
SECTION IV: MEMORY, HISTORY, AND THE ETHNOGRAPHIC PRESENT

TELLING LIVES. AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND HISTORY AFTER SOCIALISM

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In 1991 I visited a photo exhibition in Strakonice, South Bohemia, at the museum belonging to a big factory, which had previously produced weapons and now produced motorbikes, among other things. I visited the museum together with a man from the village of Lipina¹, who was foreman of one of the factory's departments. This man was one of the few proclaimed communists left in the village, a candidate for the Communist Party in the local elections in November 1990. We were shown around the photo exhibition by a female employee, obviously the person in charge of the museum. She told us about the founding of the factory in 1919, its time as a weapons producer, and the situation during the Second World War. The exhibition also had its "communist" section, i.e. pictures showing the founders of the factory's first cell of the Communist Party, leading Party members and, of course, "Victorious February" in 1948. When we came to this section she addressed the foreman directly: "Well, this I believe we don't tell anymore," she said. "No, we don't" he agreed, and a small moment of embarrassment passed.

This article is concerned with recollections of the past in post-socialist Czech Republic, with the delicate balance between what can be told and what should rather be left out when recounting one's memories of the recent historical past. I'm building on material collected during fieldwork in the first half of the 1990s (1993 and 1995), a period when the public concern with rewriting the nation's history was great, resulting in concrete actions such as the removal of monuments and

refashioning of museums' exhibitions, as well as the provision of funds for a wide range of research projects documenting and reinterpreting the recent past. This preoccupation with the past was to be found all over post-socialist Europe and is well reflected in the anthropology of post-socialism. In the last 15 years we have seen a flourishing of works on history and memory from the region (see for example Watson 1994; Wanner 1994; Skultans 1998; Pine, Kaneff, and Haukanes 2004). While some authors have mainly been preoccupied with documenting the voices silenced by communist censorship, many have analyzed the complex interplay between official versions of history and local/personal accounts under and after socialism (Borneman 1992, Lass 1994), demonstrating both how the latter are being shaped by the former (Haukanes 2004) but also how personal and/or local accounts resist being absorbed into a dominant narrative framework (Watson 1994, Richardson 2004).

In the following article I seek to analyze the relation between autobiography and the history of the "Great Czech Nation" (Holy 1996). Particular focus will be addressed to the structure and periodizations of the autobiographical accounts and questions to be dealt with are: Which, if any, of the major national events serve as landmarks and/or keys to people's periodization, (the founding of the Republic in 1918, the Munich agreement in 1938 and the subsequent German occupation, the communist takeover of power in 1948, the Prague Spring and Warsaw Pact invasion in 1968, and the fall of communism in 1989) and in which terms are they talked about? If such events are not mentioned, how do the persons interviewed periodize their life-histories? I would also like to examine the presence and eventual agency

¹ Lipina is the pseudonym of a village in South Bohemia where I spent 8 months of fieldwork in 1990-91 and to which I have returned continuously – for longer and shorter periods.

of the communist "state" or the "authorities" in the accounts, by examining the way people represent their relations and dealings with the local and/or central powerholders.

The accounts were collected during fieldwork in 1993 and 1995 in several different villages in Břeclav *okres*, South Moravia and Strakonice *okres*, South Bohemia. Five of the persons interviewed were men, five women.² The youngest person interviewed was born in 1944, the oldest in 1909; the majority were between 60 and 75 years old when interviewed, hence born between 1920 and 1935. The majority of the interviewees were or had been manual laborers, either in agriculture or in some kind of craft, but there are also two teachers, a clerk and a postman among these informants.

Periodization and landmarks in the life-histories

Considering the structure of the accounts, most of them have a lineal direction, i.e. they are sequentially and chronologically ordered in time. Nevertheless, they coincide with the periodizing of the nation's history only to a very limited extent. The period that stands out as most clearly delimited in the accounts, is the Second World War. '*Za války*' - during the war - served as a reference point in many of the accounts, and several of the South Moravians talked about the final days of the war, when battles were being fought in or near the villages where they were living. With regards to the other major turning points in the nation's history, only one informant (the oldest person, born in 1909) mentioned the founding of the Republic in 1918, which is, of course, natural as he is the only one who was old enough to remember the event himself. It is more peculiar that virtually none of the informants related their life-histories to the communist coup in 1948 and the Soviet invasion in 1968. Not only were these events rejected as keys to periodization of their own lives; they were hardly mentioned at all. The

year 1948 was mentioned by only one informant, a woman who talked about her family losing their pub after 1948. The year 1968 was made a point of by two informants. The first was a woman, Hana, who grew up in a small South Bohemian town. At the end of our conversation, when talking about particular events that she remembers well, she commented: "Well, there is of course 1968," and mentioned that people had been afraid that war would break out. In the same breath she added: "You know the really bad memories one has, are first and foremost if something happens to your family," thereby indicating that she did not want to exaggerate the importance of 1968 for her own life. "I was not interested in politics at that time" she concludes. The other person who mentioned 1968, was Jan, a teacher at a South Moravian village school, who chose to leave the Party in 1969, and who had a tough time afterwards. "My hair turned grey after that," he said, indicating the stress he must have felt. However, like Hana, Jan did not want fear and pain to be main themes in his life-history. When I tried to get him to elaborate on the difficulties of the 1970s, there was a long pause before he finally answered: "You know, I would like to forget the bad things, and prefer to remember the good ones. All in all, I believe that I have lived a happy life."

1989, or the period after 1989 (represented through terms such as "today," "in today's time") was explicitly commented upon by most of the informants. However, only three (two of whom had also mentioned 1968) integrated 1989 or "today" into the stories of themselves, as a breaking point in their own life. The others commented on the post-1989 changes in very general terms, either by expressing their happiness over the newly won freedom to travel and talk openly about politics or by complaining over more unfortunate developments such as increase in prices and criminality.

Thus, the key years in Czech National History did not emerge as turning points in my informants' stories, nor were they referred to extensively as events in themselves. There were no differences between people in this

² One of the women did, in addition to presenting her life-history during interview, write down some major events in a book which she gave me on my departure.

respect; it did not matter whether the person telling the story had been a Party member or an opponent to the communist regime, a man or a woman, old or relatively young. How could this be?

Let me concentrate on the events of 1948 and 1968, and start by saying that I have no reason to believe that these events in themselves were not considered important in villages or small towns, nor that they did not make an impression on village people *when they happened*, both indirectly, through the mass media, and directly as “local” experiences. In my examination of local chronicles,³ both in South Bohemia and South Moravia, I found that the events of both 1948 and 1968 were thoroughly described and presented as disturbing to the villagers. The chronicles also listed various kinds of local action triggered by the events, such as changes in the local political leadership and the establishment of local action committees in 1948, and the hoarding of food for fear of war in 1968. These events must therefore belong to what Maurice Halbwachs (1981) would call the *collective memory* of the villagers.

One explanation for the marked absence of these events may lie in my informants’ conception of life-history as a *genre*. The crucial question is: What does one get to know when listening to people telling about their lives from A to Z? Life histories are, of course, reconstructions of lived lives, and therefore limited as sources of information about what “really” happened (Rudie 1995). Life-histories or autobiographies constitute a genre in their own right, at least in European societies. Thus, most people probably have a notion of what belongs to this genre and what does not. The interview may therefore become a search for the genre itself, or even worse, as Paul Connerton has argued, for the interviewer’s image of what a life-history

should be like (Connerton 1989:19). I sometimes had the feeling that this was the case in my interviews, to the extent that I sensed a search going on for the proper things to tell me. On several occasions my informants made meta-comments on the endeavor they were about to embark upon. Františka Svobodová, a woman from Lipina, started the account of her life with a question and a little laugh: “Oh, so you want me to talk about how I got married and all that?” In another case it was not the person interviewed (a man in his 80’s) who had opinions on what belonged to the story, but his wife, who was present during most of the interview. For example, when the husband described a bicycle accident at length, his wife interrupted impatiently: “Why talk so much about that? Tell her about the life; what it was like.” Later he told some rather dirty stories taken from his military service. “This is not what the lady (*paní*) wants to hear” his wife objected, and continued: “Why don’t you tell her about our life together - our marriage; 50 years together. These are the things that belong to such a story.”

The lack of “grand dramas” in the life-histories might also be related to education and class. Anthony Giddens argues that the reconstruction of personal biography is a central aspect of the reflexive self, and increasingly so in the age of late modernity. Working on one’s own identity becomes an ever more crucial task to perform, as the self is now seen as a “reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible” (Giddens 1991:74). Nevertheless, the degree to which persons have a narrative experience of telling their own lives and thereby a “verbalized” distance to what they have lived through varies greatly, both within and among social strata (Frykman 1992). Narrating lives within a certain structure requires experience in self-presentation, which might not be so well developed in a village context where “everyone knows everyone” (Bringslid 1996). In the present case, it is noteworthy that the informants employing the most “external” contextualizations are those with the highest level of education, and the widest general

³ All Czech municipalities are obliged — by a law issued in 1920 — to appoint a chronicler who, by the end of each year, shall write down major events in the municipality. I have studied the chronicles of four different villages in South Bohemia and South Moravia (see Haukanes 2004).

interest in politics and history. Another indication that class and education are significant is obtained by comparing "my" stories with life-story material from intellectuals in Prague, who, when asked to reflect upon their lives, made the macro-political events of 1948 and 1968 central in structuring their self-presentation. They explicitly explained events in their own lives by referring to these dates (Leviatin 1993, cf. also Peřinová 1994).

Another and perhaps more important explanation for the absence of macro-events in these life-histories may be that, although the events were undoubtedly known and experienced, their consequences in terms of changing peoples' lives made themselves felt only gradually. This may have been particularly true following the communist seizure of power in 1948. Even though the year 1948 is only mentioned by a single informant, the 1950s as a period is identified by several as a particularly difficult time, or in one case, as a period when the post-war supply situation started to improve.

So if it is not macro-political events that structure the accounts, what is it? As mentioned in the introduction, all the stories have an element of linearity or chronology. These features probably belong to my informants' conception of a life-history, and I may have contributed to this tendency by encouraging people to proceed chronologically. When an informant lost the thread in his or her account, I would ask questions like "what happened then...?" and "who was your next employer after the baker in Brno?" In addition to being lineally told, the life-histories were structured and periodized not by external events, but by the content of the accounts themselves, which concerned work and family life. All the informants reported something about their childhood and about parents and siblings before they moved on to schooling and working lives, marriage, and own children. Almost all focused on their youth and the early phase of their working lives, and many returned to their childhood when they felt they had nothing more to tell about their adult

lives. The accounts vary with respect to what the person telling put the most stress on; some spent a lot of time on family life (mainly women), others on their working careers (both women and men). Pride in their identities as professionals and as decent, hard-working individuals, often lay at the core of the stories. In addition to telling about their own lives, some considered aspects of change in the village community, such as the decline in social activities and weakening of bonds between people. "People stuck together more before" (*drželi víc spolu*), a teacher from South Bohemia commented when remembering her childhood herding goats together with other children of her age. "Nowadays everyone just sits in the front of their own television."

A phenomenon that appears either as an event or more often as a period in most of the stories (7 of 10), is "the time when we were building" (*když jsme stavili*); i.e. "when we built the house in which we live," which in most cases meant reconstructing an inherited building. For many this was a complicated endeavor that took several years to complete and coincided with the raising of small children, so it was referred to as a difficult and exhausting period. For example, a man of 70 related how he and his wife lived in the house of his parents-in-law for seven years while saving money to build their own home. It took him three years to complete the endeavor, and since his wife was at home with small children they had very little money and had to be extremely careful with their budgeting. A woman of the same age related in detail the construction process of their home: how she first resisted her husband's suggestion to reconstruct and expand his parent's house, but had to give in; how she had to work day and night for several years while her husband worked on the house; how she took care of three small children in addition to holding a full time job.

Three of my informants had particularly traumatic experiences, which shaped their accounts and constituted a major element. One man, born in 1913 and a baker by trade, became ill when he was only 30 years old and

was left partly disabled and with a limp for the rest of his life. This event was identified as a key to understanding almost everything else in his life, including his working life, his quarrels with his wife, and his current small pension. A woman born in 1929 had lived all her adult life with a jealous, drunken, and violent husband and his very demanding mother, and this fact shed a light on most events in her account. A third person, Františka Svobodová, had two major traumatic events that constituted the content of most of her story; the first was the loss of her new-born daughter due to an irresponsible mid-wife in the late 1940s, and the second was the trauma of her family being classified as *kulaks*, i.e. wealthy farmers.⁴ She told me how her husband had been betrayed by his best friends; how the regional court had convicted him and sentenced him to prison; and how the next generation - her children - didn't receive any education because they were of *kulak* descent. She laid out one particular event (which I had heard her recount several times before this interview took place) in great detail. It concerned the loss of a huge amount of meat and lard from a newly slaughtered pig. The night after the slaughtering had taken place, some Party officials came to take it away from them; "It was Vaidiš [a local communist] who came, together with one from the regional office [Party office]." "They say that we should forgive," she says, "and my son tells me that I always go on about these old things, and that I sound like a gramophone record. But I cannot forget it, cannot forget lard and the nice meat....By the way, I saw Vaidiš at the funeral of Ms Černá the other day. He was walking right in front of me and suddenly he turned around and smiled at me. But I didn't return his smile, and I really wanted to say to

him: "Where is my pig and all the lard? Give it back to me!"

The absent state

In Františka Svobodová's account "the authorities" are represented as violent intruders in her life. However, the authorities that enter and change her life are not so much an abstract "regime," but rather concrete persons, very often locals, whose actions destroyed the life of her family. Referring to the 1950s, it is not only Františka who represents the state as an invader; most of the informants who talked about these years made a point of this state intrusion. The grandfather of one had his factory nationalized; another had to give his smithy to the agricultural cooperative; the father of a third was persecuted because he didn't want to give up his land. Only in Františka's account, however, is this loss and penetration really dwelt upon and made a major issue. Some of the informants did not make a point of their experiences dealing with the state at all; if they referred to "the authorities" or "the communists" at all, it was to provide some background information. For example, "I started to work in Brno in the year so and so; the communists were already here then." Even a person who was sent to a kind of work camp in Ostrava in 1949 reported this simply as a step in his working life, rather than as a violent act on the part of the authorities: "Well then I spent half a year in Ostrava, you know the communists didn't like those who said anything against them.... When I returned, I went back to work in the factory in Brno." Only on my further interrogation into his stay in Ostrava, did he reveal that this was a kind of work camp, where he was displaced due to some kind of rebellious behavior. In one account, that of the woman with the difficult husband and mother-in-law, the "communist regime," "the state," or "the authorities" (local or central) were not mentioned on a single occasion. The only sign that there had been transformations in her life due to political changes was when she said that her father had become chairman of the first cooperative in the village in the early 1950s.

⁴ The word *kulak* stems from Russian, and its literal meaning is 'fist.' Before 1917 *kulak* was used to denote the larger, leading peasants in a community. After 1929 (the year when the collectivization of agricultural land started in the Soviet Union), it became a term of abuse, used against those who resisted collectivization. During collectivization in the "new" communist states of Eastern Europe in the 1950s, the word was adopted in this derogative sense.

All in all, the period when the state appeared to play the most active part in my informant's lives was in the 1950s. This is not very surprising, since the 1950s was the decade when agriculture was collectivized and very brutal and radical social transformations took place in the Czech countryside. In later stages of the life stories, the "authorities" emerge only very sporadically, for example, as the agency from which money was borrowed, from which a new job or pension originated or, for the two teachers, by which they were forced to take part in political meetings. Three of my informants had themselves been Party members, and a fourth was married to the Party leader in her village. All of these informants talked overtly about their relations to the Party, although none of them made this a major point in their story. Jan, the South Moravian teacher who left the Party 1968, said that he had entered the Party at the age of 18 (in 1953). "I was so naïve; I didn't realize what they were up to." Vaculík, an old postman, reported that he had been elected three times to the municipal council, "but I was always in opposition. People in the village said so too; Vaculík is always in opposition." The wife of the communist leader in South Moravia told about how she had managed to remain faithful to her religion and God under communism. She defended her right to wear a cross around her neck, even when serving "big communists" from the regional Party organization who visited her husband. The female teacher from South Bohemia explained the political activities implicit in her role as a teacher: "It was expected that teachers take part in all kinds of activities" and "that they were active in the community." When she showed me her medals and diplomas she added, by way of excuse: "They all have the five-pointed star on them, but some of them I really appreciate. For example, this particular one was for my work in the Fire Brigade... or this one was for being the best teacher of the year. I really appreciate it, since it was for my *work* that I received it." Others she claimed not to appreciate so much, "they are more like a reward from the Party."

History, narration and avoidance

With some exceptions, I found that my informants seemed to avoid relating important macro-historical events to their own lives, and to represent the communist state as an agent affecting the course of their lives. This was the case in spite of the fact that the recounting took place not so long after the 1989 – in a time when the public sphere of media and politics was still rather obsessed with rewriting history and denigrating everything to be associated with the communist regime. Looking at the life-histories as a whole, I am surprised how little "the new order" manifests itself *directly* in the stories. I would have expected more details about the hardships under communism, more "tales of suffering." I would also have expected more excuses from former Party members. Those who had a close relation to the Party explained their decisions to engage in Party activities as a matter of necessity or related to a desire to be oppositional from "inside." They thereby tried to separate "themselves as persons" from "Party activities," but it seems remarkable that they did not make more out of this. The telling of life-histories is, of course, the result of the informant's relation to the interviewer, genre, and society. One of the explanations offered for the lack of "politicization" of the narratives may lie in the first of these three, i.e. their relation to me as a foreign researcher whom they did not know particularly well. The rather forceful attempts of the communist regime to achieve standardization of language and discourse (Verdery 1991), in particular that of historical accounts (Haukanes 2004, see also below), made people careful about how they expressed themselves about their own experiences in life. In the early 1990s this carefulness was still very much a part of public behavior. The wife of Mr. Vaculík, the postman, expressed a direct fear about her husband's accounts: "Don't talk about that," she said to her husband when he mentioned his Party membership, "It's all over now." When he later started to criticize the current government, she became even more worried. "Stop," she pleaded, "I'm afraid." The genre of life-history, or rather, my informants'

expectations of the genre, also influenced the degree of "politicization" of the accounts: "I don't exactly know what lies in a life-history, but it is undoubtedly about when I got married and all that."

As for the lack of interest in talking about 1948 and 1968 in particular, I have already suggested a number of explanations: The fact that people are not familiar with narrating their lives in relation to macro-political events; that the events themselves, although important for political leaders in the village, were not immediately felt to have consequences for the daily life of people; and so forth. Nevertheless, I still feel that there might be an additional explanation to the omission of these particular grand dramas from the life-histories of these people. This feeling is supported by the fact that in my conversations with people more generally I heard very few "local" versions of the events of 1948 and 1968; stories about "when the communists took over power here," or when "the Russian tanks passed by" (as they literally did in South Moravia in 1968). Lutz Niethammer (1992), conducting life-history interviews in 1987 among East Germans, observed that virtually none of his informants talked about 17 June 1953 on their own accord when telling about their lives. (June 17 was the day of a large demonstration and spontaneous anti-Stalinist uprising of workers, which was brutally put down and immediately denounced by the sitting regime as an attempted coup by fascists and Western imperialists). Only on further interrogation, did it appear that all of them remembered the events very well, including where they had been and what they had been doing. The politicization of the events, Niethammer argues, made the majority of those who had lived through them put their experiences at a distance "relegating it to the niche of uninvolved knowledge" (Niethammer 1992:68). A similar explanation might pertain to 1948 and 1968 in "my" stories. Although these events in themselves are very different, both in their courses and consequences, they have one thing in common: their status as (symbolic) events in official history writing

changed dramatically with the overthrow of communism in 1989.

History writing under communism was a carefully controlled and ideologically determined activity. The ideological legitimation of the regime itself was grounded on a specific historical development in the relations of production, leading to socialism. Or, as Rubie Watson has noted: "Under state socialism, Marxism-Leninism was not one ideology or political economy among many, but rather was the inevitable and glorious outcome of a discernible historical process" (Watson 1994:1). To maintain control over the accounts of key events such as those occurring in 1948 and 1968 was of great importance for the regime, and great effort was put into supervizing even local history writing (see Haukanes 2004a and Haukanes 2004b:66ff).

In every "Western" publication dealing with post-war history, the two years of 1948 and 1968 of course stand out as key moments, the first being read as the year when socialist rule in Czechoslovakia went from being legitimate and democratic to being enforced and totalitarian and the latter seen as the year when the hope - not only of the Czech people but of the whole of leftist Europe - to have a humane socialist society was brutally crushed.

In official history writing under communism the status of these events was very different. The year 1948, celebrated annually all over the country, was dealt with in detail. It was of course not termed a coup, but appeared under the label "Victorious February," "the victory of the workers (*vítězství pracujícího lidu*) and working class" (*dělnická třída*), or "the moment when the working people under the rule of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia won over the reactionaries, and definitively decided on the socialist development of our motherland." The year 1968 was passed over rather roughly, and if mentioned at all, it is described as "an attempt by right-wing and anti-socialist forces to get rid of communist rule." The Warsaw Pact invasion was described as "help from friends in a time when socialism was threatened," and

the years 1968-69 as "years of crises" (*krizová léta*) (Hříbek et. al 1982, Pubal and Robek 1963, Janda et. al 1963).

With the fall of the old regime, these "communist" versions of the events completely lost their validity. This process had started long before 1989 (see Haukanes 1999), but after the change in regime they disappeared from the surface altogether and were substituted with readings similar to the ones that we know from "Western" history writing. The events of 1948 and 1968 are still vested with national symbolic meaning, however, although the opposite to the one that the former regime tried to give them. This combination of persistent symbolic importance and radical change of meaning is, I will argue, part of what make the events problematic for people to relate to. Stories from the Second World War are much easier to deal with since they have not changed so much with the change in regime, and are therefore told much more often.

Final remarks

The early 1990s was a period when the Czech(oslovak) nation, as it appeared both in public discourse and through state-initiated actions such as rearrangements of public space, was working intensively on its relation to the past. New lines of break and continuity were established. In the overall picture, it is clear that much "discursive work" was done to set apart the communist period as an "artificial" and undesired episode in the nation's history (Haukanes 1999:25ff). At the level of politics, an attempt was also being made to collapse the genealogy of the nation and that of the state's politicians into one, so that the new leaders appeared to be the heirs to the "good" traditions of the First Republic, and to be totally dissociated from their communist forerunners (ibid:58ff). The life histories of my informants hardly reflect this tendency to reinterpret and rewrite history at all. With one or two exceptions, they all read as stories about "normal lives," having a focus on family life and not the least on work. What I find in the life histories is thus a lack of engagement in the grand dramas of the nation.

By avoiding mention of the big turning points in the nation's history, people detach themselves from what has happened to the nation. I have chosen to interpret this detachment as a deliberate and actively chosen strategy on the part of my informants. It represents an attempt to protect oneself - one's dignity and integrity- from official versions of history: not only those of the former regime, but also those of the present power holders. This habit of distancing oneself from everything that "comes from above" may not only be seen a result of people's experience with communist censorship and "enforced" history writing. It may also be understood against the background of historical experiences accumulated over a longer period of time, a defensive strategy developed by a people who have always been in the middle of the political turbulence of Europe and whose destiny always has been in the hands of someone else (Šimečková 1985, Holy 1996, see also Sayer 2000).

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