

“You look at it this way, boy.” How to teach descendants of the orderly citizens of real-socialist Czechoslovakia?

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My dear audience, I am not only a historian, but also a teacher at one secondary grammar school. If we talk about historical education, many of my colleagues still believe that teachers are popularisers of the historical science and the pupils more or less reproduce the facts of the past which historians wrote in schoolbooks. Even though modern teachers tend to present the past as the pluralism of opinions on the causes and circumstances of the historical events (we call it multiperspective approach), the all-day reality of school class is different.

First of all, teachers can't wait twenty years till the historians tell us what the communist regime was like and what we should teach. Moreover, we have to put up with different historical consciousness of students, which may cause serious troubles if confronted mutually. Last but not least, modern history is not a closed historical process - many topics of the recent history have become the subject of discussion outside the school environment and the interpretation is complicated due to political or property reasons. Confrontation with the still living actors and witnesses of historical events raise the need to pass on pupils analytical and interpretive tools that will help them to handle with this plurality of opinions and interpretations in their practical life.

Now let me introduce one specific issue I have been lately interested in - and that is the problem of **family memory of Communist dictatorship in school education**. For your information, while talking about “historical memory”, I follow the concept of memory formulated by French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs or more precisely its later modification by Jan Assmann.¹

I basically distinguish between the »cultural« and »communicative« (or rather »family«) memory. With cultural memory I understand the complex of memory and intellectual figures, stereotypes and steady interpretive models of the past that is shared within the defined community, in our case within the post-communist Czech society. In the formation and transmission of cultural memory are significantly involved institutionalized forms of communication (the official texts, monuments, rituals, celebrations, etc.). The institution of the school (here in the sense of the whole educational system from the Ministry of Education to individual teachers) can be seen as one of the major carriers and mediators of cultural memory. In contrast, communicative memory is tied to the existence of living communicators and experience bearers. For the purposes of the article I understand this communication memory countless number of family memories that contain distinctive family understanding and interpretations of the past.

¹ For more details see HALBWACHS, Maurice. *La mémoire collective*. Paris 1950, or ASSMANN, Jan. *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis: Schrift, Erinnerung und politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*. Munich 1992.

Simply formulated - Czech cultural memory of the August 1968 contains the story of soviet tanks in the streets of Prague. My family memory contains the story of my dad enjoying summer holidays with my grandparents.

Now back to school. Teachers work with historical memory because they like to do the Oral History projects. After all, normative documents encourage teachers to work with memory - the characteristic of the educational field History (from Framework Educational Program) establishes its mission as *"the cultivation of the individual historical consciousness and the effort to maintain the continuity and historical memory, especially in terms of passing on historical experience."*²

What historical experience we should pass and what we should keep in the memory depends to significant extent on the autonomy of individual schools, or rather of individual teachers. The curricular speech is not specific. It only orients the teacher toward the formation of positive civic attitudes, to developing a consciousness of belonging to European civilization and culture and to promoting *"the adoption of the values on which contemporary democratic Europe is founded"*.³

These objectives can be found in memory of active opponents or victims of undemocratic regimes (in the Czech environment the Nazi occupation and Communist dictatorship). The main purpose of this memory is a living presentation of desirable attitudes and behaviours, not primarily » objective « recognition the past.

Memories of political prisoners and opponents of communist dictatorships have certainly an unquestionable place in the historical education of post-communist states. The problem is that the majority of my students are not children of political prisoners - they are descendants of the orderly citizens of real-socialist Czechoslovakia.

Again, simply formulated - the government and many teachers feel the need to commemorate the experience of political prisoners, collectivization, oppression of Prague Spring reform and dissent. How about the family memory?

The research of the family memory in post-communist states is merely at the beginning. We may follow German colleagues who have plenty of experience with researching the memory of the Nazi regime. We can open for example the book *"My grandfather wasn't Nazi"*. In this study, Harald Welzer with his colleagues basically stated that while in Germany there is an obvious strong pressure of » cultural memory « to condemn Nazi crimes, the family memory is largely immune against this awareness of Nazi crimes. Stories that have been passed on in families for generations of children and grandchildren are interpreted in order to rid the family members of any shadow of Nazi horrors.⁴

² *Rámcový vzdělávací program pro základní vzdělávání*. [Online]. Praha: Výzkumný ústav pedagogický v Praze, 2007. Access from URL: <http://www.vuppraha.cz/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/RVPZV_2007-07.pdf> [2011-10-07], p. 43.

³ *Rámcový vzdělávací program pro základní vzdělávání*, p. 43.

⁴ WELZER, Harald - MOLLER, Sabine - TSCHUGGNALL, Karoline. *Opa war kein Nazi: Nationalsozialismus und Holocaust im Familiengedächtnis*. Unter Mitarbeit von Olaf Jensen und Torsten Koch. Frankfurt 2002.

At our Institute we coordinate an oral historical project “*Velké a malé příběhy moderních dějin*” (*Great and small stories of modern history*). The main task of the project is to confront »great history«, as presented in history textbooks, with the so-called »small history«. The project consists of three basic parts - the methodological and motivational schooling for students, the realization of interviews followed by their final analysis. The first two years we focused on two major centres of memory which are the Prague Spring and the Velvet Revolution. In contrast, in 2011 we set the theme *My family and the era of Normalization*, which we would like to deepen in the coming years. (FYI - Normalization, following the Prague spring movement and closed by perestroika, is probably the most questionable era of the Czechoslovak communist regime. You may probably know the story of the Czech dissent, represented by Vaclav Havel. Despite dissents' activity, 99 % of population supported or rather did not revolt against the communist regime until the collapse of Soviet Union in the late 80'.)

During three years we have collected approximately 220 interviews from pupils of elementary and secondary schools. Thanks to the Ministry of Education grant we managed to double the number of participating schools for the upcoming year.

The collection of interviews is freely available on the website of the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes.⁵ The collection does not represent balanced sample of memories of pre-1989 Czechoslovak society. After all it was not our intention. Regionally schools in Prague and municipal parts of Bohemia are represented; rural schools are almost not represented at all. On account of the high proportion of secondary grammar schools, compared with a total population we can find in the sum of witnesses above-average share of university and secondary educated people, people with only primary education basically absent.

Let me formulate some conclusions concerning the relation between the family memories and lessons of modern Czechoslovak history now.

For many students working on the project *Velké a malé příběhy moderních dějin* was their initial experience with the method of oral history. In most cases, narrator and interviewer were connected with some kind of family relationship and this affected the content and form of testimony. The function of a family story telling is specific - an interview within the family becomes a medium for creating an image of the past.

Parallel to the information received from textbooks, there is another important reference system for the interpretation of the past: a system which consists of concrete figures - parents, grandparents, relatives, family photos. Recorded statements do not capture the past but its dynamic interpretation which has the main objective in forming the basic image of someone's past, someone's life and family traditions. To a certain extent, recorded testimony illustrates the process of remembering, which is an active remodelling of the past and it's updating at the same time. It can be observed that from the point of narrator's view the interview was not a

⁵ *Velké a malé příběhy moderních dějin* [Online]. © Ústav pro studium totalitních režimů 2009. Access from URL: <<http://www.ustrcr.cz/cs/velke-a-male-pribehy-modernich-dejin>> [2011-10-07].

common description, but the conversation was accompanied by a high level of interpretation of the past. In addition to information, the witnesses passed on mainly attitudes, values and frames that can be used as the access to the past. Narrators obviously showed effort to influence the interviewer through the evaluation and formulating theses which have largely exceeded the level of a mere reproduction of facts about the past.

Captured memories confirm the findings of some historians that Czech society does not recall the period of Communist dictatorship uniformly.⁶ We can find different ways of relating to the past. The negative evaluation prevailed, minority witnesses recalled nostalgically neutral, we can find cases of obvious ostalgie and positive evaluation of the theory and practice of regime of state socialism. But what is interesting, there is a lack of conflict remembering in the families. Neither narrators nor interviewers met with a clear willingness to challenge moral attitudes or values of family members in the times of Normalization. Communists have disappeared from the families. If there is a morally problematic practice, the responsibility is often downplayed or externalized with reference to the nature of the time or regime.

Witnesses' spontaneous confession of a membership in the Communist Party was quite exceptional phenomenon. The unwillingness to start a conflict is most clearly shown in the topic of stealing socialist property. Despite some exceptions, the stealing is advocated by a contemporary slogan "who doesn't steal, robs his family". Some witnesses concentrated on describing the sophisticated practice of "hunting" necessary things. Shame over the theft was in many cases displaced with satisfaction over own ingenuity. In response, the students who, according to my own experience, have developed a strong sense of protection of private property did not need to complain that their witnesses have committed a theft. Likewise, interviewers did not need to challenge the fact that their relatives repeatedly lied in public or acted contrary to their conscience (in the case of elections, public rituals, etc.).

Of course, it is necessary to take into account the incomplete structure of the witnesses and thus the limitations of empirical knowledge. Though, I think in Czech families there is slowly starting a similar interaction between family and cultural memory as described for the German environment by Harald Welzer. On the one hand, there are the obvious anticommunist attitudes of most students who are involved in the project. At the same time, however, we do not find among the relatives active bearers of values and attitudes against which the pupils define. This can be interpreted in analogy to Welzer's conclusions: pupils' attitudes may be a demonstration of anticommunist attitudes prevailing in the Czech cultural memory (or educational process). In their reflections students denounce the restriction of personal freedoms, persecution of opponents of the communist regime or a dictatorship as a form of government. Concurrently, family stories of Normalization create such an image of family history so that students can take the view that Communists were »bastards«, but afterwards they could add

⁶ For further information about Czech „memory“ of Communism see MAYER, Françoise. *Les Tchêques et leur communisme: Mémoire et identités politiques*. Editions de l'Ecole Pratiques de Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales 2003.

that there were no »bastards« in their families. I can imagine that in less than twenty years a study entitled »My grandfather was not a Commie« can be in the Czech environment very topical.

I ask myself whether the Czech case is specific or teachers in all post-communist states face the similar problem.

I would like to put emphasis on the fact that a research of family memory in the Czech environment is at its very beginning and also the German findings cannot be analogically applied to the Czech environment. Moreover, between the relatively homogeneous German cultural memory of the intensive phase of the Nazi totalitarian regime and the Czech memory (or rather memories) of 40 various years of communist dictatorship are many substantial differences. Starting with the duration and ending with number of perspectives of the evaluation.

Anyway, the interpretation of the family memory projects goes further. It should be noted that multiperspective approach is methodologically challenging and can be problematic. Some teachers whom I am in contact with already tried to interpret memories in lessons, but in some cases the confrontation resulted in conflict among supporters of different perspectives. A confrontation provoked a discussion in class from which teachers could get, considering educational goals, no effect. Class did not reach any synthetic conclusion. This discussion can be seen not only at schools, but also in public. Members of Czech government liberal party would never sing the same song as the communist opposition. Czechs in pubs are able to have serious arguments concerning the communist era.

Whatever may positions which depart from the prevailing attitudes in the classroom (or otherwise from the prevailing anticommunist Czech cultural memory) be in minority, the mere fact that the teachers are confronted with them in class confirms that we mustn't be satisfied only with a simple capturing of family narrative. On the one hand, students actively learn a wide range of information about communist dictatorship, but at the same time they can take over from their relatives various attitudes and values, which in a later confrontation may have conflict potential.

As my colleague Jaroslav Pinkas pointed out during the expert meeting of Czech and German oral historians held this September in Prague, in case we emphasize tolerance to be important value of present education, it is not possible to repress these nonconforming interpretations of the past and from a position of authority repressively say "You're wrong boy, your reflection of the past is false, you have to look at it this way." We mustn't discredit the perspective, but to confront it.⁷

However, we would like to continue with the project *Velké a malé příběhy moderních dějin* and rather than to capture the everyday life of late communist regime we would like to pay attention to the process of formulating and passing on family memories. We

⁷ PINKAS, Jaroslav. Receptce rodinné paměti v pedagogické praxi. [Manuscript]. Conference contribution *Rozhovory s pamětníky - využití rozhovorů s oběťmi nacismu a komunistického režimu bývalého Československa v historickém vzdělávání: vzdělávací koncepce, diskuse a perspektivy v Česku a Německu*. Praha-Břevnov, 14.-16. 9. 2011.

would like to focus particularly on the interviewers and analyze how they perceive the narrator's story. In order to complete the project methodology, questionnaires for pupils could allow us to further describe the process of perception of family memory. I ask myself whether the Czech case is specific or teachers in all post-communist states face the similar problem.

With regard to the current economic development in Europe can be expected that opinions on the practice of state socialism would permanently polarize. Social stability and zero unemployment sound tempting, don't you think so?

Thank you for your attention.