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The nothingness myth

Creation and collapse of a Soviet industrial settlement

Anna Varfolomeeva

Abstract: This article analyzes the concept of “nothingness” as a part of human-resource relations in pre- and post-industrial landscapes. It addresses nothingness as a part of mythological narratives in Kvartsitnyi settlement in northwestern Russia. Kvartsitnyi was built in the 1970s near the new quartzitic sandstone quarry and was initially viewed as a modern settlement attracting workers from all around the country. However, in the early 2000s, the quarry went bankrupt and closed. The pre-industrial landscape of Kvartsitnyi is often viewed in the interviews as empty, and the quarry’s closure recreated this symbolic “nothingness.” These narratives resemble mythological creation stories when a new world appears from nothing but is destroyed as a result of human mistakes. The article discusses the cosmogonic myth of Kvartsitnyi within the larger context of Soviet and post-Soviet myth-making.

Keywords: creation myth, emptiness, industrial landscape, labor history, mining heritage, nothingness

At the end of August 2021, the Kvartsitnyi settlement¹ in Karelia, northwestern Russia, celebrated an important milestone: fifty years since its establishment. Kvartsitnyi was built next to a newly opened quarry producing quartzitic sandstone and received its name from the quartzite (in Russian, *kvartsit*). “Just imagine,” one of the speakers said during the celebration, “fifty years ago there was only one house here—and nothing more!” The references to “nothingness” preceding the arrival of industry are common in the interviews with Kvartsitnyi residents. Similar references are used when the respondents talk about the rupture of the

post-Soviet years when the quartzitic sandstone quarry stopped operating and Kvartsitnyi lost its primary job provider.

In this article, I discuss two interrelated layers of nothingness expressed in the interviews with Kvartsitnyi’s residents: the representations of pre-industrial spaces as “nothing” and the symbolic emptiness of former industrial settlements. The concepts of nothingness (in Russian, *nichto*) and emptiness are used in the text as synonyms, referring to physical and symbolic spatial absence as expressed by the interviewees. To bring together the temporal dimensions of nothingness, both reflecting the emotional at-



tachment between residents and industry, I turn to the concept of myth. I analyze the references to pre- and post-industrial emptiness as mythological narratives depicting a bright new world appearing “out of nothing” and then collapsing back into “nothingness” when the industry is gone. The article discusses the cosmogonic myth of Kvartsitnyi within the larger context of Soviet and post-Soviet myth-making traditions that emphasize the crucial role of industry in community formation. More specifically, it brings parallels between the history of Kvartsitnyi and the creation narratives of the Karelian epic poem *Kalevala*.

The paradox of Kvartsitnyi is that it did not appear in a barren landscape: it was built adjacent to the centuries-old village of Shoksha in the area historically inhabited by Veps, an Indigenous Finno-Ugric people. As mining workers were migrating to Kvartsitnyi from other regions, the settlement’s community became much more diverse. Many newcomers grew attached to the new place, and even when the quarry closed, they decided to stay in the settlement. The article analyzes the ways of dealing with post-industrial nothingness in contemporary Kvartsitnyi. It argues that the links between Kvartsitnyi and Indigenous Veps settlements influenced the local ways of perceiving the landscape. As a way to deal with the loss of industry as a security provider, the residents invest in their connections with the landscape, self-organization, and mutual support.

Emptiness in industrial settlements

Following Dace Dzenovska’s definition, I view emptiness in this article as “an observable reality wherein places rapidly lose their constitutive elements” (Dzenovska 2020: 10). The emic notion of “nothingness” is used in the article as the physical and symbolic emptiness of places. I discuss the sense of place experienced by the locals of Kvartsitnyi as the result of Soviet-time industrialization discourses and an emotional experi-

ence resulting from everyday interactions with the landscape. The idea of “conquering” wild nature was prominent in the Soviet discourse; at the same time, interacting with perceived “wilderness” simultaneously placed Soviet citizens outside of state control and formed new affective attachments with nature (Bolotova 2004).

This article discusses two representations of emptiness, defined as pre-industrial and post-industrial emptiness. Both representations are ultimately related to the modernity discourse where emptiness is something that precedes civilization or follows the civilization’s collapse. Following the second wave of resource exploration in the 1960s, the discourse of “senseless emptiness” became prominent. Within this discourse, nature is viewed as an important resource and as “emptiness” or “nothingness,” as it does not carry meaning when being devoid of civilization (Bolotova 2004). At the same time, the collapse of civilization signifies a symbolic return to “emptiness” or a state of rupture when the familiar observable realities do not carry recognizable meanings anymore. Lost industries, closed plants, or decaying settlements are often viewed as material implications of the fall of the Soviet Union (Martínez 2017). Material memories of extraction connect the past, present, and future of resource sites, making it difficult for residents to imagine alternative futures without resource dependence (Venovcevs 2021).

Mining sites are places with significant cultural value influencing the formation of identities and memories (Ey and Sherval 2016) and evoking mixed emotional responses of hope, worry, fear, or excitement (Komu 2019). In the post-Soviet period of turmoil, these responses have been influenced by shared nostalgia as a defense mechanism for turning a historical time into a mythological space by combining actual and illusional experiences (Boym 2019). Mining sites introduce new structures and symbols into the landscape, changing not only the physical landscape but also forms of social organization in the community (Bridge and Frederiksen 2012). The resource produces parallel tempo-

ralities (e.g., the biographies of extractive waste products that go alongside the primary product) (D'Angelo and Pijpers 2018). As mining sites are perceived as part of the landscape, the loss of this industry becomes traumatic for the community. Communities, like individuals, suffer after such losses: they go through the processes of mourning and—later—emotional regeneration (Stephenson and Wray 2005), trying to reconcile their industrial past with an “unprivileged” present and uncertain future.

This article focuses on memories of pre- and post-industrial emptiness of Kvartsitnyi, viewing memory as a personal and intimate account of the past and simultaneously a collective representation of shared events and values (Harris 2011). Collective memory is a fluid concept that represents a negotiation between historical records and contemporary social and political agendas (Smith 2002). The concept of “myth” is used in the text not to imply the falsity of specific narratives or their politicized nature but to stress the foundational character of such accounts of the past and their influence on collective identity formation (Kirschenbaum 2009). In this sense, myth is strongly linked to memory, as it structures a dispersed collection of memories into a purposeful narrative. As Slava Gerovitch notes, “remembering and mythologizing are the same thing” (2015: xii). Through collective remembering, members of the community capture their common experiences that influence the formation of their group identity (Smith 2002). Myths, as sacred narratives, symbolically organize reality and provide an explanation of the world and the place of humans in it (Barthes 1972; Dundes 1987). Myths may also be viewed as sets of instructions to community members, indicating local values and ways of behaving (Kittredge 1987).

Myth-making was an important part of the Soviet propaganda tradition, and the construction of historical continuities and new idols was used by Soviet leaders for power legitimacy and the validation of current policies (Gerovitch 2015). In post-Soviet Russia, myth-making is still viewed as a powerful instrument of regime

validation. Thus, when discussing the reasons for the popularity of authoritarian regimes like Putin's, historian Stephen Kotkin notes: “They have stories to tell. And, as you know, stories are always more powerful than secret police . . . stories about Russian greatness, about the revival of Russian greatness, about enemies at home and enemies abroad who are trying to hold Russia down” (Remnick and Kotkin 2022). Influential Soviet-time mythologies include the history of space exploits that conflate the utopia of socialism with the utopia of spaceflights, constructing their own “origins story” and emphasizing the figure of the “founding father” of cosmonautics Konstantin Tsiolkovskii (Siddiqi 2011). Arctic exploration mythologies encapsulated the themes of mastery over nature, relentless efforts, heroism, and technological advancement (McCannon 1997). Other important Soviet mythological narratives were related to large-scale industrial projects such as Baikal–Amur Mainline, which was proclaimed “the construction site of the century” by the Soviet state in the 1970s (Schweitzer et al. 2017) or the Bratsk hydroelectric complex completed in 1967 and promoted as the largest dam in the world (Breyfogle 2018). As mythological stories focus on specific aspects of the country's history, often hyperbolizing them, counter-narratives are easily omitted. Mythologies, then, become simplified versions of the past devoid of contradictions (Odissonova 2021). They serve as an embodiment of state power in creating a particular discourse and shadowing the details that do not support the chosen representation of the events. The myths of the pre-industrial and post-industrial emptiness of Kvartsitnyi did not take into account the rich history of the region; the experience of its long-term dwellers, the Veps Indigenous minority; and the strong links formed during the residents' everyday interactions with the landscape.

Case study background and methodology

The settlement of Kvartsitnyi is located in the Prionezhskii district (Prionezhie) of the Repub-

lic of Karelia in northwestern Russia. The area where Kvartsitnyi is situated has traditionally been inhabited by Indigenous Veps (currently, around three thousand Veps reside in Karelia). Contemporary Kvartsitnyi is the center of the Shoksha Veps rural settlement (in Russian, *Shokshinskoe vepsskoe sel'skoe poselenie*), an administrative unit including the Shoksha and Yashezero villages. Therefore, Kvartsitnyi is part of a rather diverse set of households spread over five kilometers, partly along the shore of Lake Onega. As the administration representatives communicated to me, there are around eight hundred registered residents in the rural settlement. In Shoksha (in Vepsian, Šokš), there are few permanent residents but its population grows significantly in the summer. The village of Yashezero (in Vepsian, Jäšarv) is now abandoned, as its last resident passed away in 2006, but it represents a significant place for many locals due to its connection to the former Iono-Yashezersky monastery that functioned until 1918 (Kozhevnikova 2014). One of my interviewees recalled how, in her childhood in the early 1950s, she used to walk from Shoksha to Yashezero with her grandmother to pray.

Shoksha has been well known in Karelia as a place where raspberry quartzite, a rare decorative stone of deep crimson color, is extracted. The extraction of raspberry quartzite, along with another rare stone, gabbro-diabase, started in the eighteenth century and was maintained by Veps stoneworkers. In the 1920s, a Soviet state quartzite mining enterprise started working near Shoksha. A new workers' settlement with wooden barrack-type houses, a cafeteria, and a daycare was built close to the quartzite mining site. It received the name Gornye Razrabotki (translated from Russian as Stone Mining Works). Today, it forms a part of contemporary Kvartsitnyi, although they are situated two kilometers apart.

In 1971, a new mining quarry producing quartzitic sandstone opened near Shoksha on the shore of Lake Onega. The quarry was intended to provide building materials for the Moscow region. Soon after that, the construc-

tion of a new settlement began; it was managed and financed by Moscow-based state enterprise *Mosoblstroimaterialy*. Kvartsitnyi was built halfway between Shoksha and Gornye Razrabotki on the shore of Lake Onega (the distance between Kvartsitnyi and Shoksha is three kilometers). The first two-story panel houses of Kvartsitnyi were designed for two households each; they are known among the locals as “cottages.” Later, several 16-flat houses were built in the settlement's center (see Figure 1). Finally, in the 1980s, four five-story apartment houses were constructed. These were the last buildings constructed there before the fall of the Soviet Union; after that, no new housing appeared. The construction of “cottages” and apartment houses near Shoksha village resulted in a strong interplay of urban and rural elements in the Kvartsitnyi area. This process reflected the Soviet-time discourse of transformation and the reorganization of rural settlements, bringing them close to urban standards of living (Bogdanova 2006). In Soviet industrial settlements similar to Kvartsitnyi, the central enterprise—such as the plant—ruled not only the employment of residents but also multiple aspects of their social life such as childcare, recreation, training courses for workers, stipends for their children, cultural activities, and maintenance works (Oswald 2007). This situation created a high level of residents' dependence on the plant as the central element of their life in the settlement.

The development of Kvartsitnyi went alongside an opposite process: the abandonment of smaller Veps villages. In the 1960s and 1970s, due to the “liquidation of the villages without prospects” policy that recognized the smaller rural settlements as economically inefficient, many Veps migrated from smaller villages to larger settlements or urban areas (Strogalschikova 2014). This migration, as well as Soviet assimilation policies toward the Vepsian language and culture led to the situations where young people from Vepsian families were often registered as Russian (Strogalschikova 2014). These processes were preceded by the late 1930s repressions of Veps activists due to their suspected collabora-



FIGURE 1. In the center of Kvarstitsnyi, 2021. Photo by author.

tion with Finland (Filimonchik 2011) and the ban of the Veps language in school education. As Kvarstitsnyi was being created, the Soviet state suppressed the established Veps culture in the area, and the landscape's modifications thus became entangled with community changes.

While initially Kvarstitsnyi was presented as a modern progressive settlement attracting young professionals with housing promises and good job prospects, the post-Soviet years resulted in great financial instability. The quartzitic sandstone quarry was privatized and managed by changing directors. In 2005, after a series of financial hardships, it closed. The raspberry quartzite quarry was working on a small scale at the time of my fieldwork. Without the presence of the quarry symbolically uniting the settlement, its residents needed to find other ways of connecting with the place. The next sections of this article will discuss the modes of constructing pre-industrial and post-industrial emptiness narratives, as well as alternative ways of dealing with an industrial collapse.

The article is based on a series of ethnographic field visits to Kvarstitsnyi and Shok-

sha between 2015 and 2021, as well as Soviet publications in the local newspaper *Kommunist Prionezhia*. The primary methods of data collection were participant observation and semi-structured biographical interviews with residents, mining workers, quarry managers, and administration representatives. From 2015 to 2018, I conducted 37 interviews with the residents of Shoksha and Kvarstitsnyi; additional 16 interviews were conducted in 2021.² The interview questions centered on the respondents' biographies, paying special attention to their work life, integration into the local community, and interactions with the landscape.

Pre-industrial “nothingness”

Stark contrasts between the pre-industrial landscape and the changes brought by mining development have been common in Karelian media and literature since the early Soviet years. In 1932, Karelian journalist Sergei Norin published a collection of essays called *Vzorvannye Gory* (*Blown Mountains*). The first essay, titled

in a mixture of Russian and Vepsian “Proklyaty kivi” (Cursed stone), describes the early days of mining development in Karelia:

Wolves came running up the mountain at night. . . . On the shore of the lake, stunted shrubs stretched in endless ridges to the north, east, and west. To the right, rare, frail lights of the village flickered. . . . In the spring, a bear approached the mountain. He ran the neighboring meadows, where the peasants drove stunted, hungry cattle from the surrounding villages. (Norin 1932: 7–8)

Through his usage of vocabulary (e.g., referring to “stunted” trees, shrubs, or cattle and “rare” and “frail” lights), Norin pictures a scarcely populated landscape symbolically owned by wild animals. In contrast, the end of the essay, when the mining industry arrives to Veps villages, presents a radically different image:

Far away in the lake . . . a steamboat was sailing. He struggled with the waves Struggling with a storm of difficulties, cutting through the crests of obstacles, people worked on the shore The wolves no longer howled on the mountain—they ran away. And the stupid bear was killed by a colt by an engineer who measured the railroad line. (Norin 1932: 34)

The arrival of industry brings radical changes to the previously barren landscape. Norin mentions a steamboat transferring stone by water and a narrow-gauge railroad, two important signs of the villages’ progress. Wild animals, the previous owners of the territory, were either chased away or killed by the spreading technology. Norin’s essay proclaims the victory of man over wilderness through the development of the mining industry in the area.

A similar image of conquering nature appears in the local media. An article published in 1984 in the local newspaper *Kommunist Prionezhia* focuses on the student construction bri-

gade³ from Moscow working in Kvartsitnyi in the 1980s. The name of the brigade, “Vikings,” is figuratively used as a symbol of conquerers discovering new territory:

In 1980, the first “Vikings” from the student construction brigade of Moscow builders arrived on the land of Shoksha. They arrived to transform this region, to build new powerful sections of the Shoksha quarry management, to build a new well-designed and well-equipped settlement. (Molotkov 1984: 3)

Many residents of Kvartsitnyi presented it as a settlement appearing “from nothing” and spoke about their impression of emptiness or wilderness at the time they moved. Thus, Oksana, who moved to Kvartsitnyi with her husband from the southern part of the country, recalls:

My first impression—it was just some kind of horror. Well, we drove and drove. The city of Petrozavodsk was still fine, but here we drove. There was forest everywhere. We grew up in the steppe regions, where you can see everything to the horizon, but here you see nothing . . . and then we saw these ten small houses and two four-story ones. That’s it! Here is the whole village. And all around it, there is a forest.

Several of my research participants, when speaking about Kvartsitnyi, used similar expressions when referring to the first years of the settlement. Thus, the period before 1971, when the new quarry opened and the first construction started at the place of contemporary Kvartsitnyi, was often presented through references to pre-industrial nothingness. When my research participants recalled the landscape before construction started, they repeatedly used the expression “there was nothing” (in Russian, *ne bylo nichego*). Herein, I provide three excerpts from interviews with: Rada, born in Yashezero

and later living in Shoksha; Lyudmila, born in the Gornye Razrabotki settlement near the raspberry quartzite quarry; and Vasily, who moved to Kvartsitnyi to work from the Lenin-grad region, with emphasis added:

Rada: *There was still nothing in the quarry, I would even say nothing-nothing-nothing at all.* In the place where the quarry was, there was still a forest; *there was nothing.* Only when I moved there [from Shoksha], they began to cut down the forest, uproot it, and build the quarry. They brought two railroad cars and a grinding mill from Moscow.

Interviewer: And how did the settlement look when you started working?

Rada: How? Oh, but *there was nothing there, simply nothing.* Later they started transporting blocks for houses . . . and people started arriving.

Vasily: When I arrived, the settlement was not there yet. There was one unfinished cottage, but besides that, *there was nothing.* It was the year 1971.

Lyudmila: This place [Kvartsitnyi] was called Ust'e before; *there was nothing here.* Just a cliff and a swamp—back in our childhood. . . . Then, in the 1970s, they started building the settlement; the first workers from Moscow arrived.

Interestingly, the references to “nothingness” appear at the same time in the interviews with those who moved to Kvartsitnyi from other places, such as Vasily and Oksana, as well as in the interviews with long-term residents of Shoksha and the neighboring villages, like Rada and Lyudmila. All of them present similar narratives contrasting the time “before” and “after” the settlement, where the time “before” is presented as the symbolic emptiness of the landscape.

However, locals had connections to this particular landscape long before the emergence of Kvartsitnyi. The residents of Shoksha used to go to the forested area on the shore of Lake Onega

to pick mushrooms or berries, and children went to the lakeshore for swimming. For example, Alevtina recalled her childhood in Shoksha the 1950s: “As soon as summer comes, we are swimming in Lake Onega, where the water intake is now.” Lyudmila and Rada also mention specific features of the landscape, such as “forest,” “cliff,” and “swamp.” Still, for them, this landscape is nevertheless seen as “empty” and lacking meaning. This meaning is eventually given to it by the construction of Kvartsitnyi. As it starts, the landscape gets a purpose and is serving the mining industry and the symbolic center of the state in Moscow.

These narratives are in line with the Soviet “romanticized industrialization” discourse when a place is granted meaning when it is used for industrial purposes and for the sake of the state. Kvartsitnyi had an important role in providing building materials for the Moscow region. Besides, it was a modern settlement constructed next to the unique deposit of raspberry quartzite used for well-known buildings and monuments in Russia and abroad. Due to the importance of Kvartsitnyi as a resource provider, as well as its high position in the neighborhood because of its modern houses and promising development plans, its construction became a rupture point in local history. Many current residents moved to Kvartsitnyi from other places, and for them, the landscape did not carry a separate meaning before they started working and became immersed in the surroundings. For them, the construction of Kvartsitnyi became a point of new life creation. However, as the quarry closed, the established life of Kvartsitnyi was shattered, and today’s residents are in constant search of new meanings and new reasons to stay.

The post-industrial collapse of the myth

Soon after its construction started, Kvartsitnyi became a symbol of a modern, progressive settlement—a place for enthusiasts overcoming the hardships of the northern climate. The first “cottages” of Kvartsitnyi were built according

to Moscow designs and technologies and were viewed as a wonder by Shoksha locals as they had heating and sewage systems. Many of my informants based in Kvartsitnyi expressed deep nostalgia for the 1970s and 1980s when the quarry's administration had ambitious plans for the settlement's future. As Oksana noted:

We believed at that time that we had interesting prospects, that the settlement would be developing, that a fancy daycare and school would be built and an ambulance station as well. The quarry's development plan was great. And we hoped it would be real, we hoped till perestroika and after it as well.

In the local media of Prionezhie, the first two decades of Kvartsitnyi were covered in bright tones as a time of hope and progress. The article published in the *Kommunist Prionezhia* newspaper in 1988 summarizes the recent developments of the settlement:

A powerful boiler house, a new water intake, and an obstetric station are being put into operation this year. Moscow builders have begun construction of an eight-year school with a swimming pool, a shopping center, and two 60-apartment residential buildings. (Vasilieva 1988: 2)

However, in the 1990s, both quarries situated near Kvartsitnyi started experiencing financial difficulties and, as a result, were working intermittently. In 2005, the quartzitic sandstone quarry, the primary job provider of the settlement, went bankrupt and closed. Initially, the locals hoped that the gravel stone quarry would re-open, but this never happened, probably because the stone was now considered unprofitable. Most of its male residents have to work in shifts in diabase quarries, leaving the settlements for periods of two weeks to several months. After years of state control and care, Kvartsitnyi was left to struggle independently. As the settlements' facilities—including the

boiler house providing heating, the cafeteria, and the industrial complex (in Russian, *prom-kombinat*)—were financed by the quarry, when it went bankrupt, they stopped working. Without stable heating, it soon became clear that the modern “Moscow-style” cottages built in Kvartsitnyi were unsuitable for harsh Karelian winters. Each household had to arrange its heating (e.g., installing boilers or purchasing radiators) to manage through the winter.

My interviewees from Kvartsitnyi often talked about the deep contrast between their perceptions of the past and the present. In such narratives, the past was often idealized and viewed as the period when active young people from different parts of the country were developing the quarry together. Whereas the construction of the quarry and the settlement of Kvartsitnyi gave meaning to the landscape near Shoksha village, the quarry's closure in the 1990s resulted in returning to “nothing.” When speaking about the situation in Kvartsitnyi after the quarry stopped operating, several of my research participants once again used the word “nothing,” although in different contexts (emphasis added):

Lyudmila: We used to have a cafeteria, and a daycare, and the industrial complex where the women worked. Then the far-away quarry was operating too. . . . There was a lot, and *now there is nothing*.

Stanislav: The youth have no prospects now. . . . What would they do? Many people leave. There is no community house, no gym, no interest groups, nothing. . . . *They have nothing to do*.

Maria: In the eighties . . . it was just cozy. For example, we planted trees here, we planted them ourselves during *subbotniki*. . . .⁴ And now everything is built up instead, *there is nothing anywhere*.

In the first quote, Lyudmila focuses on the physical “nothingness” of Kvartsitnyi. The previously existing facilities were destroyed, and planned infrastructural changes never happened. The

second quote is centered on the symbolic meaning of living in the settlement. Stanislav points out that “there is nothing to do” in Kvartsitnyi, especially for young people, so they have to leave as they cannot find meaning in the settlement’s deteriorating space. Finally, the third quote centers on people’s efforts. The interviewee contrasts the 1980s when the Kvartsitnyi residents invested their labor in making the settlement cozier with the present when these efforts depreciated and the previously planted trees died out. These quotes reflect the depth of the post-industrial emptiness experienced by Kvartsitnyi residents. While witnessing the physical decay of buildings and infrastructures, their investments in the settlement have been destroyed, and their abilities and capacities find no use in the post-industrial realities.

The remnants of the planned buildings are still present in contemporary Kvartsitnyi. Thus, the unfinished building of the shopping center, now in decay, is visible when one passes by the path from the settlement’s center to the three multi-story houses built in the late 1980s. Once, as I was walking there, a middle-aged woman, probably a guest of one of the locals, asked me what the ruins were. As I began to answer, a group of young men stopped nearby and one of them, Rustam, started talking about the shopping center’s ruins. He recalled: “When I was eight years old in 1996, this building was completed, and when I arrived again in 2005, it had already been plundered. It was built by guys from St. Petersburg. They began to build in 1994, but in 1998 the construction was frozen and never finished. There was even glass in the windows.” Quite often, as the locals talked to me about the shopping center’s ruins, they mentioned small details like glass in the windows or installed doorknobs. For many, it was shocking to view an almost completed building that was never finished and is slowly decaying visible to all as a symbol of the overall situation in Kvartsitnyi struggling with poverty and unemployment. The foundation of the school planned in Kvartsitnyi is also still visible in the center of the settlement. The local community house (in

Russian, *dom kul'tury* or House of Culture)⁵ is still situated in the temporary premises without proper heating where it moved to in 1987 in hope that a proper community house building would be finalized soon. However, just like many other Kvartsitnyi buildings, it remained only in the development plans. The presence of empty or unfinished buildings is common in post-Soviet rural areas, signifying the contrast between imagined futures and the uncertain present (Belova 2015; Pelkmans 2003).

Due to the loss of support from the quarry, the sense of nostalgia for the lost world is present in many interview narratives. “If only we had the quarry back, with all its support. It would all be different here. We would have so many opportunities,” a youth worker in Kvartsitnyi told me during our interview. Svetlana and Aleksei from Shoksha, both former workers of the quartzitic sandstone quarry, reminisced nostalgically about the time they were employed:

Svetlana: It was so good! Now I think every day, God, how good it was to work at the quarry.

Aleksei: Until perestroika.

Svetlana: Until perestroika. And then everything got destroyed.

Aleksei: Everything closed.

The narratives about Kvartsitnyi resemble mythological creation stories when a whole new world appears out of nothing. One of the possible points of reference could be the Karelian-Finnish epic poem *Kalevala* compiled by Elias Lönnrot and first published in 1835. *Kalevala* was promoted in Karelia as part of the governmental discourse promoting local folklore and epic heritage, and the one hundredth anniversary of *Kalevala*’s first edition was widely celebrated in 1935 (Filimonchik 2019). In the Soviet period, *Kalevala* was viewed as a uniting symbol bringing together the residents of Karelia as their shared heritage. As a result, *Kalevala* is typically studied in Karelian schools. Many Karelia residents still have a copy of *Kalevala* published

in the Soviet period at home. The apartment I rented in Kvartsitnyi in the summer of 2021 had a large *Kalevala* edition proudly placed in the living room. In the poem, the land of Kalevala is created from “nowhere” with the song of Väinämöinen, the epic hero; as he is born, his mother is creating headlands, bays, and coasts in the endless water. Landing on the empty land, Väinämöinen begins planting the first trees and sowing seeds, thus creating the Kalevala world. At the very end of the story, Väinämöinen departs the world he created to leave it for new heroes. He pronounces that, as time passes, he will be needed again, and people will be waiting for him to return to Kalevala.

There is a figure in Kvartsitnyi creation stories that resembles the epic hero Väinämöinen. This is the first director of the quartzite sandstone quarry Yuri Alekseevich Koren'kov. Koren'kov moved to Kvartsitnyi in 1971, just as the quarry started operating. He left the settlement in the late 1980s, shortly before the financial difficulties of the post-Soviet period began. In the interview narratives, the departure of Yuri Koren'kov and the eventual collapse of the quarry are often interrelated. One of my research participants framed this:

Yuri Alekseevich Koren'kov—he was a truly decent man. In any work one does, one should look for such leaders. He held everything together, the whole quarry, and it was possible to work with him. And in 1989, Koren'kov left. Then the collapse began: one director, then another director. . . . And so everything was squandered.

Despite leaving the quarry and Kvartsitnyi long ago, Yuri Koren'kov is still symbolically present in the settlement. He is often mentioned in the narratives reflecting on the settlement's past, and he is repeatedly invited as a special guest to celebrations. Koren'kov delivered one of the first speeches during the Settlement's Day celebration as Kvartsitnyi turned 50 years old in August 2021. He is often referred to as the founder of the settlement. Yuri Koren'kov, as presented in

the interview narratives, corresponds with the notion of Soviet *khoziain* (Russian for “master, owner”), the central enterprise's strong principal defined by Douglas Rogers (2006: 925) as a “linchpin holding the households . . . together into a moral community.” He is also praised for his deep knowledge of the settlement and his humanness: “Koren'kov Yuri Alekseevich helped us a lot; he also helped the school; he helped everybody.” The figure of Koren'kov as the ideal leader holding the whole settlement together contributes to the overall perception of the Kvartsitnyi narrative as creation and collapse story.

For many of my interviewees in Kvartsitnyi, mining development gave a new meaning and a purpose to a previously empty landscape. Still, when the quarry closed, this purpose disappeared, and the settlement returned to symbolic “nothingness.” This narrative shift illustrates how workers gradually accepted the prevailing industrial discourse viewing the landscape through the prism of its “usefulness” for the country.

“We are the ones who stayed”: Filling the post-industrial emptiness

Kvartsitnyi residents are searching for new meanings and new manifestations of belonging at the time when the mining industry, the primary reason for the settlement's existence, went down. During the Settlement's Day celebration on August 22, 2021, the Head of Kvartsitnyi, Viktoria Butorina, addressed her fellow residents:

We had good years when a lot was being constructed or developed. Then the 1990s came, and many things changed, everything that developed before. . . . [pauses] Many people left, but we stayed, and we invest in the settlement's development. Our greatest value is people. Only we can make our own life better.

In this statement, the past years, traditionally characterized in interviews as the years of sup-

port and stability provided by the mining quarry, are juxtaposed with the present day when the residents are responsible for their wellbeing and the development of Kvartsitnyi. The current residents are addressed as “the ones who stayed,” emphasizing their strong connection to the settlement. Although many residents talk about their pessimism regarding post-industrial emptiness, they are determined to stay in Kvartsitnyi. At times, this decision is framed as the only option available, especially for older residents: “We are just living out our days here.” However, many of the younger interviewees wish to stay in the settlement as well.

Although the quarries near Kvartsitnyi are either not functioning or working on a small scale, there are employment opportunities in the gabbro-diabase quarries in the nearby Rybreka village. Many interviewees noted that they were glad there were at least some job opportunities in the region; therefore, they could stay in the profession. For women, however, the employment situation is worse. As Arkadii, a resident of Kvartsitnyi in his mid-thirties described it:

In general, there is not much work here, especially for women, as you need special education to work in a school or day-care. Maybe only the boiler house, heat and power station, water extraction site, raspberry quartzite quarry, or post office. My wife does not have a permanent job; sometimes she does shift work at the post office.

Many residents rely on their strong ties with the landscape, engaging in hunting, fishing, and berry and mushroom picking. These ties were important for them also in the Soviet period of Kvartsitnyi’s history. Svetlana shared with me how in the summer she and her husband Aleksei went fishing or berry picking after a shift in the quarry in Kvartsitnyi or during a day off:

We also had time to pick blueberries, two buckets of blueberries over a weekend, and then we would go to the city to

sell them. And then he [Aleksei] would return home at 2:00 a.m. with a bag of perch. And imagine, I need to wake up at 5:00 a.m. to go to work, but at 2:00 a.m. I am still standing and scaling the perch!

Similarly, Emma, a long-term Kvarsitnyi resident, recalled her husband’s habit of going fishing early in the morning before his work shift began. Leonid, a former mining worker, noted the importance of fishing and berry picking as activities he engaged in after work. Egor, a resident of Shoksha, talked about his hunting trips as a free-time activity during days off in the Kvartsitnyi quarry. In the interviews, these activities were often viewed as elements securing the community’s wellbeing. Varvara, born in 1941 in Shoksha, noted that her family and their neighbors “managed to survive because of the berries” during World War II. She also remembered how local men used to leave for a full night of fishing and after that jointly cooked a fish broth on the shore, sharing the soup with neighbors. At the time of my fieldwork, many interviewees mentioned that the amount of fish in the lake has decreased. Nevertheless, the majority of men in Kvartsitnyi and Shoksha engaged in fishing as a recreational activity, providing a supplement to family meals.

Close ties with the landscape are kept even though the quarry as the settlement’s central pillar has crumbled. An administration worker in Kvartsitnyi, when explaining her reasons to stay, noted: “We have such great nature here, the forest and the lake. We have the purest air. My sister lives in St. Petersburg, and when her daughter was ill, the doctors told her to bring the child to Karelia. She felt much better here, going to the lake every day. Anyway, everything is easier at home.” Although the references to the purest air and beautiful nature may not seem strongly compatible with an image of an industrial settlement, they are common in interview narratives.

As the formal links with the state and industry are damaged, the residents of Kvartsitnyi build informal connections, relying on neighbors when in need of transportation, medi-

cine, or help with restoration works. A popular form of self-organization is “territorial public self-government” (in Russian, *Territorial’noe Obshchestvennoe Samoupravlenie*, or TOS). Most apartment blocks in Kvarstitsnyi have their own TOS organizations. Within TOS, residents may receive state funding for the construction of sports facilities, playgrounds, or other infrastructural elements that improve their quality of life. These initiatives should be partially self-financed; therefore, apartment owners contribute to the project first and after that prepare an application to receive the rest of the funds from the Republic of Karelia budget. Such local projects are actively promoted by the Kvarstitsnyi administration and the settlement’s House of Culture.

When the quarry was no longer sustaining Kvarstitsnyi, TOS was often viewed as a way to compensate for this lack of support through self-assembly. As one of the House of Culture workers noted: “There are people [in Kvarstitsnyi] who believe that the state owes them things. But we tell them that these times are over. They need to take care of what they have.” Alla, a school teacher, used to be the head of the residents’ organization of her apartment block and noted that the residents repaired the building’s roof through their own efforts. “This was ten years ago, and the roof is still well,” she added proudly.

Some of Kvarstitsnyi’s residents engage in informal business restoring the links damaged in the post-mining realities. Thus, when the quartzitic sandstone quarry was functioning, it financed transportation in between Kvarstitsnyi and Shoksha, and there were state bus services connecting Kvarstitsnyi and Petrozavodsk, the capital of Karelia. At the time of my fieldwork, there was no arranged transportation between Kvarstitsnyi and Shoksha apart from the school bus, and the transportation between Petrozavodsk and Kvarstitsnyi in the summer of 2021 was erratic and unreliable (a suburban-service bus that regularly failed to depart or broke during the route). To compensate for the lack of transportation, a local woman residing in Kvarstitsnyi organized a regular taxi service where it

is possible to book a place in advance for a price compared to a bus ticket. While I lived in Kvarstitsnyi, the self-organized taxi was very popular, as it was interestingly perceived as a more reliable service than the official bus route. Just as Viktoria Butorina noted in her speech, the residents of Kvarstitsnyi self-organize at times when the state is not fulfilling its obligations and when it is not possible anymore to appeal to the industry as the security provider.

The Veps legacy is increasingly recognized as a constituent element of Kvarstitsnyi’s past and present. At the Settlement’s Day celebration in August 2021, the former director of the sandstone quarry Yuri Koren’kov said:

I am so glad I ended up living with Veps. . . . I have never met such kind and hospitable people as Veps. Here we would not lock the door and would go anywhere; it was safe. And the Muscovites, when they moved here, they acquired the same way of life.

In contrast with the narratives of “nothingness,” in this speech, Koren’kov presents Kvarstitsnyi as the settlement built on the land of Veps and sharing the history and traditions of the area. This historical grounding of Kvarstitsnyi ensures its continuity even after the industry, as its driving force, is no longer present.

The stone mining legacy is now rethought in Kvarstitsnyi as a part of local ethnic identity, as the new Veps ethnic park *Ruzaver’kal’l* (translated from Veps as Raspberry Cliff) is being constructed in the center of the settlement, at the foundation of the previously planned school that was never finished (Figure 2). The construction of *Ruzaver’kal’l* park started in late 2020. It will mainly focus on the theme of raspberry quartzite extraction as a traditional local occupation. In 2021, the construction was still going on, but the area for the future park was cleared, and the paths covered with pieces of raspberry quartzite were laid. The choice of the spot for the future park is symbolic. The modern school was part of Kvarstitsnyi’s development plan, and



FIGURE 2. View of the Ruzaver'kal'l' ethnographic park, 2021. Photo by author.

for many years its foundation remained in ruins as a reminder of possible futures that were never realized. The attempt to establish *Ruzaver'kal'l'* as a heritage site, recognizing the region's experience and fame in stoneworking, represents a tactic of rethinking the local narratives. It positions Kvartsitnyi not as a place of decay but as a settlement with a rich history and strong mining heritage that is continued, although not in the way that was initially intended. Post-industrial emptiness is understood in this article as a dynamic and fluid state rather than an ending point. As the industry is collapsing, the residents find alternative ways of engaging with landscape and community building, attuning to the changing realities.

Conclusion

In the narratives of Kvartsitnyi residents, the time before the settlement's construction is repeatedly viewed through the prism of "nothingness." The interviewees depict the pre-industrial

landscape as empty and devoid of meaning. Consequently, many of them present the contemporary settlement as a collapsed world: with failing infrastructures, a lack of opportunities, and the absence of trust toward the state. These repeated references to the emptiness of the pre-industrial and post-industrial landscape stress the vital role of the mining industry in the life cycle of Kvartsitnyi. Through their shared work in the quarries, the residents absorbed powerful Soviet mythologies of dedicated labor transforming the landscape. As Veps stoneworkers immersed in the work of state quarries, and young industrial migrants started moving to Veps villages, new resource-related mythological narratives appeared in the community. These narratives viewed the settlement construction as a creation story of a new civilization appearing in the barren land.

However, the nothingness myth represents a simplified version of Kvartsitnyi's history. It does not take into account that since its early years the settlement was closely connected to the neighboring Veps Shoksha village and its

historical and cultural legacy. Even though the area where Kvartsitnyi was constructed was presented as “empty,” the locals engaged with this landscape when going swimming or fishing in the lake, picking mushrooms or berries in the forest, or praying in the sacred monastery land of Yashezero. The bonds between Kvartsitnyi and Shoksha were sustained, and many locals had relatives in both settlements or worked in Kvartsitnyi while living in Shoksha. Many locals combined their work in the quarry with fishing, hunting, or berry picking in their spare time. As the quarry closed and the perceived stability of the settlement shattered, many of them cherished informal connections with other community members and reliance on natural resources as the basis for survival in the changing realities.

The rapid assimilation of Indigenous Veps as a result of the region’s industrialization and the increased migration to Kvartsitnyi is another story omitted from the widespread mythological narratives. As Kvartsitnyi was developing, the Veps village of Yashezero became deserted. This emptiness of Yashezero, however, is seldom present in local narratives. Nevertheless, at a time when the links with the state are weaker in post-Soviet and post-industrial Kvartsitnyi, Veps history becomes an important community building factor. The new ethnic park Ruzaver’kal’l, constructed in Kvartsitnyi on the foundation of the unfinished school, represents how new narratives are gaining strength and replacing the former vectors of development that were never realized. Mythological creation stories presenting Kvartsitnyi as a bright new world emerging from nothing and collapsing into nothing serve as an interpretation of incomprehensible realities. However, Kvartsitnyi does not turn into an empty space, and its meaning is sustained through shifting local narratives, the support of informal connections and grassroots initiatives, and intimate ties with the local landscape.

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Notes

1. “Settlement” is a translation of the Russian term *posiolok* (a rural-style settlement). Settlements are types of smaller localities, usually with a mix of population working in agriculture and industry.
2. Pseudonyms are used for all respondents mentioned and cited in the article. The translations of interview quotes are my own.
3. Student construction brigades are temporary construction teams composed of students in higher education institutions, usually during vacations. Student brigades originated in the Soviet Union under the control of Komsomol.
4. *Subbotnik* (plural: *subbotniki*) is a Saturday designated for community volunteer work in Soviet and post-Soviet Russia.
5. Houses of Culture were popular institutions in the Soviet Union designed to engage residents in various free-time activities. In post-Soviet Russia, Houses of Culture still maintain a central position in small towns and villages (Habeck 2011).

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