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The Transformation of the Migratory Strategies of the Rural Population During the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century: A Case Study of the Royal Town and Estate of České Budějovice (Budweis)

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<https://doi.org/10.26493/978-961-293-399-9.103-124>

Mobility Controls and Migration Research

Czech demography defines migration as ‘spatial movement of individuals across any border (mostly administrative) connected to changing place of residence, whether short-term, long-term, or permanently’ (Kalibová, Pavlík and Vodáková 2009, 66). Historical demography defines it as ‘geographic change’ or ‘spatial movement’ (Maur 1978, 145–52). If it is permanent, it is migration; if it is brief (or temporary), it is called mobility.

Czech historians began to study the mobility of the early modern Bohemian rural population in the context of the so-called ‘second serfdom’ (Míka 1957; Válka 1958). The first efforts to limit mobility in the Bohemian lands can be traced to the period after the Hussite Wars in 1434. Some serfs experienced problems in proving their allegiance. The Bohemian Estates (the national parliament) dealt with this issue in the second half of the sixteenth and at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The effort to limit the mobility of serfs can also be demonstrated using the legal regulations that were issued for each estate by the manorial offices (Černý 1930, 89, 345, 347, 351).

The proceedings of the Bohemian Estates between the end of the Hussite Wars and the first half of the sixteenth century were analysed

Murayama, S., Ž. Lazarević, and A. Panjek, eds. 2024. *Changing Living Spaces: Subsistence and Sustenance in Eurasian Economies from Early Modern Times to the Present*. Koper: University of Primorska Press.

by Alois Míka, who examined the circumstances in which release letters were issued by overlords to their serfs (Míka 1960, 187–226). As a Marxist historian, Míka regarded the absconding of serfs from their overlords as a form of class struggle carried out by the rural population. Another Czech historian, Josef Petrání, analysed the resolutions of the Bohemian Estates from the second half of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century, using them to study the control of serf mobility (Petrání 1957; 1964, 188–208). Josef Petrání reached a compromise conclusion: ‘there were overlords who tolerated somebody else’s serfs on their manorial estates – and also the possibility for their own serfs to leave for another estate’ (Petrání 1964, 208). Czech Marxist historians debated whether absconding represented a form of class struggle. Josef Macek called the absconding of serfs an ‘individual and hidden form of class struggle during feudalism’. By contrast, Arnošt Klíma ruled this out ‘for its apparent passivity and the individual attitudes of the absconders’ (Klíma 1955, 56; Macek 1957, 299–301; Toegel 1960, 191). Most historians of the Marxist era strove to ‘portray a hard and laborious life of our ancestors, common and brave individuals ... protesting in a distinctive and sometimes determined way against their feudal oppressors and exploiters’ (Šindelář 1949; 1981; 1985, 72).

A new perspective on the issue of the Bohemian ‘second serfdom’ was formulated by some members of an international research project entitled ‘Social structures in early modern Bohemia’ which was carried out between 1996 and 1999.¹ For the English-speaking scholarly world, the issue of the ‘second serfdom’ in the Bohemian lands has been examined in the work of Sheilagh Ogilvie, who had participated in this international research project (Ogilvie and Edwards 2000; Ogilvie 2005; Klein and Ogilvie 2016; Šouša 2018).

Social Stratification

At the top of the Bohemian village hierarchy were the ‘peasants’ (Czech: *sedlák* or *rolník*, German: *Bauer*), who held enough arable land to subsist entirely from agriculture, paid the highest manorial dues and state taxes, and owed the largest quantity of forced labour to the land-

1 Cerman and Luft (2002, 353–67). In the conclusion of the latter book there is a complete bibliography of publication output from the research project ‘Social Structures in Early Modern Bohemia’ from 1996 to 2004. You can find basic information about this project, including the list of all publications, on the website.



Figure 1 The Region of South Bohemia and the Actual Borders of the Czech Republic (Map By Václav Černý)

lord, often with draft animals as well as human workers. Below the peasants came the ‘smallholders’ (Czech *zahradník*, German *Gärtner*) who held some arable land but not enough to subsist from, paid lower dues and taxes, and owed forced services to the landlord with human labour only. Finally, the ‘cottagers’ (Czech *chalupník*, German *Häusler*) held only their own cottages and gardens, paid minor dues and taxes, and owed lighter (though increasing) labour to the overlord. All other Bohemian serfs lived in households headed by members of these three official strata, as family members, servants, or inmate-lodgers (Czech *podruh*, German *Hausleute* or *Hausgenossen*). A few outsiders, mainly freemen (Czech *svoobodník*, German *Freibauer*) and Jews (Czech *žid*, German *Jude*), also lived in Bohemian villages under special ‘privileges’ granted by the landlord (Klein and Ogilvie 2016, 505).

Release Letters as Historical Sources

A serf was legally subject to the estate on which he was born. If somebody wanted to leave the estate legally and permanently, they had to obtain the permission of the lord of that estate. This process generated ‘release letters’ or ‘letters of discharge’ (figure 2), which are the main source of evidence used in this article.² The Czech term for these docu-

² The source and its use were described by Maur (1978, 67) and Čáňová (1986, 151–2).

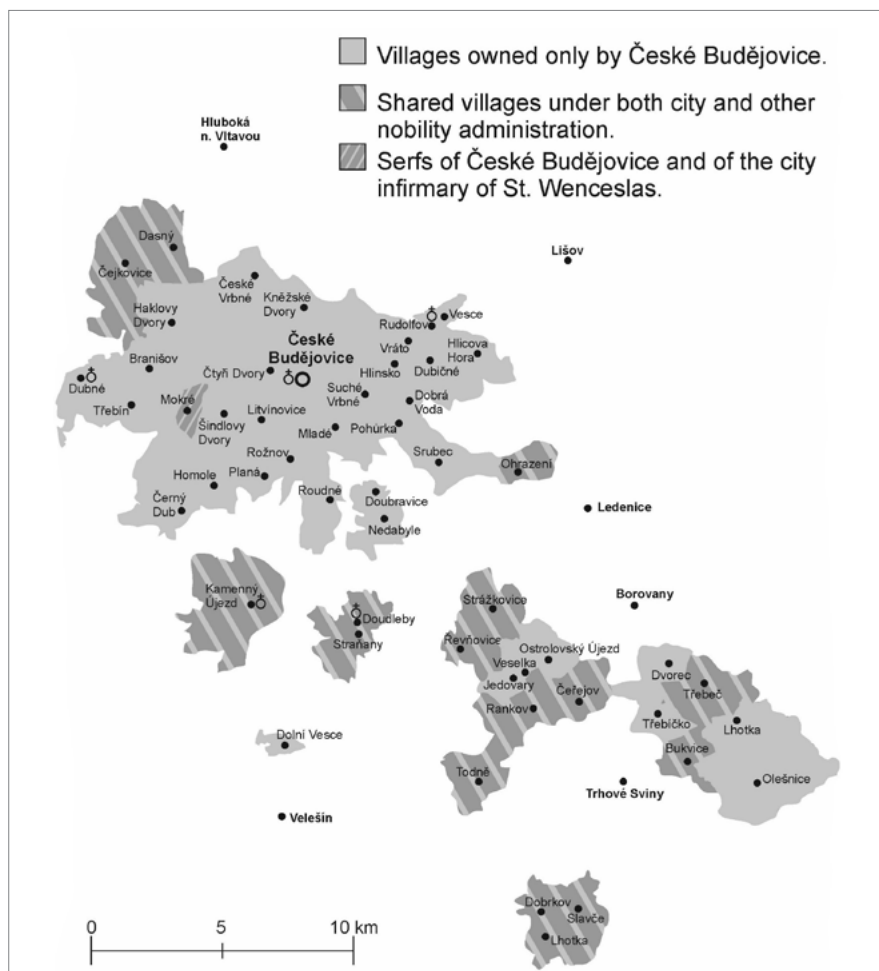


Figure 2 The Microregion: The Estate of České Budějovice after 1750 in Detail (Map by Václav Černý)

ments is *zhostní list* (short version *zhost*) or *výhostní list* (short version *výhost*),³ while the German term is *Entlassungsbrief* or *Losbrief*, sometimes *Wegloßbrief*.⁴

- 3 In nearby Poland, matters involving serf migration were handled in a similar manner. In both countries, a term derived from Roman law was used: *manumissio* (German *Manumissionsbrief*) to describe the act of a landlord releasing one of his serfs of his own accord (Trojanowska 1987–1988).
- 4 In Lower Austria it was called *Dimissionschein* or *Entlassungsschein* (Feigl 1998, 43, 46, 50).

As a result of the military events and mortality crises (such as plague, famine and other epidemics) which occurred in the Czech Lands⁵ during the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648), an estimated 1.25–2 million people died. Afterwards, many landlords' estates lacked population and manpower. This led to increased efforts by landlords to tighten control over serfs' mobility. Gradually, this generated a set of documentation which included not only release letters but also serfs' applications giving their reasons for wishing to emigrate, and sometimes letters explaining the circumstances under which migration would take place if permission was granted.

Labour scarcity after the Thirty Years War thus motivated landlords to exert greater control over people's geographical mobility in the framework of the 'second serfdom'. Until the abolition of Bohemian serfdom on 1 November 1781, there was a rule that any serf who wished to leave his or her lord's estate permanently (e.g. for marriage) had to obtain a permit from the lord. Most release letters authorized serfs merely to move from one lord to another, not to be altogether free. If a serf wanted to marry a freeman (somebody who was not the serf of any lord), take over a piece of real estate in a town, or seek employment elsewhere without specifying a target destination, he or she had to be set free. Apprentices and journeymen who wanted to learn a craft or gain experience in their occupation required a sort of recommendation letter in order to obtain a temporary release from serfdom. Among individual estates, exchange of serfs took place on the principle of reciprocity. On the estate of České Budějovice in the second half of the eighteenth century, it was relatively rare for the overlord to refuse to release serfs; refusals took place only in rare cases, for example in the case of a craftsman who would be hard to replace. This finding cannot be generalized to the entirety of Bohemia, where the situation differed across regions and time-periods. On the estate of Frýdlant between 1583 and 1692, for instance, 21 per cent of applications for migration or emancipation permits were rejected by the overlord (see Ogilvie

- 5 The 'Czech lands' or the 'Bohemian lands' – in a historical context, Czech texts use the term to refer to any territory ruled by the Kings of Bohemia, i.e., the lands of the Bohemian Crown as established by Emperor Charles IV in the fourteenth century. This would include territories like the Lusatias (which in 1635 fell to Saxony) and the whole of Silesia, all ruled from Prague at that time. After the conquest of Silesia by the Prussian king Frederick the Great in 1742, the remaining lands of the Bohemian Crown – Bohemia, Moravia and Austrian Silesia – have been more or less co-extensive with the territory of the modern-day Czech Republic.

2005, 81). The number of release letters granted on the estate of Pardubice in the seventeenth century (1617-1652, 1654-1690) was also low and fluctuated a great deal from year to year (see Maur 1983, 17). But on the estate of České Budějovice in the second half of the eighteenth century, which was a period of plentiful population and high labour availability, most applications were granted.

The research presented here analyses release letters issued between 1750 and 1787. Why this particular period? Release letters already began to appear on the estate of České Budějovice in the early eighteenth century, but did not occur en masse until after 1750, when their number trebled compared to the preceding period. In 1781, serfdom was abolished in Bohemia and release letters lost their importance, but the records continued to be kept until 1787. The archival documents used here are held in the State District Archives in České Budějovice – České Budějovice Municipal Archives.⁶ This compact collection of records includes not only release letters, but also serfs' applications.⁷ The personal applications made by would-be migrants or their relatives (such as parents or intended husbands) make it possible to analyse the context and extent of migration in the rural population.⁸ The manorial lord could also request the release of a serf with a letter of intervention, after prior agreement.

A certain sum of money had to be paid to the landlord for any individual to be released from serfdom. Most of the documents used were written in German,⁹ which dominated public records in Bohemia in the second half of the eighteenth century. Czech-language applications by the Czech inhabitants occur only sporadically, with three surviving cases in the documents used for this study. Only rarely (in two cases) do we also find release letters in Latin; these were issued by the Catholic Church.

6 Archive 'release letters' consist of two parts: SDAČB, TA, Ss, Tematická řada, Obyvatelstvo, listy propouštěcí (1676–1787) and SDAČB, TA, Ss, Poddanské vsi.

7 These sources were brought to attention by Kubák (1964).

8 The complex analysis was done by Grulich (2018).

9 German settlers appeared in Bohemia and Moravia as early as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Most towns that became economic centres were founded by German colonists. In big towns, the German population predominated until the second half of the nineteenth century. The Renewed Land Ordinance (1627, 1628) established German as the second official language in Bohemia and Moravia and declared it to be of equal status to the Czech language. Czech still predominated in the countryside, but German prevailed in towns and among higher social strata.

The release letters examined here do not, unfortunately, document all cases of migration in the area under study. Serfs of the estate of České Budějovice were allowed to migrate without permission if the migration took place within one or more estates of the same overlord. The release letters preserved in the České Budějovice City Archive only document bi-directional ‘exchanges’ of serfs – both inwards and outwards – between the estate of České Budějovice and those surrounding estates that were owned by other landlords. A compact collection is represented here by the release letters issued on the occasion of a serf’s marriage. The Catholic Church was not allowed to conduct a wedding between individuals from outside the estate of České Budějovice unless they identified themselves clearly. When an inspection was carried out, it was documented by an annotation in the marriage register, which recorded the feudal allegiance of the couple. It is very unlikely that someone with dubious feudal allegiance would have been able to enter into a marriage.

Structure and Use of the Research Database

In the Bohemian context, release letters have not yet been regarded with great interest. In the past, historians have occasionally drawn attention to their existence, but have never analysed them using a well-organized database. This study is the first attempt to undertake such an analysis. It began by creating a Microsoft Access database which brought together all available information about the context of each serf’s release from serfdom. First, the dates of the beginning and end of the release procedure were entered. This was followed by the would-be migrant’s personal information: their first name, surname, sex, marital status, and occupation.

The database also included the would-be migrant’s place of origin and their place of residence after the end of the migration. Individual localities were entered into web search engines (*Google Maps* or *Mapy.cz.*) This made it possible to determine the distance which the migrants moved. The place of origin and the target destination were mostly verifiable when a serf transferred from one overlord to another. The type of the original and final settlement – whether it was a town, suburb, village, or manor – was also entered into the database. When a serf was given his or her freedom, only information on the original location was known, so the distance of migration remained unknown.

Two-thirds of all documented cases were associated with a marriage, so the data on the migrant could be checked using the marriage registers. The basic sources here consisted of the parish registers of the St. Nicholas

Church in České Budějovice. These were used to identify cases of migration that arose in connection with marriages. Besides the place of origin, these registers also recorded the place of temporary residence of the groom, the bride, and their parents. On the basis of these parish registers it was possible to trace the change of overlord, because feudal allegiance was noted down for every married couple. Each person was identified via allegiance to his or her own family and to the overlord.

Cases of serf migration were analysed for the whole estate of České Budějovice, which consisted of one town (České Budějovice, see figure 1), one small mining town (Rudolfov), and 48 villages (see figure 2). Information about migrants was sought in the records for one urban parish and 18 rural parishes. Additional information on the migrant's marriage partner (first name, surname, marital status, social status, and occupation) was obtained from the marriage registers.¹⁰ In the case of younger or dependent persons, data on their parents were also transcribed. The marriage registers made it possible to obtain information that was not included in the release letters.

The Estate of České Budějovice – Population And Economy

This study focuses on the migration strategies of individuals who were serfs of the estate of České Budějovice, located in the south of Bohemia (see map 1). The year 1751 saw the formation of the administrative region of Budějovice and the establishment of the so-called regional office. The town also became the seat of the Bishop and the centre of the newly established Diocese of Budějovice in 1785. So it came about that the municipal, regional, and episcopal administrations were located in the same place. The spatial expansion of the town is evidenced by the increasing number of houses – from 494 in 1757 to 632 in 1789. Exact population numbers do not survive, but estimates based on the number of communicants suggest that the town had 4,000 inhabitants in 1750 and 5,400 in 1785 (Grulich 2013, 122–5).

10 These parish registers are held in SRAT, PRRC, PD (Borovany 3, 10; Boršov and Vltavou 3, 4, 15; České Budějovice 7, 8, 13, 14, 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 82, 91, 93, 97, 98; Černice 5; Číměř 10; Dobrá Voda u Českých Budějovic 19, Dolní Slověnice 4; Doudleby 2, 3; Dubné 2, 3, 7; Hluboká and Vltavou 9, 24; Horní Pěna 11; Hosín 14; Jílovce 5; Kamenný Újezd 25, 26; Lednice 1, 2, 3; Lišov 3; Mladošovice 4; Nákří 2; Němčice 5; Nová Bystřice 19; Pištín 13; Rudolfov 3; Římov 4; Soběnov 3; Štěpánovice 1, 6; Strážov 3, 4, 19; Trhové Sviny 14, 15, 16; Velešín 4, 9; Žumberk 4, 5). For digital copies see Digital Archives (n.d.).

In the heart of the town, the area enclosed by the town walls, there mainly lived families of craftsmen and merchants. They were not serfs but freemen. The town was a centre of production and trade. In 1757, 237 craftsmen were registered there. The local economy mainly focused on textile production (the town had 18 woollen-weavers, 13 linen-weavers, and 10 stocking-makers) and food production (there were 28 butchers, 15 bakers, and 15 brewers) (Chalupa et al. 1964, 116–7). The town also profited from the salt trade. Salt from Upper Austria was imported to České Budějovice and then transported on boats down the River Vltava as far as Prague. Approximately two-thirds of the town's population lived from crafts and trade. Only one third of the town's population owned land in the surrounding countryside, comprising a total area of 931 hectares in 1757. The immigration of serfs from the countryside boosted the growth of three suburbs. These free rural labourers found employment as lodgers in the buildings of the town's demesne farms.

Immigration and Emigration

The surviving records for the period 1750–1787 yielded a total of 1,073 applications for release from serfdom.¹¹ Of this total, immigrants slightly outnumbered emigrants. There were 567 immigrants (52.8 percent of the total), which included serfs who transferred over from other lords to the royal town of České Budějovice. There were 506 emigrants (47.2 percent of the total), in which a serf of the town of České Budějovice was granted his or her freedom (284 cases) or was transferred to another lord (222 cases).

The mutual release of serfs between individual overlords followed the principle of reciprocity. There is a widely held view that manorial offices, in order to maintain mutual balance, would release equal numbers of serfs. However, the present study found that the numbers of individuals released into the lordship of the town of České Budějovice was higher than the numbers of outgoing individuals. For example, there were 91 applications for release from serfs from the estate of Český Krumlov to transfer to the lordship of the town of České Budějovice. But only 15 applications for release (one-sixth that number) were made for transfer in the opposite direction. The greatest interest in change of lordship in favour of the town of České Budějovice was evinced by serfs of the Vyšší Brod monastery (on the estate of Komařice). From this estate, 96 serfs

11 From the perspective of historical demography, a representative sample is a sample having more than 1,000 units, see: Maur (1978, 72–6).

were ceded to the lordship of the town of České Budějovice, whereas in the opposite direction it was only one-third that number (32 serfs). The clear superiority in the numbers of immigrants relative to emigrants provides evidence that the estate of the royal town of České Budějovice was an attractive target destination for migrants.

What do these findings tell us about the 'second serfdom'? Marxist historiography traditionally emphasized the binding of serfs to the land. This study does not provide evidence of complete restriction of serf mobility by manorial lords. Nevertheless, we can observe efforts by lords to exert control over migration. Temporary mobility by serfs was not made conditional on the granting of a release letter. The assumption at the time was that serfs would earn money to support themselves and then after a time would return home. It was mainly in the case of the town and suburbs of České Budějovice that an individual who wanted to undertake a long-term working sojourn away from their estate of origin was not legalized or organized until they got married.

It was only on the estate of Komařice, which was the property of the Cistercian monastery of Vyšší Brod, can we observe a clear effort to get back eight serfs who were working for wages on demesne-farms near the town of České Budějovice in 1753. Referring to the 'Renewed Land Constitution of 1627' (Jireček 1888, 456–566), the Vyšší Brod monastic officials demanded that their serfs not be employed on the estate of České Budějovice without the permission of the lord. In reality, the interest of the estate of České Budějovice in obtaining an outside labour force dominated over observance of the legal requirements. Out of the total of 1,073 applications for release, only eight applications were rejected. Release from serfdom was denied to those who first absconded and then applied for legal release from serfdom. The reason for refusal by the lord may have been that he wished to compel the individual to perform compulsory military service or to retain an individual who specialized in an occupation which was important from the viewpoint of the manorial economy.

Period of Processing Applications

Applications for release from serfdom were dealt with all year round. Most of them were handled during January (176 cases, comprising 16.4 percent of the total) and October (152 cases, comprising 14.2 percent of the total). Since most applications were related to marriage, the connection to the religious year is evident (Grulich 2000, 79). People were not allowed to enter into marriage during Advent (December) or Lent (March

and April), so they submitted their applications in advance of those times of year (Dokoupil et al. 1999, 82–3). There was a strong tendency to hold the wedding ceremony in the village of the bride's parents.¹² Marriages of individuals who had not yet been released from serfdom were very exceptional. The feudal allegiance of both members of a married couple had to be identical. It was unthinkable that a husband and wife would have different overlords. When a woman gave birth to a child before obtaining a release letter, her existing feudal allegiance automatically passed to the offspring.

In one-third of all the cases analysed (366, comprising 34.1 percent of the total), it was possible to determine the period between the submission of an application and the issuing of a release letter. When a serf was transferred to a neighbouring estate, his or her application was handled positively within a few days, a maximum of one week from submission of the application (244 cases, comprising 66.7 percent of the total). The duration of the release procedure, however, could be as long as 14 days (46 cases, comprising 12.6 percent of the total) or even 4 weeks (51 cases, comprising 13.9 percent of the total). This situation might have been caused by complications in the reasons for treatment of the application or by difficult communication between individual overlords, which had to overcome long distances. It was exceptional for the handling of an application to take longer than one month (25 cases, comprising 6.8 percent of the total). The short duration of the release procedure, which can be demonstrated in most of the examined cases, testifies to a responsive attitude of manorial lords to most of the cases analysed in this study.

Personal and Family Status of Migrants

Among the applicants for release from serfdom, most were individual persons (1,004 cases, representing 93.6 percent of the total). Women (594 cases, comprising 55.4 percent of the total) outnumbered men (410 cases, comprising 38.2 percent of the total). The same is when broken down by marital status: unmarried women (550 cases, comprising 51.3 percent of the total) outnumbered unmarried men (378 cases, comprising 35.2 percent of the total). These proportions must be considered against the background of the fact that most of the release letters were issued in connection with marriage. From the viewpoint of Bohemian society in that

¹² The wedding ceremony was held in the village of the bride's parents not only in the Czech lands, but in other areas too, for example in France, see: Hayhoe (2016, 22).

time, a man was supposed to be able to support a family. At the moment of his marriage he was expected already to have a stable income based on tenure of a rural landholding, a craft workshop, or a commercial enterprise. This was possible provided that the man owned some property in a particular area. Under these circumstances, it was logical that a migrating woman would follow her new husband to the locality where the couple would then settle.

The low number of widowed persons applying for release letters can also be explained by property relations. In this case as well, the place of residence was more often changed by widows (37 cases, comprising 3.4 percent of the total) than by widowers (11 cases, comprising 1.0 percent of the total).

Situations in which several persons applied for release from serfdom in a single release letter were quite rare. Among the applicants were childless couples (12 cases, comprising 1.1 percent of the total) and married couples with between one and six children (30 cases, comprising 2.8 percent of the total). It was very exceptional to find applications for change of feudal allegiance by a single person accompanied by a child, a widowed person, or an unmarried mother (25 cases, comprising 2.3 percent of the total). Sibling groups were also not very common among migrants.

Distance of Migration

The distance between the place of origin and the target destination could be established in about three-quarters of all cases (821, comprising 76.5 percent of the total). Some serfs applied to change their feudal allegiance but then actually remained in the same locality; there were 67 such cases, comprising 6.2 percent of the total. This situation transpired because 14 villages of the estate of České Budějovice were divided into multiple sections, which were held by different overlords. This meant that serfs in that locality were shared among two to six overlords. The most intensively divided village was Kamenný Újezd. Serfs from this village were shared among the town of České Budějovice, the estate of Český Krumlov, two monasteries (Český Krumlov and Vyšší Brod), an archdeaconry (Český Krumlov), and a priest via the *fabrica ecclesiae*. In localities in which serfs were shared among several manorial authorities, a serf had to apply for a release letter even if he or she was only moving from one house to another within the same village.

Although villagers would sometimes move to places far away, in most cases they migrated short distances (Hayhoe 2016, 25–9, 59–63). When

serfs migrated, their type of settlement tended to remain the same, that is, they typically moved from one village to another. This was true of three-fifths of all cases of both emigration and immigration. Serfs in rural areas searched for partners or jobs in the immediate neighbourhood of their locality of residence. More than one-fifth of all individuals applying for release letters (224 cases, comprising 20.9 percent of the total) migrated only to the nearest village, that is, within a distance of 1-5 km. A similar proportion of cases involved migration within a distance of 6-10 km (192 cases, comprising 17.9 percent of the total) and 11-15 km (130 cases, comprising 12.1 percent of the total).¹³ In general, the mobility of the rural population typically took place within a range of 20 km, the return trip to which could be covered on foot within one day. Spatial mobility within a distance of 1-20 km was involved in almost three-fifths of all recorded cases (611 cases, comprising 57 percent of the total).

The frequency of migration decreased with increasing distance.¹⁴ A bi-directional exchange of serfs can be observed between the territory administered by the town of České Budějovice and the surrounding manorial estates, monasteries, towns and parishes. As far as long-distance immigration was concerned, only one tenth of immigrants to the estate of České Budějovice (53 cases, comprising 9.4 percent of the total) came from outside the Budějovice region. People more often came from more distant regions of Bohemia (37 cases, comprising 6.5 percent of the total), compared to Moravia (8 cases, comprising 1.4 percent of the total) or Upper and Lower Austria (6 cases, comprising 1.1 percent of the total).¹⁵ Serfs emigrating from the estate of České Budějovice, on the other hand, preferred the capital city of Vienna to provincial Prague. Even though Upper Austria is not far from České Budějovice, the rural population tended to migrate to Lower Austria, where Vienna is located. Men migrated in lower numbers than women, but over greater distances.

13 'Micromobility', which was a part of everyday life in rural society, is the term given to migration within a range of 14 km from the place of residence, see: Andersson (2018, 83-9) and Wyžga (2019, 195-262).

14 It would be extremely interesting to analyse migration across language 'borders', because in the proximity of the town of České Budějovice there were villages with both Czech and German inhabitants. A more precise distinction between the Czech and German nationality emerged as a result of growing nationalism after 1848.

15 The issue of immigration and emigration between the Czech and Austrian lands has been addressed in Komlosy (2003, 150-205, 282-92).

Migrants' Reasons for Relocating

It is very unlikely that the rural population wandered randomly around the country. If a serf applied for release from serfdom, he or she already had an idea about what they wanted to do by migrating.¹⁶ It was possible to give only one reason in the application, but to increase one's chances of a positive response, it was not exceptional for an applicant to provide multiple arguments (Grulich 2019, 153–66).

Marriage

The key to understanding migration in this region of South Bohemia between 1750 and 1787 is marriage, which was the reason for migration in nearly two-thirds of applications (677 cases, comprising 63.1 percent of the total).¹⁷ The reason is simple – labour mobility was typically temporary, so rural people changed their place of sojourn without obtaining the prior consent of the landlord. There was no need to obtain a release letter for short-term labour mobility. The situation got complicated when a serf found a life partner in his or her new place of work. Entering a marriage in the marriage register required writing down the serf's feudal allegiance. Marriage then legalized a person's present sojourn.

Marriage migration was usually associated with the process of taking over a landholding arising from the retirement of the parental generation. It was also sometimes connected with release from the army. Through the medium of marriage, particularly in the case of the town or its suburbs, a long-term working sojourn away from the individual's locality of origin was legalized. Among the reasons for entering into marriage given in serfs' applications were death of their parents, poverty, employment opportunities, and the related earning of a livelihood.

Death of Parents

The second most important argument used in applications for change of feudal allegiance was the death of parents.¹⁸ Here it is necessary to bear in mind that in Bohemia during the second half of the eighteenth century, the age of death for adults varied between 54 and 57 years (Fialová

16 Research into reasons for migrating is limited by the richness of the sources, see: Hayhoe (2016, 101–24) ('Migrants' Reasons for Moving').

17 Marriage migration in the parish of České Budějovice (1750–1824) was analysed by Josef Grulich (2006).

18 The number and age of orphans have been examined in Skořepová (2016, 115–20).

et al. 1996, 190). For girls, the death of parents was associated with the necessity to search for a life partner and enter into marriage. Parentless adolescent boys preferred to enter military service, which represented a promise of financial security. In some cases, the death of parents is mentioned in connection with the necessity to learn a craft (as an apprentice) or gain practical experience in it (as a journeyman). Another alternative offered to boys and girls was employment as servants or labouring lodgers.¹⁹

Employment

Employment is mentioned not only in connection with death of parents. It was also linked with the pursuit of economic security, which was in turn associated with searching for a life partner, entering into marriage, entering into service, legalizing one's residence, incurring extraordinary expenses, enlisting in the army, obtaining a livelihood, or taking on a landholding.

Employment was directly related with entering into service. The release letters give evidence of some cases in which a young man from a village, thanks to his skills or education, was employed by a lord – a nobleman, a military commander, county marshal, or mayor. That sort of service involved a very different scope of employment from the duties performed by a servant or labouring lodger.²⁰

'A Softer Job'

Applications for release letters sometimes included requests for a 'softer job.' Agricultural work was physically demanding, and some individuals tried to avoid it by adducing hope of lighter work was a reason sometimes given by younger men applying for release into apprenticeship. According to the orphan registers, the age of apprentices varied between 5 and 22 years. Among the most popular occupations were mason, tailor, carpenter, and smith. Boys who wanted to learn crafts usually entered into apprenticeships with master craftsmen in the town of České Budějovice itself. There are also isolated cases in which application was made for release to study at the Piarist Gymnasium (a grammar school)

19 Guilds provided networks of support for traveling male journeymen, but they strictly controlled craft work of unmarried females, including servants, see: Ogilvie (2003, 115; 2019, chapter 5).

20 More about servants and labouring lodgers can be found in Grulich (2008, 203–20).

in České Budějovice. Rural girls who did not wish to work in agriculture sought jobs as maids in urban households. Women outnumbered men in the urban population because of the large number of female household servants.²¹

Recruiting and Military Service

The period under analysis here (1750–1787) included the Seven Years' War (1756–1763), which generated an increased demand for soldiers. Many recruits came from the rural population. In their applications for release from the estate, would-be soldiers usually announced that sooner or later they would leave the estate to serve in the army.²² In some cases, a father applied for the release of a son in the son's absence. Men who were serfs of the town were mostly recruited by the artillery, whose barracks were situated in České Budějovice. The army valued young men who able to practise certain crafts (such as smiths, wheelwrights, and saddlers). Enlistment in the army is observed in connection with the death of parents and the incurring of extraordinary expenses. It was expected that the individual's financial obligations would be covered by the regular pay of a soldier. However, not every villager was interested in military service. In a number of cases, a man who had been designated to serve in the army was given a deadline by which he was required to secure a substitute to take his place.

From the Army to Civilian Life

Particularly after the end of the Seven Years' War (1763), there are also frequent cases in which a soldier returned to civilian life.²³ If he had not been released from serfdom before his enlistment in the army, he might apply for release after his return home. This took place in connection with a marriage, transfer of parental property, or completion of apprenticeship. There are also sporadic examples in which a soldier prolonged his

21 The labour migration of women – unlike that of men – is often neglected in historical sources and contemporary statistics, see: Hahn (2008, 85–98).

22 'The 'fiscal-military' state [...] converted taxpayers' money into mercenaries' salaries, thereby contributing to the mobilization of wage labor and its spatial mobility' (Lucassen and Lucassen 2009, 366).

23 By using lists of serfs from the estate of Protivín (1780–1830), Václav Černý demonstrated that between one-fifth and one-quarter of recruits had died during military service. He also documented that veterans sought to get married, take over a landholding and practice a craft after their return (Černý 2017, 23–37, 34–6).

military service several times. The return home took place within an interval of 7 to 21 years from enlistment. Some of the returnees resisted carrying out hard agricultural work, instead seeking to learn a craft and practice that occupation.

Old and Sick People

A serious problem was represented by the need to care for old and sick people. Serf applications show that the closest relatives were held responsible for providing for people in illness and old age. In such cases there were two possibilities. Ageing individuals sometimes applied for release letters that would enable them to live with offspring elsewhere, who promised to take care of them. Alternatively, adult offspring might apply for a release letter so they could return home to help their parents. The desire to take over ageing parents' property was another motivation for applying to return home to provide care in old age. In Bohemia until 1787, the youngest son was preferred as heir to the landholding, whereas after that year it was the eldest son who was supposed to inherit.²⁴

Better Livelihoods for Young and Old

Other documents preserved in connection with release letters provide evidence not only of care for ageing parents, but also of efforts to provide for physically handicapped children. Most frequent were applications from parents who connected the change of their place of residence with the possibility of providing a better subsistence for such children. In several cases they explicitly stated that they would be able to live from begging in another locality.²⁵

Scholars should scrutinize the reasons serfs gave on these applications. In order to obtain the issuance of a release letter and, above all, to avoid the fee for the issuance of the document, some exaggerated their age, sometimes even claiming to be over 100 years old. Advanced age was combined with illness, difficult living conditions, and alleged poverty (Grulich 2007, 271–5). In the case of men, poor physical condition could be further emphasized by a note stating that the man in question could not be drafted into the army. Many applicants tried to get permission for a 'soft job' by referring to their poor health. The above-mentioned argument

24 The development of the Bohemian law of inheritance is addressed in Velková (2009, 150–5).

25 Landlords were unwelcoming toward vagrants and beggars and punished them by imprisonment, see: Zeitlhofer (2014, 165).

was often used when someone wanted to learn a craft or study in the Piarist Gymnasium (a grammar school).

Conclusion

In the second half of the twentieth century, Czech Marxist historiography strove to paint a static picture of rural society,²⁶ deliberately representing a picture of the 'Dark Ages' in which serfs were fully occupied by forced labour services for their landlords, so that they were permanently tied to the land. Some versions of the concept of the so-called 'second serfdom' assume that the nobility and gentry completely dominated their serfs and made use of a variety of laws issued by the provincial authorities and ordinances issued by the nobility to enforce their exploitation of the serfs. Because of these laws and ordinances, it was argued, the spatial mobility of serfs was strictly controlled and intentionally restricted. From a Marxist perspective, the flight of the serfs was seen as one of the forms of class struggle.

However, recent studies on the migration and mobility of the rural population show a completely different situation. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, manorial authorities did not enforce effective control over their serfs did not completely limit migration and mobility in the countryside. Consequently, counter to the laws of the provincial authorities and the ordinances of the nobility, serfs left their estates of origin without permission in order to secure better livelihoods or higher earnings. If the lord to whom these serfs were subject learned by chance about their sojourn elsewhere, the general lack of manpower made it difficult to put them on trial for illicit departure from the estate. Usually, once their absence was discovered, their stay in their new location was legalized or they were required to return home but were not punished.

In a situation in which the whole area of South Bohemia and even some villages were divided among several different landlords, the noble landlords had no choice but to grant almost all applications by their serfs for a change of allegiance or release from serfdom. The idea that the manorial officers placed major obstacles in the way of issuing release letters is completely wrong, at least for this South Bohemian estate in the second half

26 Some western European historians defend the concept of a static rural society. For example, Scarlet Beauvalet-Boutouyrie's survey of French demographic history argues that France 'was a country with very little mobility, of which population was fundamentally stable. People lived in the parish in which they were born or close by' (Beauvalet-Boutouyrie 2008, 92).

of the eighteenth century. In the interests of free movement of labour and in conformity with the principle of reciprocity, the manorial officers approved, except for some cases, all the applications that were submitted for permission to change overlords or place of residence.

The analysis of the historical sources carried out in this article makes clear that acts of migration took place among all classes of rural society, but especially among those persons, whom the inheritance law did not guarantee taking over a family landholding.²⁷ Possession of a landholding was a key factor that influenced the spatial mobility of Bohemian serfs. In the light of the historical sources analysed in this article, it is possible to demonstrate the existence of a rural society which was not static but rather quite dynamic, in the sense that spatial movement played a significant role.²⁸

Acknowledgement

The research for this article was supported by the Czech Science Foundation/Grantová agentura České republiky (project No 21-16050S: 'Recruits, deserters, invalids, and veterans. Military service and its influence on the structure of the rural family in South Bohemia, 1780–1830').

Archival sources

SDAČB, TA, Ss: State District Archive in České Budějovice, České Budějovice Town Archive, Stará spisovna.

SRAT, PRRC, PD: State Regional Archives Třeboň, Parish registers of Roman Catholic Church, Parish Districts, Sbírka matrik Jihočeského kraje.

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27 From the point of view of Bohemian inheritance law, it was not permitted to divide a serf's landholding. If a couple had several offspring, only one of them (usually a son or a daughter's husband) was entitled to take over the family holding. All the other offspring were supposed to get an inheritance share and were expected to seek their living outside the family home (Procházka 1963, 453–511).

28 The idea of a rural society that was not static but rather very dynamic has also been demonstrated for Sweden and Poland (Andersson 2018, 239–51; Wyżga 2019, 405–10).

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