Back To Life

Rebuilding the Czech Republic's Miracle Village

Words by **David Farley**
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50.2136° N, 16.5494° E

Nëratov's reimagined Baroque church stands above in the Czech Republic's Orlické Mountains.

One day in 1986, Father Josef Suchar was hiking along the Orlice River in what was then Communist-controlled Czechoslovakia when he stumbled upon the ruins of Neratov, an abandoned village in the Orlické Mountains "It was like a jungle," he would say years later. "Bushes had overtaken houses; trees were growing out of the roofless stone church." And yet for some reason—divine or otherwise—the priest made a vow that afternoon: "When there's a political change in this country, I'm going to bring this village back to life."

One revolution, a country partitioned, and 38 years later, the Orlice River still snakes through the Orlické Mountains. Today though, it's traced by a one-lane country road, a direct route to Neratov, and identity in Father Suchar vowed to put on the map. Like a forest-bound lodestar, the bright yellow exterior of the township's late-Baroque church, complete with its curious glass roof, dominates the horizon.

Neratov, about 100 miles east of Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic, is now a self-sustaining village with about 65 residents and a handful of businesses. The hamlet originally known for a natural spring that produced medical miracles, in recent years has produced a different kind of power. Today, a majority of Neratov's residents are living with some form of mental or intellectual disability. For many years cast aside and without proper medical and economic resources, they have rallied to help bring this forgotten locale back from the brink. In the process, they have found a home and identify in Father Suchar's promised land, working, living, and healing a history of cultural wounds that stretches back generations.

Most days, you can find Father Josef Suchar pulling double duty in Neratov, Czech Republic.

If you ask someone in Neratov today, they'll tell you there have been over 1,100 such acts of God—thanks, apparently, to the water and the power of prayer. Neratov, as people say, is the village of miracles.

The church on the hill overlooking Neratov may have not always been this bright, but the story of its founding is quite illuminating. On the morning of August 16, 1661, a small group of pious townspeople holding up a wooden sculpture of the Virgin Mary set off for a 6-mile procession from the neighboring village of Rokytnice to Neratov. This solemn march was led by Christof Florian Blasius Drick, a priest in Rokytnice, who, a month earlier had been visited by a heavenly voice in his sleep. According to the prophecy, once he commissioned and delivered the statue to Neratov he would find an underground stream flowing with healing waters. As the story goes, within days of townspeople bringing the wooden statue to Neratov and tapping into the underground stream, a steady flow of people began sipping and miracles ensued: from curing sickness and disease, to closing wounds, to increasing fertility.

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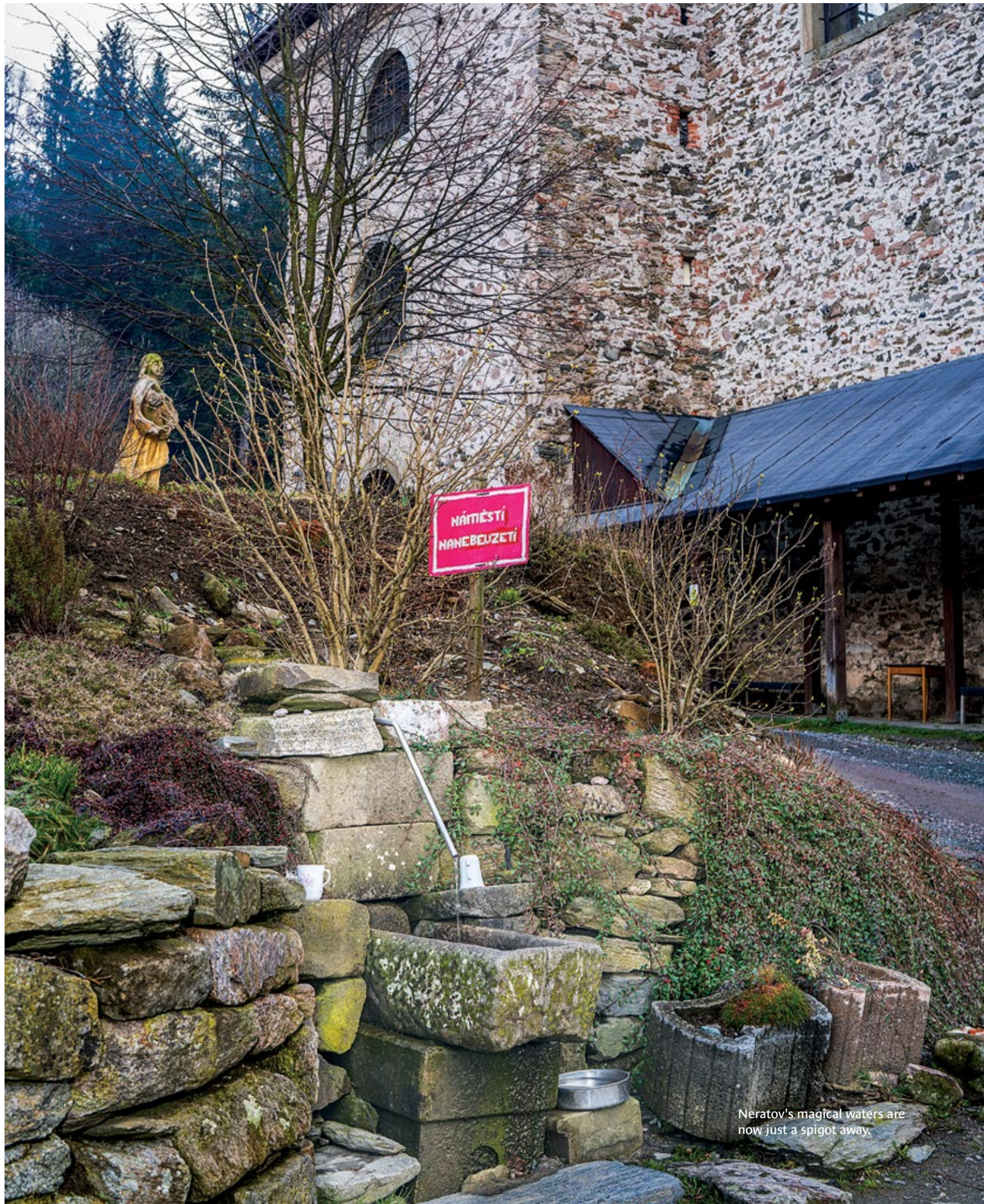
It's over this divine libation that I planned to meet up with Father Suchar on my visit to Neratov this past March. Walking into the village pub, I saw a smattering of people drinking pint glasses of golden-hued beer, brewed about 100 feet away at the local craft brewery. None of them looked to be a man of the cloth. When a gray-bearded man wearing a flannel shirt and a striped Day-Glo overalls began waving me over to his table, I was surprised to suddenly come face-to-face with the 65-year-old priest of Neratov and, it turns out, a lover of driving tractors and doing odd jobs around the village.

Father Josef Suchar was kind of a big deal in these parts; it was he that laid the first stone in what is modern day Neratov.

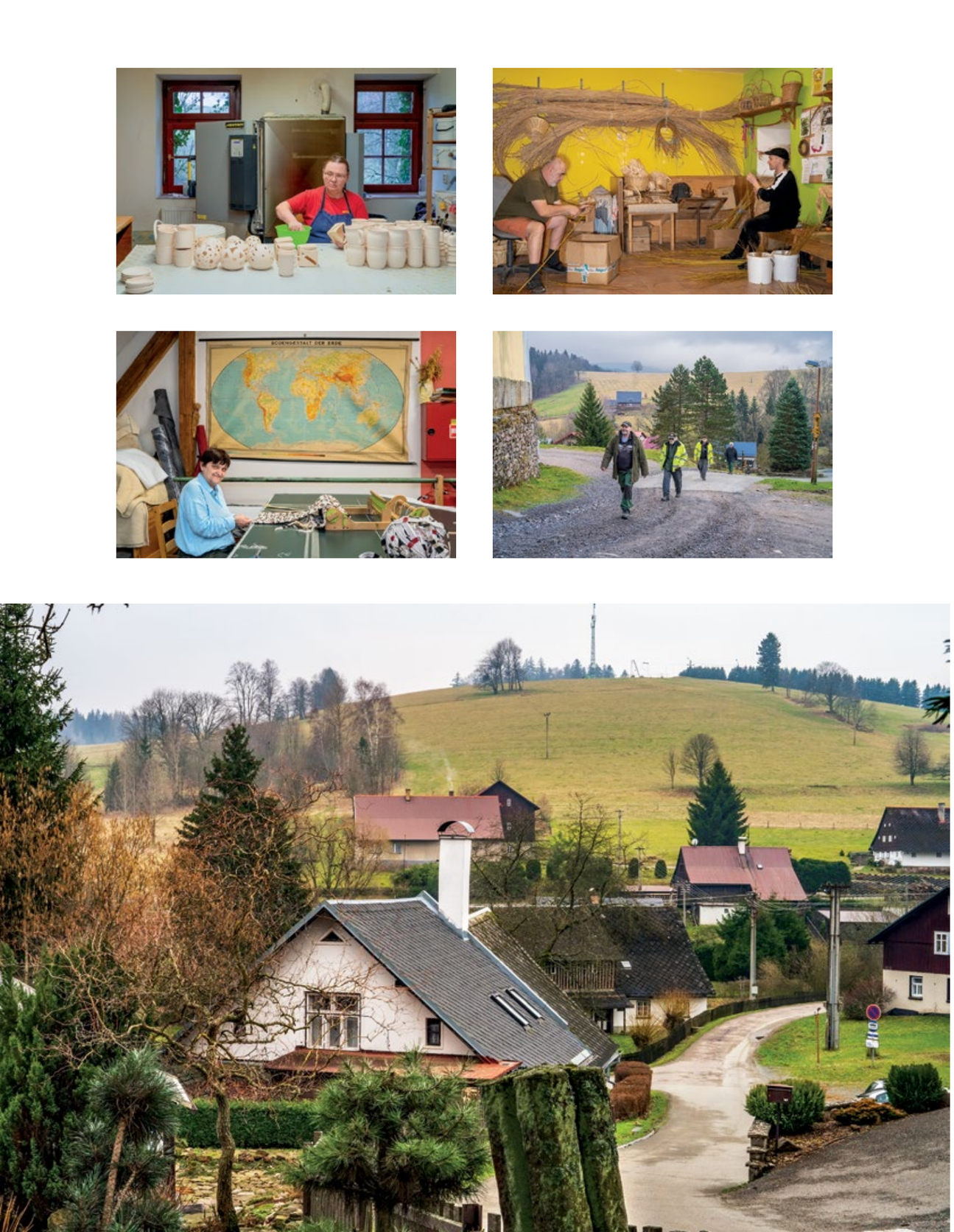
The plan was set in motion three years after his introduction to Neratov—on November 17, 1989, when the Czech people peacefully gathered in Prague's Wenceslas Square, overthrowing the Communist government. The Velvet Revolution ushered in a democratic government, as well as an inspiring new leader, President Václav Havel—a well-known philosopher and playwright.

"After the revolution there was a new spirit here," Father Suchar said. "It just felt like anything was possible." Inspired by this new energy, he was not only determined to give Neratov new life, but he also wanted to do something radical: for the village to become a haven for those hadn't been given a chance for decades.

From 1948 to 1989, the ruling Communist government hid those with mental disabilities behind the high walls of mental institutions and hospitals. According to residents of Neratov, the Communist leadership at the time said people born with serious mental impairments, and deemed "not normal," were better off neither seen nor heard.



Neratov's magical waters are now just a spigot away.



"I wanted mentally disabled people here to have a normal life because in the past they were deprived of that," Father Suchar said. In Neratov, he hoped to create a place where people once hidden were present and out in the open, working at shops and restaurants, helping out during mass. "Giving disabled people a life and a job was important," he added. "Being human means doing something, giving someone a sense of possibility."

Less than a decade after the Velvet Revolution, funds to bring the village back to life arrived via NGOs and government grants. Still, when city dwellers who own weekend cottages nearby found out about the priest's plans, they were staunchly opposed. Conditioned by half-century-old policy sheltering away people with mental disabilities, many assumed the new residents of Neratov would be dangerous. The same people also thought mental disabilities were contagious according to Father Suchar.

He went forward with plans anyway, and slowly an active village began to rouse from its decades-long slumber. Other people from the region who heard about Suchar's plans suddenly turned up and wanted to be a part of Neratov's rebirth. With the help of a growing community, a village pub opened in 2006. A craft workshop was established in 2007. A hotel flicked on its lights in 2008. The primary school for disabled children opened in 2014. A year later, a small grocery store began selling foodstuffs and locally-made souvenirs. A craft brewery called Prorok ("Prophet" in English) began producing hoppy pilsner beer just after that. And in 2020, a tourist information office swung open its doors. All of these businesses and institutions are mainly operated by people with mental disabilities whose livelihoods are now centered in Neratov.

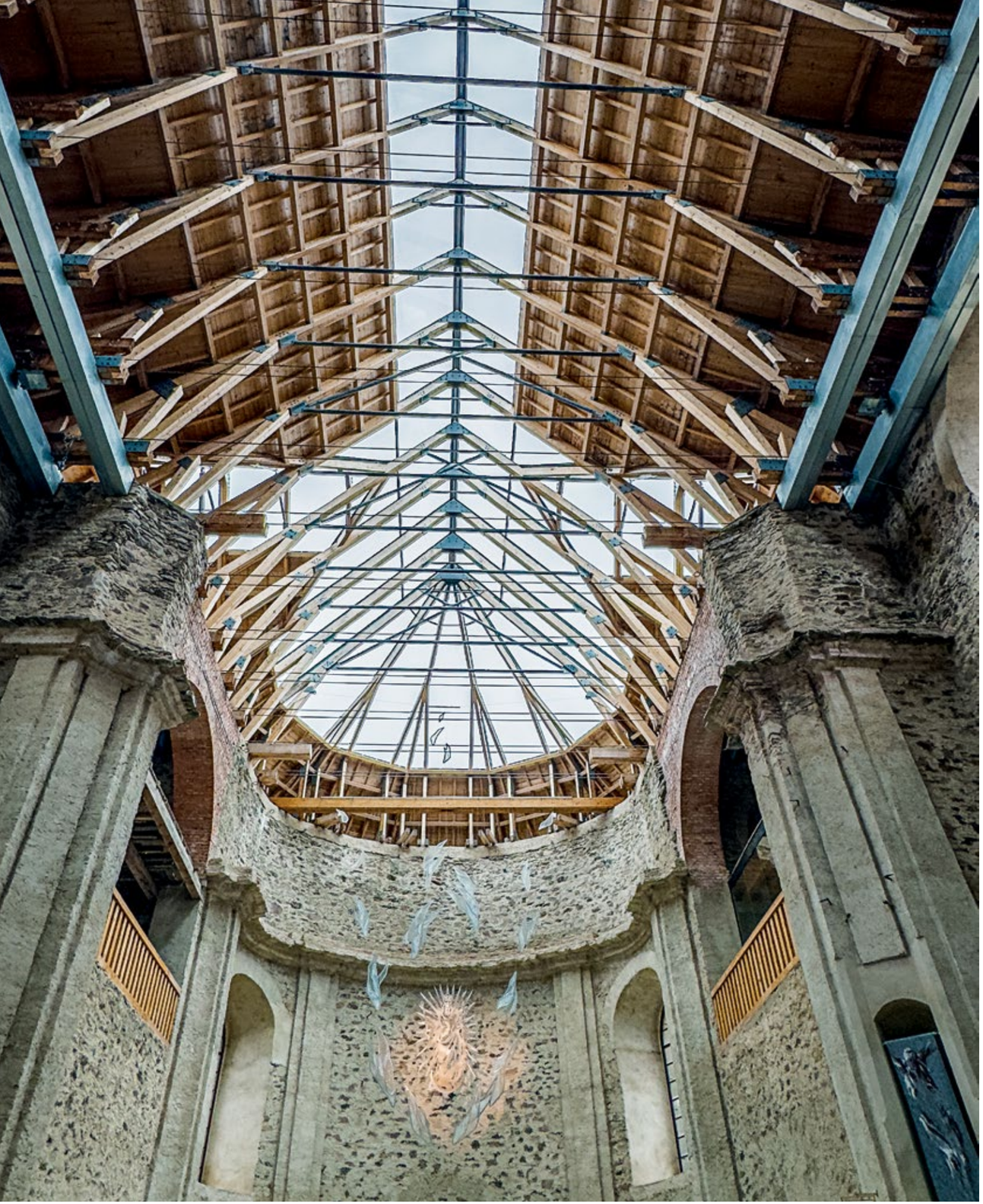
"If Neratov didn't exist I'm not sure what I would have done after my mother died," said a tearful Hana Hronovska. "No one would have given me a chance like this."

Hronovska, a 58-year-old with developmental disabilities, came to Neratov in 2009 after the untimely passing of her mother and primary caretaker. At first, she worked as a housecleaner in the village, but since 2022 she's been working at Kopiček, the town's craft workshop, weaving handmade carpets and making enough money to support herself. The director of the workshop, Romana Bukačlová introduced me to the center's 30 employees. All with some form of mental disability, they earn a living wage making ceramics, sewing stuffed animals and weaving baskets that are sold on the internet.

The town is also home to a specialized primary school and has mentorship programs for young professionals trying to develop trade skills—programs giving folks not only a leg up, but a support network insulated from the system that was once built against them. It's a far cry from the upbringing many town residents endured before the Neratov's re-founding.

Eva Valentová, 44, and Miloslava Šimková, 49, both described being "locked up" in a facility before their arrival in Neratov in 2006. "We're very happy now," said Valentová. Šimková enthusiastically nodded her head in agreement. "Without Neratov who knows where we'd be," she said, shrugging before breaking into a smile.

"Giving disabled people a life and a job was important. Being human means doing something, giving someone a sense of possibility." *— Father Suchar*



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Every afternoon, Father Suchar conducts mass for tourists and residents alike. After a 30-minute service, Suchar was eager to show me around the church, the crowning architectural glory of the village and a symbol of, well, resurrection. He pointed up to the transparent roof, a combination of wood and glass, the glass part forming the shape of a cross and beaming in a flood of natural light onto the bare stone interior walls of the church. This avant-garde design was part of his original vision, a slice of his overall plan for the village crafted back in the ‘80s.

Yet long before Father Suchar’s intervention, Bohemia (today, the western half of the Czech Republic) was made up of Czech and German speakers, each town having a name in both languages. Neratov, known as Bärwald in German, had 1,300 residents, all but two were German speakers. Hitler invaded Bohemia in March 1939 under the pretext that the German speakers of the region—known as the Sudetenland in German—were being unfairly discriminated against. When World War II ended in Hitler’s defeat six years later, the Czech government exiled all German speakers from the country. This left Neratov nearly empty.

“That’s not where this story ends,” Father Suchar said, looking up at the church’s glass ceiling. On May 10, 1945, two days after the war ended, a Red Army soldier passing through eastern Bohemia, perhaps excited the war was over and with his ammunition burning a hole in his pocket, decided to fire off one last missile from his bazooka. He aimed it right at the enormous church of Neratov, the place of worship built to commemorate the Marian miracles that had long occurred in the hamlet. It was a direct hit and, as a result, everything made of wood in the church—including the entire roof, the staircases, the pews, the centuries-old Baroque artwork, and even the legendary wooden sculpture of the Virgin Mary—burned to ash. What was left of the church was a stone, roofless shell of its former self.

Father Suchar didn't want to replicate the pre-World War II interior, the way it looked before that fateful meeting with the Russian projectile in 1945. "The interior of the church is like life itself," he said, waving his right hand at the bare stone walls. "The attractive Baroque interior was destroyed. Just like how things can happen in our lives that may seem like a turn for the worse. Maybe you end up having a child with severe mental disabilities and your life will never be as it was, but you now have a new purpose in life, a new adventure." After a slight pause, he continued. "Just like the simple, raw inside of the church, it's a reminder of the inevitable impermanence of life."

Embracing that impermanence, Father Suchar and a newly-empowered community rekindled spirit where there was none—both in the village and in people's perception of the mentally disabled. Nowadays it's an energy seen in the craft workshop or clearing trails on the edge of town. Without the will to try something new, the story would have ended before it could really begin.

"It's important to know that the revival and success of Neratov is not just me," Father Suchar explained. "It's a whole community and we all deserve credit for it. It's a place of miracles and I'm proud to be a part of it."

Today 50,000 tourists still flock to Neratov every year to drink water from the miraculous fountain or to marvel at the Baroque church that prospered against the odds. But what they often find is something different, the living proof of a cultural movement gone right, and the healing power not of a sip of water (or beer), but of neighbors determined to build together.

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