

The Life of a Potter in Klikov: An Interview with Martin the Potter



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I. Introduction.

During the excursion and seminar Studying Local Rural Systems the students divided into small sub-groups to prepare an interview with one of the local inhabitants. Our group interviewed one of the two local potters, Martin. In preparation we created a catalogue of interview questions to ask him. The questions were divided into four main categories, general, social, ecological and economic. Originally we had structured our questions along two tracks, personal and business, however in the course of the interview it quickly became clear that this distinction was more or less irrelevant as Martin's way of life meant that the two categories were interwoven. Martin quickly took hold of the interview and told us about his general background, his social life and ties in the village, and his outlook on money with little probing from our side. For the ecological questions, specifically in terms of the biosphere reserve, we posed our questions more actively. The results of our interview are presented in the following four chapters followed by a short summary and conclusion.

Note: All photographs used in the paper were taken by the group during the excursion, the captions from the photos on the title page should read: Left: The pottery, Right: Martin.

II. General background

II.1 Klikov's background.

Klikov is a small pottery village located in the Trebonsko Protected Landscape Area (PLA) and UNESCO Biosphere Reserve (BR) that covers an area of 700 km². The village is near Suchdol nad Luznici and has about 200 inhabitants, most of whom are second home owners. There is very little economic activity in Klikov. At present there are three

potteries, a saw mill, a farm, a car service, a joiner in the village. There is also a guest house at the edge of the neighbouring village.

The pottery business has evolved from having been a very difficult and dirty job in the last century, which often led to serious health issues, to being a more or less mechanized craft with totally different working conditions. During the communist era thirteen of the sixteen potteries in Klikov were forced to shut down. Due to the poor soil there is little agriculture in the entire area but the Biosphere Reserve plays an important role for tourism.

Our visit to the village aimed at getting to know more about its dynamics, particularly in terms of sustainability. During the group discussions the question came up if Klikov can be seen as a community, since most of the people do not live there permanently. This question was one that our interview group kept in mind while conducting our interview.

II.2 Martin's personal background.

Martin has lived in Klikov for two years. He moved there “step by step“ from Prague where he had lived with his parents and worked as a waiter in a teahouse. When his former job became unprofitable, he started looking for something else. During this time Martin got to know his friend Martin who owns a pottery in Klikov and who began teaching him to make pottery. Within a few years he learned the business and was eventually offered the chance to work in his own pottery in Klikov in cooperation with Martin's already established pottery. Martin is married to a Japanese woman and has spent time in Japan during previous summers where he worked on a rice farm and learned calligraphy to gain extra income.

III. Social

Upon analyzing the results of our interview it became clear that there are both inclusion and exclusion factors at play in how Martin interacts with Klikov society. Below follows a description of some of the exclusion and inclusion factors that were communicated to us through the interview.

Martin has chosen an alternative lifestyle outside society's norms, such as eating only a vegan diet and not drinking alcohol. He doesn't own a car, as he prefers walking or taking public transport. It is difficult for him to take part in a society in which it is normal to consume alcohol and meat. Martin doesn't participate in many social events because he feels as if doing so would disturb other villagers. In his opinion people don't feel comfortable when they notice that someone is behaving differently than they, especially when it comes to personal behavior patterns like consumption of alcohol. Although Martin perceives that people are often prejudiced against his lifestyle, he doesn't judge others with different lifestyle choices and values/attitudes. He tries to see the decisions and behaviors of other people from their point of view.

His presence in the village plays an important role in the neighborhood, even if he doesn't know it. Particularly the way he supports the neighbors is noteworthy. When his neighbors ask him for help he is willing to help out, for example with gardening or even with heavy chores like haymaking. Furthermore, in some cases where larger "chores" are completed on a more or less volunteer basis there exists an informal payment in kind (non-monetary) policy, which also contributes to a good relationship between villagers. Another important aspect to the sense of community Martin fosters around him is his borrowing of different things, especially tools. People from the neighborhood are willing to share with Martin, which may be a sign of his acceptance in the village and of trust.

Picture 1. Pottery Shop



Beside this active support, Martin is also plays an important role in the social dynamics of the village because of his ability to connect people of different ages and different lifestyles. He seems to be very patient when it comes to dealing with people with special needs. One main reason for his understanding, especially of young people and their trials and tribulations, is that he tries to reflect on and connect the challenges he faced in his younger days to the situations young people face nowadays. Martin takes pains to employ socially vulnerable people and gives them the possibility to work in his pottery.

In his very special way, Martin is part of the village community, but only as far as possible without feeling he must compromise his values.

IV. Economic

Martin is a very remarkable person, which affects how he earns money and his opinion of paying taxes and following rules. Martin sees himself as a full-time potter. He can't divide work time and leisure and he works almost the whole day. However, he is not registered as a potter and to inspections claims that pottery is only his hobby. He also doesn't pay any social insurance. He and his colleague Marta rent an old pottery workshop, which is a part of a large house where he also lives with his Japanese girlfriend.

Their main customers are a few tearooms in Prague. In fact, the tearooms provided the starting point of Martin's career as a potter – when people started to buy his tea pots and cups he saw that there was demand for his products. In Klikov his business consists

mainly of tourists, especially in summer. In cooperation with the other pottery they offer workshops to kindergardens and schools, as well as the kindergarden and school teachers. Each year they sell their products at four big open-air markets (usually near Prague). For the people in the village their products are too expensive. The potteries main competition is mass production of cheap pottery from Italy.

Behind the pottery is a small shop from which they sell their own products and also products of allied potters and other craftsmen and framers. Martin is not aware of how much he earns. It's not so much but it can cover his personal needs and he is satisfied with the situation. Marta is not satisfied because of insecurities associated with fluctuating income and desires something more stable. Martin is very modest and doesn't have any big financial demands so for him the meager income is enough.

Picture 2. Pottery Cash Register



Martin's lifestyle could be seen as sustainable for the time being as currently he is rather young and doesn't have any health problems. He doesn't pay any social insurance and seems not to pay any attention to the future or saving for unexpected events, so from this point of view is his lifestyle a little risky. On the other hand, to have good relationships with his neighbours and friends who can help to each other through harder times could be seen as an alternative economic strategy that may also be sustainable. For Martin, following his heart is more important than money.

V. Ecological

When presented with the question "What do you think of the biosphere reserve and how does it affect you?" Martin was surprised to learn that the natural area was actually classified as such. Martin thought of the area as no more than 'the forest' and was somewhat disappointed to learn the area was a biosphere reserve. Martin said that he thinks that these types of areas should be free for the people; no fences, no control, no technical names. That being said, Martin acknowledged that without the reserve he wouldn't be in the area doing what he's doing due to the buyers brought in from the reserve, as well as his own desire to live near nature.

As mentioned above, Klikov is historically known as a pottery community and the tradition continues today. This small town attained its reputation from the clay naturally found in the area. Martin uses this local clay mixed with imported clay due to technical reasons. He uses mostly local wood, though it's hard to come by. The wood from the area can be sold for much higher prices in Austria, so the companies often export. Recently Martin was forced to buy his large quantities of wood from farther away due to the discontinuation of delivery from his former provider. The pottery requires large amounts of wood to heat the kiln as well as for normal home heating. The kiln is typically fired four times a year and requires eight square meters of wood per firing.

As Martin is a vegan, when he doesn't get fruits and vegetables from his neighbors he uses an organic food ordering service. This year he started his own garden from which he hopes to supplement his grocery buying. Though a supermarket is available, Martin doesn't like to shop there. Occasionally he goes to a farmer's market in Suchdol to buy groceries.

Picture 3. Martin's Garden



VI. Conclusion

Martin's philosophy about society, economics, and the environment is consciously built into his lifestyle, which seems to be low-impact. In our opinion his relationship to the community is a good example of social sustainability because of the balance he finds between adjusting to the community and sticking to his values. It is due to his values that we suggest that, indirectly, Martin has moved to Klikov because of the natural elements. As he himself put it "without the biosphere reserve I probably wouldn't be here." Martin also serves as an example of how a person who has moved to the village can act as a connector between internal and external agents. Martin's attitude towards social tensions could be seen as an ideal way of easing the transition of the village from the "old" and the "new" inhabitants.

The village of Klikov is undergoing a transition in which the dynamics between locally born people and people moving into the community plays a decisive in how the village will develop in the future. This is both true for those buying second homes and those permanently working and living in the area however, we see these a two groups that should be evaluated separately. We find that for those starting businesses and living in Klikov permanently, the importance of integration and of bringing economic gain to the community is more significant. The question of how second home owners function within the village dynamics is, in our opinion, also a very important question to develop and study, however we have chosen to focus our outlook on the development of Klikov's more permanent population.

Through our discussions with Martin and the information we gained over the course of the seminar we were able to develop our own hypothesis. We suspect that Klikov's natural elements and surroundings act as an attracting factor for people with sustainable/ecological values. These values may, at least in part, be behind decisions to move to the village, to use local human and biophysical resources, and to act as a connector between internal and external actors. This hypothesis requires further examination and a broader study site. While we suspect that there are few persons so unique as Martin, perhaps there are others with similar motivations in the surrounding area that would participate in future research projects.