

Workers' Housing Schemes in Ostrava: The schemes built by the Vítkovice Ironworks and other industrial companies

Mgr. Christopher Hopkinson, Ph.D.

This publication is the last volume in a three-part series entitled *Workers' Housing Schemes in Ostrava*, whose previous volumes (published in 2011 and 2012) contained information on the architectural, demographic and social development of 54 housing schemes (known in Central Europe as “colonies”) for miners and coking plant workers on both the left and right banks of the Ostravice River. This third and final volume in the series maintains the structure established in the previous two volumes (with the sites ordered according to the current administrative division of the City of Ostrava into municipal districts) and maps the workers' housing schemes built by some of Ostrava's major companies. These include chemical works and transport companies, but the main focus is on the schemes built for manual workers, supervisors and administrative staff by the Vítkovice Ironworks – both as part of the “New Vítkovice” development, an ambitious project by the company's general manager Paul Kupelwieser (1843–1919, in office 1876–1892) to create a self-contained company town, and also other schemes not situated in Vítkovice itself but at other locations to which the company expanded its operations from the end of the 19th century onwards. While the architecture of the Ostrava transport and chemical workers' schemes drew on local traditions already established in previous company-built housing projects, the Vítkovice Ironworks took a different approach in its progressive social policies, ambitiously keeping step with the most recent European trends; from the company's earliest schemes (built around 1880) to the last of its housing projects, dating from the inter-war period and the time of the Nazi occupation, the Vítkovice developments were inspired by contemporary developments in Central European architecture. Like the previous two publications in the series, this final volume also investigates the role played by the housing schemes in the demographic structure of the municipalities where they were located, traces the influence of company schemes on civic and social amenities, and explores community life in these housing schemes and the wider municipalities in which they were situated.

Even after the Second World War, the workers' housing schemes and their inhabitants continued to play an important role in the life of the Silesian community of Hrušov (in 1921, 46.5% out of Hrušov's 368 buildings were part of company housing schemes). The housing schemes in Hrušov were built not only for the Hubert and Ida collieries, but also by two local industrial companies: **a factory producing ceramic goods for the chemical industry and the First Austrian Soda Factory**, which each built their own housing scheme. Between 1852 and 1950 Hrušov acquired a varied stock of housing for administrative staff, supervisors and manual workers. By 1910–1911 this housing had been administratively consolidated to form a single scheme, and when the local companies were taken over by German capital under the Nazi occupation and by the Ústí nad Labem-based Spolchemie works it was split into two separate schemes for the newly formed companies. In 1921 the two companies' schemes were home to at least 1203 people, making up 15.5% of Hrušov's total population (a further 24.8% of the population lived at the schemes built by the Hubert and Ida collieries). Besides having access to a good level of civic amenities and services (a preschool, a company-owned general store, a works club, and an inn), the inhabitants of the schemes (comprising up to 59 separate buildings) enjoyed a vibrant community life, and Hrušov was home to local branches of nationally active physical education organizations, political clubs and other associations.

In 1921, Ostrava's central district (Moravská Ostrava) had a total of five miners' housing schemes which were home to 5887 people – making up 13.4% of the district's total 41 765 inhabitants. This third volume of the series continues the investigation of housing schemes in Moravská Ostrava by mapping the **Kraus scheme** – a unique example of a privately owned workers' housing scheme whose inhabitants represented the lower echelons of Ostrava's social milieu. The 18 simple structures, built between 1870 and 1880, contained 124 separate apartments, with 724 inhabitants in 1900 (2.4% of the total population of Moravská Ostrava). The scheme was home both to manual workers and to a range of outsiders existing on the margins of society, including some criminal elements. The Kraus scheme was demolished before the First World War to make way for grand apartment blocks which housed prosperous citizens (these structures are still standing), but its reputation as an undesirable address in the heart of Ostrava was immortalized in regional literature, most notably František Sokol-Tůma's novel *In The Glow of Millions*.

Perhaps even more squalid conditions were to be found at the Kraus scheme in the neighbouring Přívoz district, where 13 ramshackle buildings (dating from 1867–1872) housed 772 people in 1890 (14.7% of the total population of Přívoz); even in 1930, the scheme was still home to 480 people (2.6%). Between the world wars the **Kraus scheme** was used mainly by employees of the state railway corporation (or small-scale tradesmen); however, during the period of industrialization

under the communist regime the area – already earmarked for demolition – became one of Ostrava’s most notorious Roma ghettos. Another socially excluded location in Přívoz with a primarily Roma population was the **Přednádraží housing scheme** near Ostrava’s main train station, originally built for railway workers, which gained prominence in the media between 2010 and 2013. During the inter-war period the scheme was considered a desirable residential location, its solid multi-storey apartment blocks standing in stark contrast to the modest single-floor structures of the city’s older workers’ housing schemes. Between 1889 and 1947 a total of 23 residential blocks were built at the scheme; in 1910 they were home to 780 people, 4.7% of the total population of Přívoz. Přednádraží had good transport links and access to a network of shops and services in the neighbouring part of the district. The community life of the Přednádraží scheme – and its eventual decline into a socially excluded location – are chapters that have yet to be researched and written.

In 1902 two residential blocks (each containing eight apartments) were built in the Nová Ves district of Ostrava (Bartolomějská St.) by the Ignát colliery and coking plant. However, it was not until 1926–1938 and 1946–1949 that the district (and part of the neighbouring district of Mariánské Hory) became the location for a large-scale ensemble of 16 multi-storey residential blocks for manual workers, supervisors and engineers, built by a **chemical company** and also including a villa for the works manager. In 1930 the scheme (which at the time consisted of 8 buildings) was home to just 191 people (8.1% of the Nová Ves population and 0.04% of the Mariánské Hory population), and the buildings – designed by the renowned architects Kolář & Rubý and the Šlapeta brothers – offered a solid standard of living. In 1942 the scheme was home to the Czech-German political activist Jan Borovec (1923–1944), a member of the Red Army’s “Progress” espionage group which operated in the vicinity of Hitler’s “Wolf’s Lair” headquarters in East Prussia.

At the turn of the 20th century, two company housing schemes were built in the Silesian community of Svinov (in addition to several isolated company-owned buildings). The first of these schemes, built by the **Mannesmann tube rolling mill**, was built during the period 1893–1910. In 1910 its 8 buildings were home to 339 people (one tenth of Svinov’s total population). Between 1899 and 1915 a group of 9 blocks was built in the Dubí area of Svinov for the **Wilhelm Grauer distillery**. In 1921 the scheme was home to 100 people (2.6% of Svinov’s population). The scheme was home to the Ryšový family, who were involved in the resistance movement during the Nazi occupation, and in the 1950s the distillery employed Jindřich Mach, the official chronicler of the Poruba municipal district. The foundations for a **municipal power plant housing scheme** were laid in 1932 in the Svinov cadastral district, but the group of 13 residential blocks was eventually built between 1946 and 1956. This was one of the last company-owned housing schemes to be built in Ostrava. The scheme offered a good quality of life thanks to the close proximity of the power plant and good transport links; the inhabitants continued to enjoy a vibrant community life during the era of communist industrialization.

Besides several structures owned by the Vítkovice Ironworks, the district of Zábřeh nad Odrou was the site of three company-owned housing schemes built during the 20th century. The foundations for the oldest of them – the **Bedřiška scheme** – were laid in 1902 near the Bedřiška colliery, when two residential blocks were built. The majority of the 31 semi-detached cottages at the scheme were not built until 1950, when plans were already underway to build a scheme in the close vicinity of the **Vítkovice construction corporation** (Vítkovické stavby); this scheme, built in 1951–1953, consisted of 33 rudimentary prefabricated houses of a type known locally as “Finnish cottages” due to their timber structure. The Vítkovické stavby scheme has not yet attracted the attention of researchers, but the Bedřiška scheme gained media attention several years ago as one of the most notorious socially excluded locations in the Czech Republic. Another workers’ housing complex that has not yet received attention from experts or the general public is the **Julius Rütgers scheme**, a group of just four buildings in today’s Svatoplukova St., half way between the former epidemic hospital and today’s Ostrava Arena; in 1930 the scheme was inhabited by 153 people, just 1.1% of Zábřeh’s total population.

A unique project – not only in Ostrava, but nationwide – was the “New Vítkovice” project. This was designed to be a model factory community, with almost all areas of public and private life under the control of a single corporation – the Vítkovice Mining and Iron Company, acting through its subsidiary the Vítkovice Ironworks. The oldest example of employee housing that still survives in Vítkovice is the **“Westend” housing scheme**, a group of 4 two-floor buildings dating from 1878–1879. Westend’s population reached a peak in 1890, when 324 people lived in its 58 apartments, making up 3.2% of Vítkovice’s population. A second scheme – also centrally located, and originally also designated as Westend – was the **“English” housing scheme** (1880–1882), its buildings symmetrically arranged around the main square of New Vítkovice. In 1890 the 4 two-floor buildings provided accommodation in 64 apartments to 346 people (3.4% of Vítkovice’s population), most of them employed in administration or middle management by the Vítkovice Ironworks, but also including some municipal employees and clergymen – demonstrating the close interconnection between municipal and corporate life in a factory town such as New Vítkovice. The inhabitants of the **“English” housing scheme** (named after the style of its buildings) included Max Kupelwieser, the brother of the company’s general manager Paul Kupelwieser, and Artur Wolfgang Ritter von Sacher-Masoch, whose son went on to become a major literary figure in the 20th century.

Other schemes dating from the early 1880s are the **“Gable” housing scheme** and two other schemes known as the I-blocks and the U-blocks, situated around the central square of New Vítkovice (which was known as St. Paul’s Square). The “Gable” housing scheme is a unique example of an early attempt by the company to implement its own solution to the issue of workers’ housing by part-financing a housing collective. The plans for the scheme were never implemented to their full extent, and the apartments were never actually transferred to the members of the collective; instead they became the basis of the company’s burgeoning housing stock. The 32 semi-detached cottages (including accommodation in the loft space) were built in 1882–1885; in 1900 the scheme comprised 127 apartments and was home to 826 people

(4.3% of Vítkovice’s population). Besides being the home of the Austrian writer Artur Wolfgang Ritter von Sacher-Masoch, the scheme also had an international dimension in its architecture, which was inspired by trends in English industrial cities. Two more schemes were built at the same time as the “Gable” scheme – the two-floor **“U-blocks”** (1882–1884) and **“I-blocks”** (1882–1884), named after the shape of their ground plans. The U-blocks housed supervisors and administrative staff, while the I-blocks housed supervisors and higher-ranking manual workers. The population of these schemes reached a peak in 1890, when the U-blocks housed 439 people and the I-blocks 236, accounting for 4.3% and 2.3% of Vítkovice’s population respectively. Thanks to their central location on the square, the tenants in these schemes were frequent participants in the numerous public events held in Vítkovice. Famous inhabitants included the writer Vojtěch Martinek and the Olympic shot putter Helena Fibingerová.

During the 1890s the Vítkovice Ironworks built a range of other housing schemes for manual workers and supervisors, including 5 three-floor blocks (1887–1892, known as the **“Five” scheme**) near the cadastral boundary between Vítkovice and Zábřeh nad Odrou, 10 flat-roofed two-floor blocks known as the **“Cairo” scheme** (1892), and 4 bunkhouses known as **“Scheme B”** (1893–1894), which evidently represented the lowest standard of accommodation offered to the company’s employees. The everyday lives of the inhabitants of these three schemes was influenced both by the close proximity of the factories where they worked and by the emergence of a public transport system, which brought the civic amenities of the central part of New Vítkovice within just a few minutes’ reach of their homes. The location of these schemes in previously undeveloped parts of New Vítkovice required the construction of new civic amenities, shops and schools. In 1900 the first of the schemes had 486 inhabitants (2.5% of Vítkovice’s total population), while in 1910 the “Cairo” scheme had 1229 inhabitants (5.3%), and the “Scheme B” bunkhouses had 794 inhabitants (3.4%) in 144 apartments. The first scheme and “Scheme B” were both demolished in the 1970s, but the “Cairo” scheme (home to Adolf Knejzlík, who became a victim of the Nazis) continued to enjoy a vibrant community life long after the Second World War.

After 1900, the Vítkovice Ironworks built several new workers’ housing schemes at locations close to the district’s cadastral boundaries. In 1908–1909 it constructed a group of 6 three-floor buildings as accommodation for supervisors in **Erbenova St.**; in 1910 this scheme was home to 165 people in 36 apartments (0.7% of Vítkovice’s population). In 1909–1912 five multi-storey buildings in a typically urban style were built at the **“Steelworks” scheme** for manual workers; in 1921 this scheme (with 90 apartments) was home to over 345 people (around 1.6% of Vítkovice’s population). In 1910–1913 the foundations were laid for a scheme built on Ruská St. to house administrative workers, which was completed in 1920; in the same year work began on another administrative workers’ housing scheme on Štramberská St. (1920–1930). The older **scheme on Ruská St.** (which in 1921 housed 153 people in 48 apartments, making up 0.7% of Vítkovice’s population) was based on the architectural style of the existing buildings of New Vítkovice. However, the Štramberská **St. complex** (with 103 apartments and just 212 inhabitants) drew on the latest contemporary trends in Central European architecture. It is unsurprising that this scheme was home to some of the Vítkovice Ironworks’ highest-ranking administrative staff, including the company’s general manager during the Nazi occupation, Karel Kuchinka. The company’s last major investment in workers’ housing within the cadastral boundaries of New Vítkovice was the **“Orphanage” housing scheme** (1912–1922), consisting of 20 separate buildings including two bunkhouses and one emergency accommodation block. In 1930 the scheme had 234 apartments housing 1097 people, making up 4.1% of Vítkovice’s population. Although part of the scheme has now become a Roma ghetto, during the inter-war period it had good civic amenities and was home to a vibrant community life with many clubs and associations; one notable inhabitant was the renowned Czech operatic tenor Beno Blachut.

Although the New Vítkovice project aimed to create a factory town devoid of social or spatial barriers, incorporating plenty of green spaces and shared public areas, by the end of the 19th century the Vítkovice Ironworks had grown to such an extent that the company was forced to expand beyond the boundaries of Vítkovice itself. The first housing scheme built by the company in a neighbouring district was the **Hulváky scheme** in Zábřeh nad Odrou (today in the municipal district Mariánské Hory and Hulváky); built between 1898 and 1922, the scheme consisted of 36 multi-storey buildings designed for manual workers and supervisors. In 1921 its 302 apartments were home to 1459 people, making up 14% of Zábřeh’s population. The construction of this scheme acted as an impetus for further urban growth, bringing good transport links and civic amenities. It was home to the communist resistance fighter Ladislav Ševčík. In 1907–1912 the Vítkovice Ironworks built the **“Sophienhütte” housing scheme** in Moravská Ostrava, consisting of 7 bunkhouses which in 1921 were home to 625 people (1.5% of the total population) in 114 apartments. The company’s biggest investment in workers’ housing was the **“Josef” scheme** (1907–1911), whose 70 small blocks (each containing four apartments) straddled the cadastral boundary between New Vítkovice and Zábřeh nad Odrou. In 1930 the scheme (which had excellent civic amenities including two preschools, a primary school, shops, and a stadium nearby) had 280 apartments housing 1660 people (6.1% of Vítkovice’s population).

The Vítkovice Ironworks’ human resources policy has also left two permanent marks on Ostrava’s urban fabric in the form of the company’s last two housing schemes, built after the First World War: the **“Jubilee” scheme** (Jubilejní kolonie) in Hrabůvka (1921–1932, 1939–1942, 1946–1950) and the Šídlovec scheme in the district of Hrabová (1940–1941, 1947–1955); these are often described (inaccurately) in older literature as schemes for administrative staff rather than (as was actually the case) manual workers. The “Jubilee” scheme was built in several phases, eventually creating 830 apartments in 144 separate buildings. In 1930 the completed part of the scheme had 1892 inhabitants (36.7% of Hrabůvka’s population). The Šídlovec **scheme** in Hrabová was built during the Nazi occupation and the subsequent communist industrialization; it consisted of 108 buildings containing 682 apartments. Both schemes feature

high-quality civic amenities, including a library (the “Jubilee” scheme) and a community centre (Šidlovec – only partially built). The “Jubilee” scheme ranks among the finest examples in the country of a housing project inspired by “Red Vienna”, while the Šidlovec scheme, though originating during the Nazi occupation, draws more on the tradition of inter-war Czechoslovak modernism than the ideological imperatives of the Nazis’ favoured Heimatsstil. Both developments, however, are representative examples of the Vítkovice Ironworks’ corporate architecture spanning the pre-war and post-war period.

This third and final volume in the series *Workers’ Housing Schemes in Ostrava* presents key information on 29 schemes for manual workers, supervisors and administrative staff in both the Moravian and Silesian parts of the city. However, the conclusions reached at the end of the first volume still remain valid: Baťa’s Zlín is perhaps the only other example of workers’ housing in the Czech Republic that can rival Ostrava’s schemes in terms of the overall impact they had on the urban fabric of the community and the architectural, demographic and mental history of the conurbation.¹⁵⁹⁵ Even today, in the 21st century, almost every family in Ostrava has at least one member (either living or deceased), or at least an acquaintance, who spent their childhood or their entire life in one of the city’s housing schemes – whether now demolished or still existing.¹⁵⁹⁶ This third volume of the series contains information on a total of 726 residential buildings, with various owners (including ten companies, dominated by the Vítkovice Ironworks), in ten of the city’s current municipal districts (Hrabová, Hrabůvka, Hrušov, Mariánské Hory a Hulváky, Moravská Ostrava a Přívoz, Nová Ves, Svinov, Třebovice, Vítkovice, Zábřeh nad Odrou). It is clear even from this brief overview that the schemes must have played a central role in the development of the entire western part of the Ostrava industrial conurbation.

Besides presenting a large quantity of previously unpublished information and correcting erroneous information from previous publications, this volume also encompasses a range of important findings of relevance to the Vítkovice Ironworks’ human resources policy with regard to workers’ housing: in 1921, what is now Vítkovice had 13 housing schemes for manual workers, supervisors and administrative staff (excluding the scheme in Štramberská St.) consisting of a total of 172 buildings, which were home to 7098 people – exactly 26% of the total population of Vítkovice (27 358). In 1890 around a quarter of Vítkovice’s inhabitants lived at the company schemes (the “English” scheme, the “Gable” scheme, Westend, the “Five” scheme, the U-blocks and the I-blocks); however, the number of people housed at the company’s schemes appears to have reached its peak in 1921. Ostrava’s housing schemes continued to play a central role in the local community even during the industrialization which occurred under the communist regime, when some of the schemes (by then already morally obsolete) were used to accommodate those who were classified by the local or central government as “less demanding” citizens – pensioners, childless couples, or large Roma immigrant families. The first years of the communist industrialization saw the construction of Ostrava’s last workers’ housing schemes; some of these have become socially excluded ghettos (Bedřiška, the Vítkovické stavby scheme), while others are still desirable residential areas (the “Jubilee” scheme, Šidlovec). Today, many of Ostrava’s housing schemes are still used for residential or commercial purposes. However, others are vanishing unnoticed from the map. The three-volume series *Workers’ Housing Schemes in Ostrava* has sought to preserve the memory of these fascinating elements in Ostrava’s urban fabric.

¹⁵⁹⁵ JEMELKA, M.: Resumé. In JEMELKA, M. (ed.): Ostravské dělnické kolonie I, p. 533.

¹⁵⁹⁶ JEMELKA, M.: Z havířských kolonií, p. 3.