

Interactive memorial to exiles opening in Modřany

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Czech-German video artist plans interactive ‘outdoor cinema’ monument to the nation’s exiles in Prague’s residential south

Modřany, a residential neighborhood with plenty of tall prefabricated buildings a good way south of Prague’s center, certainly feels rather suburban. With few galleries or culture destinations to speak of, it is not a place that draws art lovers or tourists.

But this soon may change with the arrival of a unique memorial to be erected in the heart of the neighborhood. Visual artist Petr Vrána, a Czech citizen who immigrated to Germany in 1968 and later became a video art pioneer, is the author of the Memorial to Czechoslovaks in Exile project.

He says it is dedicated to the hundreds of thousands of

Czechoslovaks who left the country between 1939, when a third of the country was annexed by Nazi Germany following the 1938 Munich Agreement, and 1989, when the communist regime ended. The memorial will be rather unusual, Vrána says, as it will feature audio and video elements as well as a strong interactive component.



Czechoslovak exiles exhibit

According to the artist’s ‘outdoor cinema’ conception, pictures of Czechoslovaks who lived in exile would be projected onto a large wall made of artificial sandstone



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“The district office of Modřany is moving into a new building that will have a glass vestibule in its staircase,” Vrána told Czech Position. “We will install a 15 by 4 meter wall made from artificial sandstone opposite the staircase. A series of portraits depicting the lives of prominent Czechoslovaks who lived in exile will be projected onto this wall from terminals at which visitors will be able to browse through different people’s life stories.”

The monument, which will include a fountain that trickles water over the stone surface, will be at the edge Sofijské náměstí facing — fittingly — on třída

Československého exilu, the Avenue of Czechoslovak Exiles. In addition, visitors will be able to listen to narrations of those personal histories. Vrána says he is basing his selection of whom to include in the project on the Czech Documentation Center's encyclopedia of Czechoslovaks who lived in exile, which currently lists 1,600 names. He is still updating the list of people who will be featured in the memorial project.

"The younger generation is often not aware of how many Czechoslovak citizens spent their life in exile, be it their whole life or part of it," Vrána said. "And I thought this kind of 'outdoor cinema' would be a great way to show this, and show how many famous or prominent Czechoslovaks lived in exile."

Those who left; those left behind

The author of the project says the relationship between those who left the country and those who stayed behind was tense in the early '90s, when some Czechoslovaks who had lived in exile started returning to their native country after the Iron Curtain came down.

"In the beginning, the relationship between those two groups was quite difficult," he said. "But that has changed with the years, and I think that people are moving closer to each other again."

Unlike Vrána, Štěpán Benda, who left Czechoslovakia and emigrated to Germany in 1968, did not return to his native country once the totalitarian regime fell. Benda still lives in Berlin, where he works in the film industry. He follows the happenings in his native country closely.

"I think it's good that the Czechoslovaks who lived or live in exile are being remembered in some form, but it won't solve any problems," Benda told Czech Position. "I would say that the relationship between the Czechs who stayed in the country and those who left to live in exile is still quite complicated."

Benda says it is not unusual for Czech acquaintances and friends of his to tell him that if he no longer lives here, he should not be criticizing current Czech politics.



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"And then some Czechs still understand leaving the country as an act of doing something that shouldn't be done, as if not leaving is something they should be given credit for. They feel that we ran away and left them here," he says. "But the work done by those who lived in exile is very important for who we are as a nation today because if those Czechoslovaks in exile had not worked tirelessly to promote the interests of their native country, and spoken of the need for its freedom, then we might not be a democracy today."

Others feel that while the relationship of the Czech Republic to its citizens in exile is still complicated, it's improving. "I think the relationship has gotten a lot better," said Bernard Šafařík, a Czech film director who left the country in 1968. "But there still are a lot of prejudices. And propaganda has influenced what lots of people think." Šafařík returned to his country of origin after 1989. "I considered it my duty as a citizen to be a part of this period, to be a stone in this big mosaic," he said.

Revitalizing the neighborhood

While the memorial is meant to shed more light on the stories of Czechoslovaks who live and lived in exile, its author also intends for it to have a more mundane function. "I would like to see it revitalize the neighborhood," Vrána said. "The stone wall that the images will be projected on will provide shade in the summer, and of course a talking point for people who are visiting the square, running errands and so on."

Completion of the project, which is currently still in the planning stage, is scheduled for 2012. “I am mostly funding this out of my own pocket, but the program director of the Czech Centers network has approached me,” Vrána said. “They are very interested in the project, since they are planning to declare 2012 the year of Czechoslovaks in exile, so we just have to finish it by then.”



For more information and updates on the project, visit the project's [website](#).

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