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The House of Creative Work – a Central European phenomenon? Places – practices – narratives – memories

“One of the most pressing needs of literary life there is a house in the immediate vicinity (...), where Warsaw writers could spend two or three days a week for creative work. We have no doubts that the beneficial effects of this on our writings would soon be profound” – this is how Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz, President of the Polish Writers' Union, responded to the initiative of Ewa Szelburg-Zarembina, Leopold Lewin and Aleksander Wat regarding the foundation of the House of Creative Work in the former residence of the Potulicki family in Obory near Warsaw. A year later, in 1948, the ceremonial opening of Obory took place – it was the first House of Creative Work in Poland.

Institutions emerging all over the country, such as the Journalist's House or the Chemist's House constituted an essential part of the everyday life and politics of the Polish People's Republic. The house in Obory, concentrating post-war cultural life, was at the same time a place of various tensions and contradictions caused by the specificity of this certain space (its history, architecture, ecosystem, cultural landscape). The multitude of activities of a political, artistic or social nature undertaken in the House of Creative Work prompts reflection on the division into the following spheres: official and unofficial, private and public, engaged and disengaged. Analysing Obory as a practiced place (told, described, remembered) breaks down the abstractness and arbitrariness of these divisions.

As part of the 4EU+ fellowship I had an opportunity to examine this institution as a social project in a broader, Central and Eastern European context. Although this special type of accommodation facility – with its 1920s and 1930s avant-garde sources and ideas later transformed into socialist realism – was supposed to spread to countries from the orbit of Soviet influence, discussion at Charles University revealed that the phenomenon in the Czech Republic was not as popular as in Poland. However, research during the fellowship gave me a chance to learn more about one example in particular – PEN Club chalet that was built on the eastern outskirts of the village Budislav with the encouragement of the writer Karel Čapek. It was a modern, low-cost building designed by the Prague

architect Stanislaw Tobek in 1938. This chalet – a retreat where Czechoslovak writers could meet, rest and work – will be an important reference for my further exploration.

The support of researchers at Charles University in Prague allowed me to reflect on the choice of perspective and helped me develop the methodological approach to the topic. The theoretical framework of the research is constituted by geocriticism, a literary methodology defined by Bertrand Westphal. This approach, reaching for the perspectives of other disciplines in my research and relying on architectural, photographic and film sources, as well as oral history and archival documents, can lead to a proper examination of the institution that reveals the dynamic nature of space and the significance of its transformations. It helps to define the essence of the process of changes that certain places undergo.

Comparative research during the fellowship was a perfect opportunity to learn more about a wide range of historical, social and economic aspects of our cultural area. Studying the history of creative work houses allowed for a more careful analysis of anecdotes that fit into the well-known narratives especially about the times of socialist realism and the political transformation of 1989; it gave an insight into *longue durée* of perception of creative work as well as a critical analysis of changes in the narrative field concerning its models in the Central and Eastern European context.