Markt Eisenstein:
Historic German-Bohemian Border Village

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Markt Eisenstein, now known as Železná Ruda, is set in a pretty valley in the Bohemian woods, at the edge of the Šumava National Park. It is located in the south Bohemian region of the Czech Republic on the German/Czech border. Originally, this was the border between Bavaria and Bohemia. If one takes a map and draws a straight line between Munich, Germany, and Prague in the Czech Republic, Markt Eisenstein is located about the point where this line crosses the border between the two countries.

View of the Böhmerwald around Markt Eisenstein (Photo by SAM, 1999)

The Böhmerwald, or Bohemian Forest (called the Šumava by the Czechs), is considered one of the most beautiful parts of what is now the Czech Republic. This forest, contiguous with the Bavarian Forest. includes the Grosser Arber. At 4,780 feet, it is the highest peak in the Bavarian-Bohemian mountain range and has been described as the "King of the Forest." The mountains were once covered with ice. The Grosser Arbersee and other nearby mountain lakes were also formed by ancient glaciers. Thickets of pine, spruce and deciduous trees cover much of the hills and mountains. In the spring and summer, masses of colorful wildflowers lend their beauty to the setting.

The recorded history of the region dates back more than four hundred years to 1569, when Bavarian miners and hammersmiths built an iron ore mine in the area at the request of a Bohemian feudal lord. Documents from that time indicate that mining in the area had, indeed, been conducted long before this. Frequent border disputes between the Bavarians and Bohemians led to regional instability and, eventually, to the standstill of mining in the valley. Over the years, the territory changed hands a number of times. In 1577, the lands were sold to Count Christoph von Schwarzenberg. By 1627, the lands belonged to the Counts of Nothaft von Wernberg who resided at Runding castle near Cham, Germany. There continued to be skirmishes along the Bavarian/ Bohemian frontier lines in the vicinity of Regensburg, Germany for the greater part of the 17th century. Towards the end of that period, the Bavarians instituted a policy of clearing the land and settling German families on the border to deter incursions from the Bohemians. On April 26, 1688, the village of Eisenstein, on the Bavarian/ Bohemian border, was granted the full rights of a Market-town and jurisdiction from the Bavarian Duchy. By 1693, the village had a

population of ten settlers: Hans Schreiner, Hans Aschenprenner, Michael Schreiner, Mathias Helm, Hans Koessberger, Peter Wohl, Wolf Faistiberger, Michael Koerl, Martin Koerl, and Hans Gnadt. The men were farmers who had moved to the region from Eisenhammer and neighboring villages near Regensburg in Bavaria. They came with their families and built cottages on the land.

Historically, there were three villages called Eisenstein, all located within two miles of each other: Bayerisch Eisenstein (Bavarian Eisenstein), Markt Eisenstein (Bohemian Eisenstein) and Dorf Eisenstein. Originally, the Eisenstein villages belonged to one political unit. However, in the mid-eighteenth century, Markt Eisenstein and Dorf Eisenstein became a part of Bohemia. Bayerisch Eisenstein remained a part of Bavaria. All three villages also remained under the jurisdiction of what was then the Austrian Empire.

The Counts of Nothaft, who were granted the territory in the seventeenth century, were the ones to found a glass industry in the Eisenstein valley. In 1771, the Eisenstein villages were sold to Johann Georg Hafenbrädl, a local master glassblower. Under his direction, the glass industry in the valley reached its pinnacle and the inhabitants of the Eisenstein villages enjoyed a degree of prosperity. By the end of the nineteenth century there were twenty different glassworks in the region.

Böhmerwald Village (Photo at Bohemian Forest Museum, Passau, Germany, 1998)

The Eisenstein villages supported the local glassworks. Many villagers worked in the industry as glassmakers and lumberjacks. Asch-burners felled and burned the trees of the forest to make the potash product used in glass making. Some villagers were employed as tradesmen (tailors and such). Agriculture was vital to the local economy. Following the burning of the trees, the Eisenstein villagers cleared the land of stumps and established farms to support their large families. There were distinctions among farmers. A bauer was a farmer who owned his own land. This land was usually passed from father to eldest son. The bauer lived on his land rather than in the town. A gutler lived in town but owned a few acres outside of town. He walked out to his fields each day to care for his crops and to graze any livestock he might own. Farmers might have a cow, a donkey, pigs and geese. The farmers also employed day laborers. Women were expected to work in the fields alongside the men, in addition to tending to the home and children.

For families living in Markt Eisenstein in the nineteenth century, life was filled with back-breaking physical work in the fields and humble living conditions. The small farms produced vegetables, wheat, butter and cheese. Hops, used in the production of beer, were also grown in the region. Families in the Böhmerwald ate what they grew in their gardens and what their livestock provided. The men hunted for wild game in the forest; venison was a staple of the diet. So was the flavorful and nutritious dark rye bread that the women baked. Families ate a lot of

cabbage, generally in the form of sauerkraut. It might be cooked with potatoes and pork fatback. Grain grown by the farmers was also coarsely ground and cooked with water to make a hot gruel which was consumed in the morning. Special treats were apple strudel and baked apples, seasoned with cloves, cinnamon and butter. Any extra garden produce was loaded onto a cart and sold in local markets. The family's clothing was generally hand-made by the women in the household.

Villagers lived in two-story dwellings made of wood and stucco, with low wooden roofs sometimes anchored down with stones. The stucco was usually painted white. The architectural style was reminiscent of the Swiss chalet. Residents often stabled their animals or pursued their trade on the lower level of their homes, while occupying the upper level themselves. Many of the houses had second-story balconies or porches, which offered inhabitants a panoramic view of the beautiful Eisenstein valley and Böhmerwald. The cottages and gardens were always clean and tidy; the village women were meticulous in their housekeeping. Flowers adorned the homes in the spring and summer months. Marigolds were planted on either side of the doorway. Brightly-colored geraniums graced window boxes, while rose bushes bloomed in small side gardens.

Pleasures for the village inhabitants were simple. Beauty was found in nature and in simple crafts. A finely embroidered piece of cloth or a handmade and intricately painted piece of furniture were items to be treasured. Rich traditions, including the preparation of special foods, were developed to celebrate the holy days of the church, Christmas in particular. Snuff was a popular item and this substance was carried about in small glass bottles made in the region.

Markt Eisenstein with Maria Hilf Church in the background (Photo by SAM, 1998

The Church was at the center of the villagers' lives. The Eisensteiners were devout Roman Catholics and followed the strict teachings and traditions of the Church. The first chapel for the inhabitants of the Eisenstein villages was a simple wooden structure erected at Markt Eisenstein in 1692 by the owner of the local glassworks, the Duke Wolf Heinrich Nothaft von Wernberg. Villagers worshipped in this chapel for forty years. In 1729, the duke ordered a more substantial church with a distinctive onion dome to be built in its place. The church was named "Maria Hilf," or Our Lady of Help, and was completed three years later. The Eisenstein Parish belonged to the Bavarian Diocese of Regensburg until 1808, when it was incorporated into the Bohemian Diocese of Budweis. The many baptisms, marriages and deaths of the villagers are recorded in the parish records and these are now located in the Pilsen archives.

The inhabitants of the region had a curious custom: At the side of paths and roadways, they erected *Totenbretter,* or "death boards." After a person died, his body was placed on a board where it lay in state until burial. The wooden boards were then cut in the shape of a tombstone and roughly painted. They were inscribed with the name of the departed, along with the date and a short poem, a prayer, or a few words in honor of the deceased. These memorials to the departed stood until the boards rotted away.

The original families produced many descendants who continued to live in the valley of the Eisenstein villages. In 1848, Markt Eisenstein had 457 residents and 106 houses. The town also sported three hotels and a brewery. The first school in the village was established in 1853. Education was fairly minimal: the children spent six to eight years in "people's school," where they were taught the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. Only those with money and status continued their studies. The post office arrived in 1863.

In 1877, a rail line was built through the Eisenstein valley, linking Plattling, Bavaria to Pilsen, Bohemia. Glass-making was declining and the railway helped in the development of the lumber and tourist industries. Cattle breeding and linen-making were other occupations. As early as 1880, Karl Baedeker was writing about this area in his travel guides. In his 1895 edition, he would observe that Markt Eisenstein, with an elevation of 2,540 feet, was "prettily situated at the confluence of the Regen and the Eisenbach, with a fine view of the Arber [Grosser Arber mountain]. It is a station on the railway to Pilsen and is frequented as a summer resort, affording opportunity for many agreeable excursions." He described the paths as "good" and the inns as "unpretentious," but "generally clean and cheap."

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Central Europe was racked by political unrest and violence. The peace of the Böhmerwald was destroyed by a series of bloody conflicts between Austria-Hungary, France, and the German states. All young men had to serve a mandatory three-year term in the army of the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph. Many of
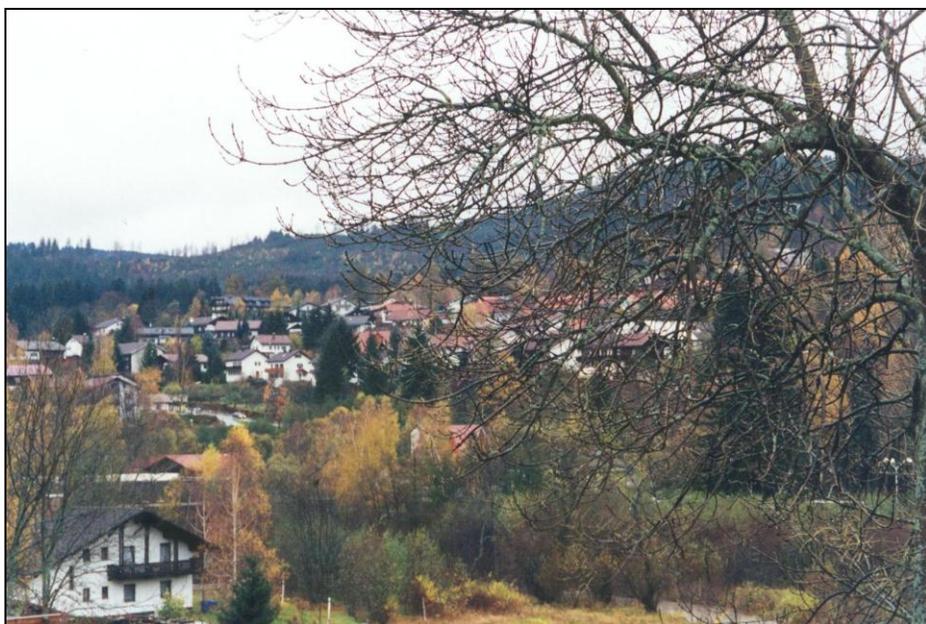
Markt Eisenstein (Photo by SAM, 1999)

those who fought in the wars died in battle, far from their homeland. It was a common sentiment that the Emperor considered the boys of the villages as cannon fodder. In 1867, Markt Eisenstein

and Dorf Eisenstein became part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1871, Bayerisch Eisenstein became a part of the unified Germany.

A number of families emigrated from Markt Eisenstein in the second half of the nineteenth century. Many of them were descendants of the original German settlers of Markt Eisenstein and the nearby villages. Their families had lived in this border region for almost two hundred years. They joined millions of other Germans who immigrated to the United States, both to avoid compulsory military service and to seek greater economic opportunities. After 1877, those who emigrated from the valley left Eisenstein by the newly built rail line from Bayerisch Eisenstein to Plattling. From there, the families traveled north to the town of Bremen, a major port in Northern Germany, where they boarded a steamer for America.

Markt Eisenstein continued to attract tourists for both summer and winter activities in the early years of the twentieth century. According to the travel writer Karl Baedeker, the town had a population of 2,800 inhabitants in 1907. Bayerisch-Eisenstein had become known as a health resort. World War I brought new changes to the valley. At the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Markt Eisenstein and Dorf Eisenstein became a part of the newly created Czechoslovakia. The names of these two villages were changed to Železná Ruda and Špičák, respectively. Bayerisch Eisenstein remained in Germany.

In 1946, at the close of World War II, ethnic Germans living in Markt Eisenstein and the neighboring villages in what had come to be called the Sudetenland were expelled from the country. These villages fell behind the Iron Curtain of the Soviet era. The distinctive "Maria Hilf" Church became the property of the Czech State. Barbed wire was stretched across the Eisenstein valley, separating Markt Eisenstein from Bayerisch Eisenstein. Armed guards patrolled the area. A wall divided the train station which straddled the border between the two countries. Deffernick (Debrnik in Czech), another community located in the woods a short walk from Markt Eisenstein, was razed and became the site of police headquarters in Czechoslovakia. There is a sign where the community of Deffernick once stood, making note of its former existence. The border remained sealed for more than four decades. In June of 1991, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the border was reopened for cross-border railway traffic. In 1993, Czechoslovakia was divided into the Czech Republic and Slovakia; Markt Eisenstein became a part of the former.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the majority of homes and other structures in the village that were built before the turn of

Outskirts of Markt Eisenstein, now Železná Ruda (Photo by SAM 1999)

the twentieth century have been torn down. The Catholic Church, built in Markt Eisenstein by the Duke Nothaft in the early eighteenth century, still stands and is a distinctive feature of the village. New alpine-style homes have been constructed, along with modern hotels and pensions. Vietnamese markets are also a feature of the landscape, as refugees from North Vietnam were settled here by the Communist regime during the Vietnam War era, in the latter part of the twentieth century. The forested mountains, the picturesque homes, shops, and the church of the village make a pretty sight. Temperatures in the area are moderate. The average July temperature is 75 degrees and the average January temperature is 38 degrees. Železná Ruda, formerly known as Markt Eisenstein, is again a destination point for Germans and Czechs seeking rest and relaxation with hiking and bicycling in the summer and skiing in winter.

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