

Štefan Koco- The history of flooded territory

The first settlers started to come to forested and almost inaccessible valleys of upper Cirocha in the first half of 15th century. After more than half of millennium, which has passed since, we can follow with enormous admiration the undefeated strength of people of this hidden corner of present Slovakia, which helped them to overcome all obstacles of the nature and the human being himself. They managed to cope with these difficulties for 500 years up to the time when they had to surrender to general interest of the majority and leave their laboriously constructed homes.

The beginnings of settling the territory of upper Cirocha date back to 60th up to 80th years of 15th century. This was the beginning of villages Starina and Veľká Poľana. In the following hundred years further five villages appeared with a similar destiny – Smolník, Ruské, Ostrožnica, Zvala and at last Dara in 70th–80th years of 16th century. The first written mentions of these settlements are connected with the first taxation of the population. The only exceptions are Starina and Veľká Poľana, which are mentioned in texts in connection with the activities of the robber gang of Fedor Hlavatý. All mentioned villages were built by peasants, mainly of Rusyn nationality. In that period all territories belonged to the extensive estate of Druget family from Humenné.

The location of the territory on the border with the Polish Haličské and Vladimírske – on the periphery of any development – together with severe natural conditions ruled the uneasy destinies of local people for ages. The inhabitants dealt with agriculture, mainly with cattle breeding. The hilly and rocky fields were little fertile, therefore mainly barley, oat, peas and hemp were grown there. In the gardens some vegetables, mainly cabbage. The total backwardness of the region is proved also by the fact that even at the turn of 18th and 19th century the two-field system of cultivating land was used there. The severe conditions were made even worse by the landlords, who consistently increased the taxes. Already in 17th century, this unbearable situation caused the desolation of some settlements and decrease of number of inhabitants of the villages.

A significant change appeared after Uzhgorod confession of faith in 1646 when the inhabitants of the villages were converted to Greek-Catholic faith. One hundred fifty years later, the older wooden churches were replaced by more solid stone churches.

The catastrophic crop failure in North-East Slovakia in 50th years of 19th century caused the decrease of population of northern Zemplín to its half. The living conditions did not improve even in the second half of the century and it is not a surprise that there was a significant emigration – also overseas.

World War I was the next hard stroke for the inhabitants. The unlucky location of the whole region again manifested itself in its most terrible form. These territories became a part of front line between Austro-Hungarian and Russian army. The front passed there twice, at the end of 1914 and half a year later and so the damages were multiplied.

Neither the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918 meant a good turn for the inhabitants of upper Cirocha. Agriculture remained the only source of food and the new border limited the chances of seasonal work for people in territories, which became part of Hungary.

At the end of World War II the location also badly influenced the life of the villages. All villages were occupied by the Hungarian Army in April 1939. However, the region escaped the terrors of the war up to the end of 1944. After severe battles for Ruské pass, the Soviet Army liberated as first the village Ruské on 12th October 1944. The diverse terrain made the battles hard and brought about enormous material damages. The destruction of villages approached 90%.

However the severe wounds did not defeat the spirit of the people. In spite of the possibility to move into the free Czech borderline of Sudetenland the most people returned to native region and started to reconstruct destroyed homes with all the strength. The state imposed collectivisation in 1948 was not too successful in these villages. In spite of new job opportunities, mainly in the nearby towns of Sniná and Humenné, the connection with land, so laboriously cultivated, could not be broken.

For five hundred years the local people managed to resist various difficulties and the wounds of destiny, however they had to surrender to the last stroke. In 1975 due to the construction of water dam Starina a plan of gradual evacuation of villages was prepared. Problems with supplying East Slovakia with drinking water encouraged the decision to construct a water reservoir, which would supply also the cities of Prešov and Košice. The destiny of seven villages was decided due to their location, environment and only minimal devastation by impacts of civilization. The last inhabitants of villages left their native land in 1986. They found new homes mainly in Sniná and Humenné, but the bonds with places where they had grown up, were never torn.