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Miners as depositories of mining tradition

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Abstract:

The article analyses the impact of mining traditions on the regional identity of Upper Silesia and addresses the issue of protecting the mining heritage in the face of industrial and social transformation. The authors point out that decades of mining industry in Silesia have shaped a specific work ethos, habits and mores, which are currently at risk of disappearing as a result of the decarbonization process and the changing the industry structure. Special attention is paid to both tangible and intangible aspects of heritage, such as souvenirs, decorative objects, medals, as well as the traditions of the cult of Saint Barbara. The role of miners as depositories of the memory of the profession and its symbolism is emphasized. Examples of good practice in heritage preservation include international projects, such as CoalHeritage, supporting the promotion of coal industry heritage. The article emphasizes that the preservation of exhibits, documentation of their history and the relationships among the mining families are crucial for consolidating the regional identity and transmitting the cultural values to future generations. The need for further actions to protect and popularize the unique mining heritage is also indicated.

Keywords: mining industry, tradition, heritage, heritage protection, depository, mining souvenirs, mining symbols



1. Introduction

Although mining traditions are associated with many regions in Europe, some of them originating in former Germany, Austria-Hungary or Great Britain, the authors in the text focused on the area of Upper Silesia in Poland. Upper Silesia is an area associated in Poland with industry, mainly heavy industry such as mining industry and metallurgy. For decades, the identity of this region has been shaped by numerous mining traditions and customs. The miner's ethos of hard work and the organization of social life around mining plants were visible in many aspects of life. However, in the face of social changes, the decarbonization process, the development of renewable energy sources and the European Union's policy, we are observing the disappearance of mining traditions and the tangible and intangible cultural heritage developed and nurtured by previous generations. Observing these changes, we should feel responsible for preserving as detailed information, documentation and memory as possible about mining traditions, technologies, as well as socio-cultural aspects. This is extremely important from the point of view of history and the possibility of presenting it to future generations. In order to protect and preserve the heritage related to the mining industry, and thus preserve the identity of the communities in the regions associated with hard coal mines, numerous projects and much work are being implemented to transform these regions.

One of the projects related to the preservation of material aspects of heritage is the transformation of closed mines into tourist facilities. One example of such activities is the Guido Mine or the Queen Luiza Adit. As tourist facilities, they provide visitors with the opportunity to visit the mine underground and learn about the machines, technology and conditions in the mine. However, such activities require considerable work and financial resources. Similarly, we can mention the Stara Kopalnia Science and Art Centre in Wałbrzych or the Former Mine in Nowa Ruda.

However, it is important to preserve intangible heritage. In this case, the celebration of St. Barbara's Day can be mentioned as the best example. St. Barbara's Day celebrations include both religious and secular ceremonies. Miners wear ceremonial uniforms and organize public marches, which promotes the integration of local communities. Celebrating together is important for building interpersonal bonds in a work environment that is often life-threatening. These traditions are passed down from generation to generation and constitute the foundation of mining culture. Thanks to the efforts of the Coal Mining Museum in Zabrze, in 2018 celebration of St. Barbara (Barbórka) Day by hard coal miners in Upper Silesia was included in the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. In addition, the museum offers the opportunity to view many exhibits presenting the history of mining and its traditions in the broader context of the history and development of Upper Silesia [1, 2, 3].

Traditions related to the cult of St. Barbary is also cultivated in the Tarnowskie Góry region. In this case, thanks to the efforts of the Association of Lovers of the Tarnowskie Góry Land, another entry was added to the National List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in 2023 entitled "Customs related to the cult of St. Barbara and the traditions of ore miners in the Tarnowskie Góry region" [4, 5, 6].

Another example of efforts to protect coal heritage is the work undertaken in various local and even international projects. An example of a European project aimed at protecting and disseminating knowledge about coal heritage is the CoalHeritage project. This project is coordinated by CERTH (The Center for Research & Technology, Hellas) from Greece. The consortium also includes the KOMAG Institute of Mining Technology and the Main Mining Institute - State Research Institute from Poland, as well as the Bureau de Recherches Géologiques et Minières from France, Premogovnik Velenje from Slovenia and DMT-Gesellschaft Fur Lehre Und Bildung Mbh from Germany. One of the project's tasks is to create a European Visual Map Journal (EVMJ) platform, constituting a kind of coal mining trail in the areas of the project partners. The project also involves scanning and creating 3D models of old mining machines [7, 8].



The presented examples can be treated as models of good practices in protection of cultural heritage related to the mining industry. However, mining traditions and regional identity associated with hard coal mines in Silesia were developed and cultivated by the miners themselves. It was the miners themselves who celebrated St. Barbara's Day and cultivated the ethos of mining work. For their achievements and attitudes, the most involved ones were recognized and appreciated, receiving commemorative, often personalized items showing their connection with the mining industry. These people and their families are also a valuable source of mining knowledge and memory seen through the eyes of a specific mine employee. The aim of this article is to present examples of objects proving identity and attachment to mining traditions that can be found in the Silesian homes. At the same time, we would like to draw attention to the cultural and historical value of these items. People who possess such items and know their origin and history can be referred to as depositaries of tradition. And by sharing this knowledge, they actively contribute to the protection of cultural heritage related to the hard coal mining industry.

2. Items related to the mining tradition

One of the ways of honouring long-term mine employees is the custom of giving them traditional jubilee badges and watches. A cash prize and a badge for long-term work in mining is the basic form of distinction. Fig. 1 shows the badges awarded to miners on the occasion of the 25th and 35th jubilee of work in the mining industry.



Fig. 1. Badges for 35 (left) and 25(right) anniversary of work in the mining industry
[source: own collection of authors]

Additionally, jubilee watches were a form of gift for the birthday person. The tradition of giving watches is very old. The right to the jubilee award was described in the Miners' Charter adopted by the Council of Ministers on November 30, 1949. At first, miners received pocket watches, and in the mid-1970s they were replaced with wristwatches. Jubilee watches were characterized by very high quality because the most frequently used were watches from well-known companies, such as German Glashütte watches or Swiss Orator, Havila, Silvana or Doxa watches. Often these were gold-plated watches. Pocket watches on the case back were decorated with reliefs depicting figurative scenes of hard work or mining symbols. There are also personalized watches with an engraved dedication or the mine's mark. The dial of the watches awarded to miners in Poland featured the mining emblem, the number 25, referring to this jubilee, and the PW monogram, which stood for the Mining Industry [9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14]. Fig. 2 shows examples of jubilee pocket watches with a relief-decorated caseback and the PW monogram.



Fig. 2. Jubilee watches given to employees on the occasion of their 25th jubilee of work in the mining industry [source: own collection of authors]

Jubilee watches were awarded to every mine employee, the only criterion was the working time equal to or greater than 25 years.

Among the supervisory staff, distinguished persons could be recognized by receiving commemorative, decorative items related to their work. Examples include carbide picks or foreman's picks. A plaque or engraving with the name of the mine was placed on the items. By engraving the name and surname of the distinguished person on the item, the gift gained a personal character. Personalized little pickaxes and carbide lamps, as forms of distinguishing the mine workers, have deep roots in the mining tradition. These tools are not only symbols of hard work, but also badges that honour the miner exceptional achievements and commitment to the mining industry.

The most deserving may be awarded an honorary mining spade. It is a symbol of the miner's honor, freedom and dignity and is part of the gala uniform. The tradition of wearing the sword has old roots from the time when white weapons could only be carried by free men of honor. The sword has also been a symbol of the authority of senior mining officials and supervisors since Stanislaw Staszic created the Mining Corps (1817). Fig. 3 shows head miner's pickaxes souvenir.



Fig. 3. Head miner's sticks/pickaxes [source: own collection of authors]

Head miner's pickaxes could be engraved with his name and name of the mine, and are a souvenir for head miners and other employees. The pickaxes shown in the figure are commemorative, however, it should be noted that they were, and even sometimes still are today, tools of mining supervision. They are used to inspect the lining, the condition of the rock and sometimes as a measure of length.

Fig. 4 shows examples of personalized carbide lamps:



Fig. 4. Examples of personalized carbide lamps [source: own collection of authors]

Personalized little carbide lamps with engraved names are popular gifts for miners, emphasizing their individuality and belonging to the mining community. Engraving a name on a carbide lamp or pickaxe is a way to emphasize the miner individuality. In the industry where teamwork is a key issue,

personalizing tools allows each employee to be distinguished as a unique individual. Such a gesture may be particularly important in the context of long-term work in difficult conditions, where each miner has his or her own achievements and merits. An engraved carbide lamp or pickaxe not only identifies the employee, but also emphasizes his or her membership in the mining community. In addition, the personalization of the lamps was also of practical importance. In the past, miners very often had to buy or repurchase lamps in case of loss. Thus, signing the lamp stood as a sure way to secure ownership and could save the miner from the need to buy a new lamp.

Miners often share experiences and stories related to working in a mine, and personalized tools can become part of these stories. Moreover, personalized carbide lamps and picks often become souvenirs passed down from generation to generation. Children of miners may inherit these tools as symbols of family tradition and the hard work of their ancestors. In this way, engraved carbide lamps become not only personal items, but also an element of cultural heritage.

Decorative or utility items given to miners on various occasions are another form of preserving the mining memory and traditions. Such items include various decorations with mining symbols and symbols related to hard work. Such a custom came to Poland in the late 1960s from Germany and Great Britain, where it was known as a form of commemoration of mines, events, etc. An example of such souvenirs is shown in Figure 5.



Fig. 5. Examples of mining souvenirs with a mine lamp motif [source: own collection of authors]

Among the presented examples, the main motif is the little miner's lamp. Some of them are functional, such as an ashtray or a pen stand, while others are decorative. Another example of utility items are various types of vases with mining emblem or made of coal with decorative reliefs depicting, for example, plant motifs. Examples of such vases are shown in Fig. 6.



Fig 6. Examples of the vases with a mining motif [source: own collection of authors]

Some of the miners made various items as a hobby after work or to earn money, carving the gifts for the family or jewellery for sale. This is how ashtrays, vases, cups, cases and bodies of Christ on the cross were created. A number of such items are sentimental souvenirs of retired miners who miss working in the mine. An interesting fact is that the tradition of carving coal became popular due to the temporary isolation of miners during sit-in strikes in the mines. In these conditions, miners, using the tools they had with them, began to create small items in the form of, for example, pendants decorated with bas-relief flowers, mining symbols, etc. These items were sent to loved ones "on the surface" as a form of thanks for their support and a sign of unity with the family members. Fig. 7 shows an example of a utility item made of coal, a decorative candlestick in the form of a branch or commemorative clock.



Fig. 7. Candlestick and commemorative clock made of coal [source: own collection of authors]

Numerous sculptures were also made of coal. In the form of reliefs or sculptures, the artists presented figures of miners, scenes depicting the hard work of a miner, the Treasurer or the figure of Saint Barbara, revered by miners. Coal sculptures reflect the cultural and social aspects of life in mining regions. Using coal to create art required artists to select appropriate lumps that had properties that allowed them to be processed and give the desired form. Most often, one of three types of coal was used to create sculptures and bas-reliefs: matte (sapropel) coal, shiny (humic) coal and mixed (fibrous) coal.

In addition to traditional chisels, artists also used penknives, drills, files and sandpaper when carving [15, 16, 17, 18, 19]. Examples of figures of Saint Barbara carved in coal are shown in Fig. 8.



Fig. 8. Examples of sculptures carved in coal presenting the Saint Barbara figure [source: own collection of authors]

In the next Fig. 9 we see the figure of a miner carved in coal, but also the figure of a miner and the bust of A. Borsig (one of the industrial magnates in Upper Silesia, the owner of one of the mines) made using other techniques.



Fig. 9. Examples of sculptures associated with the mining industry: on right and left the miner figure and in the middle the bust of A. Borsig – the magnate [source: own collection of authors]

Commemorative medals can also be found in private collections or in post-mining houses and institutions. These medals were made to commemorate various anniversaries. In Fig. 10 you can see, for example: a medal commemorating the 150th jubilee of the Królwa Luiza mine in Zabrze (1791 - 1941), a medal commemorating the 100th jubilee of the Makoszowy mine in Zabrze and a medal issued on the occasion of the extraction of 50 million tons of coal in the protective pillar for Bytom city by the KWK Szombierki – Dimitrov mine.



Fig. 10. Examples of commemorative medals related to hard coal mines
[source: own collection of authors]

An inseparable custom related to the mining tradition is organizing a beer taverns on the occasion of St. Barbara's Day. This custom is not an original custom in the Upper Silesian lands. It was brought by graduates of the famous mining universities in Leoben and Freiberg. The tradition has been maintained to the present day. The scenario of this event are strictly defined and described in the beer law [20]. The ceremony begins with singing the mining anthem and welcoming the guests. A president is appointed, who, together with the High, never-infallible in beer matters, presidium, runs and supervises the tavern party. Participants sit at long tables, called blackboards, on the right and left. These blackboards compete with each other in singing and telling jokes. The order of play is supervised by the established person (in Polish "kontrapunkt") at each blackboard. During the ceremony, mining songs are led by a cantor. There is also a traditional skin jump to welcome new mining adepts (foxes) into the Mining Brotherhood. During the ceremony, awards are also given, e.g. swords or honorary mining swords. Insubordination may result in being put in beer stocks. On the occasion of organizing a beer tavern, individual mines issue special mugs from which draft beer is drunk during the meeting. These mugs are often decorated with reliefs or pictures, they also include the name of the mine, the date and the inscription "Karczma Piwna". After the party, the mugs are often taken away by the party participants and often constitute a souvenir as part of a larger collection. That's why you can find such mugs in many miners' houses in Silesia. The Figure shows examples of mugs from beer tavern parties [21, 22, 23, 24].



Fig. 11. Examples of commemorative mugs related to participation in Beer Tavern (Karczma Piwna) party [source: own collection of authors]

3. Conclusions

In the mining regions such as Upper Silesia, in the miners' homes of and their families, you can often see the items proving their belonging to the mining world. These are the symbols that shape regional identity and show the attachment of people from the mining industry to hard work, the value of work and respect for the people doing this work. Many of these items have personal stories, memories and experiences of miners associated with them. It is an underestimated source of knowledge, information, relationships and inspiration from the point of view of preserving the tradition and protecting the cultural heritage.

To protect the regional and cultural identity we should all care about preserving the current exhibits, writing down the stories related to them and documenting the professional experiences of people related to the hard coal mining industry. In this way, future generations will be able to learn the traditions and understand the customs of their ancestors.

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