

CIESZYN FRIENDSHIP BRIDGE AND ITS GHOSTS: THE CHANGING ROLE OF A BRIDGE THAT UNITES AND DIVIDES TWO COUNTRIES

MAGDALENA BUBÍK

INSTITUTE OF SLAVIC STUDIES, POLISH ACADEMY OF SCIENCES

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Abstract

Cieszyn, once a unified town and regional center, is now divided between Poland and Czechia, with the Olza River marking the international border. The Friendship Bridge spans the river and reflects the evolving dynamics of Polish-Czech relations. This article examines the bridge's shifting symbolic and social significance – transitioning from a militarized frontier to a site of remembrance and reconciliation. Drawing on interviews, autoethnography, archival sources, and media accounts, I analyze how political events such as the fall of communism, European integration, and the COVID-19 pandemic have been inscribed into the spatial and social fabric of the bridge, shaping local identity. Through an exploration of urban elements, memories, and narratives – conceptualized as the “ghosts of the bridge” and framed within the theoretical lens of hauntology –, the article demonstrates how the bridge mediates contested histories and enables ongoing negotiations of collective memory and belonging.

Keywords: border studies; Cieszyn; Český Těšín; Friendship Bridge; hauntology; Czechia; Poland
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Magdalena Bubík is an assistant in the ERC StG project “Recycling the German Ghost. Resettlement Cultures in Poland, Czechia and Slovakia after 1945” at the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences. At the same time, she is pursuing her PhD at the Anthropos Doctoral School in Warsaw. Address correspondence to Instytut Slawistyki PAN, ul. Jaracza 1, 00-378 Warszawa, Poland. E-mail: magdalena.bubik@ispan.edu.pl.

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Introduction

Many people often ask me where I come from. Those more familiar with the region sometimes ask in which town I live – Cieszyn or Český Těšín. I usually respond with the latter, but I am quick to add that it is, in fact, one town divided into two parts. Yet, I am not certain whether this reflects reality or merely a personal, perhaps nostalgic, aspiration. For centuries, there was only one town: Cieszyn, the center not only of the Duchy of Teschen but of the broader region of Cieszyn Silesia.¹

Today, two towns – Cieszyn and Český Těšín – function independently, as the area now lies within two separate states: Poland and Czechia. The Olza River winds through the center and since the division of the town and the region in 1920 it has become a border between the two countries. Spanning the river is a bridge that once connected two parts of a single town and now symbolically unites two nations. Its origins date back to the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.²

The Friendship Bridge has undergone several name changes over the years,³ and its form and the way it has been perceived by the local community evolved as well. Therefore, in this article, I analyze the social and symbolic transformations of the Friendship Bridge within a broad historical and political context, with particular emphasis on the impact of events such as the fall of communism, European integration, and the COVID-19 pandemic. I have chosen 1954 as the starting point, i.e. when the bridge was rebuilt following wartime destruction and officially named the Friendship Bridge. The endpoint of my analysis is 2023, allowing for an examination of the post-pandemic period and the aftermath of COVID-19-related regulations.

Moreover, I reflect on the presence of both tangible and intangible “ghosts of the bridge” – elements of urban space, memories, and narratives that actively shape local identity and collective imagination. I interpret this phenomenon

¹ Idzi Panic and Janusz Spyra, *Dzieje Śląska cieszyńskiego od zarania do czasów współczesnych*, vol. 4: *Śląsk Cieszyński w okresie 1653–1848* (Cieszyn: Starostwo Powiatowe, 2012), 9–11.

² Irena Cichá and Maciej Dembiniok, *Tramvají po Těšíně / Tramwajem po Cieszynie* (Český Těšín: Regio, 2008), 63.

³ For example: Long, Salt, Main, Castle, Olziański. See Dorota Havlíková, “Historie těšínských mostů začíná ve 14. století, dva z nich mají letos jubileum,” *Těšínské listy: Těšínské toulky minulostí*, August 2018, 22–23. About the role of place names in relationship between people and spaces they occupy: Přemysl Mácha, “The Symbolic Power of Place Names: The Case of the River Olse/Olza/Łolza in Northeastern Czechia”, *Names. A Journal of Onomastics* 68, no. 3 (September 2020): 169–184, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00277738.2020.1786925>.

through the lens of hauntology, understanding “ghosts” as recurring, displaced elements of the past that resurface in public space and “haunt” the residents, demanding some action from them.⁴ Such ghosts include both symbols of unity – such as the Avion café or the replica of the Cieszyn tram – and markers of division, including the illuminated border line or the monument commemorating the separation of Cieszyn. These varied manifestations of the past influence not only the everyday lives of local inhabitants but also shape their interpretations of history and the place of the bridge in the local cultural landscape. Accordingly, Friendship Bridge plays a significant role in the everyday experience of Cieszyn inhabitants, serving as a key element of their local identity.

Generally, a bridge symbolizes “the connection of what is disconnected in time and space,” but also “the connection of two worlds.”⁵ This situation mirrors that of Cieszyn, as the two parts of the town are “disconnected in time and space.” The bridge once connected the two parts of Cieszyn: the historical, administrative one, with the suburbs. After 1920, its role changed dramatically. No longer connecting two parts of one town, it became a division between two countries or between two worlds. Faced with these two completely different realities, what function was the bridge meant to serve, now that it had lost its primary purpose of linking the parts of a single town? Has it become a commemoration of the past, a kind of ghost that persistently reminds us that Cieszyn was once one town?

Tracking Methods

What, however, is a ghost? According to María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, a ghost is something indefinable – an entity that exists between two worlds: the visible and the invisible, life and death, materiality and immateriality.⁶ Their reflections build upon the paradigm developed by French philosopher Jacques Derrida and his theory of hauntology. In my article, I draw on Derrida, but also go beyond his initial intuitions, framing the Friendship Bridge as a ghost in itself, but – one that carries its own ghosts as well. The bridge is at the same time material, a physical structure enabling passage across the river that separates the two parts of the town, and immaterial, functioning as a vessel

⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), xviii–xx.

⁵ Władysław Kopaliński, *Słownik symboli* (Warszawa: RYTM, 2015), entry: bridge.

⁶ María del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren, eds., *The Spectralities Reader. Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 2.

of memory and a component of local identity of Cieszyn residents. It is a space where the inhabitants of both Cieszyns meet, but also where past and present intersect, forming a symbolic site of encounter where ghosts confront the local community.

Despite the fact that the body of literature on Cieszyn is extensive, with its history, division, and ethnic diversity examined by scholars from a range of disciplines,⁷ so far none have focused on the Friendship Bridge as anything more than a physical structure linking two riverbanks. In this study, I consider it as a site that not only fulfils its functional purpose, but also possesses a kind of lived presence – one that interacts with residents and shapes their local identity.

Thus, I regard the Friendship Bridge not only as a ghost in its own right but also as a host to a cluster of ghosts, some symbolizing division, others unity. The ghosts, in turn, allow for encounters with those no longer present.⁸ The ghost is not just a metaphor: it reveals itself in spaces marked by loss, trauma, and historical tensions – where memory has been repressed, unprocessed, or deliberately silenced⁹ – as is the case in Cieszyn, a town split in two. Once a shared home for communities living together for centuries, the division of Cieszyn in 1920 placed some of its residents in one country, and others in another, creating a fissure, through which ghosts emerge.

However, these ghosts do not remain passive. Following the theory of hauntology, they haunt in pursuit of justice or, at the very least, answers.¹⁰ These ghosts are thus embedded in everyday life, even if their presence is not always fully acknowledged by the inhabitants.¹¹ They have learned to coexist with them,

⁷ Jan Kajfosz, “Asymilacja na Śląsku Cieszyńskim jako gra z pamięcią (analiza perspektyw badawczych),” in *Tożsamość etniczna i kulturowa Śląska w procesie przemian*, ed. Halina Zofia Rusek and Anna Wiesława Drożdż (Wrocław: Polskie Towarzystwo Ludoznawcze, 2009), 353–367; Mácha, “The Symbolic Power of Place Names,” 169–184; Radosław Zenderowski, “Stosunki między mieszkańcami miast podzielonych granicą państwową na przykładzie Cieszyna i Czeskiego Cieszyna (Český Těšín). Studium socjologiczne,” *Studia regionalne i lokalne* 3, no. 8 (2002): 49–78; Bogusław Dziadzia, “Cieszyńska wspólnota kulturalna i ciężar niewidzialnej granicy,” *Cieszyński Almanach Pedagogiczny* 6 (2019): 20–27; Radosław Zenderowski, “‘Nikdo nic neví,’ czyli krótka historia czeskokcieszyńskiego słupa granicznego,” *Wschodnioznawstwo* 15 (2021): 113–137; Studnicki, Grzegorz, “‘Nasz orzeł jest biały czy złoty?’ O sporach wokół upamiętnienia i promocji Księstwa Cieszyńskiego,” *Prace Etnograficzne* 50, no. 1 (2022): 117–136, <https://doi.org/10.4467/22999558.PE.22.007.17635>.

⁸ Colin Sterling, “Becoming Hauntologists: A New Model for Critical-Creative Heritage Practice,” *Heritage & Society* 14, no. 1 (2021), 72, doi:10.1080/2159032X.2021.2016049.

⁹ Pilar Blanco and Peeren, *The Spectralities Reader*, 11–15.

¹⁰ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, xviii–xx.; Pilar Blanco and Peeren, *The Spectralities Reader*, 9.

¹¹ Karolina Ćwiek-Rogalska, “‘It’s scary here’: Haunted landscape as a research tool to look into post-expulsion landscapes,” *Polish Journal of Landscape Studies* 3, no. 6 (2020), 27–47, <https://doi.org/10.4467/22999558.PE.22.007.17635>.

though there are moments when they are unsure how to respond to their calls, as I will explore further below.

On the one hand, a ghost can be perceived as a disturbing or oppressive phenomenon. On the other, it holds the potential as a “figure of clarification,”¹² enabling the reinterpretation of the past and a deeper understanding of previously marginalized or repressed experiences. Ghosts can therefore help to illuminate the social and emotional consequences of the division of Cieszyn, bringing to light issues that have long remained in the shadows. As literary scholar Carla Freccero argues, to speak about society is also to speak about ghosts,¹³ as listening to their voices can foster a more profound understanding of both past and contemporary social relations. Analyzing the ghosts of the Friendship Bridge and the transformation of the bridge’s symbolic role over time offers insight into the lives of local inhabitants: their everyday experiences, local interests, and entanglement in broader historical processes. In doing so, it reveals the significance of the bridge as an integral part of the local identity of Cieszyn Silesia.

The primary method I employ is discourse analysis. Although I was born, raised and have spent nearly my entire life in Český Těšín, participating in a project dedicated to “tracing” the ghosts of the past¹⁴ prompted me to take a closer look at the Friendship Bridge and notice the events associated with it. This deep-rooted connection to the place allows me not only to identify key and illustrative moments in local history that have become important to the community, but also to grasp their multidimensional meanings.¹⁵ In turn, it allows me to approach these events not only as a researcher, but also as a contributor to local identity. On the other hand, conducting autoethnography requires openness to a variety of narratives, including those that contradict my own. I am aware that certain themes may hold greater significance for me than for residents who have had – or wish to have – no connection with the Polish side of the city (or vice versa), and who may therefore perceive some

.org/10.14746/pls.2020.6. See also Karina Hoření, “Stories of Justification – Stories of Absolution: How Families in Liberec Came to Terms with Post-Displacement Heritage,” *Český lid* 111, no. 2 (2024): 147–172, <https://doi.org/10.21104/CL.2024.2.01>.

¹² Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 75.

¹³ Pilar Blanco and Peeren, ed., *The Spectralities Reader*, 337.

¹⁴ ERC project “Recycling the German Ghosts. Resettlement Cultures in Poland, Czechia and Slovakia after 1945” (ERC, Spectral Recycling, 101041946).

¹⁵ Ellis Carolyn, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, “Autoethnography: An Overview,” *Forum. Qualitative Sozialforschung. Qualitative Social Research* 12, no. 1 (January 2011), <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-12.1.1589>; Esther R. Anderson, “Positionality, privilege, and possibility: The ethnographer ‘at home’ as an uncomfortable insider,” *Anthropology and Humanism* 46, no. 2 (2021): 212–225, <https://doi.org/10.1111/anhu.12326>.

events differently. As someone who quite literally inhabits the border, many of the voices I draw on belong to relatives, friends, and neighbors who have lived in or around Cieszyn for years. Most of my interlocutors live on the Czech side, though some are based on the Polish side. However, all of them, like me, have connections with Poland or the Polish community on the Czech side, and therefore represent only a fragment of the local society. These conversations were conducted informally, often during casual meetings or walks. My position as a member of the community under study enabled me to gain a deeper understanding of the interviewees' cultural background, but also to convey the original tone of their statements.¹⁶ In the article, I distinguish between the memory of my family and neighbors. When this information is omitted, I instead attribute it to collective local memory as reflected in the local press or official memory contained in scholar publications.

Furthermore, I use family archives for analysis and reflect on personal memories from childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, analyzing them and placing them in dialogue with the narratives of others or memory contained in media. Throughout the text, I disclose my own perspective on the bridge: one that literally has evolved before my eyes. My family home is approximately one hundred meters from the Olza River; thus, the bridge has played a significant role in my life since childhood, leaving me with numerous memories. As a child, I would ask my mother why we were queuing in front of the border booth, waiting for customs officers to inspect our passports. She explained that the Polish town of Cieszyn was in another country, and that the river and the bridge marked the border. At the time, I could not grasp the concept that just a few meters away is a different state. For me, the two towns were one, merely divided, and crossing the border was entirely an everyday occurrence. I made no distinction between which side of the town I went to for shopping or to attend mass. It was normal to go to kindergarten on the Czech side or, as we used to say at home, "to Poland for meat [to buy] on Sunday."

In addition, I draw on visual sources and information published in digital news media, particularly Polish and Czech local dailies, weeklies, and monthlies such as *Cieszyn Nasze Miasto*, *OX.pl*, *Wyborcza Bielsko-Biała*, *Zwrot*, *Głos*,¹⁷ *Havířovský deník*, *AVIONoviny*, *Novinky.cz*, *iDnes.cz*, *Beskidzka24.pl*. I selected these sources based on their relevance to the bridge and the events associated

¹⁶ Wiktoria Kudela-Świątek, "Niežnośny ciężar przekazu czyli o przekładzie źródeł mówionych w badaniach oral history," *Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej* 2 (2012): 19–20, <https://doi.org/10.26774/wrhm.26>.

¹⁷ In two cases, I also consulted the print editions of newspapers.

with it. The time frame extended from the late 2000s (particularly from 2007) up to 2023. However, I frequently also refer to contemporary articles describing past events, for instance, in the context of anniversaries. In searching for relevant materials, I used specific keywords that enabled me to locate the texts of interest. I drew upon these sources whenever I wanted to supplement an interviewee's account or compare it with the narrative presented in the published material.

Before analyzing specific events, I would like to clarify a recurring term in this text. "Polish side" refers to the town of Cieszyn in Poland, while "Czech side" denotes Český Těšín in Czechia: formerly one town, now divided. This naming convention, quickly adopted by Czech-side residents, is also seen in other divided towns, such as Zgorzelec and Görlitz.¹⁸ When I refer simply to Cieszyn, I mean the unified town as it existed before the 1920 division.

The Divided Town

During the post-World War I reorganization of Europe's borders, Cieszyn – situated in a borderland and economically prosperous region – became a contested area between the newly established Poland and Czechoslovakia.¹⁹ The population of Cieszyn was ethnically diverse, and one of Poland's key arguments for annexation was the significant number of people presented as of Polish nationality in Zaolzie, a region of Cieszyn Silesia that is now part of Czechia.²⁰ Following protracted negotiations, violent incidents such as the 1919 invasion of the Cieszyn area by the Czechoslovak army,²¹ as well as riots, strikes, and mutual

¹⁸ Aleksandra Galasińska, Craig Rollo, and Ulrike H. Meinhof, "Urban space and the construction of identity on the German-Polish border," in *Living (with) borders*, ed. Ulrike Hanna Meinhof (London: Routledge, 2002), 123–125, doi: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315190037>.

¹⁹ In the article, I most frequently use terms referring to "Czech," "Czech authorities," or the "Czech side," even though until 1993, the Czech lands were part of the state of Czechoslovakia. The use of this simplified form stems from the historical context – the region of Cieszyn Silesia has been under the authority of the Bohemian Crown since the fourteenth century. Therefore, to maintain narrative consistency and highlight historical continuity, I use the term "Czech" rather than "Czechoslovak."

²⁰ Zbyšek Ondřejka, "Vznik Československa na Těšínsku," *Těšínské listy: Těšínské toulky minulosti*, August 2018, 2–3.

²¹ Dan Gawrecki, "Těšínsko v letech 1918–1920 a politické okolnosti vzniku města Český Těšín," in *Český Těšín 1920–1989: vznik a výstavba města v meziválečném období*, ed. Zdeněk Jirásek (Opava: Slezská univerzita v Opavě, 2011), 23; Grzegorz Gąsior, *Polityka narodowościowa państwa na czechosłowackim Śląsku Cieszyńskim w latach 1920–1938* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2020), 7–29; Michał Przeperski, *Nieznosny ciężar braterstwa. Konflikty polsko-czeskie w XX wieku* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2016), 168–180; Krzysztof Nowak, "Pol-

hostilities, in 1920 the Council of Ambassadors in Paris decided to divide Cieszyn Silesia, using the Olza River as one of the border markers.²² Geographically, the area was split roughly in half: Poland received 44% (1002 km²), and Czechoslovakia 56% (1280 km²). However, key industrial centers, a mining basin, and a railway remained on the Czech side. Thus, while Poland got the historically oldest part of the town as well as the administrative center, the Czech side was compelled to construct its own administrative infrastructure within a short time-frame.²³ Moreover, a substantial population identifying as Polish remained on the Czech side.

Between 1920 and 1954, the history of Cieszyn Silesia and the bridge was marked by political complexity and local tensions.²⁴ The division of the region was met with resistance from many inhabitants, leading to ongoing clashes. Processes of Bohemization and Polonization occurred alternately or concurrently, often accompanied by conflicts and mutual intimidations.²⁵ Tensions reached a peak in 1938, when Polish troops entered the Czech side, officially claiming to “recover”²⁶ Poles who had remained there after the 1920 division.²⁷ This situation was, however, short-lived, as World War II soon altered the region’s geopolitical reality. Cieszyn Silesia was incorporated into the Third Reich,²⁸ and the

sko-czechosłowacki konflikt graniczny 1918–1920,” in *Dzieje Śląska Cieszyńskiego od zarania do czasów współczesnych*, vol. 6, ed. Idzi Panic (Cieszyn: Starostwo Powiatowe w Cieszynie, 2015), 38–45.

²² Gąsior, *Polityka narodowościowa państwa*, 16–17; Nowak, “Polsko-czechosłowacki konflikt,” 64; Ondřejka, “Vznik Československa na Těšínsku,” 2–3; Przeperski, *Nieznośny ciężar braterstwa*, 196–206.

²³ Jacek Kurczewski and Halina Rusek, “Życie obywatelskie po obu stronach Olzy,” in *Transgraniczność w perspektywie socjologicznej: pogranicza Polski w integrującej się Europie*, ed. Maria Zielińska, Beata Trzop, and Krzysztof Lisowski (Zielona Góra: Lubuskie Towarzystwo Naukowe, 2007), 268–270; Ondřejka, “Vznik Československa na Těšínsku,” 3; Lenka Nováková, “Budova českotěšínské radnice má 90 let, sloužila i jako šatlavna nebo knihovna,” *Těšínské listy: Těšínské toulky minulosti*, August 2018, 6–7; Pavel Šopák, “Fenomén urbanizace a architektonický rozvoj Č. Těšína v kontextu budování ČSR v letech 1918–1938,” in *Český Těšín 1920–1989: vznik a výstavba města v meziválečném období*, ed. Zdeněk Jirásek (Opava: Slezská univerzita v Opavě, 2011), 65–71.

²⁴ Zenderowski, “Stosunki między mieszkańcami,” 50.

²⁵ Przeperski, *Nieznośny ciężar braterstwa*, 207–263.

²⁶ I follow the notion of “recovery” as disputed in Karolina Ćwiek-Rogalska, “When the Mnemonic Actors Become Storytellers: The Lore of the ‘Recovery’ in 1970s Poland,” *Acta Poloniae Historica* 128 (2023): 181–204, <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/APH.2023.128.08>.

²⁷ Krzysztof Nowak, “Okres międzywojenny w Polsce (1920–1939). Życie polityczne i społeczne” in Panic, *Dzieje Śląska Cieszyńskiego*, vol. 6, 77–124; Przeperski, *Nieznośny ciężar braterstwa*, 277–311.

²⁸ Kurczewski and Rusek, “Życie obywatelskie,” 270–271; Krzysztof Nowak, “Okres II wojny światowej,” in Panic, *Dzieje Śląska Cieszyńskiego*, vol. 6, 433–480; Grzegorz Gąsior, “Obecność Po-

bridge was destroyed twice. First, by the retreating Polish army in September 1939. Rebuilt by the Germans in 1941²⁹ it was destroyed again by the retreating German army in 1945. After the war, only a temporary bridge was erected, which was later destroyed by an ice floe. A permanent reconstruction began in 1950 and was completed in 1954, when the bridge was officially named the Friendship Bridge [*Most Przyjaźni* in Polish, *Most Družby* in Czech].

Negative Emotions: Bridge as a Guarded Gate

What functions did the bridge serve from its construction in 1954 until the collapse of the socialist system in 1989? In my mother's recollections, the river often appeared as a border. From the 1960s, she lived with her parents in the house where I now reside, located almost directly on the banks of the Olza River. She crossed the bridge only in private, usually accompanied by her parents, due to her young age. She used to tell us that we should be grateful to wade in the Olza during summer, recalling how, in her childhood during the 1970s, warning shots would be fired into the air whenever someone approached the riverbank. When I once asked whether the border guards on the other side would have actually shot her had she entered the water, she answered hesitantly: probably not – but she could never be certain, as she had never dared to try. What lingered in her memory was a common method of maintaining border “order,”³⁰ as I discovered over the years. At the time it was the Border Protection Forces [*Wojsko Ochrony Pogranicza*] to detain people found lingering near the border. They could have been detained for several weeks, without notifying their families.³¹

My mother also recalled significant family events when she, her parents, and sister would go shopping at the market located on the Polish side of the town. On such occasions, she would wear her oldest and most worn-out trousers and cross the bridge with her family using a special permit, which I will discuss later. After buying new trousers, she would leave the old ones at the home of her parents' friends on the Polish side and return to Czechoslovakia

laków na Zaozliu w ujęciu historycznym i współczesnym,” in *Opinie i Ekspertyzy. Biuro Analiz i Dokumentacji. Zespół Analiz i Opracowań Tematycznych* (Warszawa: Kancelaria Senatu, October 2016), 8; Przeperski, *Nieznosny ciężar braterstwa*, 335–337.

²⁹ Havlíková, “Historie těšínských mostů,” 22.

³⁰ Hastings Donnan and Thomas M. Wilson, *Borders: Frontiers of Identity, Nation and State* (London: Routledge, 2021).

³¹ Krzysztof Nowak, *Śląsk Cieszyński w latach 1945–2015* (Cieszyn: Starostwo Powiatowe w Cieszynie, 2015), 73.

already wearing a new pair. She particularly remembers one instance when she managed to buy corduroy trousers, of which she was especially proud. As she explained, better-quality goods were generally available on the Polish side, and they could be accessed more easily than in Czechoslovakia. But why was this the case? She could not carry the new trousers across the border openly, as doing so was forbidden. She believed this restriction was likely related to customs regulations, although she did not know the exact rationale. When I asked my grandmother, she too could not recall the specific reason, but emphasized that border checks were always strict. This illustrates how some of the inhabitants of Cieszyn had adapted to life at the border, accepting restrictions such as prohibition on carrying goods across, without necessarily understanding the underlying rules.

During the communist period, only a limited number of Cieszyn residents were permitted to cross the border. In 1960, the Local Border Traffic Convention [*Konwencja o małym ruchu granicznym*] came into force,³² remaining in effect until its abolition in 1996. The convention allowed individuals living within a designated local border traffic zone – 15 kilometers wide on each side of the border – to cross under specific conditions. Although enforcement of the convention relaxed somewhat after the fall of the regime in 1989, prior to that, crossing the border required either a permanent or temporary pass. These passes varied not only in duration but also in the nature of the holder's connection to the other side and the permitted length of stay.³³ To qualify, one typically had to demonstrate a strong tie to the other side, such as employment, family relations, or ownership of property. My great-grandmother, for example, owned a garden in Bobrek (a district of the Polish town of Cieszyn), which allowed her to obtain an agricultural pass for the entire family. At the border, it was necessary to present both the pass and an official identity document with a photograph. Officially, my mother and her parents crossed to tend the garden, but in practice, they also used the opportunity for shopping or attending religion-related events such as pre-communion lessons. Thus, border guards would sometimes mockingly ask where her rake or shovel was. They likely suspected the true purpose of the trip but refrained from asking directly.

³² Ibid., 74.

³³ *Dziennik Ustaw* 1960, no. 27, item 153.

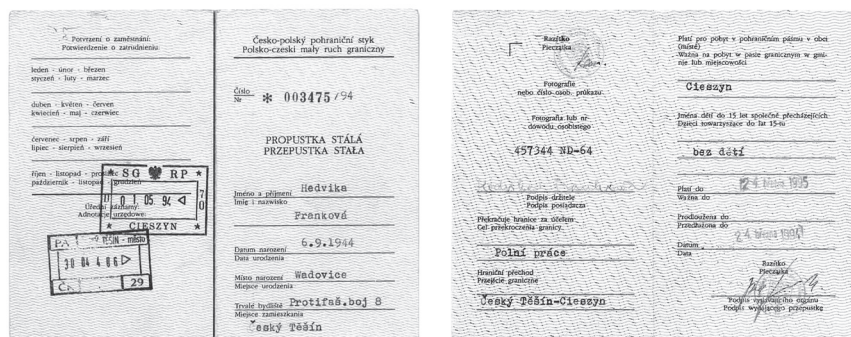


Figure 1: Permanent agricultural pass, 1994–1995. Photograph from Magdalena Bubík’s family archive.

Thus, for some inhabitants, the bridge functioned as a gateway between two worlds – one that was usually closed and monitored by state authorities. It offered access to a different, and in some cases perceived as better, reality.³⁴ Yet this gate was encircled by restrictions, and one could pass through it only with official permission. Crossing the border always entailed a degree of risk, as there was no guarantee that customs officers would allow entry.³⁵ One had to be especially cautious to return in the same way as one had entered: without having acquired any goods, as illustrated in the example of the trousers. My grandmother recalled this particularly vividly because, on one occasion, she was subjected to an invasive search by a customs officer and was left standing in her underwear, which had also been thoroughly inspected. Neither a valid pass nor assurances of innocence could prevent such treatment. In this tightly controlled space – spanning only a few dozen meters – customs officers acted as sovereigns in their own realm, exercising discretion over whether a person, even one with proper documentation, would be allowed entry or exit.³⁶ While customs officials were

³⁴ Galasińska et al. also write about seeing the other side of a town in another country as better. See Galasińska, Rollo, and Meinhof, “Urban space,” 125–127.

³⁵ Nowak, *Śląsk Cieszyński*, 73; Brenda Chalfin, “Sovereigns and citizens in close encounter: Airport anthropology and customs regimes in neoliberal Ghana,” *American ethnologist* 35, no. 4 (November 2008): 519–538, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2008.00096.x>; Shahram Khosravi, “The ‘illegal’ traveller: an auto-ethnography of borders,” *Social anthropology/Anthropologie sociale* 15, no. 3 (2007): 321–334, doi:10.1111/j.0964-0282.2007.00019.x; Yarin Eski, *Policing, port security and crime control: An ethnography of the port securityscape* (London: Routledge, 2016); Zende-rowski, “Stosunki między mieszkańcami,” 50.

³⁶ Nowak, *Śląsk Cieszyński*, 74; Jakub Grygar, *Děvušky a cigarety. O hranicích, migraci a moci* (Praha: SLON, 2016).

formally acting under the mandates of state institutions, their relative isolation from central authorities meant that, in practice, they often exercised autonomous power, effectively governing the border zone themselves.

There were a few moments in the history of Cieszyns when the metaphorical gate between them opened more widely. One such instance occurred during the celebrations marking the millennium of Poland's existence in 1966.³⁷ Cieszyn hosted a series of commemorative events on both sides of the Olza River, and, for this occasion, the border between the two towns was opened on 14–15 May.³⁸ For a brief moment, the bridge fulfilled its symbolic role, i.e. connecting two nations. This moment of openness was commemorated by the planting of a linden tree symbolizing Czechoslovak-Polish friendship, carried out by Edward Gierek – later the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party – on 14 May 1966, on the Czech side below the Czechoslovak theatre. However, just two years later, the fragile friendship between Poland and Czechoslovakia would be severely undermined.

It happened in 1968 and the bridge became a symbol of the loss of hope for a better future. In 1968, Alexander Dubček was appointed First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia and initiated a series of reforms that marked a period of liberalization known as the Prague Spring.³⁹ These developments provoked a strong reaction from the USSR, which decided to intervene militarily.⁴⁰ It was via the Friendship Bridge, among other routes, that Warsaw Pact tanks and troops entered Czechoslovakia to suppress Dubček's overly progressive agenda. This dark chapter is captured in the photograph below (Figure 2), where people stand not only on the sidewalks but also in the roadway, seemingly attempting to block the tanks entering Český Těšín. The expressions of protest are visible: clenched fists raised at the tanks, and posters held by demonstrators. One poster features two inscriptions: one in French, "Au plaisir de vous revoir" ["Looking forward to seeing you again"], and another in English, "Till we meet again." These phrases reflect both a longing for reunion

³⁷ Anita Młynarczyk-Tomczyk, *W kregu polityki, nauki i popularyzacji. Obchody „Polskiego Tysiąclecia” 1957–1966/67* (Kielce: Uniwersytet Jana Kochanowskiego, 2019).

³⁸ Renata Putzlacher-Buchtová, *V kavárně Avion, která není* (Český Těšín: Spolek-Towarzystwo Avion, 2016), 86.

³⁹ Michael Hauser, "Pražské jaro 1968 jako progresivní konstrukce národní identity," *Paideia: Philosophical e-journal of Charles University* 16, no. 1–2 (Spring 2019); Stanislav Sikora, "Alexander Dubček, nejznámější slovenský politik," *Soudobé dějiny* 25, no. 3–4 (2018): 377–390; Francesco Leoncini, "Alexander Dubček, muž nádeje v 20. století," *Politické vědy* 17, no. 1 (2014): 178–185.

⁴⁰ Milan Čierny, "Český Těšín – průběh srpnových událostí roku 1968," *Těšínské listy. Těšínské toulky minulostí*, August 2018, 27–29.

and a belief that better times will return. Although the image is too unclear to decipher all details, a chalk inscription on the pavement likely bears the name of Alexander Dubček, suggesting local support for his vision of “socialism with a human face.” This moment stands in stark contrast to the bridge’s symbolic name – there are no flowers, no applause. Instead, the Friendship Bridge becomes a site of silent resistance and dashed hope.



Figure 2: Tanks entering Český Těšín via the border bridge over the Olza River. Photograph courtesy of Muzeum Těšínska, Český Těšín, collection Fotografie, item no. F 10184. Reproduced with permission.

The political situation within the two Soviet satellite states once again profoundly affected the inhabitants of Cieszyns more than a decade later. Prior to the declaration of martial law in Poland, Czechoslovak authorities, concerned about the foreign influence of the Polish Solidarity movement, decided on 7 December 1981 to unilaterally close the border with the Polish People’s Republic to private movement.⁴¹ This action was intended to further isolate Czechoslovakia and limit any contact with Polish opposition. For the

⁴¹ Nowak, *Śląsk Cieszyński*, 75, 290–291; Zenderowski, “Stosunki między mieszkańcami,” 51–52.

people of Cieszyn, however, it meant an even greater restriction of contact with their neighbors across the Olza River. The issuance of border passes was further limited, and customs officers frequently required a certified invitation from people on the other side who were in close relations with the person seeking entry.⁴² For residents of Cieszyn without close connections to the other side, this meant that the bridge was effectively closed for the next 10 years. The few who managed to obtain passes were required to communicate with relatives or friends on the other side of the river to request an invitation. For them, the bridge thus became an even narrower passage, one that could only be crossed with careful calculation and persistence.

The Grand Opening

After the collapse of the communist regime in 1989, the bridge was reopened, but it was still not a completely unrestricted passage. Officially, the convention on passes remained in effect until 1996. However, in 1991, a law was enacted that allowed individuals to cross the border using their passports only.⁴³ Despite this, some residents continued to use passes, which, as my mother notes, may have been a more secure and faster way to cross the border. The pass was a familiar item to the customs officers, so it is possible that those holding it faced fewer difficulties at the border compared to those using a passport.

The Friendship Bridge became a place where residents from both Cieszyns regularly crossed the geographical border separating the two countries. Therefore, the passport was one of the indispensable items for people living near the border.⁴⁴ Over the bridge was a rusty metal roof, installed in 1987 to protect guards from the rain and, perhaps more significantly, to facilitate inspections of large vehicles. The structure allowed guards to climb up and examine luggage more closely, but in practice, it obscured much of the surroundings.⁴⁵

⁴² Jan Rychlík, "Severní hranice Čech a pohraniční styk se Saskem a Pruskem, resp. Polskem," in *Život na československých hranicích a jejich překračování v letech 1945–1989*, ed. Kateřina Lozovíková and Jaroslav Pažout (Liberec, Praha: TUL, ÚSTR, 2017), 100–102; Anna Szczepańska-Dużiak, "Regaining Trust: The Work of Communist Poland's Foreign Service in Czechoslovakia in the 1980s," *Slovanský přehled* 106, no. 1 (2020): 106.

⁴³ *Sbírka zákonů*, no. 322/1991.

⁴⁴ *Dziennik Ustaw* 1996, no. 46, item 207.

⁴⁵ A vivid illustration of this atmosphere can be seen in the photograph "Hraniční přechod Č. Těšín – Cieszyn" by Renata Kotalová. See projekt Doménová koule, tourism.cz, <http://tourism.cz/encyklopedie/objekty1.php?id=49807> (accessed August 27, 2025).

Customs officers remained stationed at the bridge, but their autonomy was significantly reduced, with their decisions becoming more subject to central regulations and guidelines. Nevertheless, they continued to wield considerable power. As my neighbor observes, “once upon a time, a customs officer was a master.” They were responsible for maintaining order and reminding individuals that they were entering another country. This is particularly remembered by the same neighbor, who was born on the Polish side and later married her husband on the Czech side. She recalls a time of dating, crossing the border, and waiting in long queues that stretched endlessly across the bridge, with a line of people shuffling from foot to foot. She told me she nearly missed her wedding due to border control. Today, she laughs at the memory of herself standing on the bridge with her passport in hand, remarking, “You had to stand your ground.” This illustrates how crossing the border was still regarded as a privilege, beyond the reach of the general population. Every attempt to cross was associated with a certain “cost”: in this case, the time spent waiting in long queues at border crossings. The waiting time was the same for everyone, regardless of whether one was shopping or attending church for a wedding.

Customs officers were also vigilant for illegal smuggling, and attempts to smuggle were not uncommon. Depending on their diligence and ambition, they occasionally found the hidden goods, while at other times, they either overlooked or chose not to notice them.⁴⁶ The success of these smuggling attempts also often depended on the smuggler’s [*przemytnik* in Polish, or *pašerák* in Czech] connections with the customs guards. Opportunities to make extra money were created for smuggling purposes.⁴⁷ There was a group of so-called “ants” [*mrówki* in Polish and Czech], individuals who made it their business to carry goods from one side to the other concealed beneath their coats.⁴⁸ My father recalled seeing lorries parked, from which men would emerge, sometimes with as many as a hundred eggs hidden under their coats. As my neighbor recalls, “literally everything was being smuggled.” Such activities were risky and required a high

⁴⁶ Claire Wallace, Oksana Shmulyar, and Vasil Bedsi, “Investing in Social Capital: The Case of Small-Scale, Cross-Border Traders in Post-Communist Central Europe,” *International Journal of Urban & Regional Research* 23, no. 4 (December 1999): 760–761, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-2427.00226>.

⁴⁷ Zenderowski, “Stosunki między mieszkańcami,” 57.

⁴⁸ The activities of “ants” on the Polish-Ukrainian border are described by Sławomir Solecki, “Cienna strona granicy: aktywność zarobkowa ‘mrówek’ w regionie zagrożonym strukturalnym bezrobociem. Przypadek Podkarpacia” in *Transgraniczność w perspektywie socjologicznej: pogranicza Polski w integrującej się Europie*, ed. Maria Zielińska, Beata Trzop, and Krzysztof Lisowski (Zielona Góra: Lubuskie Towarzystwo Naukowe, 2007), 295–312.

level of trust among participants.⁴⁹ The individuals responsible for transporting goods, as well as the “ant team,” were often in contact with the local customs officers, who were compensated for turning a blind eye to these activities.⁵⁰ The interrelationships between specific social groups in Cieszyn are thus evident, particularly the relationship between smugglers, smuggling organizers, and customs officers. The effectiveness of these operations required the smugglers not only to cooperate closely, but also to incur certain costs, in the form of a share of the profits, as an informal payment enabling them to successfully cross the border and avoid the confiscation of goods.

After 1989, the bridge had become a familiar and commonplace feature for the inhabitants, yet, due to the passport requirement, it remained a source of tedium and, at times, frustration. The first signs of change began to emerge in 2004, with the accession of Poland and Czechia to the European Union. In May, a play titled *Těšínské niebo / Cieszyńskie nebe* [Cieszyn Sky] premiered at the Czech-Teshinian Theatre, highlighting the multiculturalism of the town and the broader region.⁵¹ The play depicted Cieszyn as a magical place where there is no division between Polish and Czech identities, as the town is shared and the border is effectively nonexistent.⁵² The title itself reflects this duality, with the first word, *Těšínské*, in Czech, and the second, *niebo*, in Polish, and vice versa. The central theme of the performance was the Cieszyn tram, a symbol of the unified town.

Indeed, the town of Cieszyn once operated a tram line that began and ended on opposite sides of the Olza River. However, in 1921, the municipal authorities decided that the town's division into two parts was a sufficient reason to discontinue it.⁵³ Despite this, the tramline remained a powerful symbol in the collective memory of Cieszyn residents for more than 80 years,⁵⁴ representing

⁴⁹ Wallace, Shmulyar, and Bedsir, “Investing in Social Capital,” 752–753.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 760–761.

⁵¹ This bilingual production brought together actors from both the Polish and Czech stages of the theatre in Český Těšín, as well as Polish-Czech artists: poet and translator Renata Putzlacher (who authored the script and Polish translations of the songs) and singer, poet, and composer Jaromír Nohavica (who wrote the songs). The project was also supported by director and co-writer Radvan Lipus and musical director Tomáš Kočko.

⁵² Mirosława Pindór, “Przestrzeń współbycia. Těšínské niebo Cieszyńskie nebe Těšínského divadla w Českém Těšíně jako międzykulturowa narracja o wielokulturowości miasta/miast,” *Edukacja Międzykulturowa* 4 (2015): 292, <https://doi.org/10.15804/em.2015.17>.

⁵³ Cichá and Dembiniok, *Tramwaj po Těšíně*, 18; Nowak, *Śląsk Cieszyński*, 80; Mirosława Pindór, “Od dworca ‘pod słońce.’ Transgranicznym szlakiem cieszyńskiego tramwaju,” *Zarządzanie w Kulturze* 25, no. 1–2 (2024): 290; Katarzyna Szkaradnik, “Graniczny most (nie) pamięci i kawiarnia pięciu języków. Wokół cieszyńskiej sylwy Renaty Putzlacher,” *Anthropos?* 25 (2016): 88.

⁵⁴ Ireneusz Botor, “Nowe ujęcie nadgraniczności Cieszyna do wykorzystania” in *Sztuka w przestrzeni publicznej: artystyczne wymiary wytwarzania kapitału społecznego i kulturowego*, ed. Bogusław

both the modernity and a connection to the past.⁵⁵ For many, the tram embodied the town's rich yet complex history as a multicultural crossroads. Paradoxically, then, it symbolized both division and unity: two forces that have continuously shaped the identity of Cieszyn over the past century.

During the performance-related activities, both the bridge and the tram became integral components of a symbolic act of reconciliation and unity. A few months after the premiere of the play, a CD featuring songs from it was ceremonially "christened" – a term which in Czech refers not only to the Christian act of introducing a child into the community, but also to the act of releasing a record or a book into public circulation. A mock-up of the Cieszyn tram, featured in the performance, was brought to the Friendship Bridge, where the baptism ritual was enacted a few meters downstream in the Olza River. The CD was jointly dipped into the water by customs officers from both sides of Cieszyn, accompanied by Czech-Teshinian artists and local residents.⁵⁶ In this moment, the bridge and the tram, two enduring symbols of Cieszyn's interconnection, appeared as ghosts, whose forms and meanings have shifted over time. The tram, absent from Cieszyn for nearly a century, returned in the form of a model. The bridge, reconstructed in 1954, has remained physically present but has continuously redefined its symbolic and practical functions. These two ghosts were united in this performative act, embodying a shared vision and collaborative effort between the Polish and Czech communities of Cieszyn. This moment left a lasting impression on some residents, for whom the words of the performance's song resonated deeply for years to follow: "The gates are wide open / Merciful time has healed the wounds / After a long night the morning is coming."

The long-awaited unification arrived at the turn of 2007 and 2008, when – after years of negotiations and preparations – Poland and Czechia formally joined the Schengen Area. This meant that after 87 years border controls were abolished. On 21 December 2007, citizens from both sides of the town gathered on the Friendship Bridge, raising glasses of champagne in celebration of what many perceived as the symbolic reunification of the two cities. Actors from the Czech-Teshinian Theatre brought props from the earlier spectacle about the Cieszyn tram. Precisely at midnight, the municipal authorities of both Cieszyns symbolically cut through the border barrier – a gesture captured in the photograph below (Figure 3). The largest fragment of the barrier was donated to the

Dziadzia, Barbara Głyda-Żydek, and Sabina Piskorek-Oczko (Bielsko-Biała – Cieszyn, Fundacja Animacji Społeczno-Kulturalnej, 2015), 218–219.

⁵⁵ Pindór, "Od dworca," 287.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 291–292, 140.

collection of the Museum of Cieszyn Silesia in Polish Cieszyn. Residents stood in front of the guards' booths to have their passports stamped for the last time in their lives. Interestingly, passport control, i.e. an activity previously regarded as tedious and meaningless had taken on the character of a border game, and some individuals wished to play it one last time. They sought a souvenir that would remind them of a different era. As if they wanted to preserve an imprint of the past – they wanted to capture in their passport the ghosts of Cieszyn division, when passage to the other side was granted only under specific conditions. At



Figure 3: Cieszyn mayors Vít Slováček (Český Těšín) and Bogdan Ficik (Cieszyn) cross the symbolic border barrier. Tomáš Januszek, “Konec hranice vítaly v Těšíně stovky lidí,” *Karvinský a Havířovský deník*, December 21, 2007, https://karvinsky.denik.cz/zpravy_region/tesin_hranice20071221.html. Photograph courtesy of Vltava Labe Media. Reproduced with permission.

last, the bridge regained its symbolic function as a connector – it could once again serve as the link between the two sides of Cieszyn.

The bridge had transformed from a guarded gateway accessible to few into an integral part of everyday life and the shared existence of the two cities. As

well, it became a subject to urban revitalization projects. With the cessation of border controls, the canopy that once covered the bridge was no longer necessary and was dismantled. It was only after all the scaffolding and metal structures had been removed when I realized how much they had obscured. Only then – walking across the bridge with my mother – were we able to fully admire the view. It was only at that moment that the bridge revealed its aesthetically pleasing character.

In 2009–2010, a decision was made to renovate the bridge and reconstruct the café that had operated just beyond it on the Czech side during the interwar period. This venue had once served as a local meeting point, where conversations over coffee were held in the Cieszyn dialect – known as *po naszymu*⁵⁷ – as well as in Yiddish.⁵⁸ Based on archival photographs, local architects designed the café and it was rebuilt. It was named *Noiva*, a reversal of its original name, *Avion*, which had since been adopted by another eatery.⁵⁹ The project's creators opted for this inversion, allowing visitors to see the original name mirrored in the café's transparent window glass while enjoying their coffee. As noted on the café's website, this mirrored reading also references the pre-war Jewish restaurateur Rosalia Wiesner, suggesting that the name should be read in Hebrew – from right to left.⁶⁰ Today, the café operates under both names: *Avion* and *Noiva*.

The café also features depictions of characters associated with Cieszyn, originally used in the play *Těšínské niebo / Cieszyńskie nebe* – including the last customs officer, and the smuggler Ant. The creators referred to them as *těšínské postavičky*, i.e. Cieszyn characters, attributing to them the qualities of archetypal Cieszyn figures. It proves that the customs officer and the smuggler have been absorbed into the symbolic landscape of the town, becoming part of its legends and narratives. No longer perceived as representatives of a harsh reality, the customs officer and the smuggler have receded into a past that is increasingly interpreted through the lens of stylized or mythologized storytelling (Figure 4).

⁵⁷ Kamil Czaiński, "Ponašymu – mieszany kod językowy czeskiego Śląska Cieszyńskiego," *Adeptus* 14 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.11649/a.1974>.

⁵⁸ Szkaradnik, "Graniczny most," 89.

⁵⁹ Nowak, *Śląsk Cieszyński*, 578.

⁶⁰ "O Avionu: Historie a současnost," Městská knihovna Český Těšín, <https://www.knihovnatesin.cz/historie%2Da%2Dsoucasnost/ds-1045/p1=1013>.



Figure 4: A figurine symbolizing a customs officer and a smuggler in one of the cubicle of the Avion / Noiva café, in the background the Friendship Bridge and a tram. Photograph by Magdalena Bubík, 2024.

Together or Apart: Cieszyns after 2007

During the 2010 renovation of the bridge, a luminous line was installed along its midpoint, precisely marking the state border as it follows the course of the river. This glowing line extended the entire length of the bridge and was accompanied by the names of the two countries, symbolizing the boundary. Furthermore, additional signs were placed there, indicating entry into the territory of the other country (Figure 5).

The site is now frequently visited by tourists, who diligently take photographs of themselves in various poses with the border sign in the background. Based on my observations, the most common are Poles posing with Český Těšín behind them. Locals have become accustomed to this tourist attraction and, without hesitation, often walk in a wide arc around groups of visitors so as not to disturb their creation of this border-themed souvenir. The border line, originally



Figure 5: The border line on the Friendship Bridge, in the background the Avion / Noiva café. Photograph by Magdalena Bubík, 2025.

intended to commemorate the difficult history of Cieszyn's division, has evolved into not only a popular tourist destination, but also a space where the past meets the present and enters into dialogue with it.

Through its visible presence, the border line compels local people to engage with it, even if only by navigating around it, serving as a constant reminder of the historical divide. Thus, the residents are encountering the ghost that haunts this place. While some may not remember – or may prefer not to remember – the past, the ghost, in the form of a line, insists on being acknowledged: through its illumination, its symbolic placement, and the presence of tourists photographing it. It may be circumvented, as most residents now habitually do, but it is certainly difficult, even on a subconscious level, to ignore it. It imposes specific patterns of movement and behavior on passersby.

The guarding of the bridge by customs officers has become not only outdated but also unrealistic to the residents of Cieszyn. Of the border control structures that once stood on the bridge, only the main building remains. This structure

was initially repurposed for cultural events. However, over time, plans emerged to demolish it and redevelop the site. A 2021 project proposed dismantling the building to make way for a tourist information center, adjacent to which a tram replica was to be installed. The final stage of the project involved marking the former tram stops in both towns. The tram is intended to once again serve as a symbol of the unity between the two Cieszyns. Moreover, it is planned to be situated directly on the Friendship Bridge, reinforcing its role as a connector and a symbol of the relationship that links the two cities on either side of the Olza River.⁶¹

This forward-looking perspective is intentional, as I sought to convey the depth of emotion experienced by the residents of Cieszyn following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020. The situation changed rapidly as governments across Europe, including Poland and Czechia, made the decision to close their borders, which also meant the closure of the Friendship Bridge. The consequences of this decision became immediately visible. Military and administrative personnel from both countries assembled on the bridge and set up tents just a few meters apart. The fenced-off bridge and the soldiers' rifles evoked the atmosphere of a military outpost.⁶²

Many residents of Cieszyn remarked that they could not recall such conditions even under the former regime. As I described, the reason was that during the communist period, special passes were issued to individuals with strong ties to the other side of the border. Yet now, even similar reasons were deemed insufficient for crossing. As the reopening of the border was repeatedly postponed, Cieszyn residents organized silent marches on both banks. I personally witnessed residents of Cieszyn and Český Těšín calling out to each other. Banners were displayed expressing longing for loved ones on the other side (Figures 6 and 7).⁶³ Local musicians from both sides also came together to record the song *Dwa brzegi / Dva břehy* [Two Banks], which describes the border gate as a cage and voices hope that the dark period would eventually come to an end.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Botor, "Nowe ujęcie," 218–219; Cichá and Dembiniok, *Tramvají po Těšíně*, 3.

⁶² Ewa Furtak, "Z powodu koronawirusa wróciły kontrole na granicy. W Cieszyń-Boguszowicach ogromna kolejka," *Wyborcza Bielsko-Biała*, March 16, 2020, <https://bielskobiala.wyborcza.pl/bielskobiala/7,88025,25792472,z-powodu-koronawirusa-wracaly-kontrole-na-granicy-w-cieszynie.html>.

⁶³ Hynek Böhm, "Challenges of Pandemic-Related Border Closures for Everyday Lives of Poles and Czechs in the Divided Town of Cieszyn/Český Těšín: Integrated Functional Space or Reemergence of Animosities?" *Nationalities Papers* 50, no. 1 (2022): 137–138, <https://doi.org/10.1017/nps.2021.51>.

⁶⁴ Izabel ft. Bartnický – Dwa břehy (Dwa brzegi), YouTube video, 0:04:16, posted by Izabel, 2020, April 3, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=45uzYKJluA8>.



Figure 6: Inscription on the Polish side – Stýská se mi po Tobě Čechu [I miss you Czech]. Pavel Karban, “Stýská se mi. Lidé na česko-polské hranici vyvěšují dojemné vzkazy,” *Novinky.cz*, March 21, 2020, <https://www.novinky.cz/clanek/koronavirus-styska-se-mi-lide-na-cesko-polske-hranici-vyvesuji-dojemne-vzkazy-40317555>. Photograph courtesy of Borgis, a.s. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 7: Inscription on the Czech side – I ja za Tobą, Polaku [I do too, Pole]. “Mieszkańcy rozdzielonego miasta tęsknią – ciąg dalszy spontanicznej akcji,” *Zwrot*, March 21, 2020, <https://zwrot.cz/2020/03/mieszkanicy-rozdzielonego-miasta-tesknia-ciag-dalszy-spontanicznej-akcji/>. Photograph courtesy of Beata Tyrna. Reproduced with permission.

Figure 8: Monument in front of the Cieszyn Silesia Museum in Český Těšín. Photograph by Magdalena Bubík, 2023.



After more than three months, the border began to reopen, initially only to a select segment of the population. Priority was given to individuals with compelling reasons, such as employment, education, or close family ties. When government officials stationed on the bridge began packing up, the residents' joy was palpable, as reflected in local media.⁶⁵ From the night of 29 to 30 June 2020, the bridge was reopened to all residents. As had occurred during the transition at the end of 2007 and the entry into the Schengen Area, some residents gathered on the bridge at exactly midnight to symbolically “shut off the border.” I remember that when I crossed the bridge for the first time in several months without any obstacles: it was apparent that some people were lingering in the town simply to take in the moment and savor the freedom of movement. Traffic on the bridge gradually began to return to pre-pandemic levels, although it took time for relationships and routines to be re-established. At that point, no one knew

⁶⁵ Halina Szczotka, “Na otwarcie granicy przyjdzie nam jeszcze poczekać. Na szczęście już nie długo,” *Zwrot*, June 28, 2020, <https://zwrot.cz/2020/06/na-otwarcie-granicy-przyjdzie-nam-jeszcze-poczekac-na-szczescie-juz-nie-dlugo/>; Witold Koźdoń, “Już wkrótce otwarte granice,” *Głos*, June 12, 2020; Beata Schönwald, “Granica otwarta, restrykcje wracają,” *Głos*, June 30, 2020.

that the border would be closed again in the autumn due to the reintroduction of pandemic restrictions.

Before that occurred, however, a conflict about a monument was unleashed. In August 2020, exactly 100 years after the partition of Cieszyn, a monument commemorating the event was unveiled in front of the Cieszyn Silesia Museum in Český Těšín. This unveiling served as the focal point of the centennial celebrations marking the founding of Český Těšín. The sculptor Martin Kuchař chose to create a stylized replica of a border post (Figure 8). Beneath the monument, a plaque states that it was erected to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the demarcation of the Czechoslovak state border in Cieszyn, Orava, and Spiš, as well as the founding of the town of Český Těšín. The plaque also lists the founding institutions: the Cieszyn Silesia Museum, the Moravian-Silesian Region, and the town of Český Těšín.

Social media was abuzz with conversations, comments, and debates. Two opposing camps emerged in response to the event. The predominantly Polish or Polish-language media in Czechia criticized the monument as inappropriate, arguing that the events of 1920 marked a deeply tragic moment in the history of Cieszyn – one that should be forgotten rather than commemorated.⁶⁶ In contrast, Czech media outlets responded either positively or neutrally, focusing primarily on the celebration of the town's founding.⁶⁷ In interviews with journalists, the mayors of both towns stated that they viewed the monument as an important historical lesson: one that should be remembered by all who encounter it.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Beata Schönwald, "Chichot historii...", *Głos.live*, July 31, 2020, https://glos.live/Wiadomosci/detail/Chichot_historii/0; Szymon Brandy, "Słup graniczny na 100-lecie Czeskiego Cieszyzna," *Głos.live*, July 30, 2020, https://glos.live/Wiadomosci/detail/Słup_graniczny_na_100lecie_Czeskiego_Cieszyzna/0; Halina Szczotka, "Komentarz. Historia pewnego słupa," *Zwrot*, July 31, 2020, <https://zwrot.cz/2020/07/komentarz-historia-pewnego-slupa/>; Tomasz Wolff, "Nasz Głos: Sklejony szlaban," *Głos.live*, August 4, 2020, https://glos.live/Moim_zdaniem/detail/Nasz_Glos_Sklejony_szlaban/648.

⁶⁷ "Český Těšín se pyšní novým památníkem. Hraniční sloup připomíná 100 let města," *Karvinský a Havířovský deník.cz*, July 29, 2020, https://karvinsky.denik.cz/zpravy_region/cesky-tesin-se-pysni-novym-pamatnikem-pred-muzeem-pripomina-100-let-mesta-20200729.html; "100 let Českého Těšína oslavili v Muzeu Těšínska," *Frydecko-Místecký a Třinecký deník.cz*, July 28, 2020, <https://fm.denik.cz/ctenar-reporter/100-let-ceskeho-tesina-oslavili-v-muzeu-tesinska-20200728.html>; Klára Křížáková, "Český Těšín si připomněl sto let od svého vzniku," *Český rozhlas Ostrava*, July 29, 2020, <https://ostrava.rozhlas.cz/cesky-tesin-si-pripomnel-sto-let-od-sveho-vzniku-8262051>; "Muzeum Těšínska slaví 100 let města Český Těšín," Muzeum Těšínska, <https://www.muzeumct.cz/aktuality/384-muzeum-tesinska-slavi-100-let-mesta-cesky-tesin>.

⁶⁸ Katarzyna Lindert-Kuligowska, "Burza po odsłonięciu pomnika słupa granicznego w Czeskim Cieszyźnie," *Beskidzka24.pl*, July 31, 2020, <https://beskidzka24.pl/burza-po-odslonieniu-pomnika-słupa-granicznego-w-czeskim-cieszyźnie/>.

What is particularly striking, however, is the timing of the monument's unveiling. In addition to marking the centennial anniversary of a specific historical event, the unveiling coincided with a period of renewed division between the two sides of the town. For more than three months, access to the opposite bank was severely restricted, rendering it virtually inaccessible. Just as the border reopened and daily life began to resemble its pre-closure state, a monument evoking the historical split was unveiled. Obviously, the monument does not solely commemorate the division – it also marks the founding of Český Těšín. Yet this founding was itself a direct consequence of the partition. The source of the controversy, the underlying impulse that ignited it, again unveiled the spectrality, present 300 meters from this point, at the Friendship Bridge.

Today, traffic across the bridge flows smoothly once again as it has returned to being a part of daily life. Collaborative projects connecting the two parts of the town continue to progress. The initiatives previously halted due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic were ultimately completed. On 18 December 2023, the grand opening of the new information center took place, accompanied by the unveiling of a replica tram positioned nearby. Although located slightly below the bridge (Figure 9), its vivid red color draws the attention of passersby, especially in the evening, when it is illuminated by a halo of lanterns directed toward it. Resembling a trophy on a podium, the replica symbolizes the triumph of the idea of unity between the two cities. It highlights their shared history and the effort to transcend former divisions. Visitors are invited to sit on the tram benches and learn about the process behind the replica's creation, in which local artists actively participated. Additionally, guests can ring the tram's bell by pulling a string, and the resonant sound quickly fills the surrounding area. The Cieszyn tram trail is further enriched by a culinary trail that brings together food establishments from both sides of the town. Moreover, at designated times, a short historical film about the Cieszyn tram line is projected in the square on the Polish Cieszyn, as well as opposite the Noiva café in Český Těšín.

As one crosses the bridge, one's attention is now almost entirely drawn to the tram. Much like the monument next to the museum, the tram situated near the bridge can be interpreted as another manifestation of the ghost of the Friendship Bridge. Yet this time, the ghost reveals a different face: one that evokes memories of a bygone era in Cieszyn, when no borders divided the town and the tram moved freely, carrying the inhabitants from one side to the other. The persistence of this ghost becomes even more striking as it announces its presence before one even reaches the Friendship Bridge, its approach signaled by the loud ring of the tram bell, echoing like a sound from the past. The tram's symbolic



Figure 9: A tram replica, with an information center in the background. Photograph by Magdalena Bubík, 2025.

presence even appears to overshadow the boundary line drawn on the bridge itself, as if to suggest that today, unity in Cieszyn outweighs division. However, this situation might evolve in the coming years: tourists may continue to gather at the border marker, photographing a symbol of separation.

Ghosts of the Bridge

The role of the bridge, as previously discussed, has evolved significantly over the course of less than seventy years. Initially, it was heavily guarded by customs officers and almost inaccessible to ordinary citizens. In 1968, it became open only to let the tanks of the Warsaw Pact into Czechoslovakia. Following the fall of communist rule, the bridge transformed into a gate with a metaphorical key, accessible only to those who met specific criteria. It was not until 2008 that the two parts of the town began to reconnect meaningfully, and the bridge gradually came to symbolize this renewed bond. However, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 dramatically disrupted this relationship, as the bridge once again became an

almost impassable barrier. Only with the lifting of all pandemic restrictions was the connection between the two sides reestablished. Today, the most prominent symbol of this urban unity is the replica of the Cieszyn tram, located just a few meters from the bridge, standing as a tangible reminder of the town's shared history and ongoing reconciliation.

I would therefore argue that it is only since 2008 that the Friendship Bridge could be considered deserving of the name it bears. Since then, various buildings and attractions have been established around it to foster a sense of unity between the two cities. However, it is not only symbols of unity that surround the bridge. Reminders of division and the limitations of unity are also present. The boundary line and the monument near the museum serve as such examples. The ghosts of the bridge remain active, embodying different aspects of the past.

This leads to a further question: what prompted the state authorities in 1954 to assign the name "Friendship Bridge" to this structure? Was it intended to evoke the notion of camaraderie between two satellite states of the Soviet Union? Might it have been a deliberate act of irony – or even mockery? Perhaps, from the perspective of the authorities, the name was meant to promote an ideal of friendship between the two nations, or to present the twin cities as a model of proper communist coexistence between neighboring states, an attempt to uplift the spirits of their inhabitants.

Historian and museologist Mariusz Makowski observes that "today, Cieszyn Silesia is where you can see it [i.e. the region] directly, not only on the map. It is where there's something in the people, where they confirm it with their daily activities in various fields."⁶⁹ If we extend this perspective to the Friendship Bridge, we can argue that the bridge is not merely a geographical location or a structure used to cross from one side to the other. Rather, it forms an integral part of the everyday experience of Cieszyn residents. It lives within their memories and serves as a powerful trigger for personal and collective recollection. As such, the bridge contributes to the formation of collective identity, shaping the residents' sense of belonging and grounding their local identity. It also occupies a liminal space between the tangible and the intangible. The Friendship Bridge thus exemplifies how a physical structure, imbued with historical memory and emotional resonance, can become a foundational element of local identity.

⁶⁹ Małgorzata Bortliczek, "Śląsk Cieszyński w refleksjach humanistów – poszukiwanie klucza do zrozumienia narracji o przygranicznym mikroświecie," *Poznańskie Studia Polonistyczne. Seria Językoznawcza* 26, no. 2 (2019): 44.

Furthermore, the bridge possesses evolving symbolic faces, shifting over time from a closed and guarded gate to one fully open. As such, it is also surrounded by other ghosts. These include the boundary line marked on the bridge, a persistent reminder of historical division; the Noiva / Avion café, which simultaneously attests to the multicultural character of the former Cieszyn and gives tangible form to the border experience of its inhabitants; the monument at the Cieszyn Silesia Museum in Český Těšín, commemorating both the division of Cieszyn and the founding of the town of Český Těšín; and the replica tram, which harks back to the time of a unified Cieszyn and symbolizes its former cohesion. These ghosts do not appear simultaneously, nor do they convey the same message. Some evoke unity, while others recall division, and residents respond to them in varied ways. One thing, however, remains certain: these ghosts are an integral part of Cieszyn's contemporary reality. They are in constant transformation – just as the inhabitants themselves, and their perception of the Friendship Bridge, continue to evolve.