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WHEELWRIGHTING TODAY: TRANSFORMATION AND SUSTAINABILITY OF THE CRAFT IN CENTRAL EUROPE (AN EXAMPLE OF CZECHIA, SLOVAKIA AND POLAND)

Kołodziejstwo dziś: transformacja i zrównoważony rozwój rzemiosła w Europie Środkowej (na przykładzie Czech, Słowacji i Polski)

Abstract: The study deals with the transformation and current form of wheelwrighting in three Central European countries – the Czech Republic, Poland, and Slovakia. The introductory section informs about the research on the theme in the above territory, and using the example of the range of products, manufacturing technology and producers, it points out that traditional crafts can exist even today without maintaining their viability artificially. However, the text also takes into consideration how the craft has developed recently, and while evaluating its viability the author argues that the sustainability of wheelwrighting is affected not only by the economic purpose, but it is also its entertaining and tourist role and the nostalgia that begin to prove successful in addition to the former purely financial aspect. The original financial aspect shifts from the use of the wheelwright's products for transport and livelihood to the modern use of tradition and heritage concept in business, especially in emphasizing the symbolic value of the products of traditional craftsmanship for both the producer and the consumer. Moreover, it is not only the vision of economic profit but also the element of remembering and evoking the past that

are being pursued. Institutional protection of wheelwright's trade is equally important for the existence and sustainability of the craft.

Keywords: wheelwrighting, traditional craft, sustainability, heritage, Central Europe

Streszczenie. Artykuł dotyczy transformacji i obecnego stanu kołodziejstwa w trzech krajach Europy Środkowej: Czechach, Polsce i Słowacji. Część wprowadzająca informuje o badaniach nad tym rzemiosłem na powyższym terenie. Analizując asortyment, technologie wytwarzania i producentów, Autor dowodzi, że tradycyjne kołodziejstwo może istnieć do dziś bez sztucznego podtrzymywania jego żywotności. W tekście przedstawiono jednak również rozwój rzemiosła w ostatnim czasie. Oceniając jego kondycję Autor zwraca uwagę, że na trwałość kołodziejstwa wpływa nie tylko rachunek ekonomiczny, ale także jego rozrywkowa i turystyczna rola oraz nostalgia, dzięki czemu przeżywa ono swoisty renesans. Współczesne kołodziejstwo jest przykładem nowoczesnego wykorzystania tradycji i dziedzictwa w biznesie, szczególnie w nadawaniu symbolicznej wartości produktom tradycyjnego rzemiosła, co ma znaczenie zarówno dla producentów, jak i konsumentów. Co więcej, kołodziejstwo rozwija się jako element pamiętania i przywoływania przeszłości, do której nostalgicznie powracamy. Równie ważna dla jego istnienia i zrównoważonego rozwoju jest instytucjonalna ochrona kołodziejstwa.

Słowa kluczowe: kołodziejstwo, tradycyjne rzemiosło, zrównoważony rozwój, dziedzictwo, Europa środkowa

Introduction

Quite recently, a study by the Hungarian archaeologist Mária Bondár has been published, which relates to the finds of wheels and wheeled vehicles and in the introductory part of which the archaeologist reflects on their significance. She aptly points out that nowadays we believe that

the transformation of our way of life is associated mainly with present-day innovations linked to the information technology and robotics. Nevertheless, our lives are influenced by earlier discoveries, some of which date back to prehistoric times (Bondár 2018: 271). The wheel, which has accompanied humans for more than five thousand years (Šinkovec 2014) and whose production is closely related to wheelwrighting, is one such. Products of this craft are commonly encountered not only at museums and exhibitions (e.g. Bullard 2020: 162-163), but also in the field. Like the profession of joiners or carpenters, the craft of the wheelwright is primarily associated with working with wood, which is experiencing a renaissance as a material, is considered to be the material of the future and is the subject of discussion in many disciplines (May 2018). This situation may thus logically evoke the question of whether, alongside the demand and appearance of wheelwrights' products, the knowledge of the wheelwright's craft and, above all, the profession of the wheelwright itself have been preserved, and in what form. This is the question that this article seeks to answer.

In the submitted treatise, I try to illustrate the transformation of wheelwrighting and its current form with examples of the range of products, manufacturing technology and bearers of the craft themselves. These three basic elements will be subject to a discourse in the diachronic line with focus on the period from the year 1945 until the present. In the synchronic line, the text will deal with the current situation – the form of wheelwright's craft in the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Poland. The aim of the study is to build on existing scholarly professional texts dealing with the viability of cultural heritage. Using the example of a selected Central European territory, I want to highlight the issue of sustainability and functionality of wheelwrighting at present. Specifically, I will argue that the sustainability of this craft is influenced not only by its economic function, but that, in addition to the former purely financial aspect, the entertaining and tourist role and the nostalgia are now becoming increasingly important. An equally important role in the existence and sustainability of wheelwrighting is then played by the interests of producers to preserve the cultural heritage of their ancestors, to do work that they enjoy and that

is a manifestation of their individual creativity, as well as by the institutional protection of the craft.

The article mainly reflects on the wheelwright's craft; its primary aim is not to deal with crafts in general. However, as contemporary scientific texts dedicated to the sustainability of cultural heritage show, many aspects of the issues addressed in the text, using the example of wheelwrighting, also apply to other traditional crafts.

In addition to obtaining knowledge from literature and selected verified websites, the scholarly work consists mainly in the field research. I rely, to a large extent, on the knowledge gained from the previous long-term ongoing thematic field research carried out in 2009 – 2019, which dealt with traditional transport in Central Europe and applied the method of participant observation and semi-structured interviews as well as processing of questionnaires (e.g. questionnaires of the Polish Ethnological Society stored in Cieszyn). Among the persons giving interviews were two wheelwrights and a respondent whose father made a living from this craft, which inspired me to start paying more attention to this topic in the context of Central Europe. I therefore decided to carry out further short-term field surveys the aim of which was to conduct participant observation and semi-structured interviews with selected respondents who formerly made and now are making a living from wheelwrighting.

Research on this Theme to Date

Information about wheelwrighting can in the mid-20th century be found rather in chapters of monographs relating to national history and geography and dealing with inhabitants' means of subsistence, whether in a narrowly defined mountain region (e.g., Blau 1917) or in a large area of then Austria-Hungary (Heyrowsky 1896). Wheelwright's craft did also not escape attention of historians (Winter 1906: 452–453), and the theme is included in encyclopaedic handbooks of that time in the form of entries which pay attention to the characterization of the craft, production of

wheelwrights' products, and description of wheelwrights' tools (Kolektiv 1899: 535–536; Kotyška, Teyssler 1931: 736–738).

After the year 1945, due to social, political and especially technological changes, the number of wheelwrights began to decrease considerably. Despite this, the craft could be at least partially documented in the then Czechoslovakia and Poland in the second half of the 20th century. Several books were published which contained detailed techniques and sketches of particular parts of wheelwrights' products and tools (Gnoiński 1952; Chruściel 1982; Kocura 1956). These publications were intended for self-taught persons, joiners and wheelwrights as training guides. We witness a certain paradox when several publications were made available to the public at a time when the craft was significantly disappearing. This fact can also be noticed, among other things, in the case of traditional transport in Central Europe, where intensive ethnographic research on this topic was carried out, at the pan-European level, only in the 1950s–1970s. For example in the 1970s, this research resulted in an international publication about transport, which was titled *Land Transport in Europe* (Fenton, Podolák, Rasmussen 1973). This can be explained by the foundation of several scholarly workplaces – for example in Poland, the Zakład Etnografii Instytutu Historii Kultury Materialnej PAN (see Pieńczak, Diakowska-Kohut 2013: 63–68) was established in 1953. That time also saw institutional support to the creation of ethnographic atlases (e.g., Kłodnicki, Pieńczak, Koźmińska 2017) and the development of international cooperation, e.g. in the form of the establishment of the *Ethnological Commission for the History and Development of European Agriculture SIEF* (Jacobeit 1967). It cannot be also overlooked the fact that many elements of traditional culture were at risk of extinction and those responsible became aware of the necessity to carry on rescue documentation in the field (Smrčka 2017: 10). Between 1945 and 1989, the terminology relating to traditional means of transport can thus be found in many studies and chapters dealing with traditional transport, both in Czech (e.g. Baran 1973; Vondruška 1989), Slovak (e.g. Gunda 1955; Andel, Markuš 1971; Paríková 1979) and Polish literature (e.g. Szymik 1972; Kłodnicki

1981). These treatises are mainly devoted to the systematization of means of transport produced by the wheelwright.

However, the social and cultural background of the craft, mainly the wheelwrights themselves, of the period from World War II to the 1990s was not sufficiently documented. With some exceptions (Janota, Linhart 1984: 126–130; Petráň 1985: 291, 396, 818), ethnographers did not pay enough attention to that. Deeper knowledge about the history of the craft as well as data capturing everyday life of this occupation, obtained from wheelwrights through their memories and stories, are lacking. Most information is traceable rather in personal memoirs or written sources (e.g. Hlubuček 1954). Even the 1968 comprehensive ethnographic work documenting the findings of Czechoslovak ethnography, *Československá vlastivěda* [Czechoslovakia in All Its Aspects], did not pay comprehensive attention to this craft (Kolektiv 1968). The topic is not reflected in ethnographic atlases either, apart from the use of wheelwrights' products as traditional means of transport, which is mapped in detail in the publication *Polski atlas etnograficzny* [Polish Ethnographic Atlas] (Gajek 1958; Gajek 1960; see Drożdż 2018) and in Kazimierz Moszyński's comprehensive publication titled *Kultura ludowa Słowian* (Moszyński 1967: 625–692), dedicated to traditional folk culture.

A change in the ethnological research on the wheelwright's craft came partially after the year 1989. Wheelwrights began to receive much more attention in discipline's principal encyclopaedic works (Kaňavský 1995; Válka 2007). It is possible to find entries that put wheelwrighting in a broader socio-cultural background, and not only those dealing with wheelwrighting itself. Ethnologists also began to pay more attention to the contemporary form of wheelwrighting, including its transformation (e.g. Jarošová, Lid'ák, Michalička 2011: 60–77; Šimša 2018: 56–71). Methodological handbooks on disappearing professions, including wheelwrighting, can also be noticed (e.g. Zajac, Hince 2017). The added value of these outputs consists in authors' efforts to draw on face-to-face meetings with the last surviving wheelwrights and to document their work and professional life, including in the audio-visual form (e.g. Šimša 2005).

Transformation of the Wheelwright's Craft

Craft Bearers – Number of Wheelwrights

It is appropriate to understand wheelwrighting as an element of traditional culture which has dynamically developed and changed over time; this can be exemplified by the range of offered products, the manufacturing technology and the bearers of this craft themselves. This process continues even currently, which will be illustrated in this study, using the example of wheelwrights who are still working.

It is not easy to ascertain the exact number of wheelwrights in the countries observed by us, and the question remains whether the correct figure would be reached. In fact, it would be absolutely necessary to clearly define the criteria that we would currently apply to define someone as a wheelwright. Because not all wheelwrights are the same, as one of the respondents aptly described:

We visited many events [...] and always somebody came and said: Sure, wheelwrights, I am also apprenticed. And I tell him: Well, and did you do that? No, I worked at an agricultural cooperative. [...] That's the vast majority of those people who said they were apprenticed but never did it because they were apprenticed at a time when rubber wheel were used at those cooperatives¹.

Accordingly, the question concerning the main criterion arises: whether it is the inscription of a craftsman on the official national list, or the mere completion of a vocational school focussed on woodwork or directly on wheelwrighting, or the active pursuit of the profession. If, in a selective manner, a wheelwright is a person specialising exclusively in the craft of wheelwrighting and actively engaged in this branch, which is the main source of his or her livelihood, then we can speak about a few individuals, in particular four craftsmen in the Czech Republic, three of whom have been inscribed on the national list of the *Bearers of the Tradition of Folk Crafts*,² while the Slovak inventory of the *Centre for Folk Art Production* mentions only two wheelwrights. The first one is an

¹ Aleš Uherka (1974), wheelwright, recorded on 3 August 2021, Nyklovice (CZ).

² <https://lidovaremesla.cz/web/> (cited on 5 September 2021).

autodidact who specializes in the production of combs and produces also jewels and rakes. As I have found out, the other wheelwright died, and as his daughter told be in an interview, his grandson deals occasionally with the craft, however, he earns his living by another occupation³. In Poland, wheelwrighting appears neither on any official national list nor on the Polish Intangible Cultural Heritage List. However, several wheelwright's companies operate in Poland and some of them produce traditional wooden waggons and sledges⁴.

The number of persons dealing with wheelwright's production essentially increases if we consider apprenticed joiners, who make items typical for wheelwrights, e.g. wooden wheels and sledges, just as a supplementary production, to be among the wheelwrights⁵. For this reason, there are rather several workshops specializing solely in the production of wheelwrights' products in the monitored three countries.

Bearers of the Craft – Transfer of Knowledge

Wheelwrighting can be classified as a traditional handicraft the knowledge of which is part of folk culture; provided, of course, that we accept the thesis that folklore includes not only verbal elements but also material

³ Karol Smrek was one of the last wheelwrights in Slovakia who earned their living by the craft. See the database with practitioners of the Centre for Folk Art Production; <http://www.uluv.sk/product/smrek-karol-2469/> (cited on 5 September 2021).

⁴ For example Manufaktura Mendyka, <http://www.mendyka.pl/> (cited on 5 September 2021); Firma Andrzejewski, <http://www.andrzejewski.com.pl/AND/firma.html>; despite the seemingly high number of wheelwrights in Poland, their number is not so high. For example a face-to-face meeting and informal conversation with the ethnologist Paulina Suchecka showed that there is no individual wheelwright in the Wrocław area, and currently it is difficult to find a wooden wagon for the collection.

⁵ If we do not take into account interviews with joiners and wheelwrights' descendants, three interviews for this study were conducted with wheelwrights who are currently active in the branch in the Czech Republic – in north-eastern Moravia, the western Giant Mountains, and the Bohemian-Moravian Highlands. In Slovakia, one interview was made per phone, and in Poland a wheelwright's workshop in Dolsk was visited.

culture (Wilson: 85)⁶. The reason why I mention this fact in connection with wheelwrights is, as follows. Wheelwrighting fulfils the criterion of intergenerational transfer, which is peculiar to the tradition (Shils: 15–16). If we, in the case of tradition, emphasized the intergenerational transfer of knowledge in a verbal form, without using written records, and if this concerned a *verbal* or also *folk* tradition (Kandert 2007: 1065), which works in many areas of traditional culture, including traditional transport (Smrčka 2021: 16), we come across an interesting fact. It was possible to be apprenticed to a wheelwright at school – in Poland and in the then Czechoslovakia even as late as in the 1970s⁷. Parallel to that, like in other traditional professions – e.g. coachmen or woodcutters – experience was passed down, in addition to the institutional form, mostly from generation to generation, from father to son. Some wheelwrights learned the craft in their family even in the period of socialism, and they also completed their apprenticeship as wheelwrights at school.

I was lucky as when I became an apprentice, an old master worked there, one from the old times like my father. And I remember when we came to the workshop for the first time, he lined us up and asked what our parents did. Well, and when he came to me I told him my mother was at home and my father worked as a wheelwright. And he said – I'll keep my eye on you, kid. And must tell you I was trying to do my best all the time and I always got poorer marks from him. And today I know why he did that. Because he forced me to work on myself⁸.

⁶ Nevertheless, a possible volatility in interpretation must be accentuated, when tradition and folklore acquire different connotations of their meaning in particular countries (Testa 2016: 233–235), and the terms can be understood as a tool of nationalism (Kuligowski 2014: 323), commertionalisation, or overuse, which we commonly encounter, on the other hand, also in the case of heritage (Harrison 2013: 1–5).

⁷ Augustin Krystynik (1952), wheelwright, recorded on 31 March 2016, Nový Hrozenkov (CZ); Zenon Mendyka (1957), wheelwright, recorded on 20 July 2021, Dolsk – Księginki (PL).

⁸ Augustin Krystynik (1952), wheelwright, recorded on 31 March 2016, Nový Hrozenkov (CZ).

In contrast to what is mentioned above, the apprenticeship programme for wheelwrighting does no longer exist in the countries monitored by us. Present-day young or middle-aged wheelwrights have been mostly trained as joiners who learned the wheelwright's work only by the transfer of knowledge within their families, from older relatives and without getting any formal education.

Sometimes eight, ten years ago my wife began to poke me because I worked in a woodworking company and I was very unsatisfied there. It lasted for about one year before she talked me into learning the (wheelwright's) craft from my grandfather⁹.

Due to the lack of specialized vocational schools, many of those interested became wheelwrights by building on their experience as carpenters and learning the knowledge necessary for the wheelwright's work from available handbooks. This was also the case for the respondent who, together with his son and daughter-in-law, runs a wheelwright workshop with about 25 employees in the area of the small town of Dolsk in Poland; the workshop focusses on the production of wheels and horse-drawn vehicles, mainly carriages. Our respondent who also is the founder of the company originally worked in machinery. In 1989, he decided to return to carpentry and continue his father's profession. Since 1995, due to the demand, he has also focussed on wheelwrighting. However, he had to get the information on how to make wheels and waggons from handbooks. Wheelwrighting was no longer taught at vocational schools.

It was heavy work, because everything had to be made manually. In Poznan you could become trained in everything - carpentry, smithery, construction of machines [...] 1968 –1973 [...] But wheelwrighting no more¹⁰.

⁹ Aleš Uherka (1974), wheelwright, recorded on 3 August 2021, Nyklovice (CZ).

¹⁰ Zenon Mendyka (1957), wheelwright, recorded on 20 July 2021, Dolsk – Księginki (PL).

These examples illustrate the transformation of the bearers of the craft. While at the beginning of the second half of the 20th century it was still possible to complete apprenticeship as a wheelwright, and many had the opportunity to gain knowledge from a relative in their family, currently only a few wheelwrights are active who can pass on their experience to the younger generation.

Although it is possible to speak almost about the near extinction of wheelwrights, it is not the case for the bearers of the craft as such. Modernisation and globalisation paradoxically foster a desire for traditional crafts and their products (Twigger Holroyd, Cassidy, Evans and Walker 2017: 287; Borges 2011: 203), which can be demonstrated by the wheelwright's craft. Indeed, contemporary producers have confirmed the interest in their services. Thus, despite the diminishing opportunities for the intergenerational knowledge transfer in selected wheelwright families, we can see a resurgence of this craft. Other craftsmen working with wood are showing interest in wheelwrighting, and some of whom have managed to specialise entirely in wheelwrighting¹¹. Due to the lack of wheelwrights, it is the joiners who make wheelwrights' products and for whom the production of a wagon or sledge becomes a rather interesting source of diversification, the possibility of developing creativity and extra money (Photo 1)¹².

¹¹ This concerned also our respondent who began to deal with wheelwrighting after 1989, and he searched for information in books and with contemporaries; Zenon Mendyka (1957), wheelwright, recorded on 20 July 2021, Dolsk – Księginki (PL).

¹² Miroslav Kůs (1960), artist joiner, recorded on 30 December 2019, Kašperské Hory (CZ).



Photo 1: Local joiners make a sledge for the mountain village of Modrava in the Bohemian Forest. Kašperské Hory (CZ). Photo by Aleš Smrčka 2019.

In addition to the intergenerational transfer of knowledge in the family, which, however, has become unique in-between, we also witness the revitalization of the craft. This process could be understood as a kind of adaptation to the present, when “no tradition can be picked up in a static or unchanged form“ (Dahlin, Svensson 2021: 6). The production becomes a supplementary matter, the technology has been modernized, and the products do not necessarily have to serve for their original purposes. Simultaneously, it does no longer have to be wheelwrights who are the bearers of the craft and who have gained their knowledge of wheelwrighting in their family or at school.

Development of the Range of Products and Technology

The transformation of craftsmanship and, in general, tradition and heritage is amongst natural properties. Tradition is a never-ending dynamic process (Jeřábek: 1), which can also be seen in wheelwrighting. Throughout its existence this craft has renewed and extended its product range. Its production profile changed already in the Middle Ages and the early modern period. Wheelwrights dealt no longer only with the production of wheels and simple carts, but, alongside the spread of the craft to the countryside, also with the production of farm tools (Válka 2007: 378). At the beginning of the 20th century, the range of products made by wheelwrights expanded to include wooden bodies for cars, buses, and lorries (e.g. Kocura 1956: 199-201). Even the contemporary wheelwrights receive inquiries for the production of wooden wheels for historic cars¹³, or for the manufacture of wooden bodyworks for buses so that their serviceable replicas could be made (Photo 2)¹⁴.



Photo 2: Wheelwright Augustin Krystyník and bus bodywork. Nový Hrozenkov (CZ).
Photo by Aleš Smrčka 2016.

¹³ Monika Mendyka (1978), representative of wheelwright's workshop, recorded on 19 July 2021, Dolsk – Księginki (PL).

¹⁴ Augustin Krystynik (1952), wheelwright, recorded on 31 March 2016, Nový Hrozenkov (CZ).

It is therefore not possible to insist on semantic, functional and technological immutability in the context of the safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage. Cultural heritage is sustainable to the extent that it can be adaptable to changes through transformation (Holtorf 2018: 6). This transformation can also be noticed in the wheelwright's craft, based on informants' testimonies, in the period we have studied, meaning after 1945 up to the present.

My grandfather with the auntie, his sister, remembered that they operated great-grandfather's lathe by turning a crank (before the Second World War) [...] They made many things by hand, because my grandfather told me he could acquire the first machines and mechanisation only after the war. Only he. The great-grandfather was used to making everything by hand. He was born in 1888 and he completed his apprenticeship in the early 20th century so he was used to manual work. Only my grandfather got some machines after the war [...] And the grandfather when something new came along he replaced that. Some light progress was running. Some original things have remained here in the workshop, some not¹⁵.

For example at the Mendyka family wheelwright's workshop in Dolsk–Księginki, while making traditional wooden carriages they pay attention to adhering to the original technologies, if the customer requires maximum authenticity and does not care about the final price of the product (Photo 3, 4). However, besides the traditional handwork, they also use modern computer technologies, for example for the design and production of carriage frames, which are then in detail finished by hand. This confirms the use of digital technologies in handicraft (Nimkulrat 2020)¹⁶.

¹⁵ Aleš Uherka (1974), wheelwright, recorded on 3 August 2021, Nyklovice (CZ).

¹⁶ Monika Mendyka (1978), representative of wheelwright's workshop, recorded on 19 July 2021, Dolsk – Księginki (PL).



Photo 3: A view of one of the halls at the Mendyka wheelwright's manufactory. Dolsk-Księginki (PL). Photo by Aleš Smrčka 2021.

Nevertheless, the process of partial technological transformation of traditional crafts can be viewed positively. Many researchers consider the innovation to be one of the important characteristics needed for the sustainability of a craft. They emphasize the necessity of being opened to changes in order to maintain necessity, including economic necessity (e.g. Chan 2018; Wanniarachchi, Dissanayake and Downs 2020). The importance of economic returns, and thus the need for the partial adaptation of the production, was confirmed by the wheelwrights themselves.

Today, we face economic pressures. If I have to do that to contribute at least a little bit to the household budget, I just can't do that all by hand. Planning and cutting in the old-fashioned way. You just can't. The simpler process on those machines will offer me that it's also more precise. It would take a long time to get to the precision of the machine. That would be economically much worse¹⁷.

¹⁷ Aleš Uherka (1974), wheelwright, recorded on 3 August 2021, Nyklovce (CZ).



Photo 4: Zenon Mendyka, founder of the family company. Dolsk- Księginki (PL). Photo by Aleš Smrčka 2021.

Although elements of partial technological innovation can be observed in the present-day wheelwright's craft, it is still handwork that predominates in wheelwright production, and the currently used production technology correlates to a large extent with the form before the year 1945. This can be exemplified by the tools and wood used. Some wheelwrights buy this raw material after this has dried out using industrial methods. At the same time, they air-dry some of their wood somewhere near their workshop for several years, in order to preserve the flexibility of the raw material, which is needed, for example, in the manufacture of wheel spokes (Photo 5). The degree of technological transformation thus depends on individual wheelwright workshops and producers. This can also be seen in the division of labour. Some wheelwrights, in order to reduce their dependence on others, also do forging of the product by themselves¹⁸.

¹⁸Aleš Uherka (1974), wheelwright, recorded on 3 August 2021, Nyklovice (CZ); Metal parts for wheelwright products are treated at the Mendyka family workshop in the village of Księginki near the town of Dolsk (PL).



Photo 5: Drying the timber intended for spokes. Nyklovce (CZ). Photo by Aleš Smrčka 2021.

The transformation of the wheelwright's craft in Central Europe concerns not only the technology but also the range of products. In addition to the fact that at the beginning of the 20th century wheelwrights commonly produced not only wheels but also bodyworks (Kocura 1956: 199-201), before the year 1945 customers also came to the wheelwright to have small items for their household made. Traditional rural wheelwrighting also included the manufacture of hand tools – scythe handles, rakes and various handles.

I know from my memories that my great-grandfather was very defensive. He didn't want to do that. He didn't do that until he retired, and only when he was a very old man, he started making rakes. He didn't see that as profitable before. But he made that as a wedding present for my dad. It's a neat, beautifully cut [...] I don't do that today. Nobody even comes to me anymore. Hobby market's offer

is better. It's unnecessarily thicker, less well-crafted, but it's sufficient¹⁹.

Nowadays, it is hobby markets that take over the sale of wooden tools. Wheelwrights focus mainly on the production or reconstruction of decorative carriages and barouches, fire engines and wooden carts for clubs, currently used for entertainment or presentation on festive occasions. In one case I have noted a specialisation in the manufacture of sledges²⁰.

Sustainability of Wheelwrighting at Present

The sustainability of a traditional craft depends on its necessity and functionality. When we asked present-day craftsmen–wheelwrights why they operate their trades, we received several answers. Apart from livelihood, it is the pleasure of the work as well as the continuing tradition of their ancestors that play a significant role. This was mostly an argument of the wheelwrights who experienced the craft in their families. Nevertheless, it is the economic aspect that plays a crucial role, where the motivation is based on the demand for wheelwrights' products and thus the possibility of making a living from the craft.

¹⁹ Aleš Uherka (1974), wheelwright, recorded on 3 August 2021, Nyklovice (CZ).

²⁰ Farm sledges are produced e.g. by the Nosek family in the Czech village of Roprachtice, which is situated in the western part of the Giant Mountains; Josef Nosek (1930), wheelwright, recorded on 6 March 2013, Roprachtice.



Photo 6: A wooden wagon in the city of Liptovský Mikuláš (SK). Photo by Aleš Smrčka 2015.

However, if we ask ourselves what motivates the persons potentially interested in wheelwright products today, and thus the sustainability of the craft, we are usually no longer looking at the economic level. While before World War II traditional wooden means of transport (wagons and sledges) were commonly used for subsistence transport in Central Europe, after 1945 wooden wagons were, with a few exceptions, no longer used (Photo 6)²¹. This was also associated with the growing mechanisation and development of road freight traffic. During our research, only one Czech wheelwright, who lives in north-eastern Moravia, told us that he had

²¹ For example, Ewa Kocój mentions wooden wagons to have been used by shepherds as late as in the 1990s in the Carpathian region in the Polish-Slovak borderlands (Kocój 2018). Within the research on traditional transport in selected Czech mountain ranges (Giant Mountains, Bohemian Forest, western Beskids, and Javorníky Mountains) between 2009 and 2020 I met informants in the field who remembered transport on wooden wagons, but the means of transport mostly had rubber wheels.

received an order for several sledges for dung²². Some traditional means of transport no longer transport materials for the purpose of earning livelihood; in addition to the former purely economic reasons it is currently entertainment, tourism and nostalgia that help maintain their existence.

Several authors call the situation when a craft brings *new life to a culturally significant design, product, or practice*, “revitalisation” (Twigger Holroyd, Cassidy, Evans and Walker 2017: 288). It is however necessary to bear in mind that the use of the original means of transport for sport and tourist purposes is not a temporary phenomenon; e.g. the farm sledge with horn-shaped runners, called a “rohačky”, was used for tourist purposes on the Polish and Czech side of the Giant Mountains as early as at the beginning of the 19th century (Steć and Walczak 1962: 234). A certain continuity of the function of traditional forms of transport, which was only extended or transformed into the form of e.g. races, can be observed even today (Krišková 2021: 68; Nováková 2008; Nováková 2020: 60; Smrčka 2021).

The present-day wheelwrights have only a few customers who use wheelwright products for farming. Interviews with Czech craftsmen show that their clientele consists mainly of village associations that have old fire engines or wagons, used in various festive parades, reconstructed²³. The clientele of a family-run wheelwright firm in Poland, specialising mainly in the manufacture of carriages and in the reconstruction of barouches, includes memory institutions and, above all, wealthy customers for whom horse breeding is also a pastime. They take part in various horse races with their carriages. Another group of customers of the Mendyka workshop in Poland is made up of people interested in history or of tradesmen for whom the reconstruction of an old wooden wagon represents a certain memory and nostalgia for their ancestor who founded the business. At the same time, they emphasize the long history and tradition of their

²² Augustin Krystynik (1952), wheelwright, recorded on 31 March 2016, Nový Hrozenkov (CZ).

²³ Aleš Uherka (1974), wheelwright, recorded on 3 August 2021, Nyklovice (CZ); Augustin Krystynik (1952), wheelwright, recorded on 31 March 2016, Nový Hrozenkov (CZ).

family business, which they use in its promotion (see Petrova 2018). As a concrete example, the owners of the wheelwright's workshop gave the example of a bakery products merchant who had an old baker's waggon made according to a period photograph²⁴.

These examples show that the original purely economic aspect, related to the use of wheelwright products for transport and subsistence, significantly changes. It moves to the level of using the tradition and heritage in business, especially in the emphasis on the symbolic value of traditional craft products for both producer and consumer (Parts, Rennu, Jääts, Matsin and Metslang 2011: 418). At the same time, it is not only the economic profit motive that is applied, but also the element of remembering and nostalgia and the evocation of the original atmosphere of the past. Wheelwrights are now also addressed by customers who are interested in restoring an old waggon or making a wooden wheel just to decorate a farmhouse or the interior of a building²⁵.

In addition to its functionality, also the institutional protection plays an equally important role in the existence and sustainability of wheelwrighting. The Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia have not inscribed the wheelwright's craft on their national lists, which are based on the 2003 UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. The Czech Republic is a certain exception in the safeguarding of this craft – since 2001 the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic has awarded selected craftsmen the title “Bearer of the Tradition of Folk Craft” every year, which has been bestowed upon three wheelwrights to date. These declare that this award helps them to gain more publicity among the general public, ensures their promotion, and has an important symbolic value for them. This award may be the reason why small wheelwright workshops have managed to survive in the Czech Republic. The inscription on the national list of the intangible cultural heritage requires mandatory criteria that each craftsman has to meet – e.g. to ensure the transfer of knowledge from generation to generation. Practitioners

²⁴ Monika Mendyka (1978), representative of wheelwright's workshop, recorded on 19 July 2021, Dolsk – Księginki (PL).

²⁵ Aleš Uherka (1974), wheelwright, recorded on 3 August 2021, Nyklovce (CZ).

awarded with the title “Bearer of the Tradition of Folk Craft” also have to adhere to traditional technologies²⁶. However, two opposing tendencies may clash with each other here. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish when a change in the production process is an intervention into the technology that completely changes the form of the craft and has nothing to do with its variant, and when it is a necessary innovation that ensures the sustainability of the craft in the current market.

Conclusion

The example of wheelwrighting illustrates that a traditional craft can still exist today. However, this requires the craft’s social function and the customer demand for its products, including the resulting economic benefit for the producers, to be maintained; this is also one of the fundamental prerequisites for the sustainability of cultural heritage (Olalare 2019: 7–8). Nevertheless, a shift in the function of wheelwright products can be observed. While before the year 1945 wheelwright products – most often wheels, waggons and sledges – were used in transport and farming, the change in technology and the development of motorised road transport caused the situation to have changed in the second half of the 20th century. The original functions were greatly diminished, the demand for wheeled products steeply declined, and the wheelwright’s craft was in danger of becoming extinct. This is also illustrated by the fact that the last apprenticeship courses specialising in wheelwrighting were cancelled in the early 1970s. A similar development applies to all three countries under study, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia. Revitalisation that allowed the traditional crafts to exist today and restored their viability has contributed to the safeguarding of the craft, at least in the Czech Republic and Poland (e.g. Dahlin, Svensson 2021: 6; Twigger Holroyd, Cassidy, Evans and Walker 2017: 288). Wheelwright products – traditional wooden waggons and sledges – are now mainly used for entertainment and tourism. The nostalgia and interest in remembering

²⁶ <https://lidovaremesla.cz/web/> (cited on 5 September 2021).

the history of transport cannot be overlooked. Identification with cultural heritage and its use in business play a positive role.

The revitalisation of the wheelwright's craft was also supported by the political and social transformation. Thanks to the economic liberalisation in the countries of Central Europe after the year 1989 and the opportunity for free enterprise, individuals who desired to continue their family tradition began to deal with wheelwrighting. Wheelwright products are occasionally made, in dependence on the demand, also by some joiners. This is a quite significant sign of the transformation of the wheelwright's craft. The boundaries between the joiner's and the wheelwright's, possibly also carpenter's, craft are blurring.

After the year 1945, the wheelwright's craft also experienced a partial change in technology, when electric lathes began to be used, for example. Quite big wheelwright's workshops, such as the one visited in Poland, uses modern computer technology in their production process. However, there have been no significant changes in the production process that is still dominated by handwork. The range of products has not been essentially changed either.

Nonetheless, the sustainability of the wheelwright's craft in Central Europe is still very uncertain at present. In Slovakia, if we do not include among wheelwrights also those carpenters who make extra money by making wheels, the craft has probably vanished, according to our findings. A few individuals involved in wheelwrighting are active in the Czech Republic. In Poland there are wheelwright's workshops with several dozen employees. The revitalisation of the craft and the revival of wheelwright products in the Czech Republic and Poland, which now fulfil new functions (entertainment, tourism, nostalgia) and which are in demand from the customers, have ensured the longevity of the craft.

This is also one of the important conclusions of our research – the sustainability of wheelwrighting is not only influenced by the economic function, but, in addition to the former purely financial aspect, the role of entertainment, tourism and nostalgia is now becoming increasingly important. It cannot be overlooked that making wheelwrights' products is a pleasure and an expression of individual creativity for some craftsmen,

nor the fact that some actors consider this craft to be a cultural heritage passed down to them by their ancestors.

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