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Between Two Homes: Crossing the Borders of a Divided World Through the Personal Accounts of Czechoslovak Seafarers (1970s–1980s)

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Abstract

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This study examines the professional mobility of former Czechoslovak seafarers, focusing on their perceptions of freedom and also its constraints during times when this fundamental right was severely restricted by the authoritarian regime. Although the broader context covers nearly forty years of communist rule, the paper concentrates on the 1970s and 1980s, with the primary sources being direct interviews with seafarers, complemented by archival materials. These personal narratives reveal a persistent ambivalence toward freedom as well as the inherent restrictions, along with continuous, implicit negotiations with the regime. While seafarers benefited directly from international work-related travel, they were also subject to a constant risk of having such opportunities rescinded at the discretion of superiors and Communist Party authorities.

How long does it take a person to start feeling homesick when traveling abroad for work, especially when such a journey means leaving family and loved ones behind for days, weeks, or even months? How were these emotions affected when business trips meant crossing the so-called Iron Curtain? How did people manage the risk that in pre-1989 Czechoslovakia, with an authoritarian regime, every trip abroad could be their last if the ruling "regime" and its repressive bodies decided to no longer allow another one? Such questions will be addressed in the following pages through a case study of former Czechoslovak seafarers, a group that experienced all these feelings due to their profession. The paper begins with a broader outline of the issue, encompassing the basic characteristics of the policy on trips abroad before 1989, as well as an explanation for why Czechoslovakia, a country without a coastline, established a company focused on merchant fleet operations. The next part addresses the meaning of "home" for men traveling around the world, men who repeatedly returned to a country where the majority of the population faced significant restrictions on travel, with some even completely denied one of their basic rights[1]—the freedom of movement.

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1 The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights stipulates that "everyone

Working in the transport branch as an opportunity to travel beyond the Iron Curtain

Guarded borders, strict bureaucratic procedures for authorization of all trips abroad, often humiliating border controls, and a general restricted freedom of movement—all these measures created a system of control imposed by the authoritarian regime in Czechoslovakia on its citizens before 1989. As such, people longed to see what lay beyond the border, whether due to the natural curiosity of exploration or just for the simple reason that they were not allowed to travel freely.[2] On a more prosaic level, the desire was driven not only by the experience of crossing the forbidden border, especially if it involved traversing the so-called Iron Curtain, but in a centrally controlled economy, a trip abroad also meant the opportunity to purchase goods which may be in short supply, unfashionable, or of poor quality on the domestic market, like shoes, cosmetics, consumer electronics, or household equipment. Such shopping primarily concerned trips to countries with market economies, but for Czechoslovak citizens, the former East Germany or—especially in the 1980s—Hungary were also popular destinations with a wide variety of "desirable" goods. Generally, what and in what amounts individuals could import from abroad was controlled, either for ideological reasons—typically in the sphere of literature and music, or due to the continuous pressure of nivelisation in society, etc. On the other hand, shortages on the domestic market "provoked" people, encouraging them to engage in different forms of smuggling to import goods in sufficient quantities to meet personal needs, as well as the wants of family and friends.

In this milieu, people who travelled abroad on business as part of their profession were in a bit of a privileged position—whether it was a journey that lasted only a few days, repeated trips, or long-term stays abroad for months or years.[3] The purposes of such journeys were diverse, ranging from diplomatic missions to business trips, or visits for reasons of culture, sport, or science and research. Additionally, Czechoslovak workers should be mentioned as participating in the construction of a range of investment complexes, typically in so-called third-world countries, in accordance with the state's economic and political interests.[4]

shall be free to leave any country, including his own." Part III, Article 12/2. International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. In *United Nations Human Rights*, http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CCPR.aspx [last viewed on 26 March 2026].

2 For more information on restrictions covering cross-border mobility during the Cold War era and the existence of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia, see: RYCHLÍK, Jan. *Cestování do ciziny v habsburské monarchii a v Československu. Pasová, vízová a vystěhovalecká politika 1848–1989*. Praha : Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 2007.

3 Also in other socialist countries, those traveling for business had similar experiences and frequently used their trips to procure goods in short supply at home or to engage in more or less extensive black-market activities, which was often their main source of their income. See, for example: BLUSIEWICZ, Tomasz. Illegal, Anti-Socialist and Petty Bourgeois: How Maritime Smuggling in the Baltic Undermined the Soviet Economy. In *Journal of East Central European Studies*, 2019, vol. 68, no. 4, pp. 551–575; HAMMER, Ferenc. A Gasoline Scented Sindbad: The Truck Drivers as a Popular Hero in Socialist Hungary. In *Cultural Studies*, 2002, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 80–126; BURRELL, Kathy. Materialising the Border: Spaces of Mobility and Material Culture in Migration from Post-Socialist Poland. In *Mobilities*, 2008, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 353–373.

4 More on the issue of business trips from Czechoslovakia abroad, see: KRÁTKÁ, Lenka – MÜCKE, Pavel. *Za hranice služebně. Pracovní cesty z Československa do zahraničí v letech 1945 až 1989*. Praha : Karolinum, 2022.

One specific type of business trip could be found in the transport sector, where the essence of the job was repeated journeys. Securing a position in a transport company, in a branch that realized transport abroad, especially to Western countries (all of the specialized enterprises undertook both domestic and international transport), represented a truly privileged status at the time.[5] To get the position, these people, mostly men, had to obtain not only the appropriate qualifications, but also satisfy certain political criteria, or at least prove enough loyalty and reliability to fulfil requirements of the "regime" under the supervision and control of the ruling Communist Party's bodies, and the State Security bodies as well. Personal ties, patronage or corruption, sometimes even mutual denunciation and slander among colleagues with the direct aim of securing the chance of travel abroad, also played a significant role at the time.[6]

Amongst the various types of business trips and different people who travelled abroad for work, the study will focus on seafarers, specifically employees of the Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping company. Although several thousand men practiced the profession,[7] the nature of their trips serves as a very good illustrative example of the variety of benefits and consequences the opportunity to travel abroad could bring. A relatively low number of men in the profession is an advantageous variable in this respect, since interviews conducted across the shipping hierarchy and individual naval specialties provide a good insight into the issue as a whole. Unlike, for example, truck drivers or boatmen on river boats, who were several times more numerous, and at the same time, these transport companies engaged in other activities, primarily inland transport or repair services and the like. As a result, transfers of employees to different types of work were part of common practice in these companies, which was reflected in the environment itself, in relationships between people, work habits, and behaviour, etc. In the Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping company, men were hired to provide transportation to and from foreign countries.

The article is also intended to maintain a certain counterpoint against the current prevailing interpretations of running a merchant fleet by the socialist state. The point is that, at present, no company in any part of the former Czechoslovak federation operates naval ships or employs Czech/Slovak seafarers, yet the performance of this profession in the Czech Republic is presented within

5 The opportunity to travel abroad on business was perceived as so exclusive and differentiating that a particular individual was seen as distinct from the rest of the population, and as such, the memories of those who worked in those fields either completely lack or do not emphasize the problems and disadvantages of the profession. To list some of the inconveniences: inadequate hygiene conditions in less developed countries, homesickness, problematic relationships within small teams, stress from professional failure, which would mean the end of trips abroad. We cannot forget a disrupted family life when moving and staying abroad, the fates of partners, predominantly women, who had to give up their careers, children who live abroad and do not integrate well among their peers upon their return, children who have Western goods and enjoy certain luxuries, but on the other hand may be exposed to anger and envy.

6 For example, one of the witnesses described a company providing river transport from Czechoslovakia to Hamburg as an "ugly company" precisely because of envy, betrayal, and denunciations among boatmen who sought to gain the opportunity to provide cargo transport to West Germany. Ústav pro soudobé dějiny Akademie věd České republiky (ÚSD), Prague, f. Digital Collections, Interview with V. P., *1967, former employee of the Czechoslovak Elbe-Cruise Company; recorded on 17 May 2023.

7 Due to record damage and an incomplete archive collection, the number of seafarers is not accurate; however, it is estimated at around 5 000 men in total.

the framework of various nostalgic and romanticized narratives. These are intended to both confirm the skills and abilities of individuals—those who built maritime navigation in the former Czechoslovakia and those who sailed on ships—and to emphasize that, after 1989, as part of the post-socialist transformation, especially privatization, a few irresponsible individuals destroyed the "prosperous"[8] enterprise.[9]

From the broad framework of the history of everyday life,[10] the text focuses on mobility and a reflection on the degree of freedom people had or did not have when traveling abroad; the profession of a seafarer then serves as a kind of case study. Since attention is directed to personal experiences, interviews with former seafarers are an irreplaceable source of knowledge here. The set of interviews conducted includes 17 men who worked as seafarers for more than 10 years each, the longest career among them was 40 years. The group encompasses all levels of the ship's hierarchy, from crew through petty officers and officers to captains; it also covers all areas of expertise: deck crew, engine, stewards, cooks, doctor, radio officer, high officers, and ship master. On the one hand, the qualitative research design allows for a deep understanding of the issues outlined, but only limited ability for generalization.

Interviews were conducted according to the methodological and ethical standards of the oral history method. The snowball method was used to select narrators, and many interviews were conducted to achieve sample saturation. On the other hand, the set of interviews allows for an analysis of the issue of "crossing the borders" as a part of seafarers' everyday life through the lens and memories of men who worked on ships for many years, between 15 and 40, who were dedicated to their work despite the disadvantages or trying work conditions, and men who, at the same time, subordinated work to their family life, a fact confirmed through the interviews.

Using one-to-one conversations as a primary source (supplemented by archival sources) also defines a time scope for the study, primarily the 1970s and 1980s. In the former Czechoslovakia, this was the period of so-called normalization, which began after the invasion of Warsaw Pact armies into Czechoslovakia in August 1968. The aim of this "normalization" was to quash the democratization process; thus, in fact, it did not represent a return to normal,

8 It is true that, with some exceptions, the company maintained an active trade balance almost throughout the entirety of its existence from the early 1950s to 1998. However, in many retrospective evaluations of its profitability, it is neglected that this was achieved in an environment of a centrally controlled economy, where, until 1989, the company was not exposed to the direct influence of the maritime market. The image of "unconditional profitability" is also still reproduced by various Czech media.

9 This narrative is primarily spread by former seafarers (and their families) through social networks and books of memoirs or autobiographies, and it is very strongly present in the activities of the recently opened Czech Maritime Museum in Central Bohemia.

10 The study is based on Alf Lüdtke's approach to studying the history of everyday life, primarily the emphasis on two characteristic features or experiences of everyday life. The first is the routinization of activities that gives people a sense of security. The second factor is social practice; the fact that people and groups establish their modes of perception and action exclusively within a network of social relations. LÜDTKE, Alf – TEMPLER, William. Introduction: What Is the History of Everyday Life and Who Are Its Practioners? In LÜDTKE, Alf (ed.) *The History of Everyday Life: Reconstructing Historical Experiences and Ways of Life.* Princeton : Princeton University Press, 1995, pp. 63–74.

but rather a contrary suppression of democratizing efforts. The whole period from 1968 to 1989 was characterized by its dynamism, with a rather rigid regime in the 1970s and a gradual easing in the decade thereafter.[11] From the point of view of maritime navigation, the Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping company experienced a significant boom in the 1970s, mainly due to a combination of favourable conditions on the global maritime market and the realization of lucrative transports of so-called specials, typically army equipment, munitions, etc. (such promising conditions were interrupted by the world oil crisis at the turn of the decade and a worsening national economic situation). On the one hand, the positive developments from the 1960s onward necessitated a substantial number of seafarers to operate the growing merchant fleet, on the other hand, the "normalization" period was characterized by a significant and further strengthened ideological control of citizens, intensively applied to any and all who had travelled abroad.[12] Loyalty to the ruling regime was important, and any suspicion of intentions to emigrate could be very damaging for one's career. Still, the seafarers' position remained, in a certain sense, exclusive due to the very nature of the work and their irreplaceability in the operation of ships, since maritime transport represented a source of valuable foreign exchange for the national economy.[13]

Serving in the Czechoslovak merchant fleet as a unique opportunity to travel the world

Czechoslovakia was granted the right to register and operate its own merchant ships after the First World War under the Treaty of Versailles and the Barcelona Conventions of 1921. This branch of transport underwent significant

11 This entire period is marked by persistent economic challenges. The early 1970s benefited from the positive effects of the preceding reform era. The subsequent years are characterized by stagnation and mounting economic difficulties, mainly at the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, exacerbated in part by the global oil crisis. The subsequent "perestroika" years were defined by attempts to improve economic mechanisms, introduce certain market principles, and open opportunities for small private enterprise. Politically, the 1970s were dominated by a rigid regime, which gradually loosened its grip during the following decade, particularly in the latter half of the 1980s, as restrictions, including those on travel, were relaxed.

12 The most important milestone in setting limits on free travel was the communist *coup d'état* in 1948, which "closed" the boundaries. During the 1950s, travel abroad was severely restricted, including journeys to other socialist countries. In 1963, an important breakthrough towards the liberalization of travel occurred: "trouble-free" Czechoslovak citizens were allowed to travel to other socialist countries. It was also possible to travel to Western (capitalist) countries. However, in this case, the conditions were much more restricted and people could only travel to the West on officially organized tours by a travel agency, not individually. While the democratization period in Czechoslovakia (the second half of the 1960s) brought significantly greater freedom to venture abroad, the period after the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 was characterized by the imposition of new travel restrictions. Journeys to Western countries were banned through a strict travel policy. As a form of "compensation." traveling within the socialist countries was enabled and supported in some way, but even these journeys were subject to a complex administrative procedure. Though the approval process for traveling to socialist countries was simplified in 1980, visiting Western/capitalist countries was still much more complicated. The abolition of all barriers to travel came just before the Velvet Revolution, following the fall of the Berlin Wall (9 November 1989).

13 The need for Western foreign exchange was so crucial that there was even a special calculation according to which the efficiency of operations was determined and economic results were evaluated. Specifically, the Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping company even provided loans to other Czechoslovak foreign trade enterprise Transakta. For example: Národní archiv (NA), Prague, f. Československá námořní plavba (ČNP), Zápis č. 36 z ředitelské porady konané 9 October 1970.

development shortly after the communist takeover in 1948, mainly because of the fact that Czechoslovakia began to cooperate with communist China, providing a "cover" for ships of the People's Republic of China (PRC), whose fleet was affected by an embargo and naval blockade due to the country's inclusion in the Soviet sphere of influence and later the PRC's involvement in the Korean War on the side of North Korea. The Czechoslovak–PRC cooperation was terminated in the first half of the 1960s (again, mainly for political reasons). In parallel, Czechoslovakia developed its own merchant fleet to transport Czechoslovak goods, including "special" cargo such as weapons, military goods, and explosives, thereby saving scarce foreign currency. Later, the Czechoslovak ships were successfully offered on the capitalist market and operated under time charters. After 1989, a new economic (based on market principles) environment along with privatization and a series of poor management decisions led to the sale of the fleet in 1998.[14]

Men[15] could receive qualifications for work on a seagoing ship either in Czechoslovakia (engineering professions, machinists, cooks, stewards) or at one of the foreign maritime academies, typically in the former Soviet Union or in Poland if they were naval officers. Deck crew most often had qualifications in river navigation (apprenticeship at the Czechoslovak Elbe-Oder Cruise Company). Unlike other areas of transport, seagoing shipping was characterized by long periods of work abroad. Czechoslovak ships sailed practically all over the world, there were no clearly defined shifts or routes, such as the voyage along the Elbe from Děčín to Hamburg in the case of river navigation. While in maritime transport, ships also went to socialist countries, developing countries, and destinations that were generally not very attractive to seafarers. These boatmen regularly commuted between Czechoslovakia and West Germany in monthly shifts, so their ability to procure Western goods, and in particular, to trade them at home, was actually part of the rhythm of work, with many of these boatmen considering their extracurricular duties being much more lucrative than those on the seagoing ship.

At the same time, the lengthy of the embarkation reflected the company's limited pool of seafarers who took turns on ships. The Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping company then stipulated, with regard to costs, that a seafarer must serve on a ship for at least six months, which increased to nine months in the mid-1970s, and may be disembarked no later than 12 months after serving on the ship. Another condition for the end of voyage was disembarking in a European port, because the company covered the travel costs. It was clearly favourable that the ship be in a nearby European port, typically Poland or Germany, and that the trip home be as cheap as possible. Mainly the last condition often

14 More on this history see: KRÁTKÁ, Lenka. *A History of the Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping Company, 1948–1989*. Stuttgart : Ibidem-Verlag, 2015.

15 Women were not allowed to be employed on seagoing ships. The reason was primarily the provisions of the Labor Code, which did not allow women to work in continuous operations. At the same time, employing women would bring additional practical/logistical problems in the daily operation of a ship (social facilities, accommodation, etc.). The gender patterns of the time also played a significant role in this arrangement—on the one hand, the proclaimed equality of socialist society, on the other hand, the persistent patriarchal patterns of behaviour.

led to a situation in which the one-year work limit was exceeded.[16] Towards the end of the 1980s, the situation worsened as the company expanded the number of ships it operated and often lacked enough qualified seafarers, thus overburdening the existing staff:

> Complaints about crew members being on board for more than a year are increasing. Some seafarers are threatening to take the matter to court because they have not seen their families for over a year. And some seafarers are refusing to go on board and plan to file a request to terminate their employment.[17]

In practice, this meant seafarers spent about half of their active professional lives abroad, sometimes more than half, a theme reflected in their specific experiences of crossing borders and staying abroad. In the interpretation of the interviews, two levels of this experience were defined based on a thematic analysis of the sources: private—connected with family and home, and public—related mainly to attitudes towards the ruling political system. Both intersected in certain ways in the men's attitudes towards emigration.

Journeys abroad and back home: an analysis of interviews with former seafarers

"One shouldn't have allowed oneself to think about what was going on at home"[18] (the meaning of home and family)

The sequence of a seafarer's long absence from home followed by a few months home with the family seems incompatible with a life in a marriage.[19] However, the opposite is true; a high marriage rate was reported among seafarers, similar to the majority of society. In addition to economic reasons like a state policy favouring families accompanied by economic and social incentives, two facts played a crucial role here: the family served as a refuge from social control, and especially in the case of seafarers, the family environment was important because of these men's need to have a solid background, a refuge, a place to which they could return.

At the same time, these seafarers gave up a significant part of their family life for the benefit of their profession. They did not change jobs even when their wives suggested so because life with a seafarer was too difficult. This is not surprising since the seafarers' wives faced many different issues—loneliness,

16 NA, Prague, f. ČNP, unorganized, b. 15, Materiál pro ředitelskou poradu, 4 March 1977, p. 11.

17 Archiv bezpečnostních složek (ABS), Prague, vol. 4147, Záznam – Problémy v zajišťování posádek lodí/Record – Problems in providing ship crews, 26 May 1989, p. 1.

18 Interview with J. K, *1946, former seafarer (cook); recorded on 12 November 2010, author's personal collection.

19 The seafarer was at home (obligatory vacation and compensatory leave for continuous operation on the ship); however, his wife and children had to continue with their normal duties—going to work and school, maintaining the daily rhythm of such a family could be difficult. At the same time, the seafarer's wife was dependent on herself alone during her husband's time at sea and had to take on all the duties herself, which also meant significant independence and autonomy. After her husband returned from the ship for several months, she was forced to adjust this position again for a while in order to maintain balance and "peace" in the family. It is necessary to realize that the profession of a seafarer is defined as strongly masculine, so an independent and decisive wife could threaten this self-image of the man. Such attitudes were confirmed also during interviews with several seafarers' wives, for example: ÚSD, Prague, f. Digital Collections, Interview with L. D., *1946, wife of a former seafarer (captain); recorded on 19 April 2017.

taking on the full responsibility and care of the children, the envy of relatives, friends, or acquaintances because travel abroad brought a certain economic benefits. Children experienced similar feelings—on the one hand, they grew up essentially without a father and were also exposed to envy; on the other hand, they had the opportunity to travel,[20] explore the world, and access foreign goods that were not available at home. Despite the great importance of a family background, which is implicitly present in the interviews, the seafarers did not emphasize home as a value too much—the topic of family is a place of "silence in conversation,"[21] which explains seafarers', albeit often implicit, awareness of how much the family sacrificed, what difficulties the wife and children went through, what they had to accept so that man could devote himself to his profession.[22] In fact, men perceive this woman's role as decided, as something that is a women's "fate." Of course, gender stereotypes maintain a strong influence here; however, a deeper reflection into historical context goes beyond the scope of the study:

> She said [seafarer's wife] many times: "Stay home, I can't take it anymore." [...] She never threatened divorce like that, not in her life. At most, she said: "I'm going crazy, I can't take it." But she never went crazy; she always endured it.[23]

In addition, the interviews—again, rather implicitly—uncover not only the men's need for a home in the sense of family, but also a home in general, experienced as an attachment to the region where they grew up, where they lived, and where their "roots" lie. The possibility of going abroad and returning, which the seafarers had, underscored the strong need for family support, home, and connection to their birthplace, which was one of the main reasons many never decided to emigrate.

"I kept putting it off..."[24]—the issue of emigration

Firstly, it is necessary to note that the interviews analysed here were conducted with men who never emigrated and had worked for the company for many years. The seafarers' job was very important to them, as mentioned above, and sometimes even the interests of the family were subordinated to the work. Therefore, any motives for emigration associated with professional careers were weak or completely absent for these seafarers. At the same time, these exact reasons were among the important impulses, along with the feeling of a lack of freedom, that led people to leave their homeland during the communist regime.

20 Since 1965, as a stabilization measure against fluctuations and to support family life, it was permitted under certain conditions for wives or children of seafarers to travel on a seagoing ship. The condition was three years of net time worked on a seagoing ship and payment of a specified fee, and the child had to be between three and 15 years old. Prepared in accordance with the relevant minutes from director meetings. NA, f. ČNP, unorganized.

21 More on this methodological issue: FREUND, Alexander. Toward an Ethics of Silence? Negotiating Off-the-Record Events and Identity in Oral History. In SHEFTEL, Anna – Zembrzycki, Stacey (eds.) *Oral History Off the Record*. New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, pp. 223–238.

22 The collection of interviews, as mentioned above, contains personal reflections from those who worked as seafarers for several decades, or perhaps their entire active professional lives, and their families' experienced difficulties, which is why family coexistence is an important topic.

23 Interview with M. B, *1949, former seafarer (machine engineer); recorded on 26 May 2010, author's personal collection.

24 Interview with J. J, *1952, former seafarer (cook); recorded on 13 April 2010, author's personal collection.

The topic of experiencing freedom or the lack of freedom among seafarers is revisited at the end of the study.

It can be roughly deduced that the rate of emigration among Czechoslovak seafarers was similar to that in the majority of society.[25] Despite the fact that for these men, while they were employed as seafarers, emigration was easy since each Czechoslovak ship frequently travelled to various foreign ports, not only in the countries of the so-called socialist camp. Similarly, it was possible for the seafarer's family to emigrate while accompanying him during one of the ship's voyages. The State Security authorities were well aware of this "problem":[26]

> The Trade Union's agreement with the company guarantees seafarers the right to take their family on one voyage per year (this agreement cannot be cancelled), which allows the seafarer to emigrate with his family without the company being able to prevent him from doing so. The company has not yet taken any measures. It is possible to prevent emigration by issuing an internal regulation, but the legislation does not provide many options to prevent it.[27]

This excerpt from the official document reveals strong concerns among state security forces and party authorities that seafarers should emigrate extensively, as the nature of their work allows for it during everyday operations. On the other hand, there is a relatively conservative seafarers' attitude and de facto reluctance to leave the country permanently, to emigrate, because in addition to all the other unknowns that emigration entails, there was the risk that they would no longer be able to work on merchant ships, or would be forced to adapt to completely different living conditions. Moreover, a certain status of exceptionality that they had in socialist Czechoslovakia would be lost:

> Of course, I had a girl in West Germany, in Hamburg. Her name was Silvia. And she said: "Well, stay here." Stay. Speaking German wasn't a problem for me. But I would still be a foreign worker, a disrespected worker. And I knew that the colleagues, seafarers had a hard time finding a job, they had a hard time finding a job. Even the captains. They ended up at the transshipment yard as ordinary workers.[28]

The majority of narrators, however, emphasized that they could have easily emigrated, not referring specifically to the relatively ease of emigration itself, but to the fact that they would be able to perform well professionally abroad. The possibility of emigration thus serves as a confirmation of their own abilities and skills. Finally, personal ties and family interests were mentioned as important reasons for not emigrating.

At the same time, and this is very significant, the meaning of home and homeland was very clearly evident in the interviews—home in the broader

25 During the period of so-called normalization, approximately 150 thousand people emigrated from Czechoslovakia, more than half immediately after the invasion of the Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968. GEBAUER, František et al. *Soudní perzekuce politické povahy v Československu 1948–1989, Statistický přehled*. Praha : Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 1993, p. 196. Available data on the seafarers' emigration shows similar percentage. ABS, Prague, vol. 4147, Informace o hospodářsko-politické situaci, 4 January 1976.

26 Emigration was punishable by the criminal law of the time, with penalties ranging from six months to five years and confiscation of property. Collection of Laws, 140/1961 Coll, Criminal Code, § 9.

27 ABS, Prague, vol. 4147, Záznam/Record, 13 December 1988, p. 2.

28 Interview with J. N, *1943, former seafarer (A/B sailor); recorded on 15 April 2010, author's personal collection.

sense of the word as the region from which the seafarer comes and to which he returns. Seafarers are well aware of this need "to return home" precisely because their lives alternate between leaving and returning home:

> I was used to going to the pub when I came home to meet my friends. And then there is the village, where my first trip was always when I came from the sea. The village where I was born. And I couldn't go back there [after emigration].[29]

Unlike the above-discussed theme of family, i.e., a rather muted issue of the lives of the closest beloved relatives, wife, and children, the need to return to a specific place was very clearly expressed in the interviews.

"We weren't communists, but we had to be in the Communist Party"[30]—the communist regime's control on ships

As the subtitle suggests, seafarers clearly distinguish between "being a convinced communist" and the type of formal loyalty to the "regime" necessary for their professional activities and employment in the company. These ambiguous attitudes were present throughout society, especially after the regime's discrediting as a result of the August 1968 invasion. In the case of seafarers, however, even this formal aspect had its cracks and was generally dependent on the specific collective as well as the ship's command. Moreover, even though it was a relatively lucrative profession to be a seafarer, (not in terms of official income, but other because of benefits, as outlined above, primarily foreign currency, Western goods, traveling abroad, and—very important—the possibility of being a seafarer, doing the job), the company often struggled with a shortage of qualified staff, because work on a seagoing ship was incredibly demanding and not everyone was willing or able to handle it, whether due to the danger, tough working conditions in storms, continuous operation, isolation, or problems in partner relationships complicated family life, etc. It was therefore not possible for the company to apply the full, strict Communist Party's requirements during the selection of employees:

> Approximately 30% of the Communist Party members are part of the officer cadre. We have information that ship captains tolerate anti-communist and anti-Soviet excesses and moods, and do not report and resolve such cases. All activities of the ship's command are directed toward fulfilling economic tasks and subordinate everything to this goal. Passive attitudes towards the Communist Party's policy prevail at the headquarters, and again, activities are directed solely towards fulfilling economic indicators, with the primary motive being profit. Ordinary seafarers during their stay on the ship are largely under the influence of Western propaganda; they do not have the opportunity to follow the Czechoslovak media.[31]

The situation was more complicated than stated in the cited State Security material. It depended on specific individuals, officers, but also on the composition of the crew, including who in the crew were members of the Communist

29 Interview with P. S, *1942, former seafarer (captain); recorded on 8 May 2010, author's personal collection.

30 Interview with M. R, *1930, former seafarer (captain); recorded on 11 November 2010, author's personal collection.

31 ABS, Prague, vol. 4147, Vyhodnocení operativní situace, 31 August 1989, p. 4. Although the cited State Security document dates back to September 1989, at the very end of the communist regime's existence, it reflects a long-term trend.

Party, at a specific time, etc. What is worth noting in the document is the emphasized issue of economics; on the one hand, the pressure on ideology and loyalty to the ruling regime from the state security forces, and on the other hand, the reflected primary interest of the company in economic results.

Simply put, seafarers could feel quite "free" and detached from the communist regime when they were at sea. However, this put them in a strongly dependent position vis-à-vis the company's management—which was further subordinated to higher Communist Party bodies. Similar to other companies, Czechoslovak Ocean Shipping had a politically oriented personnel department (the cadre department) responsible for the recruitment process, including verifying workers' political positions and their relationship to the socialist social order. This department also participated in decisions regarding one's staying with the company. As a result, cadre officers also abused their authority:

> The personnel and cadre department employees abuse their positions and squeeze seafarers by demanding gifts from abroad for these women in the cadre department. The seafarers are afraid that the department will cause them problems when traveling abroad, so they bring gifts.[32]

For these reasons, the above subtitle dedicated to the communist regime's operation reflects the memory of a former seafarer in saying that they "had to be in the Communist Party," although they were not "real" communists, as this fact was emphasized by the narrators, i.e., those people were not communist by their persuasion. Available documents indicate that members of the Communist Party comprised less than half of the staff, suggesting that the aforementioned obligation to be a member of the Communist Party was more a matter of internalized loyalty to the ruling regime. Of course, in the example cited above, a man could express it as an "apology" for one's own membership in the Party. Even this hypothesis, however, does not refute the conclusion of the seafarers' internal ambivalence in experiencing freedom; while, they consider freedom in their lives as given and inevitable, they still feel the fragility of such a position.

Far away, or close to the socialist state's borders?—conclusion remarks

Even in retrospect, seafarers present themselves as free despite performing routine activities tied to the ruling regime like mandatory celebrations of political anniversaries, or the influence of the Communist Party organization on ships, etc. Comparing what they saw abroad with what they experienced at home, the seafarers realized they had a relatively higher-standard social and economic position than the general population. In addition to an income that was average compared to the majority of the population and below average for some professions, they had access to foreign currency and goods. Thus, they did not suffer from shortages or economic pressure, and their material standard of living was higher than was common at the time, and more exclusive because of access to Western goods. Still, this is rather a general feature of perform-

32 ABS, Prague, vol. 4147, Hodnocení pracovnic kádrově-personálního úseku, 4 May 1989, p. 1.

ing foreign business trips; people from other fields and, of course, from other post-socialist countries had similar experiences:

> And what did I lack? I basically lacked nothing here. I brought what I wanted, I always had enough money, and I never suffered from any poverty. And as a captain, there was no reason for that [to complain or emigrate].[33]

Seafarers embodied a distinct community, although not an ideal one. It was a community firmly interconnected by performing a specific job on naval ships, a hard, interesting, and also exceptional profession in the context of a landlocked state. A specific feature of this profession in the contemporary context of communist rule is the possibility of escaping from the authoritarian regime for a significant period of time, like many months. Despite the fact that Communist Party units operated and carried out certain mandatory activities on ships, in retrospect seafarers reflect a considerable detachment from the situation at home. Being physically far from the country allowed them to forget the restrictions of communist rule, which still applied but were experienced with a substantial mental distance. However, this feeling was quite illusory, since explicit control over the very possibility of traveling was continuously present.

When analysing the stories of seafarers who devoted practically their entire lives to work at sea, a characteristic feature of the interview set, it is clear that the need to travel was no longer important after just a short time, after several voyages. On the other hand, it became increasingly important as a prerequisite for them to work as seafarers and to experience life at sea. And this is a significant difference compared to the experiences of seafarers from other socialist states; in these countries with a shipping tradition and direct access to the sea people had the ability to live and work close to the shipping industry without being restricted by free cross-border movement.

33 Interview with P. K, *1944, former seafarer (captain); recorded on 5 May 2010, author's personal collection.