

## Ecological Refugees and Lost Land

*Jana Kopelentova Rehak, Loyola University Maryland and Towson University, Baltimore*



This is a story about displaced families and polluted land.

**A Lost Place**

It was 1992 when I found Kurivody. I was driving through Northern Bohemia searching for a place lost to the industrial past of communist Czechoslovakia. I came upon a place resembling a village settlement.



Kurivody #1

All that remained were fragments. Brick and cement walls erected and disconnected all over. I was drawn to the visual power of these dilapidated remains and had no idea about the stories that were hidden underneath them, manifold stories with surprising connections.



Kurivody #2



Kurivody #3



Kurivody #4



Kurivody #5



Kurivody #6



Kurivody #7



Kurivody #8

As I photographed I began to recognize specific shapes of traditional village brick houses, a church with a sealed entrance, but also army barracks with sealed windows, army parking lots and garages, and panel walls for socialistic slogans. I came across *panelaky* (multi-storey housing constructed from prefabricated concrete slabs), a general store, an old school, and a modern cultural center building, surrounded by locked gates, abandoned gardens, painted tree trunks, and entrances to nowhere. Some of them bore Cyrillic inscriptions. The ground was covered with a heavy carpet of cement and various rusty metal parts were scattered everywhere. This place called Kurivody was an old village located near the town Ceska Lipa, in the area also known as Ralsko.

The first historical settlements in this region date back to 1620. Later the villages became part of what was called the Sudetenland – the Czech-German-Austrian border region populated by people of mainly Czech and German descent. Near the end of WWII, the German Army built an airport in this location, later bombed by the American Army. After the war, people of German origin were expelled from the Sudetenland, the Ralsko region included. The Sudetenland was repopulated by peoples coming from Slovakia and other parts of Europe.

In the period between the 1950s and 1960s the Czechoslovak Army coveted this area because of low population density and as a result the Ralsko region was even more depopulated.

Today Kurivody is an isolated, deserted village hidden in the shadow of cement walls.



Kurivody #9



Kurivody #10



Kurivody #11



Kurivody #12



Kurivody #13



Kurivody #14



Kurivody #15



Kurivody #16



Kurivody #17



Kurivody #18

In the winter of 1992 I returned to Kurivody several times. Each time I came back I saw a man with a small truck in the distance. Later I learned that the land surrounding Kurivody had been an army training ground and he was appointed by the army to clear the minefield.



Kurivody #19

Then I met one of the forest workers who was familiar with this area, and he warned me about landmines buried in the soil of Kurivody.

Worker: “When we work in these woods we know that there can be landmines anywhere. A landmine killed one of our co-workers. The Russians, before they left, buried their entire supply of munitions. We don’t know where it is now.”

“Russians?” I asked. “This was a Russian Army base between 1968 and 1991,” he said. I also learned from this conversation that in Kurivody the “Russians” built their own school, shops and housing. They maintained contact with Czechs from the nearby village Mimon (10 km from Kurivody) mainly for the purpose of trading. Soldiers exchanged army gasoline for goods and food. A forest worker remembered: “They always looked for a deal. They needed meat in cans. The average soldier was just very young and often from Kazakhstan or other Soviet territories outside of Russia”.



Kurivody #20: A Soviet newspaper as wallpaper



Kurivody #21: Landmine



Kurivody #22



Kurivody #23

When I asked him more about the Soviet army, he indicated:

“These boys were living like prisoners, they were treated like animals by their own people. If they desired meat, they escaped the army barracks and when they returned to the camp they were imprisoned for weeks. Often they came back for foot medicine. Their feet were swollen because they had to stand in a hole in the ground, as a form of punishment”.

From our conversations it was evident that “Russian” soldiers sent to occupy Czechoslovakia actually seemed to have lived as prisoners on the Soviet army base.



Kurivody #24



Kurivody #25



Kurivody #26



Kurivody #27

This was my first lesson about Kurivody, and its Soviet army base. In the summer of 1968 the Soviet tanks came and the invading Soviet Army moved in by night and stayed until 1991. The Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968 took a huge toll on Northern Bohemia. The Ralsko area became a strategic location for the Soviet Army. While the Ralsko lands were protected in some areas from industrialization and tourism, they were polluted by Soviet Army chemical waste.



Kurivody #28

After the Soviet Army left in 1991, the military base was closed and the region was reopened to the public. But now the land in the Ralsko area, including the village of Kurivody, was contaminated. The old village was destroyed and hidden in the decay of the former army base. Army barracks have overshadowed the original buildings in the village and the surrounding fields were polluted with landmines, fuels and garbage left behind by the Soviet Army. On the northwest side of the village an army field was situated with a tall fence and a long line of garage-like buildings. This side of the village, in contrast to the southeast part with officers' housing, had the character of a war zone. The country roads running to and from Kurivody were made to accommodate tanks and heavy army vehicles. Additionally, there were buildings that in the past served the army professionals and their families, such as high-rises for living, a school, shops, a cultural center and library. These buildings and institutions were not for ordinary soldiers, but for high-ranking officers. Ordinary soldiers had to live in army barracks.

In this abandoned Soviet Army base, I saw the symbols and metaphors of oppression, written into the Kurivody landscape. For me as an artist, Kurivody became a symbolic place of political rape.



Kurivody #29

**Portraits and Memories: Another Lost Place**

“After Chernobyl, in the spring the trees in our village bloomed, and then all of a sudden the trees lost their blossoms.” (Milada Petrackova)

In the spring of 1993 I saw a small group of people farming on the rim of Kurivody. They were turning the army land into fields and gardens to grow crops. I learned that they were refugees from a farming village called Mala Zubivschyna in Ukraine. In 1986 the Chernobyl disaster contaminated their village.

They had been part of the Czech Diaspora in Ukraine. In 1992 Vaclav Havel, president of Czechoslovakia, supported the relocation of Czechs from Ukraine regions affected by the Chernobyl disaster. For some the former army base in Kurivody became their new home.



Kurivody #30



Kurivody #31

Our roadside conversations, in Czech language, in Kurivody, led to my first invitation into their homes. Milada Petrackova, one of the older women, invited me for a cup of tea. She lived with her husband, Jaroslav Petracek on the southeast side of Kurivody in the row of modern houses. It was in the middle of the afternoon when I visited their home. Based on Milada

and Jaroslav's use of Czech language I expected to see a Czech style of home interior. I was surprised to see that their living room walls were decorated with oriental carpets and furniture was covered with flower print fabrics, which stood in stark contrast to the way Czech homes are decorated. The Czechs don't use carpets for wall decorating and use single color textiles for furniture covers.



Kurivody #32: Jaroslav and Milada Petracek

Milada offered me black tea sweetened with jam, sliced dry meat, dark bread and other food they brought with them from Ukraine.

We spoke about their home village Mala Zubivschyna. Milada remembered Zubivschyna as a beautiful place.

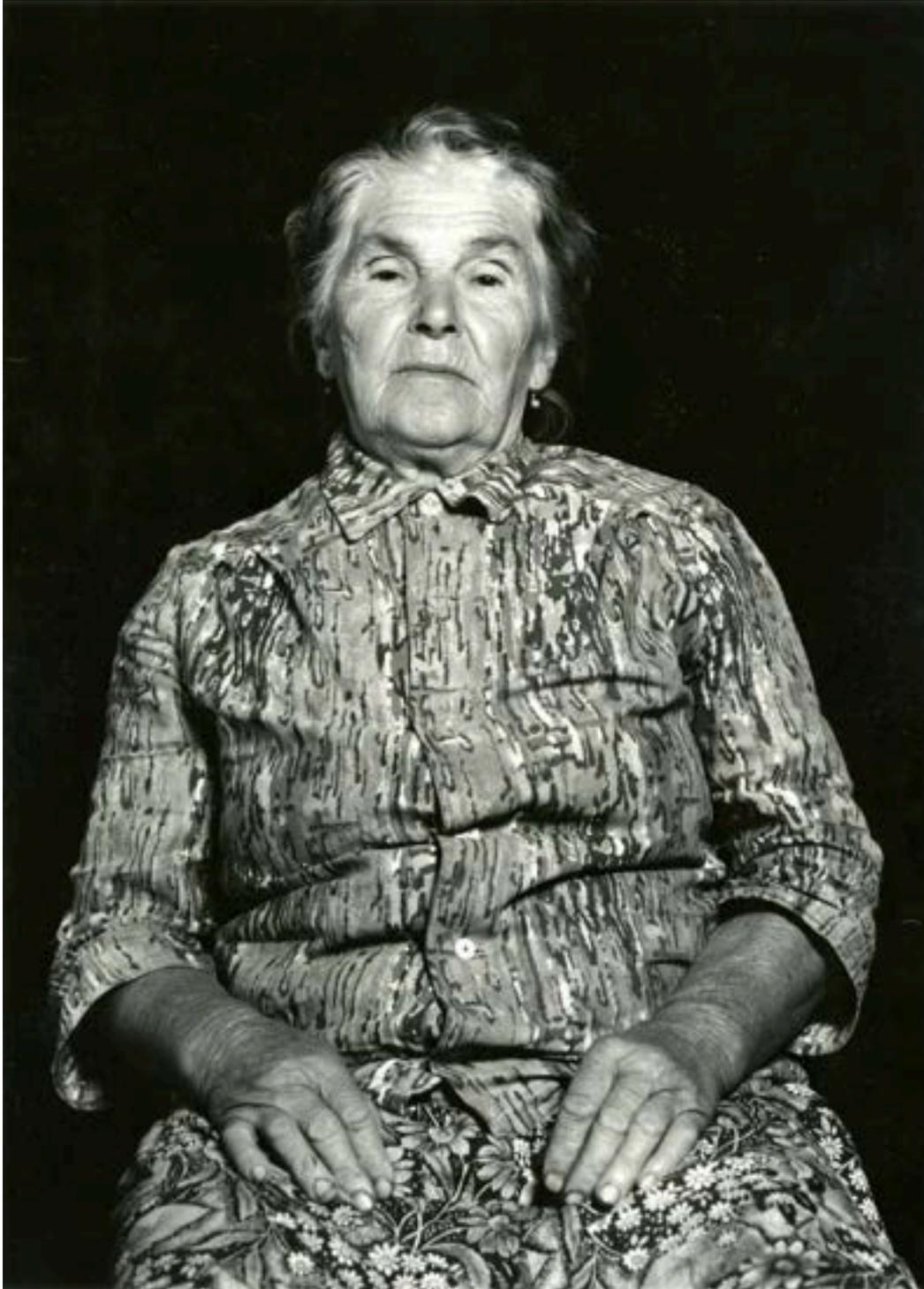
Milada: "Our village was beautiful. Two rows of farmhouses were always painted white. Our gardens were big and with fruit trees. We farmed well and our village was a role model for the whole region."

I asked her why they left the village.

Milada answered: "After Chernobyl, in the spring the trees in our village bloomed, and then all of a sudden the trees lost their blossoms. We were told that we couldn't grow anything. But that was our way of life. The Chernobyl catastrophe killed our way of life."

Milada's husband, Jaroslav was listening quietly to her memories. He entered our conversation later with the story about his relatives who left the Czech lands for Canada as his part of the family was moving to Ukraine in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Between 1850 and 1914 under the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in search of better economic opportunities, many Czechs and Slovaks migrated to Russia, the United States, Canada, Argentina, Brazil, Austria, Hungary and the former Yugoslavia.

Jaroslav: "My grandfather took a wagon and went from Prague to Ukraine when his brother went to Canada. My grandfather started a farm and became wealthy, but that led to accusations of his being a *kulak* ("fist", the expression for an allegedly rich farmer in the Soviet Union). He was to be sentenced to Siberia. What saved him was that the whole village signed a paper that he was not a *kulak*."



Kurivody # 33: Milada Petracek

Milada Petrackova was born in 1926 in Mala Zubivschyna. She was sent to a forced labor camp in Germany in 1942. There she worked as part of the cleaning staff in a hotel until 1945, when she returned with the Red Army to Ukraine. In 1948 she got married and in the following years she had three children. She would not have left her home if it had not been for the Chernobyl catastrophe.

In their narratives Milada and Jaroslav remember their lost home in Zubivschyna as pleasant and prosperous. They emphasized how their village was different in contrast to other villages. Milada defined the Czechs in Ukraine as different in their work ethics: “We always worked hard and that made us different.” For them the ‘difference’ was in the beauty and prosperity of their Czech village and in their narratives they reveal that such ‘difference’ made them vulnerable to the political power of the state. If the Soviet government became suspicious of their prosperity and empowerment, individual members from the Czech Diaspora could be sent to Siberia as a punishment for their ‘difference’. Milada and Jaroslav suggested that I meet with the woman who is the official chronicler of the village. But first, I met other families and individuals from the new community in Kurivody. Their individual life histories are closely connected to the history of their village in the Ukraine.



Ph

Kurivody #34: Husband and wife



Kurivody #35: Family



Kurivody #36: Three generations I



Kurivody #37: Mother and son



Kurivody #38: Family



Kurivody #39: Mother and daughter



Kurivody #40: Three sisters

Many were welcoming and open to talking about themselves, but during the day, when I was walking around with my camera, I talked the most with the older women. They were at home during the day or working in the fields. Their children, the middle generation, were working at the nearby sugar factory regardless of their former training, because it was the only employer far and wide. Some from the middle generation, back in Ukraine, moved from their home village to live in Kyiv and worked in white-collar jobs. After the re-settlement to the Czech Republic they had to accept factory jobs.

As a result, I began to establish a deeper connection and contact with the elders of the community, mostly women.



Kurivody #41: Three generations II

Among the elder women I met was the village chronicler.



Kurivody #42: The chronicler

She lived by herself and was not comfortable with me using her real name, but she let me take a picture of her with her cat and dog. “Our village was beautiful,” she told me when I visited her home. She and I talked about history and Zubivschyna over tea while reading the village chronicle for several hours. The chronicle of the village was an interesting archive. It was bound in the style of a photo album with images, drawings and text. She repeated what some of the other women said: “We worked hard in our village and Ukrainians learned from us about farming. Our village prospered, but we had to defend some farmers from the government, because they had been accused of being *kulaks*.” I learned from her that these accusations could result in being sentenced to Siberia.

The historical narratives in the chronicle started with the origins of Mala Zubivschyna and its first inhabitants. It stated:

“Mala Zubivschyna was founded in 1870 as a colony of 293 houses and 853 people. The foundation of this village was originally one estate in the holdings of Lord Ulmann. In 1870 the estate’s forests and marshes were divided and sold off. One of the first buyers was the Czech family Karasek. Other Czech families arrived from the Czech cities Melnik, Knezice, Bubeneč, Vysoké Myto, and Mezilice. In 1900, the colony Zubivschyna contained 70 farms. Each farm included fields of hops. People made beer.” (Chronicle)

The chronicler told me about the first generations of Czechs in Ukraine. She spoke about marriage restrictions imposed by the government. Czechs were not allowed by the government to

intermarry with Ukrainians. This rule was relaxed later and when I met with families in Kurivody in 1993, mixed marriages were frequent.

Based on the chronicle, the first Czech doctor in the village, Jaromir Pisel, targeted as an enemy of the state, was imprisoned in 1928. He returned and took on the role of *komsomol* (political youth party) leader. The farmers were forced to join the *kolkhoz* (a state run cooperative) in the 1930s. Those unwilling to join were sent to work in Siberia. Then in 1937 – 38 there was a period of many arrests and a large number of people from the village disappeared.

One of the older women spoke about disappearances. Her name was Eva Ornstova, born in 1914 in Mala Zubivschyna; she worked in agriculture all her life. She was married in 1931 and had two children. Her husband was a *propadl* (Czech for an arrested person) she told me—he was arrested and sent to a labor camp.



Kurivody #43: Eva Ornstova

Eva remembered when I met her:

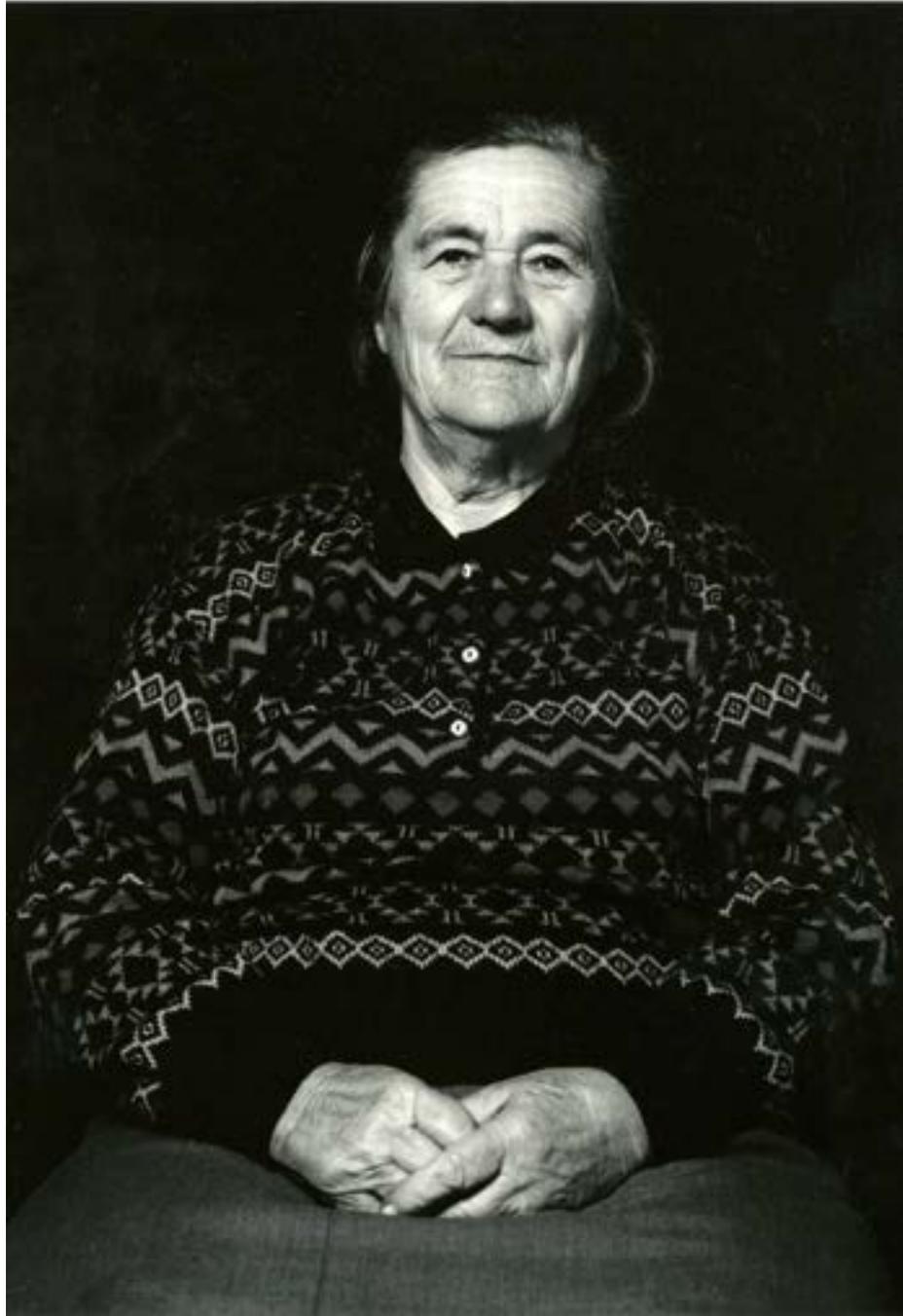
“For many years I would send him packages to prison. I never heard from him. After ten years I remarried. It was only after 1990 that I found that he was killed half a year after his arrest, when working on the Volga canal.”

Eva’s memories of her husband’s arrest and sentencing are connected to testimony in the chronicle about the Czech schoolteacher Vaclav Pisel. The Czech school where Pisel taught was - according to the chronicle - established in 1925. He was later imprisoned as an enemy of the state and died in prison.

Languages taught in the school were Czech or Ukrainian, German, and Russian. At home Czech families spoke the Czech language only. The Czech school was closed in 1938.

Historically, the Ukraine had strong traditions of national independence and statehood and suffered many oppressions and cleansings by Greater Russia and later by the Soviet Union. Stalin’s violent riots against minority groups, *pogroms*, a term typically referring to attacks on Jews, but was also used by Czech and other minorities in the Ukraine in the 1930s were inspired by his “russification” program. The aim of Stalin’s political power was to eliminate any obstacles to the “russification” of Ukraine (see Panikos 1999, Rupnik 1988, Tudjman 1981). Minorities in Ukraine, along with Ukrainian nationalists became victims of the ethnic pogroms. Along with nationalism and economics, language was part of these political-historical processes. Stalin was aware of the political power of language. In the case of Zubivschyna, the government tolerated the Czech language, learned and spoken within the family, but as soon as a Czech community supported its intellectual leader, he or she was targeted as a potential political threat and faced punishment.

In 1941 some of the villagers, like Milada, were among those sent to forced labor camps in National socialist Germany; many others were forced to join the Soviet Army. The women and children remaining in Zubivschyna were destined to work the land on their own. Several women remembered wartime as a defining rupture in their lives in Zubivschyna.



Kurivody #44: Anna Ornstova

Anna Ornstova, born in 1916 in Zubivschyna, where she worked in agriculture and bore her three children, described the wartime situation:

“In the village there was a shortage of men during the war. I was strong and young and so had to take over heavy manual work. My husband was on the front, but at the end he was missing.”

Another woman, Ludmila Hruha, born in 1910 in Zubivschyna, was also married to a man that left during the war, remembered how she had to take care of seven children by herself. They had four kids and her husband had three more from a previous marriage.



Kurivody #45: Ludmila Hruha

Ludmila recalled: “I was driving a tractor and doing all the work men used to do before”. And then she continued with her story:

“My husband went all the way to Prague with the Army and then decided to stay there. He never came back. He re-married and had more children with his new Czech wife. It was not until he was deceased that his children came to visit me and re-unite with our family. I have accepted them.”

Another woman, Ludmila Cerna, born in 1911 in Zubivschyna, remembered working hard and supporting her children while her husband was absent. Ludmila: “My husband was shot a month before the end of the War World II. I had to work at the *kolkhoz* and in addition I also worked on my own farm to support all my kids.”

The women elders testified about historical movements and how they impacted their family and community. They spoke about the accomplishments and wellbeing in their village, but also about the hardships and losses. I was moved by their strength and power. I saw them as heroines, because of their ability to challenge a traditional woman’s role in the farming community and family. At first I photographed them with their families in their homes. But later I came back and photographed the stories written in their faces and resting on their hands.



Kurivody #46: Emilie Cerna

The records in the village chronicle and individual memories reveal the struggles Czechs had to face in Ukraine. The Soviet interest to control intellectual and political leaders in the Czech village reflects on the Soviet state and its relations with minorities.

Before Chernobyl, people from Zubivschyna had a strong sense of belonging. They perceived themselves as Czechs living in Ukraine despite the fact that the members of this community were born and raised in Ukraine, the stress from oppressions, as well as geographical isolation from Czechoslovakia. The community that I met in Kurivody was diverse. The children and grandchildren of these women portrayed here spoke the Czech language and kept Czech names, but many had married Ukrainian or Russian partners; some also left Zubivschyna and moved to Kyiv. Czech sociologist Nadja Valaskova (1993) in her document used the term “re-immigrants”. I prefer the term ecological refugees, since in their narratives everyone stressed that if not for Chernobyl they would never have left Ukraine.

For over two years, I visited families in Kurivody. As I observed in Kurivody, this newly developing community faced many obstacles. The village of Kurivody reflects the ravages of its days as an abandoned army base, and its isolation far from other villages and cities. Many surrounding villages were destroyed by the army and to this day are decaying. Kurivody is a dilapidated and isolated place. When people moved in from Mala Zubivschyna they had very little contact with other Czechs. This led to their sense of disconnect from the rest of Czech society and as a result some went back to Ukraine. When I asked them what happened with their homes in Mala Zubivschyna, one of the women told me: People from other parts of the Soviet Union moved in. They are strangers from distant places. I conclude, as they lost their way of life—farming in Mala Zubivschyna—and took up farming in Kurivody, for these ecological refugees Bohemia, a long ago lost home was now exile.

REFERENCES

Anderson, Benedict

1983 *Imagined Communities*. London: Verso.

Gal, Susan

1987 *Code – Switching and Consciousness on the European Periphery*.  
*American Ethnologist* 14 (4) : 637 – 653.

Gellner, Ernest

1983 *Nations and Nationalism*. Cornell University Press.

Panikos Panayi

1998 *Outsiders: a history of European minorities*. London: Rio Grande, OH:

Hambleton Press.

1993 *Minorities in wartime: national and racial groupings in Europe, North America, and Australia during the two world wars*. Oxford: St. Martin's Press.

Rupnik, Jacques

1989 *The Other Europe*. New York: Schocken Books.

Tudjman, Franjo

1981 *Nationalism in contemporary Europe*. Boulder: East Europe Monographs; New York: Distributed by Columbia University Press.

Wolf, Stefan

2000 *German minorities in Europe: ethnic identity and cultural belonging*. New York, N.Y.: Berghahn.

ELECTRONIC REFERENCES

<http://www.zanikleobce.cz/index.php>

[http://cs.Vojenský\\_prostor\\_Ralsko](http://cs.Vojenský_prostor_Ralsko)