearable for everyday life.

"Myths" delineate the circle of people who now belong to Vrchní Orlice, regardless of their families' varied origins. A prominent motif is the contrast between "us," who feel a duty toward the place and take care of it (though the goals and forms of such care may differ among individuals), and "them," those who bring decay and disorder while remaining invisible, or stereotypically anonymous. In our case, we do not see the formation of a cohesive group here. Rather, we observe the establishment of many individual relationships to the locality. It is worth noting that ties to Vrchní Orlice are rarely the result of a deliberate decision – more often, people seem to accept the coincidences of life that brought them to this place.

It is telling that while P1, as a descendant of the displaced, original residents of nearby Neratov, suggests there should be more care and restoration – seemingly in the spirit of prewar visual forms – and speaks generally more about loss, others, when asked about the sustainable future and appropriate/inappropriate redefinitions of the church's function, respond that the place is fine as is, and apart from necessary repairs, large changes should be avoided: "*I think it's in the best shape it could be in now.*" (P7)

The locality becomes adopted heritage (Hoření 2024: 167; Kurpiel – Maniak 2024; Ćwiek-Rogalska 2020b). An emotional bond is formed, essentially akin to kinship, between people and the material world of Vrchní Orlice. Despite the dramatic local changes, despite there being no one left from whom to inherit, and even though such people were once strangers to each other, the church – with its peculiar, liminal *genius loci* – becomes part of their contemporary lives and identities (Kurpiel – Maniak 2024):

> "*There's no one to inherit this from, right? Because the ones who built it and who prayed there daily – well, they've gone somewhere else, and now it's basically been found by some new people. Well, this is their legacy, but no one knows who they were, personally.*" (P7)

Despite the "haunted" landscape, and in alignment with it, relationships of closeness and belonging are established.

Conclusion

This study, primarily based on qualitative, semi-structured interviews conducted with people who live in the area of the defunct village of Hohen Erlitz (Vrchní Orlice) and/or are connected to it through origin or participation, seeks to summarize and understand contemporary "myths" that thematize the place's distinctive *genius loci*, emptiness, and devastation. In interpreting the gathered data, the study draws on academic literature and employs the concepts of liminality, haunted landscape, and adopted heritage.

We use the term "myth" outside of classical anthropological frameworks, though partly in reference to them. Here it serves to describe the creative balancing act at the intersection of personal and collective experience. The myths of Vrchní Orlice address blank spots in memory, help process the difficult past, and serve as tools for clarifying identities and appropriating the place. Within the scope of the available personal recollections and collective memories, these myths allow individuals to engage with their own presence in the locality in unique ways, establishing various forms of closeness and belonging. Myths make it possible to pose and answer essential life questions and to connect the known and the unknown into a coherent whole.

The remnants of houses and the "empty" Church of St. John of Nepomuk disturb the "ordinary," unproblematic present: as mementoes of a vanished village, they transcend temporal boundaries and invite new reflections on both the past and the present, as well as the search for and construction of bridges between them. These processes of historical interpretation, of course, must involve a search for truth, but they cannot do without creative aspects. In our case, this applies both to the "mythical" narratives and to the care for the church and its surroundings, where one faces a choice between the tendency to "clean up" the monument and subject it to a particular interpretive coding – or, on the contrary, to leave space for the "ghosts of the past" (Sterling 2021).

Some places in the Sudetenland and border regions are relatively successfully disentangling themselves from the problematic legacy of the past, which does not necessarily mean that the narrative of a liminal, abandoned, and haunted landscape cannot continue to persist there. Based on our engagement with Vrchní Orlice, we dare say that here, "haunted" liminality is very strongly present in both the narratives and the practical living

Fig. 5 "Lights 2023", concert inside the church.
Photo by Barbora Motlová.

conditions. The place lacks continuity, memory, community, services, job opportunities, and infrastructure. Vrchní Orlice is neither forgotten nor entirely abandoned – it has many platonic supporters and a handful of "adoptive heirs" with long-term interests or commitments. We consider the myths to be part of slow, transformational processes; for these "adoptive heirs," they offer a way to deal acceptably with the presence of ghosts from a discontinuous past and to step out of liminality into structures that are sustainable for everyday life.

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