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**Czechoslovak Seafarers’
Memories of Polish Ports
as their “Second Home”
during the State Socialism
Period (1949–1989)**

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Czechoslovak Seafarers’ Memories of Polish Ports as their “Second Home” during the State Socialism Period (1949–1989)¹

Czechoslovakia began to develop its ocean fleet after the communist coup d’état in 1948. Prague was designated as the place of registration for these ships. From a practical point of view, however, it was necessary for the Czechoslovak fleet to reach a port located as close as possible to the Czechoslovak border. Szczecin (located 298 km from the border) became the base for the fleet not only due to the political circumstances of the Cold War but also for economic reasons. While Hamburg remained a vital harbor for international trade where “East meets West,” Polish ports were used not only for loading and unloading goods and transporting them to the republic but also to supply ships, change crews, carry out most shipyard maintenance, etc. Consequently, Czechoslovak seafarers themselves called Szczecin their “home port.” Numerous aspects of this perception as “home” will be reflected on in this paper. Specifically, the paper will touch on perceptions of Poles (mainly seafarers and dock workers), some aspects of the relationships among Czechoslovaks and Poles, including a discussion of some important historical issues (1968, the 1980s) in this area. This paper is based on archival sources, oral history interviews with former seafarers, and published memoirs. It should contribute to broader research and understanding of relationships among people living in various parts of the socialist block and show different images of life under socialism(s).

KEYWORDS:

Czechoslovakia, Poland, oral history, shipping, smuggling, socialism, Solidarność

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Introduction: The Importance of Polish Ports for Czechoslovak Seafarers

All the main Polish ports—Szczecin, Świnoujście, Gdynia, and Gdańsk—are frequently mentioned in the Czechoslovak seafarers' memories.² They were not just the ports the men visited during their voyages and spent time at, or even where they engaged in various exploits and dalliances. In many cases, these ports³ were also where Czechoslovak seafarers disembarked before going home for a holiday or short visit and before their retirement. They were also points of embarkation for the voyage—the "second part of life"—the seafarers spent on the ship. In this sense, a Polish port was a steady place between Czechoslovak seafarers' two homes: onboard without their families and in their homeland with their families.

In the context of the Cold War, from the shipping business point of view, Polish ports were sea harbors located closest to Czechoslovakia and were in another country belonging to the Eastern Bloc.⁴ As a consequence of this location, much of the activity related to Czechoslovak shipping occurred in Polish ports: delivery of supplies from the homeland to ships, shipyard maintenance, exchange of crews, and family visits on ships. Furthermore, Szczecin, located on the Oder River, was well connected to Czechoslovakia by rail, and was thus suitable for transporting goods there and farther east to the Soviet Union. Several Czechoslovak ships were built in the Szczecin Shipyard,⁵ and quite a few Czechoslovak marine officers and captains graduated from the Nautical School in Gdynia or the Maritime University of Szczecin. In this context, it is also not surprising that due, to its proximity and friendly environment, Szczecin was chosen by the Czechoslovak State Security officers as a meeting point for secret meetings with collaborators from the crews.

32

² Political reasons were behind the first impetus to build the Czechoslovak merchant fleet. Czechoslovak ships were used to provide a cover for ships from the People's Republic of China (PRC), whose fleet was affected by embargo and naval blockade. These measures had been adopted by the United States and their western allies because of the PRC's inclusion in the Soviet sphere of influence and Communist China's involvement in the Korean War on the side of North Korea. The cooperation between Czechoslovakia and the PRC in the merchant fleet operation was terminated in the first half of the 1960s. In the meantime, Czechoslovakia ascertained that running a fleet for maritime trade could be advantageous, especially for transporting certain kinds of cargo (weapons, military goods, explosives, dangerous chemicals, etc.) or when using the ships to transport Czechoslovak goods in order to save foreign currency spent on transport costs. Later the Czechoslovak state, via the Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping company, successfully leased its ships as time charters on the capitalist market. From 1952 to 1989, Czechoslovakia operated eight (1967) to fourteen (1984) ships. For more detail on the history of COS, see Lenka Krátká, *A History of the Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping Company, 1948-1989* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2015).

³ Świnoujście was an exception; it is remembered as a place where a part of the cargo was unloaded to reduce a ship's draft before anchoring in Szczecin.

⁴ The East German port of Rostock was still being built at the time. Because it was not directly connected to Czechoslovakia by a river route, it was not as advantageous as other Baltic ports.

⁵ According to the seafarers' memoirs and experiences, four of these ships – Blaník, Radhošť, Sitno, Kriváň (built in the 1960s and named according to Czech or Slovak mountains connected to a legend) – were at the time the most favored among seafarers because of their technology, equipment, and comfortable environment. In total, twelve ships from the entire fleet of 44 vessels were built at Polish dockyards.

A list of these activities shows that a substantial part of Czechoslovak ocean shipping business occurred at Polish ports and especially in Szczecin. But the main reason Czechoslovak seafarers felt Szczecin was their second home originated from a belief that a part of the port, specifically the Ewa embankment, belonged to Czechoslovakia. In their minds, it also belonged to the seafarers (in fact, this issue of possession was much more complicated, as I will present later on). Thus, Szczecin was perceived as a specific place where Czechs (and Slovaks before the split of the federation) had a right to feel at home.

Thus, this article will focus on verifying the hypothesis that Czechoslovak seafarers perceived Polish ports to be their second home. It will also focus on identifying this second home's main characteristics and the form in which it persists in their memories. The first part of the article concentrates on the concept of a second home in its physical sense, meaning one's additional residence or a place where one spends a great deal of time (as it is usually described in dictionaries). Regarding this, the historical development of the Ewa embankment as a free zone for Czechoslovak trade and shipping will be presented later on. This section will also briefly touch on the situation in the area after World War II by describing the area's development from Czechoslovak supervision after World War II up until the Czechoslovak free zone and the infrastructure built there was transferred to Poland.

In the second part of the paper, a micro historical view of Szczecin based on seafarers' memoirs will be added to this macro point of view. It is guided by the perception of a second home according to an emotional meaning, in which home is a place that feels familiar, good, and secure. This part of the study focuses mainly on former Czechoslovak seafarers' individual memories related to Szczecin and other Polish ports. Specifically, it will touch on the perceptions of Poles (mainly seafarers and dock workers), some aspects of their mutual relationships, and details about time spent in Poland. The study thus adds more detail to the overall picture of life in the period of state socialism, and intends to describe contact between citizens of socialist countries and cross-border (business) travel during this period.⁶

The conclusions outlined later on are based on: 1) archival materials from the National Archives in Prague (collections of the supreme state and party authorities), the Foreign Ministry Archives, and the State Security

⁶ Some recent works on the topic are, for example, Alena K. Alamgir, "Labor and labor migration in state socialism," *Labor History* 59, no. 3 (2018): 271-76; Mark Keck-Szajbel and Dariusz Stola, "Crossing the borders of friendship: Mobility across communist borders," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 29, no. 1 (2015): 92-95; Mark Keck-Szajbel, "Texas' jeans, taboos, and transnational tourism," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures* 29, no. 1 (2015): 212-25; Alexander Vari, "Introduction. Escaping the Monotony of Everyday Life under Socialism," in *Socialist Escapes. Breaking Away from Ideology and Everyday Routine in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989*, eds. Cathleen M. Giustino, Catherine J. Plum and Alexander Vari (New York: Berghahn, 2013), 1-23.

Archives; 2) oral history interviews with former seafarers and bargees⁷ from over three dozen interviews conducted between 2010 and 2018. The interpretive conclusions presented here are based on an analysis of all (or the vast majority) of the interviews. Where suitable, I provide extracts from the interviews, but I do not want to flood the article with direct quotations at the expense of my interpretive conclusions.

Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping employed approximately 600 to 800 seafarers during the 1970s. This number increased with the purchase of new ships, and by the end of the 1980s it exceeded one thousand. Many seafarers often worked for the company throughout their active professional lives, which would last from ten to twenty or twenty-five years. It is impossible to deduce from available sources how many seafarers actually visited Polish ports, but a qualified estimate would be around 1,500 during these two decades. Regarding this, the set of twenty-one oral history interviews with seafarers is not a representative sample, and studies based on qualitative research (as in this case) thus offers fewer possibilities for generalization. However, it provides a high degree of validity and a possibility for a deeper understanding of the topic at hand, which is Czechoslovak seafarers' experience of Polish ports as a second home. It begins at the Ewa embankment in Szczecin, a place the seafarers perceived as their own, and still do despite historical facts.

History of the Ewa Embankment in Szczecin as a Czechoslovak Enclave

34 Since the establishment of the new Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, its economy had been export-oriented due to its expansion under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and was hence dependent on transport routes and disadvantaged by lack of direct access to the sea. Because of this, during the post-war peace negotiations much attention was given to transport issues. Along with other provisions, Articles 363 and 364 of the Treaty of Versailles (Part XII) guaranteed the lease of free zones in Hamburg and Szczecin ports for 99 years.⁸ These areas would be "placed under the general regime of free zones and [...] used for the direct transit of goods coming from or going to" Czechoslovakia.⁹

After World War II, Szczecin ceased to belong to Germany, but continued to be a transport hub, which was in considerable contrast to the post-war political situation and the division of the world. Among other things, Szczecin became the most critical node for Scandinavian transport

⁷ The interviews were done following the theoretical and methodological procedures and principles of the oral history method. See, for example, Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (London - New York: Routledge, 1998); Donald A. Ritchie, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁸ Corresponding articles of the Treaty were included in Chapter II (Free Zones in Ports) and Chapter III (Clauses relating to the Elbe, the Oder, the Niemen (Russtrom-Memel-Niemen) and the Danube).

⁹ "The Versailles Treaty June 28, 1919," *The Avalon Project. Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy* (Yale Law School), accessed May 18, 2020, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/versailles_menu.asp. At the same time, the Treaty of Versailles, together with the 1921 Barcelona Convention, gave Czechoslovakia the right to operate its own maritime business, register seagoing ships, and operate them under its flag.

to Eastern Europe (a major market for Swedish ore in the post-war period). Therefore, it is not surprising that Anglo-Saxon plans emerged to internalize this port (following the example of Trieste). However, the Polish government rejected such plans as they would mean changing the border set at Potsdam. The Soviet Union also supported the Polish position.

Plans and negotiations on further use of the port and post-war restoration were based on Poland's willingness to provide Czechoslovakia with a free port zone.¹⁰ An important step in these efforts was the establishment of the Czechoslovak-Polish Economic Cooperation Council, which was part of the Convention on the Provision of Economic Cooperation concluded in 1947.¹¹ Both parties reached an agreement on providing a free zone for Czechoslovakia in Szczecin. Given the fact that the convention was concluded in the early phase of the Cold War and after the communist takeover in Czechoslovakia (and Poland), the influence of international politics, and especially Moscow's interests, were an essential variable in the negotiations and final arrangements. Surprisingly, contrary to the Treaty of Versailles' original provisions, the lease was not free of charge.

The zone was provided to Czechoslovakia on a peninsula called Ewa, located about 100 meters from the banks of the Debicky Canal and about 300 meters along it, and it encompassed a total area of about 30,000 m².¹² Special customs regulations were to apply in the zone were were also valid in the Szczecin port free zone. The Czechoslovak part was to be used for maritime and river transport needs.¹³ The lease for the area was set at a flat rate of one million zlotys per year, and the first contractual period was for eighty years. Afterward, all buildings and investments acquired by the Czechoslovak state were to be transferred to the lessor (Poland) according to the following conditions: 1) all constructions and investment older than fifty years would go to Poland without any compensation; 2) all other investments would be compensated based on a current appraisal.¹⁴ The contract was signed in July 1949.¹⁵

Preparatory work for building the necessary foundations to use the zone started in February 1949.¹⁶ The construction itself would begin in September 1949 after the contract was concluded and the documentation was approved. It was necessary to build a 300 m embankment wall with a

¹⁰ Letter to Ministry of Foreign Affairs from the Czechoslovak Embassy in Poland, March 14, 1947, box 2, Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Territorial Department – secret files [henceforth: AMFA/AMZV, TO-0].

¹¹ „10/1948, vládní vyhláška, kterou se uvádí v prozatímní platnost Úmluva mezi republikou Československou a republikou Polskou o zajištění hospodářské spolupráce, podepsaná v Praze dne 4. července 1947 [Convention between the Czechoslovak Republic and the Republic of Poland on Ensuring Economic Cooperation, signed in Prague on July 4, 1947],“ *Zákony pro lidi*, accessed May 18, 2020, <https://www.zakonyprolidi.cz/cs/1948-10>.

¹² Lease Agreement, translation of the document's final version into Czech, undated, 1, box 2, AMFA/AMZV, TO-0.

¹³ General Agreement, translation of the document's final version into Czech, undated, 1-2, box 2, AMFA/AMZV, TO-0.

¹⁴ Lease Agreement, translation of the document's final version into Czech, undated, 1-7, box 2, AMFA/AMZV, TO-0.

¹⁵ 2nd Report of the Consul General in Szczecin, September 7, 1949, box 2, AMFA/AMZV, TO-0.

¹⁶ 2nd Report of the Consul General in Szczecin, February 21, 1949, box 2, AMFA/AMZV, TO-0.

crane track, warehouse, office buildings, railway tracks, access roads, sewage, water and electricity networks, and a fence. The equipment included two cranes with a load capacity of five tons.¹⁷ The construction was ordered by the Szczeciński Urządzie Morske (Szczecin Maritime Authority),¹⁸ and the total cost reached 116 million Czechoslovak crowns.¹⁹

After the completion of the construction phase, there arose significant problems concerning the zone's exploitation. The situation was complicated not only by Poland's intention to "abolish the regime of free zones"²⁰ but also by the different plans of domestic/Czechoslovak organizations that were also able to participate. According to a resolution by the Czechoslovak government, Metrans (an international forwarding agency), together with the company Czechoslovak Shipping on the Oder (*Československá plavba oderská*) carried out the exploitation. This arrangement required cooperation between the Czechoslovak Ministry of Foreign Trade and the Ministry of Transport, to which these companies were responsible. In fact, the ministerial offices often acted in a contradictory manner.

At the beginning of the 1950s, Polish monetary reform (1950) caused severe problems after it was implemented when wages and prices increased threefold, but rates for services provided by the port to foreign clients were not increased. The difference, a loss for Czechoslovak companies, was paid for from the state budget. Wages were another problem linked to the monetary reform that was disadvantageous for Czechoslovak companies. Under the contractual arrangements, Metrans had to maintain the same level of wages for port workers and other staff as for those elsewhere in Poland, and was also bound by other tariff arrangements valid in Szczecin. Metrans thus paid for the zloty overstatement after the monetary reform. The loss was estimated at 21 million Czechoslovak crowns a year; later, the amount was 14 million.

Using the zone thus created huge losses. However, the free zone operation in Szczecin improved performance and eased the financial situation for Czechoslovak Shipping on the Oder (another involved partner), which at the time had losses of up to 60 million crowns.²¹ Thus an administrative decision by the Czechoslovak supreme party and the state authorities confirmed the status, which meant using the zone in cooperation with these two enterprises—Metrans (fully in the red) and the Czechoslovak Shipping on the Oder (struggling for profit). The context of a centrally directed economy in which interests were often governed by considerations other than economic ones allowed for such a decision.

The zone's infrastructure was completed in the second half of 1951, and thirty workers were employed there starting from October of the same

¹⁷ Letter from the Ministry of Technology to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 14, 1949, box 2, AMFA/AMZV, TO-0.

¹⁸ Report from the Consul General in Szczecin, October 5, 1949, box 2, AMFA/AMZV, TO-0.

¹⁹ Report from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Government Office, November 16, 1953, box 3, AMFA/AMZV, TO-0.

²⁰ Letter from the Czechoslovak Embassy, October 13, 1950, box 2, AMFA/AMZV, TO-0.

²¹ Record for Comrade Minister - Exploitation of the Czechoslovak port zone in Szczecin, November 10, 1951, box 2, AMFA/AMZV, TO-0, 1-3.

year. Running this business required monthly payroll expenses and related payments totaling half a million crowns.²² Almost at the same time, however, the Polish partner tried to force Metrans to renounce exploitation of the zone in favor of the Szczecin Maritime Authority.²³ The basis of this requirement was that Polish authorities were not too welcoming of an independent foreign enclave (a Czechoslovak zone) at the Polish port.²⁴ Furthermore, at the beginning of 1952, Polish officials were trying take over the zone because it was equipped with two cranes able to load bulk commodities such as coal, iron ore, pyrite, phosphate, etc. from river barges onto seagoing ships and vice versa. In Szczecin, only the Huk embankment was equipped with such cranes, and they were not able to handle all kinds of cargo.²⁵ To conclude, both parties were interested in running the free zone, but the Czechoslovak partner did not have enough experience with this form of transport or with forwarding activities. It was mostly dependent on the Polish authorities' position, and they created many obstacles that stood in the way of to the Czechoslovak free zone in Szczecin running smoothly and effectively.

In addition to these various obstacles, in the 1950s Poland imposed on Czechoslovakia very disadvantageous conditions for cooperation in the field of maritime transport, which increased the zone's losses. In 1953 there was an estimated total loss of 26 million crowns, which was expected to increase further in the following period. Thus, in December 1953 the Czechoslovak Republic adopted a resolution for the free zone in Szczecin to be offered to its Polish partner in exchange for reimbursement of its investments. If the Polish side did not show interest in reimbursing investments in money or goods, the Czechoslovaks would submit a proposal to the Szczecin Maritime Authority for a lease.²⁶

Gradually, the significance of the zone for Czechoslovakia also changed. Hamburg began playing a significant role in Czechoslovak foreign trade after the first time the Cold War got "hot" during the Korean War. At the same time, Szczecin was significant mainly for Czechoslovak ocean shipping.²⁷ Moreover, in many aspects, Hamburg as a delivery point was cheaper, and also the natural Elbe route led there.²⁸ Thus it was much more advantageous to use it than Szczecin, even though this vital transport hub was located in a capitalist state that an adversary during the Cold War.

²² Record for Comrade Minister – Situation in the Czechoslovak port zone in Szczecin, July 8, 1951, box 2, AMFA/AMZV, TO-0, 3.

²³ Record for Comrade Minister – Situation in the Czechoslovak port zone in Szczecin, July 8, 1951, box 2, AMFA/AMZV, TO-0, 1.

²⁴ Report from the Ministry of Transport to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 3, 1952, box 3, AMFA/AMZV, TO-0.

²⁵ Report from the Consul General in Szczecin, February 26, 1952, box 3, AMFA/AMZV, TO-0.

²⁶ Meeting record concerning the liquidation of Czechoslovak companies in the Polish People's Republic's territory, held on December 14, 1953, box 3, AMFA/AMZV, TO-0.

²⁷ For more information see, for example: Ivan Jakubec, *Československo-německé dopravněpolitické vztahy v období studené války se zvláštním zřetelem na železnici a labskou plavbu (1945/1949-1989)* [Czechoslovak-German transport policy relations during the Cold War, with special regard to railways and the Elbe shipping (1945/1949-1989)] (Praha: Karolinum, 2006).

²⁸ Relationships of the Polish ports towards the Czechoslovak institutions, October 22, 1953, box 3, AMFA/AMZV, TO-0.

As a result of political and economic development and related government negotiations, the Czechoslovak zone in Szczecin ceased to exist as a free zone at the end of the 1950s. However, in seafarers and bargees' minds, this idea of ownership has survived for several decades, and practically to this day. The next section will touch on the issue of why this perception is so firmly embedded in seafarers' minds.

Polish Ports in the Memories of Czechoslovak Seafarers

At the beginning of this section, I would like to point out some features of collective memory related to the Czechoslovak free port zone in Poland. First of all, there is a distinction between seafarers and bargees. The men in the second group do not care much (and did not care in the past) about Szczecin. For them, the river Elbe and the Magdeburg (former East Germany) and Hamburg ports were of great importance. Journeys to these German ports and stays there for loading or unloading were part of the bargees' everyday working lives, brought them earnings, and offered opportunities for leisure activities or chances to make some extra money through smuggling or black marketeering. For bargees, going to Szczecin (rivers do not directly connect Gdynia or Gdańsk with Czech or Slovak territories) was necessary only when they were ordered there for work. Still, it was a duty linked with fewer benefits than a journey to (West) Germany.

Coworkers were not very interested in it. They always said, "Szczecin, there's no money, no West German marks." I didn't mind. I liked that, it was such craftsman work, I relished it.²⁹

38

Furthermore, bargees did not perceive Szczecin (or Hamburg or Magdeburg) as a specific part of their homeland, since they spent a shorter period of a few weeks abroad without any inevitable homesickness. The situation for seafarers was different because, similarly to other Polish ports, Szczecin was the last place they went before setting off for long periods at sea, and it was the place from which they returned to their homeland and families. However, the times they left their families were not the only sensitive, emotional moments for seafarers. They also reported the same feelings when leaving the ship.

When you're standing on the ship's deck in Gdańsk, somewhere five miles from shore, then a ferry comes for you to pick you up, and the ship disappears in the distance... I cried a bit almost every time on the way home.³⁰

The other very interesting point in the collective memory on the topic is the fact that seafarers perceived (and still perceive) Szczecin (the Ewa embankment) as more "theirs" than Hamburg, where the zone really was

²⁹ Interview with M. S. (* 1940, bargee, captain of river boat) recorded by Lenka Krátká, April 30, 2019. *Sbírka Rozhovory, Centrum orální historie, Ústav pro soudobé dějiny* [Oral History Interviews Collection, Centre of Oral History, Institute of Contemporary History; following as ÚSD, COH, Oral History Collection].

³⁰ Interview with I. P. (* 1950, ship doctor) recorded Lenka Krátká, May 6, 2010, ÚSD, COH, Oral History Collection.

in Czechoslovak possession. This paradox can be explained by the fact that people had little awareness of complicated negotiations with Poland over the use of the free port zone in Szczecin (although the issue was undoubtedly covered by contemporary propaganda based on the “fraternity of socialist nations” and “proletarian internationalism”). There is another powerful explanation of Czechoslovak seafarers’ emotional bond to Szczecin (and Polish ports in general), which is the perception of these ports as a real home where people spoke a similar language and lived in the similar reality of a socialist country. Furthermore, considering the seafarers’ travels and the faraway regions they visited during the course of their duties, in terms of distance, the Polish port really was “home.”

However, it is interesting that, although Szczecin is remembered as a place of great significance in seafarers’ memoirs as a place of memory, Polish people are hardly mentioned, if at all. It would be useful to mention here briefly the often very stereotypical general perception of Poles by the Czechs and vice versa, which still persists in society and mutual relations. In short, Poles perceive Czechs as beer-lovers and “Švejks”³¹ (who play the fool to avoid anything unpleasant and try to back away from everything in a humorous manner), without pride or with very little courage, who speak a language that sounds very funny to them. Contrary to this, Czechs see Poles as those who love “handelek” (wheeling and dealing), and vodka; they are rebellious and proud, tilting at tanks with swords, which of course leads to defeat and gains them nothing. These stereotypes are based mainly on a) historical background;³² b) individuals’ experiences, for example, Czechs in border regions who could observe Poles engaging in *handelek*; c) other information and experiences, typically those from literature and usually characters like Švejk or works by Mariusz Szygiel (his book *Gottland*,³³ for example, dispelled some Polish myths about the Czechs).

These stereotypical images of Poles are missing in the former Czechoslovak seafarers’ narratives, and this can only partly be explained

³¹ Jaroslav Hašek, *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války* [The Fates of the Good Soldier Švejk During the World War], a four-part humorous novel published in 1921–1923. The author depicts convincingly, with the help of all sorts of caricatures, strange figures, and unusual situations, the deplorable conditions in the Austria–Hungary monarchy, to ridicule senseless warfare and the old order.

³² For example, the dispute over the border/mining area of Český Těšín (Cieszyn in Polish) played an important role. More on the topic in Stephen E. Medvec, “Poland and Czechoslovakia: Can they find that they need each other?,” *The Polish Review* 36, no. 4 (1991), 451–69. According to a secret pool conducted in Czechoslovakia in August 1968 (after the invasion of Warsaw Pact armies), Poles ranked second among despised nations. Since then, the Czech image of Poles has improved, although, during the Solidarity era, communist propaganda in Czechoslovakia did much to show the Polish strikers in the worst possible light. Similarly, on the Polish side, the Czechs were not seen as enemies either during or after World War II. In general, however, mutual relations were characterized by somewhat unfavorable, contempt, indifferent, with a lack of proper knowledge of the other nation – unfortunately, this also applied to political elites. The fall of the Soviet bloc gradually allowed such a view of the neighboring nation to be abandoned. Roman Baron, “Čech v polském zrcadle, Polák v zrcadle českém” [Czech in the Polish mirror, Pole in the Czech mirror], *Listy* 5 (2009). Accessed October 27, 2020. <http://www.listy.cz/archiv.php?cislo=095&clanek=050907>.

³³ Mariusz Szczygieł, *Gottland* (Wołowiec: Wydawnictwo Czarne, 2006). In Czech: Mariusz Szczygieł, *Gottland* (Praha: Dokořán, 2007).

by the fact that these men had better insight into everyday life in Poland.³⁴ What is essential is that seafarers remember only individuals, those they had a close relationship with—coworkers (some Polish seafarers also served on Czechoslovak ships), teachers, or classmates from Poland; or they mention Poles in connection with a specific occasion. Thus, their opinions and judgments of Poles are not subject to such biased simplification and stereotypes as are those of the general population.

While studying at a Polish naval school, I and another student from the Czech Republic taught Polish classmates to sing Czech songs, mainly marching songs. When we marched to the most popular of these songs through Szczecin's streets, some people wondered how many Czechoslovaks were studying there.³⁵

I would hypothesize that proximity, close individual relationships, and a sense that Poles represented a part of their seafaring family (being their fellow seafarers, classmates, or Slavic seafarers, or men with a similar experience of life in a socialist country). This sense of belonging among men sailing the sea prevented them from making generalizations and rash judgments, which is contrary to, for example, narratives about Soviets (and Soviet women) or Arabs I recorded during these interviews.³⁶ However, there is one exception: the stereotype of the Pole (Polish seafarer) as a skilled trafficker.

Poles, I can't say if they were better or worse [than Czechoslovak seafarers]. Instead, they could give advice when there was a deal. When we went somewhere, they knew what to buy, what to sell. A seafarer in the past had to earn some extra money. We were so poorly paid.³⁷

40

Contrary to the generally negative label of Poles as traders shared among the Czech population, this interview excerpt (and other, similar statements in these accounts) also shows a form of admiration or at least appreciation of skills that were invaluable for seafarers at the time. Was mainly because, during the period of state socialism with its shortages and centrally directed economy, activities such as black marketeering and

³⁴ Interaction with Polish men and women who lived in port cities was mainly in the sphere of work, shopping, and nightlife. Family visits or deeper friendships were not typical – mainly due to the nature of seafarers' work, together with the fact that seafarers had good facilities and comfort on board and work duties. These circumstances did not allow much development of activities or interactions outside the seagoing ship.

³⁵ Antonín Fojtů, *Moře milované, moře proklínané... Vzpomínky jednoho z prvních poválečných kapitánů Československé námořní plavby, část 1* [The sea beloved, the sea cursed... Memories of one of the first post-war captains of the Czechoslovak ocean shipping, part 1] (Praha: Mare Czech, 2006), 8–9.

³⁶ These judgments stemmed predominantly from direct seafarers' experiences abroad (and in the first case along with general negative attitudes towards Soviet dictatorship).

³⁷ Interview with J. J. (1952–2014, A/B seafarer, serving on ships for eighteen years), recorded by Lenka Krátká, April 13, 2010, ÚSD, COH, Oral History Collection.

smuggling were widespread.³⁸ For seafarers, this “business” opened access to foreign currency and what at the time were luxury foreign goods, and allowed them to improve their families’ living standards. These benefits were also considered compensation for long absences from their families, for which their wives and children often suffered.

Money was needed for everything, of course. And I brought a little more money than usual so that we could afford a few more things. Finally, we could afford to build a house. But these are irrelevant things. Today. The point was that it all came down to my wife. She said many times, “Stay home. I can’t bear it anymore. If you don’t stay home...” But she always bore it.³⁹

These captured personal stories and memories convincingly show that Czechoslovak seafarers’ relationship to Poles, Polish seafarers, and citizens of port cities, was specific and rather family-like. This relationship was based on the shared experience of life in a socialist society, and especially on the shared experience of a seafaring life. Interestingly, in these personal memories related to stays in Poland that lasted days and weeks, there are, in fact, no moments associated with the reality of the authoritarian regime of the past. Of course, these topics are captured in the sources of official provenance, minutes from management meetings, and especially in the documents of the former State Security (contemporary political police).

Polish Ports in the “Memories” of Czechoslovak Official Documents

In connection with the Czechoslovak merchant fleet, the State Security operated mainly in Polish ports. The reasons for this were twofold. First, these ports were located closest to their headquarters in Prague and within another socialist state. Second, unlike the East German ports, Czechoslovak ships anchored there most frequently. Thus, almost all of State Security officers’ individual meetings were held there to collect information from secret collaborators among the crew members. Large cases were also investigated there, and especially those related to smuggling or black marketeering (naturally, it was not possible to send the entire crew to Prague for interrogation because ships were required to operate smoothly to avoid economic losses).

41

³⁸ For example Tibor Dessewffy, “Speculators and Travellers. The Political Construction of the Tourist in the Kádár Regime,” *Cultural Studies* 16, no. 1 (2002): 44–62; Anna Wessely, “Travelling People, Travelling Objects,” *Cultural Studies* 16, no. 1 (2002): 3–15; Ferenc Hammer, “A Gasoline Scented Sindbad: The Truck Drivers as a Popular Hero in Socialist Hungary,” *Cultural Studies* 16, no. 1 (2002): 80–126; Venelin I. Ganev, “The Borsa: The Black Market for Rock Music in Late Socialist Bulgaria,” *Slavic Review* 73, no. 3 (2014): 514–37; Alenka Švab, “Consuming Western Image of Wellbeing: Shopping Tourism in Socialist Slovenia,” *Cultural Studies* 16, no. 1 (2002): 63–79; Jerzy Kochanowski, “Pašeráci, turisté, kšeftaři: Neoficiální obchodní výměna mezi Polskem a Československem” [Smugglers, Tourists, Traders: Unofficial Trade between Poland and Czechoslovakia], *Soudobé dějiny* 17, no. 3 (2010): 335–48.

³⁹ Interview with M. B. (* 1949, chief engineer, serving on ships for 29 years), recorded by Lenka Krátká, May 26, 2010, ÚSD, COH, Oral History Collection.

I recommend increasing contact with the agency [secret collaborators] because these people return to Czechoslovakia after a long time. Since there is no other connection (except the cover correspondence address) where the collaborator can send general information, it is necessary to gather information personally. Furthermore, this is necessary so collaborators can be used to the commanding officer, because when they are assigned a task, they are extracted after returning from the journey and not after a longer period of time.⁴⁰

To briefly outline the activities of the State Security in this area, it can be said that it was interested in the operation of the company and its relationships with partners (especially from abroad) and employees. These tasks were a natural result of the State Security's primary goals: counterintelligence and protection against internal and external enemies.⁴¹ These activities also included monitoring the population's movement, which was influential in the case of seafarers, mainly because these men (and partly their families) traveled practically all over the world. They could be of benefit for the State Security if they joined the agency network or demonstrated loyalty to the ruling communist power in other ways. However, their "loyalty to the regime" had to be monitored, encouraged, and enforced if necessary. What was effective in this respect was the latent threat that a seafarer would not be allowed to travel abroad or to work on a seagoing ship, which would mean losing employment and economic benefits.

The Czechoslovak State Security forces were also particularly concerned that at Polish ports, crew members (and their families during visits to the ships) might interact with people from capitalist states. Such encounters were considered "ideologically dangerous." The State Security bodies worried these could lead people to access undistorted information other than what was provided by official communist propaganda about life in either the West or the East. This is a very interesting point, since Czechoslovak merchant ships in fact sailed all over the world, and it was not always possible to ensure that only reliable men (reliable from the State Security forces' and the communist regime's point of view) sailed west. In this case, the fear that people in Poland would meet someone from a "capitalist" country was somewhat naive and senseless because, very often, the first stop for ships sailing from Poland was the Kiel Canal in West Germany (where seafarers could better and more easily defect or contact western counterintelligence).

The captains of the ships, whom I spoke to during my business trip, drew attention to the unsatisfactory situation at the port of Szczecin. There the seafarers go to local pubs and bars where they can interact with the seafarers from capitalist countries. Several times already in Szczecin, seafarers violated regulations and service provisions. Some seafarers have a chance to leave the ships for several days if they have time off after duty. For this reason, the movement of seafarers is challenging to control. Because a large number of tourists come to Szczecin and ships other than Polish ones also anchor there, the Czechoslovak seafarers have a chance to come into contact with foreigners, both seafarers from capitalist countries

⁴⁰ Report on a business trip to the port of Szczecin [prepared by a State Security Officer], September 6, 1967, object volume No. 4147, part 2, State Security Archives, 7.

⁴¹ For more on these activities, see: František Koudelka, *Státní bezpečnost 1954-1968* [State Security 1954-1968 (Praha: Ústav pro Soudobé Dějiny AV ČR, 1993), 10-17.

and other foreigners—tourists. Our seafarers mostly establish these contacts in the Cascada-Bar nightclub, which is a center for all foreigners. This nightspot is sought out mainly because the most elite registered prostitutes meets there.⁴²

Shortly after the report quoted above from a State Security officer was submitted, the situation changed. Polish police and other forces began to worry about Polish workers' contact with Czechoslovak seafarers. These concerns arose in connection with the reform period of the 1968 Prague Spring and the subsequent invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact troops, which included some from Poland.

After the ship arrived in Szczecin, a banner attacking Czechoslovakia that called them revisionists was hung opposite the ship. A customs officer then went to the shipmaster and asked him to remove clippings from the *Rudé právo* and other official dailies from a notice board in the crew's dining room. [...] The captain refused, saying that the clippings were official materials and were posted onboard a Czechoslovak ship. The customs officer then asked the captain to ban Polish workers from entering the dining room so they wouldn't read the articles. The crew was informed of this and condemned the Polish customs authorities' request.⁴³

This study does not focus primarily on ordinary Poles' attitudes and opinions concerning the Prague Spring.⁴⁴ The quoted excerpt from official materials demonstrates how communist regimes perceived meeting people in the port area as something dangerous. In 1968 Czechoslovak seafarers may have encountered negative reactions to "their" Prague Spring and reform efforts, but the situation was reversed when the independent trade union Solidarity started becoming active in Poland and in Polish dock (port) areas.

However, an overview of interviews with seafarers shows that the topic of Solidarity appears to be missing. This seems odd, given the frequency of voyages and the amount of time Czechoslovak seafarers spent in Poland, including Gdańsk where the organization was founded. A partial explanation for this could be the focus of the interviews, which were biographical narratives with a later follow-up that primarily focused on the development and running of the Czechoslovak merchant fleet. But in this case, what is much more important than the format of the interview itself is a specific form of apolitical attitude common among seafarers. While the profession could not be separated from contemporary politics, at least

⁴² Report on a business trip to the port of Szczecin [prepared by a State Security Officer], September 6, 1967, object volume No. 4147, part 2, State Security Archives, 4.

⁴³ Report on a business trip to the port of Szczecin [prepared by a State Security Officer] carried out from September 30 to October 10, 1968, object volume No. 4147, part 2, State Security Archives, 4.

⁴⁴ The attitudes varied and had their dynamics, whether it be the negative standpoints of the communist ruling party, sympathy in student and artistic circles, perhaps ambivalent attitudes of "ordinary" people, or the fact that the Polish Church failed to respond to Polish troops to Czechoslovakia by the way that it could consider itself as reasonable and dignified. See Tomáš Zahradniček, "Book review: Petr Blažek – Lukasz Kamiński – Rudolf Vévoda (edd.): *Polsko a Československo v roce 1968*, Praha, Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR – Dokořán 2006," accessed June 8, 2020, <http://dejinyasoucasnost.cz/archiv/2007/1/petr-blazek-ukasz-kami-ski-rudolf-vevoda-edd-polsko-a-ceskoslovensko-v-roce-1968-/>.

concerning restrictions on freedom of travel across borders at the time, the seafarers' attitudes showed a certain detachment from the domestic politics of the pre-1989 ruling regime. Their absence from home for many months is not the only explanation here. The seafarers were well aware that they needed to be at least outwardly loyal to the regime to work in their profession essentially because the job offered in part an income in foreign currency and opportunities to travel or purchase foreign goods. Many seafarers did their best to keep their jobs because it was a vital need for them, and even a sort of addiction—an addiction to ships and the sea. Within this historical context, there were plenty of reasons for most seafarers to avoid being involved in political issues.

Although the topic of Solidarity is not present in the retrospective memories of seafarers despite basically covering their entire professional careers and the course of their lives, it is not absent in contemporary State Security materials. There is no doubt that the party authorities and the security forces thoroughly monitored the situation in Poland and Solidarity's activities. In addition to other sources, they also obtained information from secret collaborators among the crews. Rather than actual points of view, however, these reports reflect what informants assumed the State Security, and the supreme authorities in general, wanted to hear.

In the beginning, people joined Solidarity in droves because they were "fooled" by its rather good ideals. Gradually, however, people who were bribed, compromised, and raked in money for themselves took the lead. So honest people started to leave Solidarity. The Poles can get excited about something and follow it, but they can suddenly turn around and sneer at something they had recently praised.⁴⁵

44

The official materials also reveal that the seafarers also perceived the Solidarity movement as something that complicated smooth operations at the port and provoked increased control of seafarers by the State Security.⁴⁶ This conforms to the seafarers' relatively apolitical attitudes caused mainly by the specifics of life at sea and considerable detachment from domestic politics (or politics in the socialist bloc). How much the State Security was interested in seafarers in this respect, and how little the seafarers were interested in politics because they were happy in their work, is rather paradoxical.

⁴⁵ Record – Relations of the Polish People's Republic' citizens to the Soviet Union and Solidarity, September 6, 1984, object volume No. 4147, part 11, State Security Archives, 2.

⁴⁶ These conclusions show a certain degree of generalization because what is outlined here are prevailing attitudes, the behavior of the majority (at least at a proclamatory level). But the quoted materials from the State Security also show that some individuals, albeit only in exceptional cases, took part in demonstrations organized by Solidarity or otherwise supported this independent trade union. See, for example, Report of the detention of two Czechoslovak seafarers during a demonstration in Szczecin, June 30, 1982, object volume No. 4147, part 9, State Security Archives.

Concluding Remarks: Szczecin (and other Polish Ports) as a Place of Memory

In the memories of the former Czechoslovak seafarers, Szczecin is firmly anchored as a place that is “theirs.” Szczecin (and Polish ports in general) thus represents a significant point in a seafarer’s mental map, however, often without taking important historical processes into consideration. No one remembers the Poles’ efforts to defect as stowaways on Czechoslovak ships or the reactions of Poles, and mainly Polish authorities, at the ports during the Prague Spring. Memories of direct experiences with Solidarity’s activities in Poland were also not a significant moment in the seafarers’ narratives. At the same time, official sources demonstrate that all of these historical events and processes had a real impact on the work and everyday lives of the seafarers who spent a considerable amount of time in Poland. An important variable explaining this distance from politics was the actual distance from home inherent to the seafarer’s profession, which also meant a psychological distance from life in one’s country in the socialist Europe of the time.

Returning to the leitmotif of this paper, Polish ports as a second home for Czechoslovak seafarers, I can state that originally this place became important because of post-war development, specifically 1) the construction of the Czechoslovak merchant fleet was closely related to the Cold War and in connection with Moscow’s power interests (and support for the development of the People’s Republic of China in its early years); 2) Polish ports were the closest and most suitable points of access to the sea within the Soviet bloc that land-locked Czechoslovakia could use. Finally, for Czechoslovak seafarers, this was a “lucky choice” because of its proximity and a sort of friendliness they experienced in this neighboring country. The reasons were various: similar language, the reality of life under an authoritarian regime, belonging to the family of Slavic nations, proximity to their home base, and the uniqueness of a profession that unites seafarers around the world.

Consequently, the frequency of memories of Polish ports in seafarers’ narratives, their emotional tone, and the fact that these memories are associated with specific people or situations do not appear to be connected with any other place in the world. This was despite the fact that seafarers often had other opportunities to visit other ports regularly and build relationships with these places, for example, through time charters. Surprisingly, the Yugoslav ports had similar conditions as in Poland (Czechoslovakia)—linguistic proximity, certain historical parallels, etc.—but these seafarers did not develop the same emotional connections to them. Furthermore, eleven ships, a full quarter of the Czechoslovak fleet (or a third if only the period up to 1989 is considered), were built in Polish shipyards. The vast majority of these ships were built in Szczecin in the 1960s and 1970s (other ships were no longer constructed anywhere in such a concentrated manner), and seafarers consider these decades the golden age of the shipping business operated by Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping.

A certain paradox that Czechoslovak seafarers considered (and still consider) Polish ports as their second home without ever truly living there is explained by the fact that their primary place of residence was always their ship.

SOURCES

ARCHIVE SOURCES

Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Territorial Department – secret files [AMFA/AMZV, TO-0], box 2:

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2. 2nd Report of the Consul General in Szczecin, February 21, 1949.
3. Letter from the Ministry of Technology to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 14, 1949.
4. 2nd Report of the Consul General in Szczecin, September 7, 1949.
5. Report from the Consul General in Szczecin, October 5, 1949.
6. Letter from the Czechoslovak Embassy, October 13, 1950.
7. Record for Comrade Minister – Situation in the Czechoslovak port zone in Szczecin, July 8, 1951.
8. Record for Comrade Minister – Exploitation of the Czechoslovak port zone in Szczecin, November 10, 1951.
9. General Agreement, translation of the final version of the document into Czech, undated.
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1. Report from the Ministry of Transport to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, February 3, 1952.
2. Report from the Consul General in Szczecin, February 26, 1952.
3. Relationships of the Polish ports towards the Czechoslovak institutions, October 22, 1953.
4. Report from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Government Office, November 16, 1953.
5. Meeting record concerning the liquidation of Czechoslovak companies in the territory of the Polish People's Republic, held on December 14, 1953.

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3. Part 9, Report of the detention of two Czechoslovak seafarers during a demonstration in Szczecin, June 30, 1982.
4. Part 11, Record – Relations of the Polish People's Republic' citizens to the Soviet Union and Solidarity, September 6, 1984.

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2. Interview with J. J. (1952–2014, A/B seafarer, serving on ships for eighteen years). Recorded by Lenka Krátká, April 13, 2010.
3. Interview with M. B. (*1949, chief engineer, serving on ships for 29 years). Recorded by Lenka Krátká, May 26, 2010.
4. Interview with M. S. (*1940, bargee, captain of river boat). Recorded by Lenka Krátká, April 30, 2019.

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