Ghosts of Marx—Forgetting and Remembering Labor History and German Heritage in Czechia

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Abstract: This article examines the dynamics of historical memory in the former German-speaking industrial center of Liberec/Reichenberg, Czechia, from the postwar period to the present. The analysis focuses on two sites: the pre-1989 tourist and public memory project, Path of the Labor Movement, which celebrated the city's pre-war leftist traditions, and the former villa of a German-speaking entrepreneurial family, whose legacy became recognized after 1989. The article contests the prevailing view that German history in postwar Czechoslovakia was solely suppressed before 1989 and subsequently rediscovered. It demonstrates that the memory of the labor movement remained visible under socialism, as it corresponded with official memory politics. After 1989, this history diminished in public space, while the legacy of capitalist industrialization received increased attention. Utilizing the concept of hauntology, the article explores how different sites and layers of memory become visible or invisible in public space, further developing Jacques Derrida's idea of how the memory of the communist project generates affects and tensions.

Keywords: memory, memory politics, Czechoslovakia, post-socialism, communism, hauntology, sites of memory, ethnography, labor history

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Introduction: A Rusty Plaque

Once bright red but now succumbing to rust, an aging plaque declares this building a "Memorial Site of the Labor Movement." Above it, a well-weathered metal sign offers more detail: "In memory of the pioneers of socialism in northern Czechia, 1869–1969. This building was the seat of the leadership of the All-Austrian Social Democratic Party" (Fig. 1). These signs suggest that the structure in front of me was once rather important, although its deteriorating façade and abandoned appearance now imply quite the opposite.



Fig. 1 – A memorial plaque to the pioneers of socialism in northern Czechia, photo: Karina Hoření, April 2024

The building stands near the center of Liberec, a major city in northern Czechia. The plaque, marked with the small image of a burning torch, identifies the site as part of the "Path of the Labor Movement" (*Cesta dělnického hnutí*), an educational and commemorative route that was laid out in the 1980s, linking together over twenty sites associated with the history of the labor movement in the city and its vicinity. At present, the path is no longer an official tourist attraction, and this is the only surviving sign. The reason why this particular plaque still exists is that neither the private owner nor the tenants have had the energy to take it down or invest in the renovation of the façade, as I was told by a man who lives in the

house (D.K., interview, March 17, 2024). This site therefore embodies, in a sense, the broader status of the history of the labor movement in this region: once central to historical narratives in Eastern Bloc countries, it is now largely missing from both national and local memory. In Liberec, this trajectory is further complicated by the forced displacement of the former German-speaking inhabitants of the city after the Second World War, who had been the founders and activists of the original labor movement—a movement later celebrated mostly by a different population. Hence, the region I study is both post-socialist and post-displacement, that is, profoundly marked by both, ideological regime change and expulsion and resettlement post-1945.

Using the methodology which combines archival research with field ethnography, this paper illustrates and analyzes the dynamics of memory culture at the local level and how it manifests in the urban landscape. I focus on the Path of the Labor Movement, on the one hand, and, on the other, on the villa of a local family of entrepreneurs as a contrasting case study of the dynamics of local memory. In particular, I examine how the traditions of the expelled German community were obscured or integrated into the changing narrative of local postwar history. I show how, in recent decades, the history of the labor movement has been replaced by narratives that celebrate industrialization, and how, as a result, other traditions of prewar German culture have been drawn upon to create a local version of history. In doing so, I critically engage with two bodies of literature: that on the memory of the expulsion, challenging the idea that the German past was overlooked across the board, and that on the transformation of Central and Eastern Europe after 1989, illustrating how the ideological shift towards liberalism manifested itself at the local level. The central research questions are as follows: How has labor history been commemorated in the region, and how is this commemoration linked to broader ideological and political shifts? To what extent was the history of the expelled German minority included in the dominant historical narrative during the socialist period? How was the new local memory after 1989 manifested in the city?

This paper is structured as follows. First, I describe my methodology and introduce the theoretical concepts, inspired by the hauntological framework, that I employ. I then provide historical context and an overview of the labor history of Liberec, followed by an account of the history of the Path of the Labor Movement, its spatial layout, and the characteristics of its sites. Next, I proceed to the two main sections, which compare two sites and their historical trajectories. The first section focuses on the Kolosseum, a major venue for the prewar labor movement that was turned into a museum in the 1980s. The second section examines the case of the

Liebieg villa, the former residence of a family of prewar German entrepreneurs whose commemoration was established and cultivated after 1989. Comparing these two sites enables me to analyze how, after the collapse of the Eastern Bloc, labor history traditions were marginalized and, at the local level, replaced by narratives celebrating industrialization. I argue that the local memory of the German labor movement was central before 1989, and I highlight the omissions in today's celebration of German heritage.

Methodology

To understand the lives of sites in the *longue durée*, I combine two complementary strategies, archival and ethnographic research, to help overcome their individual limits in reconstructing the lives and afterlives of these sites.

Archival documentation concerning sites connected to labor history in the region is limited, in part because they were primarily of regional rather than national significance. Moreover, the available archival material has been shaped by political changes in the region during the second half of the twentieth century. Although the region's labor history was rich, with multiple political parties, newspapers, unions, and collectives active since the late nineteenth century, preservation of archival materials was impeded by several factors: the Nazi occupation (1938–1945), the postwar displacement of the German-speaking population, and the subsequent decline in interest in their culture and traditions. From the remaining archival records of the regional archive in Liberec (*Státní Okresní Archiv*), I have focused on sources related to the heritagization of labor history sites, a process run by municipal heritage committees and agencies.

For the period after 1989, when the Path of the Labor Movement was no longer an official part of the municipal budget, archival records are nonexistent. To describe the development of these sites, I have employed ethnographic methods, personally walking the original "Path of the Labor Movement" as recorded, visiting other relevant sites, and interacting with current inhabitants and users of these places. My interactions therefore mostly took the form of short ethnographic interviews conducted on site, in which we discussed the person's memories and experiences of the place, their relationship to it, and their ideas about it. For my research questions, ethnographic research poses a challenge, as it typically requires active engagement and the study of complex social contexts. In this case study, however, I explored sites that are forgotten and invisible, and most of my

observations and short interviews focused on how people did not notice these places and how nobody interacted with them. Invisibility thus became a key analytical concept (Pink, 2011), as I focused on how this invisibility is framed and on the affects or reactions that arose when I brought these sites and their histories into conversation. As part of my broader research, I also conducted interviews with inhabitants who have various relationships to Liberec, in which we discussed which sites in the city they considered formerly German and how they perceived the signs of the city's prewar German history when they were growing up. I quote excerpts from those interviews in which sites relevant to this paper are mentioned.

Theoretical Overview

To understand the symbolic value of the sites along the Path of the Labor Movement and their transformations, I draw on a range of scholarly literature and theoretical concepts on memory and materiality. In this section, I first describe the existing historiographic literature on labor movements and the German minority in Czechoslovakia, before proceeding to the more theoretical concepts derived from hauntology and post-socialist memory studies, and finally defining how the concept of the ghost allows me to interpret the interplay between the post-German and the post-socialist at the local level.

The pre-war history of labor movements in Liberec, the origins of its important sites and their relevance, are not at the core of this study, hence to evoke and summarize them, I rely on the existing literature. Crucial for my case studies are the recent accounts by Jakub Vrba (2020, 2021), who described in detail the history of the communist movement in northern Czechia and thereby provided me with data on sites that were later memorialized through the Path. I add a further layer to these histories, illustrating how they served ideological purposes during the socialist period and how their interpretation has since changed with time. I also draw on older publications dealing with the history of the labor movement, which seem to occupy a borderline position between historical sources and scholarly literature. An example of this can be found in Ruda's (1979) booklet *Památná místa dělnického hnutí na Liberecku* (Memorable Sites of the Labor Movement in the Liberec Region), which I use in two ways: as a window into the ideological framing of the sites during the socialist period, and as a source of detailed knowledge about the history of these sites when more recent encyclopedic treatments fall short.

For my case study of labor history commemoration, the year 1989 is a turning point. I draw on the rich literature that examines economic and political changes in post-socialist Europe, with a focus on how they materialize in the region's public space. Political scientists and historians have described how the liberal anti-communist narrative of the past has become dominant in the media and public sphere of the region since the 1990s (Illner, 1996; Behr et al., 2020; Welsh, 1996). Hrubeš and Navrátil (2017) focus in more detail on the rhetorical and discursive strategies that the liberal media use in what they call "anti-communist framing." They argue that the anti-communist rhetoric that developed in the early 1990s Czechoslovakia became a major tool of political debate, and that, by casting what was perceived as "communism" and "communist" as the public enemy, various anti-communist framing tools became a way of delegitimizing opponents (p. 58). Within studies of the post-communist transition, I draw especially on those that focus on the transformation of memory culture. While Dujisin (2021, p. 91) argues that anti-communism became the dominant memory framework, supported by an ecosystem of organizations, other memory scholars have focused on how this dominance materialized in the cityscape (Young & Light, 2001), for instance in the destruction of memorials (Rusu, 2025; Holubec, 2018; Debruyne & Nazarska, 2024).

While the analysis of political discourse describes the rhetorical strategies and effects that I identified in my case study of how people talk about sites connected to the labor movement, the studies focused on public space describe how these effects and politics shape the cityscape. I focus on a specific layer of heritage that must be interpreted not only as post-socialist but also as post-displacement; I therefore examine whether and how the trajectories of these multifaceted sites differ.

I conceptualize post-displacement objects or sites as *ghosts*—material manifestations of specters of the past, following Jacques Derrida. In his seminal work *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (2012), Derrida examines how suppressed histories re-emerge, with reference to the specter of communism from the Communist Manifesto. Although communism appeared irrelevant after 1989 and the end of the Cold War, Derrida contends that "the specter of communism," understood as the idea of radical Marxist critique, remains relevant for Europe. In this way, I bring hauntology back to Derrida's original argument about the uncanniness of Marxism in post-1989 Europe. Derrida also binds his idea of hauntology to materiality. He develops Marx´s original argument about fetishization into the claim that objects, whose "becoming commodity opens up the dimension of secrecy, mysticism, and fetishism," i.e., they hold certain affects, can be considered haunted (p. 178).

Derrida's lecture, later published as a book, inspired the development of the research framework known as *hauntology*, which offers a perspective for studying the afterlives and effects of suppressed or traumatic events in the past (del Pilar Blanco & Peeren, 2013). In Central Europe, the repressed pasts studied through a hauntological lens have been the ethnic and political conflicts of the 20th century, above all the Holocaust (Dziuban, 2014). The hauntological perspective can therefore also be used to describe the afterlives of the German minority's presence in Central Europe. Ćwiek-Rogalska (2020, p. 28) argues that post-displacement settings and landscapes that carry traces of the previous (German) culture are often understood as haunted, as a way of expressing a difficult relationship with the space. Thus, hauntology provides a conceptual language for analyzing the invisibility of certain sites (and certain issues) that I identified as a central quality during my ethnographic research. With its focus on the interplay between the visible and the invisible, it makes it possible to describe the dynamics of local memory culture. The existing research on the effects of displacement in Czechia has mostly focused on the active erasure of German culture after 1945 (Wingfield, 2000) or on the suppressed or traumatic character of memories of the displacement and of relationships to formerly German materiality (Kreisslová et al., 2025), with Karlová and Motlová (2025) using the hauntological framework explicitly. Current research has thus cemented the idea that the postwar trajectories of German heritage and materiality were ones of decay, suppression, and abandonment.

The case study presented in this paper forms part of a broader research project on the memory of the displacement of Germans from East Central Europe after the Second World War. Over the course of that long-term research, I identified labor history movements and their sites as a case of remembrance with a specific trajectory that complicates the general understanding of German heritage in Central Europe as having been erased. In contrast, I focus on a case study in which German traditions were incorporated into the official postwar Czech historical narrative, thereby challenging assumptions about suppressed history.

To illustrate my thesis, I use case studies of public sites and of materiality in urban space more generally. To analyze how political and ideological changes have shaped the urban space of Liberec and how its materiality recalls various legacies and ideological projects, this article also employs the concept of *palimpsest*. Originally a term from manuscript studies—referring to a parchment that has been scraped clean and rewritten upon, yet still bears faint traces of earlier inscriptions—palimpsest has been adopted in urban and memory studies to describe how cities accumulate and partially overwrite successive historical layers. I follow the

approach proposed by Andreas Huyssen (2003), who examined how, in contemporary cities, material layers from different periods create a palimpsest of pasts—a complex overlayering of stories that can be read through the urban landscape. These layers are periodically contested, as various actors attempt to erase or highlight them through plaques, statues, or heritage protection, depending on shifting political and economic contexts. In Liberec, these layers include late 19th-century industrial development (associated notably with the city's German majority), the Nazi occupation, the socialist period, and the current neo-liberal era.

Combining a hauntological perspective with the concept of palimpsest enables me to bring together the materiality of these palimpsests and the affects and meanings associated with these sites. Hauntology allows me to describe how the various layers of historical palimpsests are not simply stacked on top of each other but also evoke certain emotions—some can be perceived even though they are hidden, and under certain conditions they can be made visible again.

An Obelisk in the Hills—The History of the Labor Movement in Liberec

In the hills above Liberec, atop one of the mountain ranges that surround the city, stands a large stone obelisk with a plaque in Czech and German that reads, "In Memory of a Gathering of Czech and German Laborers, August 7, 1870." This obelisk, located on a popular hiking path, is more visible than the urban plaque on an abandoned building, yet it too has lost significance: it is no longer a site of annual celebration or commemoration, as it once was. The obelisk was erected and inaugurated in 1970, on the hundredth anniversary of the gathering it commemorates—as municipal officer notes: "Until now, there has been no decent memorial to commemorate the event" (*Památník tábora lidu*, 1970). Archival documents about the opening ceremony illustrate in detail the efforts made by the organizers—the regional municipality and regional branch of the Communist Party: performances by a brass band and choir, speeches, transport arrangements and refreshments for a large crowd of visitors, all suggesting that this was quite an important symbolic event (*Pokyny pro účastníky manifestace*, 1970).

To understand the complex history of this place, its materiality and spatiality, I will now provide a brief overview of the region's labor movement. Starting in the 1860s, Liberec (then known by its German name, Reichenberg) developed into a major center of the textile industry, ranking among the most prominent in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy (Good, 1984). Rapid development transformed Liberec

from a regional center into the second-largest city in the Czech lands, a status reflected in the construction of grand municipal buildings, including the ornate town hall, gallery, and museum (Karpaš et al., 2004, p. 345). The development was led by several entrepreneurial families of German nationality, most notably the Liebiegs, Ginzkeys, and Klingers, who owned most of the factories, funded the public buildings, and showcased their importance through ostentatious private homes.

The city was also shaped by the negative consequences of rapid industrial development, including the influx of laborers, who lived and worked in overcrowded apartments, and increased environmental pollution. Josef Strasser, a key figure in the social democratic movement in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, offered a critical portrayal of the city, emphasizing the stark contrast between the opulent villas of industrial magnates and the impoverished living and working conditions of the working class (Strasser, 1982, p. 66). The social disparities and social conflict that were apparent to observers led to the development of the leftist movement—Liberec/Reichenberg was at the forefront of the labor movement in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, which in its early stages was characterized by mass meetings like the one on the hilltop in 1870 (Urban, 1982, p. 230). In the 1890s, the labor movement in the Austro-Hungarian monarchy was officially established, and left-leaning parties became successful in elections, especially in the industrial regions, even though repression of events (such as the celebration of May 1st) and censorship of printed materials remained part of everyday life for leftist activists, as illustrated by archival materials preserved in the local archive in Liberec (*Levicové dělnické hnutí*, n.d.). In the 20th century, Liberec remained a center of this movement, serving as the hub of publishing and various umbrella organizations (Vrba, 2020, p. 170). In 1918, the Austro-Hungarian Empire collapsed, and northern Czechia became part of Czechoslovakia. The collapse of empires and the establishment of smaller national states in Central Europe also meant the end of the liberal capitalism that had driven the region's industrial boom before the First World War. Industrial production in northern Czechia was focused on exports, and the decline in demand and the newly established customs regime triggered an economic crisis in the region that radicalized the leftist movement (Krpec & Hloušek, 2021, p. 525). In 1921, the Communist Party was established in Czechoslovakia, with German and Czech branches being established independently before they were unified several months later. The German branch held its inaugural congress in Liberec (Vrba, 2020, p. 164). Even within the Czechoslovak Communist Party as a whole, German activists from Liberec were the most radical, and the city became nicknamed as the "red bastion." (Vrba, 2020, p. 170). In the 1930s, the next economic crisis—the Great Depression—

hit the region especially hard with raging unemployment and deteriorating living conditions, especially in the industrial centers. This time, a different political movement was able to appeal to disillusioned and impoverished masses in Liberec, which turned from a "red bastion" into a prominent seat of a fascist movement. In the late 1930s, most ethnic Germans began to support the *Sudetendeutche Partei* (Sudetengerman Party)—a pro-Nazi party in Czechoslovakia that, backed by Adolf Hitler, pressured Czechoslovakia and the international community to allow Germany to annex the Sudetenland—the part of Czechoslovakia inhabited by a German-speaking population (Smelser, 1976, p. 245).

The labor movement in northern Czechia did not disappear entirely, however. The Social Democratic and Communist Parties were the most vocal centers of resistance against fascism and the Third Reich's annexation of the Sudetenland. Liberec was the site of a demonstration in 1938 that showed that not all German-speaking Czechoslovak citizens had turned towards fascism (Vrba, 2021, p. 41). Ultimately, however, the resistance proved insufficient: the Sudetenland was annexed to the Third Reich in October 1938, and leftist activists and politicians were actively persecuted (Brandes, 2008).

After the Second World War, Liberec again became part of the reestablished Czechoslovakia, and, as in other countries in the region, socialism became the political program there. Due to a combination of political pressure from the Soviet Union, a strong tradition of prewar socialist and communist parties, and a longing for a new political order after the failure of the prewar one, Czechoslovakia was rebuilt with the intention of establishing a more egalitarian political system with the working class in a leading role (Hoření, 2025, p. 790). In Liberec and throughout the former Sudetenland, however, the situation was more complicated, as the new regime was shaped by the forced displacement of its German inhabitants. Liberec and the surrounding region lost more than 90 percent of their inhabitants in 1945 and 1946, as they were forcibly displaced to Germany as part of the Czechoslovak politics of revenge (Glassheim, 2000). Here, the social revolution and leftist politics went hand-in-hand with nationalism and included ethnic cleansing.

But the ethnic cleansing in northern Czechia entailed not only the physical displacement of people but also the active erasure of German culture and traditions (Novotný, 2025; Wingfield, 2000)—streets were renamed and statues demolished. The city's German history was to be forgotten, and the sites where it was still visible (such as old German inscriptions that were not repainted or buildings with distinctively German architecture) became ghostly reminders of the suppressed past (Ćwiek-Rogalska, 2020). The sole exception was the tradition of the labor movement,

which was incorporated into the new official narrative of the past, in keeping with the Marxist perspective that viewed history as a history of class struggle (Schmidt-Hartmann, 1988, p. 304; Kolář, 2010). Even though Germans were generally constructed as collective enemies in the historical narrative promoted in communist Czechoslovakia, a limited exception was made for those who were deemed to have been progressive, on the right side of history. This was especially true in the post-displacement regions of Czechia. In Liberec, if all German traditions and culture had been erased, there would have been little left from which to build a local version of history. Thus, from the 1960s onward, it was the history of labor struggles that was remembered and celebrated, first in books and leaflets officially published by local authorities (Ruda, 1966; Procházka, 1966). This process of establishing labor history and its institutionalization accelerated in the following decades, peaking in the 1970s and 1980s. In Liberec, this process was cemented by the expensive, large-scale renovation of the Kolosseum hall a site of foundation of the German branch of the Communist Party and by the establishment and promotion of the "Path of the Labor Movement," linking major sites associated with the labor movement and identifying and commemorating them with memorial plaques or statues. As the most visible and ambitious project commemorating the city's labor history, the Path is described in detail in the following section.

An Obelisk in a Parking Lot—The Path of the Labor Movement

As the most visible and ambitious project commemorating the city's labour history, the Path is one of the primary objects of my research interest. One of the sites that forms part of the original Path of the Labor Movement is a stone obelisk, now standing in a parking lot next to the Liberec city hospital (Fig. 2). Although located close to the city center, the obelisk is not very prominent. Even when it was built in the early 1980s, it commemorated a building that had already been demolished decades earlier: an inn where the General Workers' Association (*Všeobecný spolek dělnický*) was founded in 1869. As such, the site served as a reminder of the labor movement's long history, but it does not do so anymore: the plaque that explained the significance of the site is missing, so it is now only an empty obelisk that adorns a parking lot. I had the chance to interview A.Š., the director of a nearby kindergarten, who has spent her whole life in Liberec and is therefore familiar with the place. When, in the course of a longer interview, I asked about the obelisk, she laughed and answered that she "did not remember what the obelisk commemorated,

but remembered the 'theatricals' the communists put on around it" (A.Š., interview, March 28, 2024). In the following section, I give an overview of the history of the Path of the Labor Movement from its establishment onward, and I also offer an interpretation of people's reactions to its sites.



Fig. 2 – The memorial to the General Workers' Association in Liberec, photo: Karina Hoření, April 2026

The obelisk is one of the last remaining material remnants of the original Path of the Labor Movement. Although the remaining archival documents are scarce, they do not illustrate a marginal issue but rather one that was marginalized through a process of archivization, in which only a fraction of the materials were preserved. From these remnants, I will try to reconstruct the project's history. The commemoration of labor history that I described in the previous section had materialized in the cityscape by the mid-1960s, when important sites were reconstructed and memorialized with plaques or monuments. The transformation from the German Reichenberg, whose history was destroyed, to the Czechoslovak Liberec, which celebrated only a specific part of its prewar history, can be illustrated by a planned memorial to the "pioneers of socialism" that was to reuse a stone obelisk from a demolished First World War memorial (*Připomínky k vybudování památníčku průkopníkům socialismu*, 1969). The ideological rewriting of history thus

materialized in the cityscape—not as a simple erasure of all previous traditions, but as a limited selection from them. In this case, the ideological change involved physically transforming a memorial to one event into a memorial to another.

Efforts to establish the memory of the labor movement intensified after 1976, when the issue became part of official cultural policy of the municipality; in 1980, the regional heritage authority conducted an investigation into the state of the sites listed as protected heritage (*K plnění koncepce kulturní politiky*, n.d., p. 1). Reports and documents produced at that time give an idea of the scale of the effort and the care devoted to the history of the labor movement. According to the final report of the heritage authority in 1980, there were 26 sites connected to labor history in Liberec, the vast majority of them in good condition, with a plaque or memorial; three of them needed further renovations that were already underway (*Důvodová zpráva*, n.d., p. 7). Most of the sites commemorated the prewar German history of the labor movement. These included sites of demonstrations and the seats of organizations—besides the seat of Austrian Social Democracy, a former printing house run by the Communist Party and the seat of Vorwärts, a co-op and bakery also run by the Communist Party. Seven sites were former homes (and one a burial site) of important figures in the movement, all of them German-speaking. Only three sites were connected to wartime or postwar history—an execution site, a local jail where antifascists were imprisoned, and the headquarters of the Red Army unit that occupied the city in spring 1945 (*Důvodová zpráva*, n.d., pp. 5–7). This illustrates that the postwar pro-Soviet interpretation of history did not in any way overshadow the prewar German traditions of the city.

In the same period, to draw attention to these sites, the municipality's tourism committee connected them through the Path of the Labor Movement project: additional signs with a red torch were added (like the one preserved on the seat of the Austrian Social Democratic Party with which I opened this article), and the route was included in maps, leaflets, and tourist guides published by regional and also national bodies, such as ČEDOK (Československá dopravní kancelář, "Czechoslovak Transportation Office"), the official provider of organized holidays and tours (*Důvodová zpráva*, n.d., p. 2).

The Path as a whole consisted of three different routes. The "Small Path of the Labor Movement" connected sites in the inner city and was intended for grammar schools (*Malá cesta libereckého dělnického hnutí*, n.d.). The "Great Path of the Labor Movement" led all the way to the memorial to the 1870 mass gathering in the nearby mountains and was some 20 kilometers long (*Liberecká stezka dělnického hnutí*, n.d.). The "Bus Path of the Labor Movement" also included sites on the outskirts of the

city and was intended for organized bus tours (*Autobusová cesta po památných místech dělnického hnutí,* n.d.). The official report states that these routes were used by schools, "Pioneer" youth organizations, and official sports, leisure, and union organizations. Annual hikes such as "In the Footsteps of the Labor Movement," as well as races, were also organized (*Podklady ke komplexnímu zhodnocení památek dělnického hnutí*, 1983).

Although these documents planned further development of the Path after 1985 (*Důvodová zpráva,* n.d., p. 1), the intended new memorials never materialized, and after the Velvet Revolution and the regime change of 1989, the Path—and the memory of the labor movement as a whole—disappeared from official documents.

Thus, to fill in the missing pieces of the history of the project and its sites, I used ethnographic methods. Although official documents stressed the importance of the history lesson offered by the Path of the Labor Movement (*Podklady ke komplexnímu zhodnocení památek* dělnického hnutí, 1983), the authentic experience of those who walked is hardly accessible. While walking the original path, I asked current passersby, users, or owners of the houses whether they recalled the original sites or had somehow engaged with the Path. Like the woman in the previous section, no one I met remembered the Path as a specific project, yet they did recall that labor history was at the forefront of history education, and they had taken part in various rituals. This lack of engagement with a project that must have been visible, reflect the problems on everyday life in late socialism. Both dissidents during the Cold War and contemporary scholars examining the issue frequently argue that, in the final decades of the Eastern Bloc, public support for communist ideology was largely superficial, and ideological rituals, including Labor Day celebrations, became empty formalities (Pullmann, 2022; Johnston, 2013; Bren, 2019). This perspective is exemplified by a greengrocer in one of Václav Havel's essays, who displays an ideological slogan in his shop window each year, but does so only out of habit, without attaching any real significance to it (Havel, 2018). This is similar to the kindergarten director who remembers the festivities around the memorial only as "theatricals," meaning that they were an empty ritual. Therefore, despite the efforts of municipal institutions to ensure that labor history was prominently represented in the city, these sites may have been invisible to city dwellers even before 1989, and they became even more so after the regime change, when even official care for them disappeared. Neither documents nor memories indicate that the Path was actively dismantled; this is further suggested by the fact that its remnants survive in various forms, probably reflecting the different trajectories of the individual buildings and sites.

By the combination of the two research methods, archival search query and ethnographic fieldwork, I was able to recreate the history of the Path that is full of discrepancies. The official documents from the 1970s and 1980s demonstrate that labor history was visible in the city and that care was taken to commemorate the diverse traditions of the local labor movement, particularly those of the German branches of the Communist and Social Democratic parties. The effort that the authorities put into this commemoration, and its ubiquity, contrast with the invisibility of these places and traditions to the inhabitants nowadays. I found that the sign with a torch described in the first vignette is the only one remaining and that the obelisk in the hills is the only memorial still standing; I identified four other sites with material remnants, such as a stone obelisk or a shadow on a wall, but without any information about the event they are supposed to commemorate, while the majority of the commemorative sites have disappeared completely. In the next sections, I analyze the central site of the Path of the Labor Movement in more detail in order to explain the dynamics of local memory culture.

The Kolosseum—Celebrating Labor History

One of the sites on the original Path that has not changed that much is the Kolosseum, even though its function is now different. On an early weekday afternoon, the Kolosseum building—a social-services center in Liberec—is quite alive. There is a café for clients, mostly elderly, run as a social enterprise, where one can buy a cup of tea at a much lower price than in the city center, enabling people who use the center's services to spend time socializing. Yet the building's architecture suggests that its previous function and symbolic message differed from those of today. For a start, there is a large statue in front of the quite massive building (Fig. 3)—a bit of closer inspection reveals a little overgrown plaque, stating the title of the statue, erected in 1981: "Revolution." Although abstract, the message of the statue is clear—the intact stone obelisk appears to be cut open, with more sharp stone beams symbolizing how every revolution destroys something that seems solid. As such, the statue could represent any revolution—the unsuccessful liberal revolution in 1848, the communist coup in 1948, or, just as easily, the revolution that came a few years after the statue's erection. The collapse of socialist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989 is known as the "Velvet Revolution" in Czechia because of the lack of violence involved, yet it also destroyed the previous social, economic, and political order and turned this site from prominent to peripheral.



Fig. 3 – "Revolution," a statue in front of the Kolosseum center in Liberec, April 2024, photo: Karina Hoření

As I was contemplating which revolution this statue celebrates, a woman approached me and asked why I was interested in the monument. Unlike anyone I

had met before, she was excited that I was interested in the building's history and offered me a tour during which we talked about the building and her relationship to it. I refer to her as A.M.

Although the building is no longer in optimal condition, its symbolic significance is evident in features such as stone finishings, designer lighting, and spatial arrangements. Prior to its conversion into a social-services center, the former Kolosseum served as a cultural hub and a museum celebrating its own history as a key site of the labor movement, of not only local but also national significance. In the 1910s and 1920s, as one of the largest gathering spaces in Liberec, it was frequently rented by local left-wing parties and organizations for demonstrations and rallies. Notably, it was the site of a speech given by Karl Liebknecht, the German socialist and communist politician, in 1912, and, most importantly, the founding of the German branch of the Czechoslovak Communist Party in 1921 (*Ruda*, 1979, p. 27).

After the communist coup in Czechoslovakia in 1948, the founding of the Communist Party became a core event of national memory (see, for example, the official publication by Veselý, 1953), and it therefore also became the event around which local memory in Liberec was centered. In Liberec, the situation was specific because the new historical narrative was being constructed in a city that had recently experienced the displacement of the majority of its inhabitants. The difficulties and limits of constructing a labor movement memory in a post-displacement setting can be illustrated by the following example: a meeting with "German comrades" in August 1950 at the regional party school of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in Liberec (*Zápis*, 1950). More than 30 men in their seventies were invited to share their memories of the labor movement, especially of the founding of the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia at the Kolosseum rally in 1921. Most of them had joined the Communist Party in 1921, and many had attended the founding meeting at the Kolosseum. This meeting shows that the official local leadership of the Communist Party was interested in their memories.

At the beginning of the meeting in 1950, a Czech comrade, a generation younger, representing the postwar Communist Party, said: "During those long and difficult years, you have been through a great deal, and now the time has come for you, too, to join us once again in building our republic. Those years were also a test of your loyalty, but you have weathered them with honor" (*Zápis*, 1950). By that, he was referring to the immediate postwar period, when people of German nationality had lost their civil rights in Czechoslovakia, rights that were restored to them only in 1949 (Spurný, 2011, p. 193). In principle, German antifascists were one of the groups exempt from the forced displacement, as their individual stories did not fit the

narrative of Germans being collectively responsible for the horrors of the Second World War and occupation (Spurný, 2011, p. 160). In practice, however, the anti-German sentiment in postwar Czechoslovakia was so strong that even prewar members of the Communist Party struggled to resist displacement, and if they did manage to stay in Czechoslovakia, they were harassed, for instance, for speaking German (Ibid.).

That this period was not entirely over in 1950 was confirmed by another introductory speech by a Czech communist, who emphasized that "we should not forget the suffering of the Czech nation and the guilt for the horrors that the Germans took on themselves" (*Zápis*, 1950). He emphasized that although the German memories were again considered relevant by the Party, the nationalistic principle and the concept of German guilt still took primacy. Moreover, although the "German" memories were voiced, they were framed and interpreted from the perspective of the postwar inhabitants. Although the majority of the German experience was silenced in Czechoslovakia, this particular meeting and these memories were included in the larger historical narrative precisely because they offered valuable accounts that illustrated the long tradition of the labor movement in the country, which became the key motif in the new postwar narrative about the past.

As I illustrated in the previous section, the process of establishing and institutionalizing labor history accelerated in the following decades, and it was cemented by the expensive, large-scale renovation of the Kolosseum hall. To commemorate the sixtieth anniversary of the founding assembly of the German branch of the Communist Party, the Liberec municipality initiated an extensive renovation in the 1970s, transforming the then-deteriorating inn into the central site of memory for the local labor movement (*Upřesnění rozpočtu na záchranu objektu Kolosea,* 1973). The renovation alone consumed the vast majority of the annual budget that the municipality allocated to promoting labor history, and although the project was delayed by the structural problems of the late socialist planned economy, including shortages of raw materials and labor, its political priority was invoked to increase the budget so that the renovation could be finished on time (*Žádost o uvolnění finančních prostředků na přestavbu Kolosea*, 1977). Reopened in 1981, the Kolosseum included a main hall, a small museum, a library, a smaller convention venue, and a restaurant (*Architektonická studie*, n.d.). The venue's symbolic relevance was underscored not only by its size but also by the luxurious furnishings and finishes. Besides the outdoor statue, there were nine other pieces of art in the interior that often evoked the history and ideals of the labor movement,

including symbolic tapestries, vedutas of revolutionary Liberec, and thematic sculptures (Architektonická studie, n.d.). After it opened, the hall hosted various meetings and assemblies of the local Communist Party. The small museum was not open to the public, but historians from the municipal museum offered tours to various groups, including school and youth groups, organized tours from the Vladimir region of the USSR, which was partnered with Liberec, and even participants in the World Assembly for Peace and Life Against Nuclear War that took place in Prague in 1982. In 1982, almost nine thousand visitors saw the exhibition on the history of the labor movement (*Podklady ke komplexnímu zhodnocení památek dělnického hnutí, 1983, p. 2*). The enduring grandeur of the site demonstrates its status as a central locus of labor movement memory and its significance within the local memory politics.

The role of the Kolosseum as a center of local memory of the labor movement did not last long, as the narrative centered on labor history was replaced by a new liberal anti-communist narrative that celebrated previously overlooked chapters, such as anti-communist resistance and dissident movements (Falk, 2011, p. 350). In the case of the Kolosseum, the process is not easy to describe. There are no records of when the museum was closed, but the building, still owned by the municipality, was used to host various cultural and public events (A.M. (interview, April 12, 2024). In 1991, the building's heritage status had already been revoked (Národní památkový ústav, n.d.), and it was later converted into a social-services center, although most of the artifacts, including the statue at the front and the paintings, were left in place as I realized during my visit in spring 2024.

The story of the Kolosseum thus embodies the commemoration of the labor movement in Liberec: its beginnings in the postwar era, its peak in the late socialist era, and its eventual decline after 1989. In the next section, I compare this trajectory with the completely opposite trajectory of another site.

The Liebieg Villa—The Memory of Capitalist Industrialization

In the period after 1989, along the decline of sites connected to communism, including the German labor movement, other sites became memorialized, emphasizing other aspects and personalities of Liberec's prewar German past. One of them is the Liebiegs Villa, a site quite different from the others I described so far. Set in a neighborhood of ornamental villas, it is the largest, most imposing, and most

ornate of these structures (Fig. 4). In the first half of the 20th century, it belonged to the wealthiest and most influential family in the city, the Liebiegs, who owned several textile factories in the city and the region. It is reminiscent of a medieval German castle and was clearly built to project this impression—the number of towers and alcoves is breathtaking, and the whole building is covered in timber framing.



Fig. 4 – The former villa of the Liebieg family, photo: Karina Hoření

The villa, completed in several stages by 1904 (Mohr, 2009), represented the power and influence of the Liebiegs. The family played a central role in the development of Liberec (then Reichenberg) into the industrial center of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy; this role can be illustrated by their involvement in other public projects, such as a similarly ostentatious and eclectic local museum whose collections came mostly from the family's private holdings (Baldová, 2024, p. 2).

This carefully performed role, however, was already criticized in the decades before the Second World War, when the Liebiegs were among the symbolic enemies of the local communist movement (Vrba, 2020, p. 167). This criticism became dominant after the Second World War. At the local level, Czechoslovakia's political turn to the left was reflected in public hatred of the Liebiegs. In the immediate

postwar Liberec, this anti-capitalist rhetoric was connected with anti-Germanism. As rich industrialists and Germans, the Liebiegs embodied both of the new postwar order's rhetorical enemies. This can be illustrated by the slogan "No More Liebiegs" in the PR journal published by their confiscated and nationalized company (Vlna, 1946, p. 2) and by the coverage of the trial of Johann Liebieg, who was accused of treason in a highly politicized trial in the immediate postwar era. In the weekly *Pohraničí* (The Borderlands), he is depicted as a caricature of a treacherous German, whose historical role is nevertheless over (*Pohraničí*, 1946, p. 1).

The trajectory of the villa embodied these wider ideological shifts: after being confiscated, it served various purposes, including as a kindergarten. In my research, I identified many similar stories—ostentatious villas were turned into public facilities, as they were no longer to serve as the seat of a single privileged family but rather the public good. People I interviewed who attended kindergarten in these facilities often recall the hauntological character of the experience—the ornamental and pompous character of the villas was still preserved, but stood in contrast with the practical furnishing of the kindergarten. The space's uncanniness was further heightened by the fact that its history was unrecognized, leaving its users only to guess or invent stories. "It was especially creepy during nap time, because all the wood was very creaky. All the kids were asleep, and I was sitting there all scared," I was told by a woman who once worked as a teacher in the former Liebieg villa (I.P., interview, November 15, 2023). The villa thus became a ghost itself. In the socialist period, through its distinctive character, which seemed out of place in the everyday reality of a Czechoslovak socialist city, it reminded its users of other, hidden histories of the place.

The legacies that haunted the socialist era became recognized after 1989. In 2014, a new tourist trail entitled "In the Footsteps of the Liebiegs" was opened in Liberec, connecting fourteen sites associated with the former Liebieg industrial empire, with the villa as its main point (Prokopová, 2014). The booklet that accompanies the trail reproduces the story of the Liebiegs as key drivers of the industrial wealth and success of prewar Liberec, while omitting leftist critiques (Šternová & Łaborewicz, 2015). This new recognition of the family's legacy is visible on site, too. Nowadays, the building hosts offices of the regional government, and the history of the building is commemorated by two plaques: one celebrates Baron Theodor von Liebieg as a pioneer of automobile transport in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (he was the first person in the country to own a car and made a historic journey in his Benz from Liberec, then Reichenberg, to western Germany), and the second one, which is part of the commemorative path, gives details about the

architecture of the villa and its central position within the surrounding neighborhood of company housing. Both plaques were put up in the last two decades, bringing the family's history to the forefront of public space once again. The family's central role has also been re-established in other public spaces in the city. A local gallery named its permanent exhibition "Heinrich von Liebieg: Collector and Patron" (*Heinrich von Liebieg – sběratel a mecenáš*; Galerie Lázně Liberec, n.d.); the exhibition is based on the collection that Liebieg himself gifted to the gallery. Another villa in the city, which had been the seat of another family member, Johann Liebieg, was restored in 2022 and turned into a community center. The site has been renamed "The Liebieg Palace" (*Palác Liebieg*; kudyznudy.cz, n.d.), and a large LIEBIEG inscription was installed on the front wall; thus the name itself, although proclaimed obsolete in 1946, is once again prominently visible in the cityscape, even though on buildings that are hosting public institutions since their confiscation.

The legacies of prewar industrialization embodied in the sites connected with the prominent Liebieg family thus followed a trajectory completely opposite to that of the history of the labor movement: suppressed and neglected in the postwar era, they became the core of the city's new memory after the political and ideological change of 1989. The celebration of industrial traditions is a form of official memory, as all the projects, booklets, and renovations were carried out by municipal institutions. These institutions used these sites and their memory to attract tourists and to build an image of a city that was successful, at least in the past.

Marx's Portrait—Conclusions

At the last of the original stops along the Path of the Labor Movement discussed in this text, the former commemoration is no longer visible. This late 19th-century urban building used to be the Hotel Central, where Karl Liebknecht stayed in 1912 during the tour on which he spoke at a rally in the Kolosseum (*Malá cesta libereckého dělnického hnutí*, n.d.). This stop on the Path of the Labor Movement was, like most of the sites, adorned with a plaque that disappeared after 1989. If any traces of the plaque remained, they disappeared during the building's most recent renovation a few years ago, when it was turned into the Liberec tourist office. "Would you like to visit the castle?" I am asked by a member of staff as I am paying for a set of postcards. I do not want to admit the truth: that I am buying them only as a pretext to visit the tourist office itself, hoping to find out more about what kind of sites constitute the "Walk along the forgotten places of Liberec" that the office promotes in its windows. But I take her remark as a conversation starter and tell her: "No, actually, I am interested in the so-called 'Path of the Labor Movement,' which

used to connect all the sites associated with the leftist history of this city. Maybe you know something about it?" I ask. The atmosphere of the conversation changes instantly—although previously friendly, she stiffens and says: "Not really, I have never heard of it."

I am already familiar with this abrupt change of atmosphere whenever I mention the "Path of the Labor Movement," or indeed "members of the Communist Party" or the "international leftist movement." I would not say that the ethnographic conversations I tried to initiate about the labor movement history of Liberec died away simply because people were not interested. On the contrary, I would argue that it was strong affects that entered the conversation—these could be laughed off, as by the kindergarten director I quoted in the section "An Obelisk in a Parking Lot," or give way to awkward silence, as with the woman working in the tourist office. In my research, I experienced what Hrubeš and Navrátil (2017, p. 44) describe for the realm of politics: certain phrases and language connected to communism or the communist regime are so polluted that it is difficult to use them in a conversation that strives to remain descriptive.

The woman became much more talkative when she invited me on the tour "along forgotten places of history," which turned out to be a tour through former company housing built by the Liebiegs on the opposite side of their factory from the villa. The tour focuses on commemorating the family's architectural legacy, being another official recognition of the importance of the family in the city´s history. I argue that the history of the Liebiegs, which has been so visibly present in the city over the last two decades and promoted by its official institutions, can no longer be labeled "forgotten." On the other hand, there is a forgotten German history—one that people have difficulty talking about, and that has disappeared from public space. It is the history of the labor movement, which was once symbolized, for example, by a plaque commemorating Karl Liebknecht's stay in the very house where this conversation is taking place. This conclusion seeks to explain these paradoxes of the local memory. My concluding remarks are twofold. First, I contend that the prevailing interpretation of German history in Czechoslovakia as merely suppressed prior to 1989 is limited. Second, I apply and further develop the framework of hauntology to illustrate how, in Liberec, the memories of labor history and capitalist industrialization coexist within a dynamic interplay of visibility and invisibility.

In this article, I have examined sites that have symbolized the city's official memory from the Second World War to the present day. I focused on the Path of the

Labor Movement and its most prominent site, the Kolosseum, on the one hand, and on the legacy of the Liebiegs, embodied by their former villa, on the other. The disappearance of the commemoration of leftist traditions after 1989, symbolized by the intentional or unintentional destruction of memorials, has been documented throughout the post-socialist world. Similar attention has been devoted to what has been seen as the "uncovering" of German heritage. Liberec is a case in which both of these processes intertwine, creating a more complicated trajectory—or, in spatial terms, a more complicated palimpsest.

First, the entire history of the commemoration of the labor movement in Liberec illustrates that perceiving German traditions in post-displacement Czechoslovakia only as suppressed is too limiting. I demonstrated that, even though the city was shaped by the displacement of the majority of its German-speaking inhabitants and the active suppression of most of their traditions, the history of the labor movement was something of an exception. Labor history was one specific tradition that could fit into the accepted postwar historical narrative. I have shown that there were clear limits to the inclusion of authentic German voices in Czechoslovakia. Nevertheless, the commemoration of the labor movement was visible in the city and formed a privileged layer of the cityscape palimpsest until 1989, so the prewar history was far from suppressed. Sites connected to major historical events in the Czech, German, and international labor movement were memorialized because they fit within the broader framework of memory politics in the Eastern Bloc, which foregrounded class struggle as a major driver of history in accordance with Marxist theories. This material commemoration took varied material forms, ranging from plaques and stelas to extensive centers of local culture, and was accompanied by ritualized use in the form of opening ceremonies, annual wreath-laying, and educational walking routes. After 1989, a different layer became visible: the city's industrial upheaval since the 19th century became celebrated. The story of industrial progress and success was embodied by the Liebieg family and the buildings they inhabited or financed in the city. This new narrative, however, overlooks the wider social and environmental context of the industrial development under the Liebiegs. What has been described as the uncovering of German heritage is, I argue, not the uncovering of the complex history that was suppressed but the foregrounding of one specific layer and interpretation of the prewar era.

Secondly, using hauntology, I have focused on the ways in which layers of history are neither simply visible nor invisible, forgotten or celebrated. Like the villa that did not feel like a socialist kindergarten, even seemingly suppressed layers can evoke emotions or imaginings that, under different political circumstances, become

more pronounced. The same can be said of the history of the labor movement, which, although currently suppressed, is far from neutral; it evokes emotions and tensions, as I have illustrated throughout this article. Using a hauntological framework, I demonstrated how certain layers of memory can be visible while simultaneously pretending to be "forgotten", while the layer that has really been forgotten in a way that it disappeared from public space can still hold affects. In this respect, I follow Wyss (2021, p. 118), who argues that there are various types of silence and that silence is not an unproductive omission but a space filled with multiple meanings. These tensions can be explained by reference to Derrida's Specters of Marx. The case under scrutiny focuses precisely on the uneasy afterlives of the socialist project in Europe, embodied in both the original labor movements of the 19th century and the state socialism of the 20th century, and therefore brings hauntology back to its original discussion. Although the history of the labor movement disappeared from the public space, it still creates tension and, as such, "haunts".

My findings will perhaps find their most fitting illustration in this final vignette. Returning to the Kolosseum, the venue where the German branch of the Czechoslovak Communist Party was established and later became a key site of local commemoration of labor history and, still later, a social-services center, I am given an unofficial, impromptu tour by a woman who manages the place. After we have seen the remaining leather sofas, meeting rooms, and a model of the original inn, she stops in front of a more abstract art piece depicting two men around an apple tree. "There is a portrait of Marx hidden beneath it," she tells me. I am skeptical, but she insists that the portrait is indeed still there, only hidden behind a less ideologically abstract motif.

And so the *ghost of Marx*—envisioned by Derrida as a specter more on the level of ideas, as a suppressed conversation about radical critique that refuses to disappear—is allegedly still present in Liberec, albeit in material form, lingering out of sight but not gone.



Fig. 5 A painting in the Kolloseum supposedly hiding the portrait of Marx beneath, photo: Karina Hoření, April 2024.

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