

ASSOCIATIONAL LIFE IN THE LESNÁ HOUSING ESTATE IN BRNO

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Abstrakt

Brněnské sídliště Lesná je významným architektonickým i urbanistickým počinem. V posledních letech čelilo četným neúspěšným snahám o zahuštění zástavby nebo rušení dětských hřišť. Z těchto důvodů vytvořili její obyvatelé několik občanských hnutí, jež si kladou za cíl zkvalitnit životní prostor Lesné a zachovat její současnou podobu. Zasazují se také prostřednictvím různorodých aktivit o zlepšení sousedských vztahů. V článku na vybraných příkladech představím vývoj a současný stav spolkového a komunitního života na Lesné. Z dosavadního výzkumu a zjištěných informací mohu již teď říci, že zájem obyvatel Lesné o jejich životní prostředí a společenské dění roste a uvědomují si jejich hodnotu.

Klíčová slova: *panelové sídliště, spolky, spolkový život, sociální kapitál, sousedství, etnologický výzkum*

Abstract

The prefabricated housing estate Lesná in Brno is an important architectural and urbanistic phenomenon. Over the past few years it has faced numerous unsuccessful

attempts to increase the density of buildings or close playgrounds. In order to block such attempts, the residents launched several civic initiatives aimed at an improvement of Lesná as a residential area, preserving its present face. In addition, they try to improve neighbour relationships in various ways. The present article presents selected examples of the development and current state of associations at Lesná. Based on the information obtained through my research so far I may already state that the interest of residents of Lesná in their environment and social events is rising and they are aware of their value.

Keywords: *housing estate, association, community life, social capital, neighbourhood, ethnological research*

Introduction

Over a third of the inhabitants of the Czech Republic live in prefabricated housing estates. The ownership of a flat is a dream come true for many young people, who are more willing to live at a prefabricated housing estate rather than buy their own house. Scientific interest in prefabricated housing estates has been on the rise in the past few years. They attract the attention of architects, urbanists and politicians but also sociologists, anthropologists, ethnologists, art historians and journalists. The residents themselves are beginning to take interest in their homes and their surroundings. The exceptionality of the housing estate Lesná, discussed in this study, resides in its architectural and urbanistic value, high proportion of greenery and above all, civic, volunteer and political activity of its inhabitants, which is the subject of this study. Therefore, my goal is to introduce my research and preliminary results. In particular, I focused on answering the following questions: Which associations are active at Lesná? What was the impulse for their establishment? What are their main activities and how do they affect social relationships in the housing estate?

I divided the study into several parts. In the initial part, I introduce the terms and phenomena concerning my work and subsequently discuss the employed methods. Next, I will present the characteristics and a brief history of Lesná. The core part deals with the actual topic of this study. Within this part, I assess my ethnological research and findings concerning civic activism, associations and possibly social relationships. My objective is to present not only selected aspects of current life at the prefabricated housing estate but also possible forms of civic activism of its residents. I intentionally use the singular form *estate* here, because relating findings from a specific estate to another one is a very difficult matter. It may be said that each housing estate in Brno is different in something, which is reflected in the results of Divina's MA thesis *The Image of*

the Prefabricated Housing Estates in Brno (Divina, 2010). It must be mentioned that my research is still under way, which is why I limit myself here to introducing its basic theoretical concept. The presented data from the field research are, in fact, hypotheses to be subjected to further verification.

Associations and Community Life. Basic Concepts and Terms.

In this section, basic concepts and key terms used in this study are introduced. The main concept is social capital, through which we can observe social networks. The main terms that are used throughout the study include local identity – the strength of the inhabitants’ bonds to the place where they live. The next term is public space, this concept explains how the quality of environment at a housing estate may affect its inhabitants. And the last but not least term is neighbourhood, which is essentially the most important term of this study because neighbour relationships have a profound effect on the activity of citizens.

Social Capital

The concept of *social capital* has a long history stretching from Durkheim, Marx and others (Portes, 1998; OECD 2001) to the works of Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988) and Portes (1998). However, it was Putnam (1993, 2000) who made the concept widely known and his version constitutes the basis of my study. Czech or Slovak concepts of *social capital* were presented e.g. by Lenka Bušítková (1999) or Juraj Janto (2012). An interesting critical view of the issue was developed by Jan Keller (2009). The term *social capital* was originally coined as a purely economic term. “Sociologists and others argued that classical analyses of capital as purely financial and physical ignored the values that lie both in individuals’ knowledge and skills (cultural capital) and in the social networks and shared values that facilitate cooperation between actors (social capital)” (Russell, Scott & Redmond, 2005, p. 214). Robert Putnam mentions features of social organisation, such as trust, norms and networks, which may increase the effectivity of a given society and help it reach its goals (Putnam, 1993, p. 167). According to his view *social capital* refers to connections between individuals. His key concepts are social networks and norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness, stemming from those connections. Social capital in this sense is closely connected to what is sometimes called “civic virtues” (Putnam, 2000, p. 19).

Social capital may be understood as a label for social cohesiveness, trust, mutual relationships and networks. We regard it as social network based on trust,

which is beneficial in its effects. This means that it is a desirable phenomenon with a positive effect on the community's as well as individuals' prosperity. The central factor of social capital is social networks. These are structures of relationships connecting people, institutions and organisations. They are mutually dependent and their purpose is reciprocal support (in terms of emotions, work, opinions etc.). The significance of social relationships in a locality becomes more perceptible if institutions do not function properly but also in the case of low economic, physical or cultural (historical, artistic and architectural) capital of the area and low human capital of the inhabitants. The engagement of residents in dealing with problems concerning their homes is a result of their social relationships and a manifestation of social capital of the locality. The most relevant point here is that it is possible to mobilize a large number of people to protest against negative interventions into the locality's environment. The examples in this study will show that potential threats to the quality of life provide a comparably strong motivation to become engaged (Janto, 2012, pp. 24-30).

Local Identity

Any activity of the residents such as the willingness to unite and get involved in improving the quality of the surroundings and neighbour relationships requires positive relationships among the residents and between the residents and their locality. Such relationships are labelled *local identity*. According to the ethnologists Juraj Janto, local identity is "important for the relationship of an individual to a space, expresses responsibility for it. An important condition of its presence is the acceptability of time and space." (Janto, 2012, p. 28). This means that the crucial factors for local identity are the time for which an individual life at a specific place and basic identification with the place.

The political scientist Jaroslav Vencálek claims that "identity is important because it is an active, conscious relationship of a person to himself/herself, to a space and people who inhabit it. It is connected to specific acts and it is a manifestation of responsibility" (Janto, 2014, p. 52). An observation of how people identify themselves with the place where they live should focus mainly on "how they understand the place, how they identify with it, how they define it in physical space, name it and how they use this space, how it becomes a part of their inner world, how they organize, change and improve it etc." (Zich, 2007, p. 49). Our interest here is how people identify with the place where they live. We may understand local identity as a component of human identity and define it as "an inner feeling of affiliation with a community of people living at a specific place and the place itself" (Heřmanová, Patočka, 2007, p. 64).

Public Spaces

Public spaces offer the opportunity to take part in everyday activities, to be in the society of other people, to see and hear them, getting to know their behaviour in various situations. The Danish architect Jan Gehl defines three types of outdoor activities: 1) necessary activities, which are almost unaffected by the material environment, since they are more or less forced; 2) optional activities are directly dependent on optimal outdoor conditions such as the weather and place and people take part in them only if they want to. The frequency of these activities rises proportionally to the quality of material conditions; 3) social activities including children's games or even watching people are called resultant activities, since they more or less accompany activities from the previous two categories. They are the direct result of the fact that people share a common space. As such, they are indirectly supported if there are better conditions for necessary and optional activities (Gehl, 2000, pp. 11-17).

A public space does not directly determine people's actions but it can facilitate or complicate them. The influence of a public space is essentially a restrictive or a motivating force encouraging or restricting certain behaviour. This kind of open and generally accessible space is a crucial factor in the development of relationships to people and one's home. Public spaces are usually found on public land without buildings. Public spaces are physical as well as social spaces (Janto, 2014, pp. 49-50).

In the case of public spaces at housing estates, a discrepancy arises between the ideas of the residents and those of the urbanists and architects, who are mainly interested in "the architectonic expression of housing estates, they miss traditional features of urban housing, they call attention to bad, undifferentiated conception of public spaces etc. Local residents are mainly concerned about untidiness around the house, bad maintenance of common indoor spaces, the feeling of unsafety in public spaces and common indoor spaces, lack of parking places and deficiencies in public facilities. While many architects would prefer to complete the housing estate by constructing new buildings, the residents appreciate the areas of greenery and oppose further construction, especially if it results in an increase of the number of inhabitants" (Barvíková, 2010, p. 61).

Neighbourhood and the Needs of Inhabitants at Different Stages of the Life Cycle

Strong local identity and functional social networks encourage the formation of relationships with neighbours. Conditions for strong neighbour relationships

include comparable age, going through different life stages together, common interests, similar education, the presence of a local leader etc. The sociologist Jiří Musil gives key factors shaping the perception of a place, including different human needs and changes in one's action radius: "Changes in the course of the life cycle (change of roles, members of the household and their mobility etc.) transform human needs and demands on the flat and living space in general. An important factor in the perception of one's home at the different stages of the life cycle is the widening or narrowing of his/her action radius" (Barvíková, 2010, p. 65).

The formation and intensification of relationships and social communication between the inhabitants are influenced by objective factors, mainly time and the opportunity to meet. The frequency depends on membership in local groups and specific characteristics (e.g. parenthood), which increase the possibilities to make contact with certain people. Subjective factors include chiefly compatible personality, the interest of participants in the relationship and their communicativeness. Latent neighbourhood may transform into a community, which means that there are more opportunities to meet and do things valuable to oneself and beneficial to others. This often happens thanks to local leaders, i.e. active residents, who, nevertheless, must be provided with favourable conditions. This may be realized in the form of self-administration programmes (such as organized calls) or systematic support of community work (Janto, 2012, pp. 26-36).

Research Methods

The research project is conceived as a case study consisting in a detailed analysis of several cases with the objective to capture the complexity of phenomena and relations in their entirety. Case studies involve the collection of a large amount of data obtained from a few individuals (Hendl, 2005, p. 104). The focus of the study is the community of neighbours and community life in the prefabricated housing estate Lesná.

I use the qualitative method of semi structured interview. This method relies on a list of questions or topics, which the interviewer wishes to discuss. "Semi structured interview allows the interviewer to make his/her use of time as effective as possible. At the same time, it introduces similar structure into interviews with several people, facilitating their comparison. It helps to maintain the focus of the interview but also gives space for the interviewee to apply his/her own perspectives and experience" (Hendl, 2005, p. 174).

If further employ participant observation, including participation at the activities of a selected association. Observation is used to find out what is actually happening

and help us to complete our report with a description of the environment. The participant observation is usually open. Thus, it is possible to describe the events and their causes, the participant persons or objects, the environment etc. When I take part on activities of associations, I usually assume the role of “observing participant”, which grants the researcher equal membership in the group, but others are aware of his role as a researcher (Hendl, 2005, pp. 191-193).

I started the main research in 2015 and I have conducted nearly 30 interviews up to this day. Nevertheless, the topic of my research is still undergoing certain development; therefore, the number of interviews that are actually used is lower. I used quotations from six of the conducted interviews included in this study. All the respondents are members of the researched association. Three respondents are men and three are women. They are aged 30–40. All of them have higher education. I participated in many activities of these associations; for example, the neighbourhood market, planting flowers, neighbourhood breakfast in the grass, screenings of films and documentaries, beautifying the neighbourhood and some other events. At these occasions, I observed the activity of the members of the researched associations and other volunteers.

The History and Characteristics of the Prefabricated Housing Estate Lesná

There were originally few buildings in the area of present day Lesná¹. It served as a military exercise area since 1909. An emergency workers’ colony “Divišova čtvrť” (Divis district), sometimes also called “Shanghai” was built after 1925 in the south-east. A new district “Nade Mlýnem” was built at the same time in the east (Minárik, 2012, p. 87).

The chief architect of the housing estate was František Zounek (residential buildings) and his co-workers were Viktor Rudiš (centres of public facilities), Ladislav Volák and Miroslav Dufek (nursery schools, schools, day care centres). The architectonic and urbanistic conception from 1959 was a response to the contemporary requirements of intensive industrialization of construction, which was supposed to provide fast building procedures. The reason for this was the need to compensate for the losses of the war and provide houses for the growing post-war population (Dufek, 2012, p. 25). The architects drew inspiration from the Finnish garden town Tapiola (Espoo). The housing estate was constructed

¹ The original title from 1965 was “Za Tišnovkou”, derived from its location close to the railway (Minárik, 2012, p. 87).

between 1962 and 1970, i.e. in the “golden 1960s”.² It was the biggest housing project in Brno at the time and also the widest and most radical one alongside the Brno exhibition centre. Another point of significance about Lesná is stream construction. There were four simultaneous construction streams – 1 stream of infrastructure, 2 streams of houses and 1 stream of public facilities and greenery (Maleček, 2014).

The finished housing estate comprised 5920 flats for a total of 20 500 inhabitants. For example, in 1970, there were 37 inhabitants in one house. The demographic composition is affected by the time of building. Initially, mainly young families moved into this housing estate but their members have aged since then. It is assumed that a part of the children from the housing estate has moved away over the years. The housing estate Lesná had the lowest proportion of child population of all the large housing estates in Brno in 1991 and 2001. This corresponds with the highest proportion of population aged 60 and living at large housing estates in Brno. There were 5 % more women than men in 2001. There is also the highest proportion of university graduates of all major housing estates in Brno (21.5 %) and the lowest proportion of people with basic education (13.7%) (Gergorová, 2012). Lesná was not an enterprise housing estate and cooperative apartments were mostly sold to the citizens; therefore, middle class is strongly represented at Lesná, especially the so called new middle class³ (Možný, 2012).

One of the respondents who has lived most of her life here brings us the current status of the overall population at Lesná.

It changes in that the original inhabitants who got a flat, whether it was business or cooperative flat, those are already dying slowly and their grandchildren move there, so whether it is a council flat, such entrances there are too, of course, whether they are council flats, which we have seen now in a housing commission at Brno-Sever when they come asking for housing with a grandson, we are not against it, because why could it not be the grandson of a grandmother, who visits her or wants to live there and take care of the family. So I have been saying for a couple of years that it is not true that Lesná is aging, but rather that Lesná is getting younger, that the grandchildren of the first generation are moving in, so our kindergarten and school are filling up slowly and I'm afraid of another

² Socialist realism used to be obligatory but the stress later shifted to increasing the norms for building density, competent architects were dismissed and the quality of prefabricated houses declined. The architects had managed to push through building procedures, materials and project, which were truly exceptional in the context of prefabricated housing estates of the period.

³ This term includes people in professions requiring high qualifications.

calamity like the one in the eighties when there were so many children that they had to go on shifts, some of them went to school in the morning and the others in the afternoon. (Respondent A, personal communication, 7. 4. 2016)

The effort of the architects was to make the buildings merge with the ground in a natural way, using mainly horizontal lines, low density of construction, stretches of parks and large areas of greenery. Lesná was divided into four districts, each having a so-called district centre (Lučina, Polana, Obzor, Dukát). These were not only utilitarian buildings providing services but also very valuable as regards their architecture and they were full of life. Each of these districts served approximately 5 thousand inhabitants. They had a crèche, nursery, elementary school and shopping centre with a supermarket, buffet, restaurant, culture centre and other services (e.g. a barber, laundry or shoemaker) (Gregorová, 2012). Obzor is even mentioned in connection with the tradition of Brno functionalism.

The blocks of flats at Lesná are built in groups, some of them are isolated tower blocks, others are arranged in rows of variable length. There are no flats on the ground floors, which are used as utility rooms. The entrance halls have some above-standard features (ceramic tiles, greenery, mirrors). The housing estate is sometimes called “an open-air gallery” because there are a number of works of art, mainly decorative walls (Maleček, 2014).

Lesná has faced attempts to build more houses since the 1980s. Representatives of the contemporary regime argued that the low density of buildings at Lesná is essentially a waste of agricultural potential of the region. This is why they considered an increase of density necessary. This change was prevented by an active intervention of Ludvík Doležal – one of the residents of Lesná, who was supported by many others. Doležal regarded the action as a beginning of civic society, although it took place years before the Velvet revolution. The following years saw more (often successful) attempts to “spoil” the face of Lesná, which met with more or less intensive resistance of the residents⁴ (Doležal, 2012, pp. 45-47). The most prominent change took place in the 1990s, when the new housing estate Majdalenky was constructed. This estate was adjacent to the “old” Lesná and there was a sharp contrast between the two. There are hundreds of flats on a small area, public facilities are insufficient and the residents often seek the services in the original housing estate. A spiritual centre was built near the tram stop in 2004 and it is going to be transformed into a church.

⁴ Chiefly by the construction of a retirement home, superstructure of eight-storey houses or the reconstruction of the majority of district centres.

Associations

This section deals with the actual research into the life of associations and civic activism of the inhabitants of Lesná. There is a relatively high number of citizens' associations (henceforth CA)⁵. These include The CA for the Environment Ježkova and The CA Majdalenky, The CA Arbesova and the CA Haškova, Obzor Lesná, Lesná, of the Residents of the Divis district. Another independent association is the Preparatory Committee of the Association Barvy – Soběšická – Seifertova. All of these associations decided to act in unity, if needed, and they founded The Council of Civic Initiatives Lesná, an offshoot of which is the political movement The Association of the Citizens of Lesná. In this study, I focus mainly on associations which are concerned with the architecture of Lesná, public space, greenery and functional neighbour relationships. These are ordered according to the date of establishment. Furthermore, these associations are NGO's with a legal registration, except for the Association of the Citizens of Lesná, which is a political movement.

The CA for the Environment Ježkova⁶

The present activity of the citizens of Lesná was initiated mainly by the current mayor of the district Brno-Sever (Brno-North) Martin Maleček. He makes a considerable contribution to the general awareness of the history and significance of the housing estate not only among its residents but also in Brno as a whole.⁷ The impulse to found the association was the plan of the Brno City Municipality to demolish a playground on the street Ježkova and sell the land to a private company as a space for a multi-level parking system. The local suburban municipality claimed that the playground was not used and there was a lack of parking places. A wave of disagreement with this decision arose in 2006 among the residents of the concerned locality as well as others from more distant areas of Lesná. A petition with four hundred signatures was presented. The citizens' association was founded at the same time. The construction of the multi-level parking system was successfully prevented. The new association

⁵ A change in the Civil Code of the Czech Republic took place in 2015 and citizens' associations were transformed into so-called registered associations or simply associations. Both terms referring to the same subjects are used in the text.

⁶ See <http://www.osjezkova.estranky.cz/>

⁷ He organizes thematic strolls at Lesná, contributed to the book *Lesná – 50 years of the housing estate* and above all, is a politician present at all events at Lesná.

has focused since then on an improvement of more playgrounds but also the surroundings. They renewed the abandoned tradition of turning an asphalt pitch into an ice rink and holding a masquerade ball there. They also reconstructed the natural amphitheatre in Čertova rokle (Devil's gorge) (Maleček, 2012, p. 20). As was previously mentioned, Martin Maleček became the mayor of the district. As a result, the activities of the association were more or less taken over by the municipality.

A current member of the association describes his experience with this playground the renovation of which he did not personally witness but he was glad that it was done:

We used to go there with the older daughter, now she is eleven, so she doesn't come to play there so much. But we have a three-and-a-half-year-old daughter and she still plays there. It's definitely good, this playground is popular among people from different parts of Lesná. We've got a lot of friends who actually go there over the ravine. I think there was a time when this was perhaps the only playground with a fence where you could be with little children. (Respondent B, personal communication, 17. 8. 2015).

He does not have much time to participate in various activities of this association but he seeks to contribute to the revitalization of life in Lesná via creating a website and a Facebook page called "Naše Lesná".⁸

I was attracted by the work of this association and by the fact that it started to be more organized here. (...) I would like to spread information about current events or what one can find here at Lesná through these webpages. A lot of new shops and workshops emerge, some of them in the entrances of panel houses. People might not know about them. They can support them by going shopping there. There are two streets away and people don't know that there's something there. (Respondent B, personal communication, 17. 8. 2015).

The CA Obzor Lesná

Some of the inhabitants of Lesná realize the architectural value of specific buildings and the housing estate as a whole. In case of a "threat" in the form of new construction or rebuilding, they are able to join forces at succeed in keeping the contemporary situation, at least to some extent, unchanged. Rebuilding of one of the last centres of public facilities Obzor has been under consideration since 2008. The original investor's project was to build three tower blocks comprising c.a. 170 flats. The foundation of the association was preceded by a petition

⁸ "Our Lesná".

committee in the street Fillova in 2009. Its activity culminated in protests against the construction of the tower blocks in place of the original Obzor complex and the presentation of a petition with 424 signatures. A gathering of citizens followed in July 2009, at which five hundred people participated (Minárik, 2014). The petition committee joined forces with The CA Ježkova in the same year. The association was officially established in 2010. Its main objective remains to solve the problem concerning the Obzor complex.⁹

The CA Majdalenky¹⁰

This association is currently the most active one. As was mentioned above, the character of Majdalenky is completely different from the original idea of Lesná. The inhabitants of this new estate are bothered by a large number of buildings and flats, minimal public facilities but also the private ownership of the nearby greenery areas.

The main stimulus to establish the association was the effort to prevent further increase of the density of buildings in the area, which was a real possibility. The plan of the investor was to build a four-storey house in a locality already occupied by three tall buildings. However, he soon changed the project proposing a 16-storey building instead. The reaction to this intention was the foundation of The CA Majdalenky. One of its activities was a petition campaign “No more storeys at Majdalenky” and 712 signatures were collected. A number of meetings of citizens with association representatives and politicians followed. The disagreement became a court case. It was presented to the Supreme Administrative Court (2013) and later the Constitutional Court (2014), which decided in favour of the citizens’ association. According to this decision the authorities are not allowed to increase the floor area ratio without the consent of the citizens and all changes must go through regional planning.

Following this success, the activities of the association were transformed. The focus gradually shifted from defensive and protest activity to more active and creative one. The objective is to form functional neighbour relationships. The year 2015 saw the beginning of the project “The four seasons at Majdalenky” and the first event was a breakfast in the open air, organized by the neighbours in

⁹ The last meeting of the citizens with the representatives of the investor took place 15th January 2015. A radically different and more modest reconstruction project was presented, proposing only two floors and ca. 40 flats. However, this still includes a partial rebuilding of one of the centres of public facilities.

¹⁰ See http://www.majdalenkyos.cz/?page_id=2

May. In September, they planted flower bulbs in order to make the surroundings of their homes more beautiful. There is only grass around the houses and the lawns are often not maintained at all. A screening of a documentary and historical photographs of Lesná took place the same autumn. A wall served as the screen and the green space in front of the house as the auditorium. I participated at all of these events and actively took part in the planting of flower bulbs. I observed that the largest number of participants came to the least active event – the screening of the documentary. On the other hand, a second open-air breakfast took place this year and the number of participants was comparable to the previous year. The association also contributes to screening of films in Čertova rokle and continues to be interested in the environment at Majdalenky. This suggests that the members are very active.

The most active members are currently families with children. A respondent and a member of the association gave examples of activities, which she would like to realize. She became interested in the situation in the locality only after she gave birth to a child. Consequently, her ideas concern the closest surroundings of her home.

I had kind of these ideas, that we could just make the life here more interesting, we could have this neighbour fair or some sort of a festival thing or some event at the lawns outside. Or some sort of a sport. So I had wishes like this and then I had the child and it actually happened right when Mrs Hoffman¹¹ sent something like an invitation to renew or complete the committee of the citizens' association. It used to be the citizens' association Majdalenky then. My son was born then; he was a baby. So it was some time in 2014. I'd lived here four or five years by then and I hadn't been involved in any way before then. (Respondent C, personal communication, 8. 4. 2016).

Another respondent described her way to this association. We can see a shift in the activities of the association from a purely defensive attitude to efforts to create something new.

I only know that there is an association Majdalenky that Mrs. Hoffman founded and maintained simply on the basis of legal battles with the developer. We went back to Lesná and it was my husband's idea to look for associations, yep. And he gave them a gift, he wanted to encourage them actually and so we got to them. But we did not see any activity, it was just invisible. There was an invitation once or twice a year "Come sign a declaration against the developer", nothing else. So the idea of the association (of which the respondent was already a member) was like let's show people that we're here, and if it happens that

¹¹ The chairwoman of the association.

someone wants to get involved, and the people in those units, in those flats find out about it, they will know where to go. Because I didn't know too, an individual cannot start anything when he or she does not have a platform. (Respondent D, personal communication, 22. 1. 2016).

And she continues:

Well, it seemed pretty good to me and I said to her that the direction of this association should not be in the negative sense, it has been said several times, but that we should do something for pleasure. And I think that a civic association is a good place to do so because it is an entity and people are aware of it. Because it would be difficult to organize something alone. So it was my idea, and then we moved further because Mrs. Hoffman was in touch with other people. And therefore, she put together the committee and the audit committee, and thus it began. (Respondent D, personal communication, 22. 1. 2016)

One phenomenon is visible here in particular – if conditions are favourable, some people prefer to engage in activities focusing on creating something new. And in the second part, the role of a local leader who can draw people together is aptly described.

The CA Arbesova

Similarly to the Citizens' association for the Environment Ježkova, CA Arbesova was founded because of the need to reconstruct a playground. Having united their efforts in a single organisation, the members gained new possibilities of development and negotiation with local authorities.

Yeah, but we basically founded it because we found out that we wanted to repair the playground somehow and we found out that it is quite difficult to address, for instance, the municipality as a single citizen. I'm not saying that the municipality is not willing to talk but if there is an organisation of some kind, like a registered association – it is a registered association now, used to be a citizens' association, so the association then has a better position (Respondent D, personal communication, 18. 2. 2016).

Another advantage of activities organized in this way is that they can attract more citizens from the given locality.

We were three founding members. I mentioned two close families with children, so we three daddies were there at the beginning. Then we accepted more members because several people, and it came as a nice surprise to me, that some of them were from the older generation, were interested and joined the thing. They said that it was just worthwhile. But the activities of our association as such just stopped basically at the moment when a new, sort of, general citizens'

association was founded, that is the Council of Citizens' Initiatives Lesná (Respondent D, personal communication, 18. 2. 2016). This cease of activity of individual associations following the establishment of the general citizens' association concerned also other associations at Lesná.

The Association of the Citizens of Lesná (ACL) and Municipal Elections 2014

The political movement ACL was established 18th June 2014 as a political body of the Council of Citizens' Initiatives Lesná. The objective of the movement was to win chairs in the suburban municipality, since the members considered the activity of the municipality Brno-North insufficient. They support their establishment referring to the history and a kind of original idea or wish that Lesná should have an independent municipality. "The life of the newly emerging district would find a most purposeful and operational support in a local administration reserved for this new complex only. Such an administration would be more operational in reacting to the needs of the residents of the new housing estate. It is regrettable that propositions of this kind presented to the municipality at the beginning of the project of the housing estate Lesná found no response, which could otherwise positively influence the satisfaction of the residents as well as successful completion of the whole project." (Historie hnutí SOL). Based on previous activities, the movement offers advisory services to similar initiatives outside Lesná. Its pro-active approach and considerable popularity were presumably the reasons why it won the municipal elections in autumn 2014 and its members received the highest number of votes¹². After lengthy negotiations and one "coup" they gained 9 out of 35 seats in the local government and the office of the mayor of the district Brno-Sever. It is worth noticing that the movement founded new traditions in the form of a neighbour fair or the lighting of the Christmas tree. In 2015, a neighbour fair was held for the second time in the vicinity of a primary school and one recently closed centre of public facilities. The purpose of the neighbour fair is not only to gain political points but also to renew the relationships between neighbours in the locality and create space for meetings.

It was only the second year of the neighbour fair, which met our expectations also in the sense of fulfilling the principles of neighbour fairs. That is, the

¹² Winners in this election across the Czech Republic were often similar associations and movements intending to change the contemporary situation in politics and the attitude of citizens to local issues.

people made contact and began building true neighbour relationships, which is important also because the market centres began to disappear from Lesná and they actually used to ensure this. I mean, the thing that people meet during their free time activities, talk and so on. This does not happen here now, so people who live just a street away don't know each other. (Respondent F, personal communication, 23. 9. 2015).

Conclusion

The undoubtedly interesting and currently highly relevant topic of citizens' activities would deserve a deeper analysis. However, the goal of the present study was to draw attention to the issues of civic activism, associations, community life and general interests of the inhabitants of the prefabricated housing estate Lesná in their surroundings, presenting opportunities for ethnologic research in this specific environment, which currently draws the attention of researches from different fields.

The reason for the foundation of the discussed associations was mainly the effort to protect the area from further construction, which would increase the density of buildings. Another impulse was the need to improve on the state and appearance of the surroundings of the houses. This concerns chiefly front gardens and playgrounds but there is also a stress on the protection of greenery in the housing estate, mainly in Čertova rokle. It is worth noticing that (bad) quality of the public space can become a stimulus to the activity of association members, de facto encouraging social contact of certain residents.

Research into the activity of individual associations further showed that the initiators of change are predominantly residents who have lived in the locality for a long time and major contributions are made also by families with children. The vast majority of the initiators are people with university education. Their age ranges from 30 to the retirement age. Most of them are middle class. The number of men and women is different in each association (in some, there are just a few men and a majority of women while in other associations the opposite is the case). As for the participation of residents in community life, it is worth noticing that people take part mainly in protests (hundreds of them) but the numbers of participants are significantly lower (from individuals to tens) in the case of events requiring activity and aimed at creating something new, in this case, an improvement of neighbour relationships at Majdalenky or neighbourhood markets.

Based on the presented examples, I dare claim that social capital in the examined locality is very high, which is largely due to the presence of leaders

able to activate high numbers of inhabitants. Moreover, the political movement The Association of the Citizens of Lesná exports the experience beyond the boundaries of the housing estate. The organized events, foundation of new traditions and interest in the history of this housing estate can intensify local identity of its residents.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the research is still under way, therefore the conclusions presented here are based on the interviews and observation done so far and general research in the locality. Still, I may already state that Lesná is an exceptional environment. Nevertheless, a number of questions arise. The most important one concerns the perception of the associations' activity on the part of the residents. How much important is it to them? Does it affect everyday life at the estate? Does it help to form neighbour relationships? What is their perception of the political activity of associations representatives? Another interesting topic is the activity and "lifespan" of associations after the establishment of umbrella associations.

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