

Conditions for a Successful Farewell

Memories of Coal Mining in Ibbenbüren

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In conversation, Ibbenbüren miners sometimes call their colliery a small Gallic village. This term refers to the relationship with RAG Aktiengesellschaft, which owns the Ibbenbüren colliery since 1999. However, the pitmen always add that the expression is not meant maliciously but entirely amicably. Unlike the fighting Gauls in the Asterix books, the citizens of Ibbenbüren do not regard themselves as the last shelter of resistance against an all-powerful opponent. The term “Gallic village” rather means that the colliery occupies a special position in the corporation where it is managed as a limited liability company, located at some distance from the Ruhr area, the largest German coal field, and far from the administrative centres of the coal industry. The Ruhr remains a frequent point of reference when it comes to the self-description of the Ibbenbüren miners. But perhaps the word also simply means that Ibbenbüren is the smallest coal mine in Germany.

The Ibbenbüren colliery was one of the last two German coal mines to cease production in December 2018. The coal district in northern Westphalia comprises the town of Ibbenbüren and five neighbouring municipalities (Fig. 1). It has a total population of about 110,000. This region is the field for a long-term documentation of mining culture in Ibbenbüren (Schürmann 2015)¹, a key feature of which will be a collection of oral history interviews undertaken with active and retired miners as well as with other people involved in the wider Ibbenbüren community. Based on these interviews, this article will have a closer look at the changing self-images of miners in Ibbenbüren, particularly in the recent context of an accelerated deindustrialisation process both in Ibbenbüren and in German coal mining at large.

¹ Between June 2014 and August 2018, I conducted 100 interviews. I would like to express my thanks to the interviewees and also to the RAG Anthrazit Ibbenbüren GmbH for giving me the opportunity for the interviews. The recordings and transcriptions are kept in the archive of the Volkskundliche Kommission für Westfalen, Münster, Germany. The following text references to the interviews also contain the date of the interview and the page of the transcription. The documentation can be seen as a parallel project to the documentation “Menschen im Bergbau” set up in Bochum: <http://www.menschen-im-bergbau.de/> (21.06.2018). Thanks to Roy Kift (Essen) for making a completely new translation of this text.

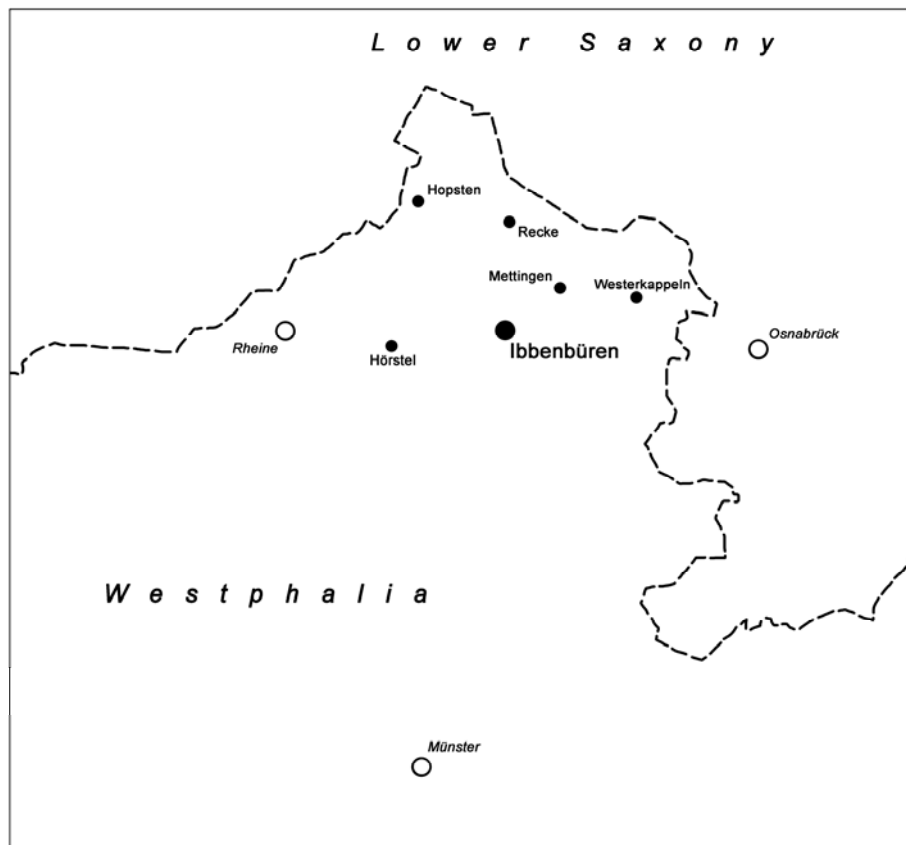


Fig. 1: The mining region of Ibbenbüren in the North of Westphalia (Source: own illustration)

Pitmen and Farmers

One of the things that characterises the self-image of the Ibbenbüren region is the fact that Ibbenbüreners assume people in the Ruhr area are unaware of its existence. And if they are, its image seems determined by agricultural stereotypes: the miners there wear wooden shoes (Interview 68 *1962), they drive to the colliery on tractors (Interview 95 *1978), and they tend to dig out sugar beets rather than coal (Knappenverein 2005: 23). An ink drawing made in 1960 in Ibbenbüren humorously illustrates how the people of Ibbenbüren imagine the way people in the Ruhr area see their district: as rural and rather backward (Fig. 2).

The people of Ibbenbüren would strongly dispute the opinion that their colliery is backward. Technically speaking, they were up to date – from today's point of view one can say: until closing. So they proudly point out that one element of the mechanisation of coal mining, the coal planer, was developed decisively in Ibbenbüren. In addition, for many years Ibbenbüren was the deepest coal mine in the world, its shafts going deeper than 1,500 meters below the surface. Indeed, because of the immense depth and

the high pressure underground, the miners were forced to work on new concepts of tunnel construction. Thus, they developed the so-called Ibbenbüren system on the basis of the New Austrian Tunnelling Method. By contrast, the people in Ibbenbüren would hardly dispute the relatively strong rural features in which the mine is embedded. And here lies another truth behind their own description of being a Gallic village.



Fig. 2: “The von Oeynhausen shaft seen from the Ruhr”. Indian drawing by J. Stallbörger, Ibbenbüren, 1960. (Source: Mining Museum Ibbenbüren)

Another characteristic feature of the Ibbenbüren district was that mining developed in smaller leaps than in the Ruhr area. Hard coal has been mined in Ibbenbüren since the 16th century (Rickelmann/Röhrs 1983: 14). The colliery’s employees mainly came from Ibbenbüren and its neighbouring towns – in contrast to the Ruhr area, where after the mid-19th century the workforce rapidly expanded and most of the workers were recruited from the east of the German Reich.

This difference can also be seen in the townscape. Since Ibbenbüren did not need to provide large amounts of living quarters within a short period of time, there are no classic colliery settlements of the kind that characterise the Ruhr area. The few settlements built according to plan were constructed after the Second World War. In the 1950s, for example, the Hollenbergs Hügel housing estate was built in the neighbouring village of Westerkappeln, something which also alleviated the post-war housing shortage. In Mettingen, near the north shaft, the North Shaft Settlement was built in 1967/68. Here the miners built their own houses with their own efforts and with reciprocal help. The people of Ibbenbüren are well aware of the difference to the housing estates in the Ruhr area. The mayor of Ibbenbüren at that time, Heinz Steingröver, recalls in an interview with the author:

*Once, maybe twenty years ago, I drove from one shaft to the next with a group of SPD members from the state parliament. We passed through a settlement, the North Shaft Settlement. And as we drove around, they commented as one: "Oh, this is where the foremen live." – "Nah", I said, "this is where they all live!" In other words, the people here all built their own houses (Interview 1, *1942).*

This story, especially coming from the mouth of a Social Democrat, indicates the pride in the fact that the living conditions of the majority of the ordinary miners in Ibbenbüren are as good as people in the Ruhr area would expect of their foremen. Indeed, it is more the rule than the exception for workers in Ibbenbüren to live in their own houses. And as the interviews reveal, the autobiographical narrative usually involves either the construction of a house or work on an inherited house. From a local history point of view, the striving for a home of one's own is attributed to the down-to-earth nature of the miners from Ibbenbüren (Rickelmann/Röhrs 1983: 299). However, the high proportion of home owners among the miners is not a special feature of Ibbenbüren but a characteristic of small mining fields in rural areas.

One of the traditional economic structural features of the area is the great importance of part-time farming. Quite a number of miners from Ibbenbüren kept a small farming plot in addition to their mining work. They not only kept a goat (in the Ruhr area this was known as the "miner's cow") or a pig, but also pursued several different types of farming: agriculture, cattle breeding and dairy farming. Until the late 19th century, part-time agriculture helped the employees of small mines to compensate for their irregular income (Brüggemeier 2016: 203 ff.). In the course of industrialisation, employment at the mines became more secure. With the change of generations, small-scale farmers who worked in mining as a sideline became miners who worked in agriculture as a sideline.

Part-time agriculture remained in existence until the late 20th century and, in a few exceptional cases, its remnants still exist today. At the beginning of my survey, I suspected that the people of Ibbenbüren would stress this fact to underline their self-image of being down-to-earth miners. In fact, however, several of those questioned were still personally active in agriculture, or their parents ran a farm. The close link between miners' work and agriculture is also evident from the fact that in exceptional cases two of those questioned actually did drive a tractor to get to the colliery. In this respect, they confirm the stereotype of Ibbenbüreners as rural farmers.

One feature of rural mining regions is that the incidence of sick leave increases at harvest time. This was already noticeable in the Saar district around 1910. At the time this seems to have been tacitly tolerated in the interest of maintaining social stability (Reif 2016: 315 f., 367). In Ibbenbüren, part-time farmers sometimes behaved in a similar fashion when they were otherwise unable to cope with gathering in the harvesting. This is how one miner recalls the 1960s:

You can imagine what it was like with all the farming. In spring we had to make hay, then we cut the rye, then the potatoes had to be dug out. And in autumn the fodder-beet had to be got out. And by then my holidays were used up. So I went to the doc. I said: "Doctor, I've got to take a break for a few days." – "Yes", the doctor said, "I see, you have some back problems." – He knew very well that

*I had to do the harvest. So he wrote me a sick note for a week (Interview 82 *1944).*

But the interviewee assured me that he only went to the doctor once a year to prolong his holidays.

The idea of the miner and farmer in one person often only disappeared in the late 20th century. One example is the parish of Recke to the north of Ibbenbüren. About forty miners lived in a part of the village called Langenacker until the 1980s. They all ran small farms, each covering one or two hectares. A bus drove them to the colliery. In the course of time, most of them changed their main profession, and later they ceased farming altogether. Now agriculture on the small part-time farms has been replaced by three full-time farms (Interview 54 *1965). If miners do give up farming, they usually lease the land rather than sell it. This is not a peculiarity of Ibbenbüren but a general characteristic of part-time farming: the land is meant to be kept in the family for later generations (Mahlerwein 2016: 49).

One reason for the decline in part-time agriculture was the structural change in agriculture: the pressure on costs that burdened agriculture forced the formation of ever larger units and specialisation. Agriculture became increasingly difficult to pursue as a sideline. Mining work also forced them to concentrate exclusively on a single job, e.g. foremen were duty-bound to work in the mine for well over the usual eight hours.

Just as in full-time agriculture, generation change was often the reason for abandoning the business of farming. One example is the story of a miner whose father had also worked as a collier and farmed the land as a sideline, but was now retired. In 1990 the father became an invalid and as a result his family decided to disband the farm and lease the land. Until then the miner's parents had mainly borne the brunt of running the farm. But often they demanded help from their son: "When my father or mother were sick, I would milk the cows before going off to my shift. Everything got done beforehand" (Interview 32 *1960). But the work in the mine also demanded increased commitment:

*Sometimes I was tired because the shift had begun at two o'clock in the morning. I worked overtime, and after that I had to make hay or straw. Or at weekends, I had to work an extra shift because this used to be compulsory; and then, in the afternoon, come home to bring in the straw or something like that. As a foreman you were around ten or eleven hours in the mine. Parallel to that I had an afternoon shift with a report in the evening. In between I used to be called in by the pit when they had problems, so I had to drive back to the colliery. And if that was during harvest time it was bad for the harvest because the work at the shaft had precedence (Interview 32 *1960).*

Shrinking Workforces and Early Retirements

The settlement structure of the Ibbenbüren district has retained rural features. The town itself has about 50,000 inhabitants. Without mining it would not have become the medium-sized town it is today. This makes the transition that accompanies so-called "structural change" all the more serious. Since the end of the 1950s, the number of employees in the mine has been permanently decreasing. The workforce peaked in 1958

with over 8,000 employees. With the onset of the coal crisis, this number quickly fell to 6,854 in 1965 and 5,204 in 1970 (Rickelmann/Röhrs 1983: 184). In mid-2016, as a consequence of a drastic reduction in the workforce, the plant employed less than 1,500 people (Steinkohle 2016, no. 9: 31). The plant has long since lost its position as the largest employer in the region. In 2015, the Copenrath & Wiese cake factory, founded in the neighbouring town of Mettingen in 1975, employed 2,600 people.² For the miners, the contraction of their colliery is already noticeable in small details, for example in the growing number of vacant parking spaces:

*From the tiny details alone you can see that things are getting increasingly difficult. Visually this is easy to see from the fact that there are more and more parking spaces available. We have large parking spaces for our employees, which you used to have to drive around to find a parking space if you came a bit later. But today this is no longer a problem (Interview 49 *1969).*

The reduction of the workforce within the plant has resulted in a large fluctuation. This is also noticeable in the oral history project: employees with whom an interview was scheduled had occasionally already retired before the scheduled meeting. Other employees have been given further responsibilities and now manage several departments instead of one. In the past, fluctuation was an opportunity for social advancement. But now it no longer seems worthwhile for most people to expose themselves to the considerable pressure of further training and familiarise themselves with new areas of work when they only have a few months left in their new position.

In other respects too, the reduction of the colliery has made the work more complicated rather than easier. This is already evident in the relationship of the mine to outside companies when the mine places an urgent order. The colliery is no longer perceived as an important major enterprise but as a medium-sized business. As such it no longer enjoys such preferential treatment. The employees responsible for procurement are only too aware of this:

*Of course, it's a problem for us that RAG, which has always been perceived as a group, and at one time there were [...] around 600,000 people [...] employed nationwide [...]. And today, whether you like it or not, I don't like to say this, but we are actually only a medium-sized company. [...] When in the past we put in an order for something from any company, that meant immediately. The mine is calling! And then it had to be delivered the next day. Today this is no longer the case. They say: "Yes, well, there are other bulk buyers." So they don't treat you so preferentially anymore (Interview 39 *1958).*

This was also confirmed by another employee:

Now I also hear similar stories when we order relevant parts from companies somewhere or other. In the old days you could phone them and, bam!, they were there. They immediately dropped everything for us because of the size of our orders. Today it's different. Mining is, how can I put it, dying. Yes, really. It's

2 <https://www.copenrath-wiese.de/karriere/wir-als-arbeitgeber.aspx> (09.04.2018).

*diminishing all the time, and companies have reoriented themselves because they are getting larger orders elsewhere. Now we're no longer number one in mining. Now I'd say we're number 15. So we have to wait for the parts, that's the way it is. It's not like it used to be when people rang up and said, "Right now! Get a move on. Just do it." That's no longer possible (Interview 28 *1959).*

Another side-effect of the contraction in the mine is that a growing number of activities above and below ground are being taken over by temporary employment agencies, officially known as "friendly partner companies". These companies' staff work at the mine for a limited period of time. However, since high safety regulations apply to everyone entering the mine, all staff have to be given comprehensive safety training before they can start work.

*We are now in the extreme situation of being confronted with employees from temporary employment agencies, and as a result no new workers are hired. It doesn't make sense. And these employees come from completely different working backgrounds. This may still be feasible where surface work is concerned, but underground it can sometimes be a bit dangerous. So you can't just leave them to their own devices, you have to take them in hand. That's what we do. So they're watched very closely. They always have an experienced employee at hand (Interview 39 *1958).*

A rapid reduction of the workforce can only be achieved in a socially responsible manner by retiring miners at an early stage. The conditions for this were agreed in 2007 in negotiations between representatives of the Federal Government, the relevant state governments of North Rhine-Westphalia and Saarland, RAG company and the IG BCE trade union. In the same year a federal law set out the grants necessary for transition measures and for draining the decommissioned mines. The transition funds granted to underground miners enable them to take early retirement at the age of 50. Miners without "underground status" go into early retirement at the age of 57 and with reduced salaries. This early retirement scheme was fought for by the unions, and after 2007 it had to be defended against subsequent attempts to overturn the agreement. For those affected, however, it is a two-edged issue because at 50, many miners are not yet at an age when they can really benefit from being professionally inactive. The first few months are like a long vacation, but at some time or another all the repairs in the house and the garden have been completed, and this can give rise to a cavernous feeling of emptiness. Some of the interviewees were therefore also very concerned about their imminent retirement. A foreman who had retired four years earlier told us:

*When I turned fifty, I had to retire early, which was very, very difficult for me. You can't really say, "immediately, from now on". You knew that. You could prepare for it, so as not to jump in at the deep end. But it wasn't so damn easy. No, in midlife, when your life is full of juice, to say, at fifty! One moment I was used to speaking to 150 people at six in the morning, and the next I was sitting at home alone in front of my daily paper (Interview 5 *1960).*

In this case, my interviewee had found a counterweight in his increased commitment to voluntary work by taking over the management of the local miners' association. Other respondents also work on a voluntary basis. For example, one miner said that it was only possible to cope with the extensive work of the local association in Mettingen because so many miners who had taken early retirement were involved. Some of these miners in early retirement also earned a little extra from so-called 450 euro jobs. However, if they had larger supplementary earnings, they would lose their entitlement to early retirement.

In many parts of the world, of course, miners would be happy to have such problems. In addition, for many outsiders, early retirement along with subsidies to the mining industry can be a cause of social envy. Several miners have been heavily criticised for being highly subsidised and living in relatively good circumstances. A colliery employee, who originally worked at the Westfalen colliery in Ahlen, met an electrician there again after many years, who had later changed his profession:

*This electrician had also received a severance payment from us and changed jobs. And after a long time, our paths crossed while I was out shopping, and because we knew each other from the colliery, I went up to him and asked: [...] "How's it going?" – "Quite well actually. What about you? Are you still down the pit?" – "Yes", I said, "I'm still at the colliery." – "So you're also one of those social scroungers!" (Interview 42 *1963).*

Such examples show that the socially responsible dismantling of the mining industry is always accompanied by conflicts, even in the local environment.

Relocations and the "Family Pit"

Starting in the year 2000, the expansion of the workforce was boosted by the relocation of numerous colleagues from the Ruhr area, and later also from the Saarland, to Ibbenbüren. The majority of the over 300 employees from the Ruhr area came from the Westfalen colliery in Ahlen, which ceased production in mid-2000. A manager from the personnel department in Ibbenbüren who was working in Ahlen at the time was involved in the preparation of the transfer:

Relocation planning started quite early. [...] We finally came up with a concept and, in three shifts, talked to every employee who was still there and recorded their wishes. In this way we prepared notes, with the names of the collieries who were to take them over [...] And then we again carried out surveys with all the workers for weeks, i.e. during the three-shift system, and discussed matters thoroughly with all the employees. They had to decide their order of preferences. Of course, many of them wanted to be transferred to the Ost colliery because it was only 15 kilometres away from the Westfalen colliery. The problem was that only about one hundred of the planned number could be transferred there, and we had over 2,000 employees left to deal with. And that's why it was so tricky. But we managed to smooth things out in our discussions by saying: "Even if you tick 'Ost', the probability of being transferred there is very low because the target figures say that only a hundred can be moved there, and more can be transferred

*to 'Prosper' and to Ibbenbüren." Yes, so our transfer programme really turned out quite well; the general level of satisfaction amongst the men was good (Interview 42 *1963).*

Whether those affected were really satisfied is another question. Here, the tendency to rate one's own actions as successful is unmistakable. In most cases the employees who were to be transferred from the Westfalen mine did not really have a choice.

The distance between Ahlen and Ibbenbüren is about one hundred kilometres. Most employees commute daily on the motorway and often form car pools. Only a few employees have second homes in Ibbenbüren and commute weekly. An employee from Ahlen defends the daily travel as follows:

*The colleagues here at Ibbenbüren always said: "Why don't you move home?" That was very easy to say. I have my own home in Ahlen. My wife is working, the children have their friends in Ahlen, so moving was out of the question. And I tell you, I didn't want a weekend relationship either. I knew I'd be home in an hour or more to see my family every evening, and I can also enjoy my wife's company for four hours in the evening (Interview 42 *1963).*

In the first few years, the colliery also provided funding for commuting to Ibbenbüren:

*At the beginning there were still bus connections, there were still factory buses to bring the people. There was still ticket money from the company, but in 2002/2003, savings measures were introduced, bus lines were cancelled along with the ticket money, a large number of car pools were created, and care was always taken to ensure that employees could work the same shifts to enable them to take part in car pools (Interview 42 *1963).*

By 2016, as a result of retirements, the number of employees from Ahlen had fallen from over 300 to around 40. From 2010, an even larger increase in the number of employees, approximately 750, came from the Saarland in the north-western part of Germany. The reason for the premature end of coal production at the Saar colliery was a rock burst in February 2008, which was felt in the region as an earthquake and also caused damage to buildings. After the rock burst, the prevailing mood of the general population rapidly turned against mining. Miners say that after that they sometimes had to go to work under police protection. It was also said on several occasions that in one place there was a baker who refused to hand out bread rolls to miners' children (Interview 5 *1960; Interview 43 *1963). And if they did not want their tires punctured, pit workers were well advised to remove mining symbols like mallets and irons from their cars (Interview 43 *1963). From February 2008, coal could only be mined under strict requirements. Production in the Saarland region ceased in mid-2012.

For the Ibbenbüren colliery, the premature end of mining in the Saar region may also have had advantages. Some respondents suspect that if the Saar mines had not been closed, the Ibbenbüren colliery would have been closed earlier and the workers in Ibbenbüren would have had to commute to the Saarland (Interview 51 *1960; Interview 94 *1962). The reason for this assumption is that RAG Aktiengesellschaft was forced to reduce coal production in accordance with the political agreements. One practical

advantage of the Saar closure for the Ibbenbüren colliery was that experts from the Saarland were able to replace their retired colleagues in some positions and fill gaps. Due to the forcible reduction of staff, there was a shortage of experts in some areas in Ibbenbüren (Interview 78 *1964; Interview 84 *1968).

Like the Ruhr area collieries and the Ibbenbüren colliery, the Saar mines were part of the RAG company, in which all remaining German coal mines have been gradually merged since 1968. Therefore, the relocation of the miners could be planned centrally. A senior member of the personnel department in Ibbenbüren remembers that employee discussions were held with all the affected Saarland miners in order to find a suitable job for them in Ibbenbüren.

*One year before the employees were transferred, we went to the Saar colliery and held discussions with the employees who were to be transferred. I can remember the first batch; due to move on April 1st 2010. We went there in 2009 and talked to around a hundred employees, went to the Saar site with three employees from the human resources department, three operational staff and three works councils and talked to each individual employee in three groups for three days, wrote down their particular duties, noted everything and gave the people the feeling that with us they were in good hands (Interview 42 *1963).*

The head of human resources also remembers that apartments in Ibbenbüren were visited in the company of his Saarland colleagues:

*The talks in the Saarland were followed by on-the-spot discussions here. We helped the employees find accommodation, we increased our housing office by three employees, we really did inspect the apartments with every employee and helped them find somewhere to live. Here, in the period from 2010 to 2013, we accommodated almost 750 Saarland employees within a radius of 15 kilometres (Interview 42 *1963).*

The colliery subsidised rents for the first two years so that the miners could meet the financial burden of a second home. In mastering the travel distance of about 500 kilometres each way, the colleagues from the Saarland paid a high price for continued employment. Only very few of the 750 Saarlanders have moved to Ibbenbüren permanently. One interviewee, who left the Saarland and bought a house near Ibbenbüren, knows of fewer than ten colleagues who, like him, have moved permanently. As a rule, the family, the wife's job in the Saarland and, last but not least, home ownership posed an obstacle to moving home. Just as in Ibbenbüren, the proportion of Saarland miners who live in their own houses is very high.

*90 percent of the employees owned property there. This is not generally the case in the Ruhr area where many people lived on the colliery estates. And in the Saarland and here in Ibbenbüren, people own – I guess – 90 percent of the workers own their own property. [...] Of course they didn't sell their houses, there were very few who did. Many have a second home here and commute on weekends or go home to their wives every two weeks (Interview 42 *1963).*

As a rule, they go home every one or two weeks. One miner from the Saarland told us that he takes turns with his wife: every four weeks he goes back to the Saarland; his wife and daughter come to Ibbenbüren every four weeks. This way they can at least spend every other weekend together. Cars are used throughout, and the Saarlanders travel together in even greater proportions than the Ahleners.

*We carpool. [...] I scarcely know of any people who drive alone, and I think that in the process, many of us have arranged the shifts there in such a way that we can travel home together on Fridays at noon after the early shift, or in the evening after the noon shift – it always depends on how the shifts are arranged – that the people can then always fill a car with four people, and then they can share and minimise the costs (Interview 44 *1969).*

Since it is a long way, they usually drove fast. It can be considered a success – and is indeed regarded as a success – that there have been no serious road accidents during the weekend trips back home to the Saarland. Nevertheless, the journey took quite a while, at least five hours per trip, and miners from Ibbenbüren asked their local colleagues to agree to the Saarlanders leaving the plant as early as possible on Fridays because they have to return back to work on Sunday night.

In order to reduce the stress of commuting, most miners from the Saarland were keen to retire as early as possible. One way of doing this was by using long-term accounts in which they can save up overtime. In 2016, there were no more than around two hundred and in mid-2018 there were only around forty colleagues from the Saarland in Ibbenbüren. The Saarlanders were mainly transferred to Ibbenbüren and not to the Ruhr area not only for operational reasons but also because of personal preferences: from their mentality, they felt closer to the people of Ibbenbüren than to the pit workers in the Ruhr (Interview 94 *1962). They also commented that their colleagues in the Ruhr were more indifferent to their workplace. This can be explained by the fact that many Ruhr miners had already been moved from one mine to another and that their personal sense of responsibility had suffered as a result:

*In the Saarland there are always the same people at the mine. And there have been no additions from outside. And in the Ruhr area they have been constantly moved from one colliery to the next. So they no longer really care about what's around them but only think: "Yes, I can get through the last ten years, too" (Interview 95 *1978).*

Of course, there are also differences in mentality between the workers in Ibbenbüren and the Saarlanders. One Saarlander who moved to Ibbenbüren said that it is easier to start a conversation in the Saarland, while in Ibbenbüren people seem more distant at first sight:

*But now, if you want my opinion, in the interpersonal area, it isn't as easy to establish contact as in the Saarland. The people there are quite simply different. More open. They're more approachable (Interview 43 *1963).*

The way in which the colliery is perceived has also changed in part with the influxes from the Ruhr area and the Saarland. A term frequently used in Ibbenbüren is “family pit”. This expression has different meanings. For example, it is striking how many employees are related to each other. But it also indicates a family-like relationship between the workers, who all come from the small towns and villages around, and a great sense of belonging. This close relationship was very helpful in integrating new co-workers, as a native of Dortmund, who had previously worked at several mines, explains:

*The integration at the mine worked very well for all the newcomers. It was also made easy because until [...] 1999 – when the first people arrived from the Westfalen colliery – the mine only employed local people who knew each other and had family ties. At the gate to the mine I once jokingly remarked that everyone’s related here, they just have different names (Interview 41 *1961).*

Several interviewees say that the “family pit” relationships began to loosen after 2000. An administrative employee who came from the Ruhr area 15 years earlier reported:

*I came here in 2001, when Ibbenbüren was still a family mine, when there were Ibbenbüreners, when there were workers who came from around Recke, from Hopsten, from Hörstel, from Mettingen, from Tecklenburg all the way to Lenggerich. In other words, more than 90 percent of the workforce was actually from the region. And then with the first 300 from the “Westfalen” pit, the whole thing got mixed up, and I guess around 450 employees from the Ruhr had been transferred here by 2006/2007. They were followed in 2009/2010 by their colleagues from the Saarland, some 750 in all, and today it has to be said, we’re a rather mixed bunch (Interview 42 *1963).*

In the Ruhr area fluctuation, the transfer of workers between the mines had been more frequent, whereas in Ibbenbüren there was only the one colliery. Nonetheless, several of those questioned still like to use the term “family pit”.

Coal Mining and the Social Market Economy

Despite all their differences, miners from the Ruhr, Saarland and Ibbenbüren have one thing in common: they are proud of their work. Pride is also one of the findings of an employee survey carried out at the Ibbenbüren colliery in mid-2016 (Steinkohle 2016, no. 11: 6). It can also be seen in the interviews. It is their pride in their work, in the company and in how miners are dealing with the challenge of structural change. Indeed, structural change in the area of Ibbenbüren can in many respects be regarded as a success story – at least until now. This refers to how the mine has organised its rapid contraction, the redundancy plans for its employees, how the city and the region are absorbing the loss of this major economic factor, and also to the drainage work involved in long-term concepts for the environment.

During the last few decades, company culture in the German coal mining industry, and thus also in Ibbenbüren, has undergone a change in many respects. One change that miners experienced at the end of the 20th century affected the management culture. Un-

til around 1990, there was a tone of communication in large parts of the colliery operation that was often described by sentences like “The one who shouts the loudest is right”. In reality, however, this was generally not a competition to see who could shout loudest but shouting at subordinates. Due to the general noise level in mining, there was a technical necessity for this shouting, but this was not the primary reason, because this shouting also shaped the communication style in the foremen’s offices.

Ultimately, loud tones are the legacy of an unfortunate tradition in German coal mining. Indeed, such behaviour was condemned as mining militarism as early as the first few years of the 20th century (Briefs 1934: 121 f.). The distinctive system of command and obedience survived the watershed between and after the two World Wars. That said, since the 1960s, the system of co-determination in the coal and steel industries, along with the pressures to tackle structural change, has gradually led to a more cooperative social climate in the Ruhr area.

In Ibbenbüren, there was a highly perceptible change in management culture in the early 1990s. The then Operations Director took advantage of the fact that a number of senior executives could be retired and replaced them with people with a more balanced temperament and modern leadership qualities. Within a few years, a new working atmosphere and a much calmer tone had been established in large parts of the colliery. This also helped people to master the new technical challenges.

Modernisation also meant better prospects for the employment of women. In the German coal mining industry of the 19th and 20th centuries, it was unthinkable – with the exception of Upper Silesia – for women to work underground (Kroker et al. 1989; Ziegler 2013: 128). But by the end of the 20th century, a different legal view prevailed. Now the idea of protecting women from physically demanding and dangerous work was replaced by the idea of equality. In 1997, women in Ibbenbüren were allowed to work as miners (trainees) and as foremen to enable them to complete their training as mining assessors (Interview 95 *1978). All in all, however, opening up the mining profession to women came too late to bear fruit in the coal industry.

If structural change in the coal industry, especially in Ibbenbüren, can be regarded as a success story, there are several reasons for this: The economic conditions have been comparatively favourable. The unemployment rate in the Ibbenbüren coal region was 3.9 percent in 2014, compared to the state average in North Rhine-Westphalia of 8.2 percent (Manteuffel et al. 2016: 27 ff.). The proportion of industrial workers in the population is also high. Industrial employment is spread across a relatively large number of smaller firms. Unlike in many traditional industrial areas, it is not concentrated in just a few large companies and enterprises.

These comparatively favourable circumstances promote calm and considered actions. Local authorities have made the most of the opportunity to prepare the area and the population for structural change and have included this factor as far as possible in the plans for the colliery.

One condition for this success is the great dedication of the miners, who pay a high personal price for their continued economic existence, not least because they have to cover long distances. One political condition is the close cooperation between the trade union, the coal industry and the state, in the course of which the united enterprise Ruhrkohle AG, later known as the RAG company, emerged, a fact which created the base for overall planning activities. The success of structural change has also been pos-

sible because the laws of capitalism have been partially relativised by the state-supported creation of a unified company but above all by the financial support for social plans and long-term post-mining employment. Perhaps it can also be seen as an extreme form of social market economy or “Rhine Capitalism”.³ In this respect, the phasing out of coal production in Germany is a historic exception.

Since the late 20th century, the German coal industry has become a model industrial sector as a result of the change in management culture and tone, access for women, consistent attention to occupational safety for miners and growing sensitivity to the environment. It is particularly regrettable that these developments only occurred a short time before the closing of the last collieries and that only a very small proportion of miners have benefited from them. But such developments towards an “ideal” form of capitalism could probably only have taken place in an industry that had already been declared dead.

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3 The French economist Michel Albert defined the “Rhine” model of capitalism practiced in Germany, Switzerland and Scandinavia, in contrast to the Anglo-American model (Albert 1991, cf. Spangenberg 2011).

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Abstract

In 2018, when the last German hard coal mines were closed down, the conditions were relatively favourable, especially in the coal region of Ibbenbüren in Northern Westphalia. This district is marked by small towns and medium-sized enterprises with a relatively low unemployment rate. On the one hand, the shutdown without greater lay-offs was enabled by the co-working of the trade union and the mining company. This, on the other hand, depended to a large extent on external influences, not least on state subsidies and the preceding integration of the German hard coal industry into a rescue company. Furthermore, the relatively smooth transition would not have been possible without the willingness of many miners of covering far distances to other locations. This article is based on narrative interviews conducted before the shutdown of 2018 with miners and other persons involved, focusing on their memories of mining in Ibbenbüren.