

THE YEAR 1968 IN THE MEMORY OF ONE GENERATION

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The paper presents initial findings of research carried out among a same-age cohort (respondents born between the years 1938-1950) in the same town. The objective was to collect biographical narratives concerning the lives of the youth in the 1960s. The paper focuses on interpretations of respondents' leisure time activities within a chosen urban area and their reflections on the invasion of the town on the part of occupation armies.

Keywords: oral history, interviews, biographical narratives, memories, age-group.

Članek predstavlja prva dognanja raziskave, ki je potekala v starostni skupini (rojeni med letoma 1938 in 1950) v istem kraju. Namen je bil zbrati biografske pripovedi o življenju mladih v 60. letih 20. stoletja. Prispevek se osredinja na njihove interpretacije dejavnosti v prostem času v mestnem okolju in premisleke o vdoru zasedbene vojske v mestu.

Ključne besede: ustna zgodovina, intervju, biografska pripoved, spomini, starostna (vrstniška) skupina.

INTRODUCTION¹

The invasion of allied troops of the Warsaw Pact into Czechoslovakia in August 1968 impacted the development of Czechoslovak society at all levels and affected the lives of the entire population. The fortieth anniversary of the invasion in 2008 inspired many activities in academic and literary circles, in the media² as well as at the local or civic level. Public commemorative events were organized by local activists and by those who experienced the invasion first hand.

Academic interest and the inquiry of historians, political scientists, philosophers and other social scientists focusing on a particular historical milestone or era usually yield a broad spectrum of data, new findings and interpretations of the studied issue in various contexts and from various angles. Results of the research in this case were presented in numerous forums – including seminars and conferences – and were published in specialized and popular science publications.³

¹ The paper was written within the VEGA grant scheme No. 2/6059/31 Everyday Narrativeness in the Context of Historic Turning Points in Czecho/Slovakia (the principal investigator Zuzana Profantová, Ph.D.).

² For instance, the nationwide SME daily published digitalised editions of contemporary press from 21 August 1968 on its website over the course of the summer. In this fashion, many people of today had the opportunity to learn about contemporary reactions and interpretations of the occupation and its consequences on society.

³ The Institute of History Slovak Academy of Sciences in cooperation with other institutions published up to 10 books in the years 2007–2009; see: e. g. Bystrický 2008; Londák 2007, 2008, 2009; Londáková 2008; Michalek 2008; Ragač 2008.

Ethnological research generally speaking emphasizes the study of everyday life at the micro-level of society. It primarily employs qualitative methods, and its findings provide data complementary to those collected through the heuristic study of archival documents. Findings of our field research represent various subjective interpretations of historical events and processes; they focus on mechanisms of remembering or re-constructing individual histories or that of certain social groups in the context of the macro-history of various historical periods.

In my paper I deal with the partial findings of my research concerning the construction and concrete content of memories of people belonging to one generation in a particular town concerning the year 1968. In my research, I applied diverse oral history methods with which I have been working since the mid-1990s. I interpret my data within the framework of the characteristics of the town and its life as recorded in written documents I have studied in the archives of the town of Trenčín.⁴

I defined my research sample as people representing one generation, or more precisely, one same-age group who in the year 1968 either reached at least 18 years of age or finished their secondary or college studies and were less than 30 years of age. It means that this group consists of people born between the years 1938 and 1950. What this specific group of people of diverse educational, social, class, ethnic, religious or other backgrounds has in common is the experience of being the youngest generation of an urban population in the given period. During the 1960s, this group who had just come of age started to project their own independent life and formulate their professional, social, political and personal plans, which they tried to carry out in the atmosphere of the period.⁵

In current academic and public discourse, the 1960s – especially its second half – are often, even stereotypically, labeled as a period of political thaw and gradual democratization. I wanted to know whether and in what terms such a stereotypical statement is mentioned in the testimonies of my respondents. The collective memory of the “youth of the 1960s” is part of the collective memory of the town’s citizens. What is included in this collective memory, does it influence the official memory of the town or does it remain unofficial?

In my research I focused on the construction and contents of the memory of a certain age group of inhabitants of one town with emphasis on a concrete historical period: the 1960s. In studying the concrete contents of collective memory, we come across the concept of historical memory denoting a set of information about the common history of a given group, or about common experiences occurring in a certain historical period. In this case we cannot speak of a systematic description of the past but about the more or less purposeful and selective explanation of the past and recent events. As social psychologist

⁴ I studied proceedings from the meetings of the municipal council and its particular departments, the *Chronicle of Trenčín 1960–1970* as well as local periodicals and newspapers published by local factories.

⁵ One important fact in the context of the presented theme is that in the studied period there was no college or university located in Trenčín.

Viera Bačová writes about historical memory: “Perhaps the key motive of its functioning is to explain, understand, excuse or critique the current state of affairs (both private and public)” (Bačová 1996: 19).

I collected my data with the aid of interviews and biographical narratives as methods for compiling oral history. In doing so I worked with the concept of collective/social memory. The term social memory was coined by Maurice Halbwachs, who wanted to underscore the social nature of remembering and the importance of shared ideas for a group or collectivity. As this French sociologist has pointed out, the transfer of memories always takes place in certain social frameworks or contexts. The concept of social/collective memory has been on the rise since the 1980s and has been accorded various meanings – both broader or narrower – in addition to different adjectives (historical, cultural, national, etc.).⁶ Nonetheless, neither its originator nor his followers have provided us with its precise definition. Therefore, it is important to define the concept of memory within the context of concrete research.

In the collection as well as the analysis of biographical narratives, I focused on the ways in which people expressed themselves about the given historical period and the themes they employed. In my analysis, I presupposed that the concept of memory has two interrelated meanings: as memory processes and as memory contents.

The former meaning of the term is related to processes of remembering or forgetting, while the latter meaning points to certain complex sets of information about the past. I followed the thesis that the information stored in memories is not fixed and immutable. The memory of a group or collectivity is formed only by what is repeated or passed on in remembering as well as by what group members have in common – shared information. This can be, for instance, shared ideas (about their own group, historical period, etc.), values, norms, behaviors as well as communication of group members with others outside of the group.

A complementary part of the memory construction process (remembering) is forgetting. In relation to oral history methodologies, which I apply in my research of the group memory of this particular age group, sociologist Zuzana Kusá (1995) highlighted several facts that oral history researchers ought to take into account:

- *Selective nature of memory.* From the perspective of present-day interests and knowledge, each act of remembering is a reconstruction of the past from the perspective of the present through the prism of the present values and norms of the narrator, thus combining current and past attitudes.
- *Selection of the private as historically insignificant.* The main point of oral history is to find the link between an individual biography and history, between individual experience and social change. The average narrator as well as the historian or social scientist studying biographical narratives is faced with an uneasy and not always clear question: how personal is history and to what extent is one’s private life historical? What in personal experience is public and thus worth of remembering and recollection?

⁶ An overview of various understandings of the concept can be found e.g. in Linke 2001: 2219–2223; Prager 2001: 2223–2227.

It is important to keep in mind that witnesses of small history formulate and highlight the experiences and events in their memories that they consider to be important:

- *Selection of memories is influenced by dominant collective memory.* Our memory tends to adjust to images created by respective social groups, and these images are mutable.
- *Selection as the expression of self-esteem.* Each biographical narrative represents a process related to the evaluation of one's own life. Therefore, in constructing their own life story, narrators – especially older people – evaluate their life and hence reveal their attitudes and values. I agree with Zuzana Kusá that the biographical narrative (or more precisely its narrator) is too fragile to bear the weight of rigorous reality check. Various motivations of authors and narrators (be it the need to appropriate their own life experience, to absolve themselves, to fulfill their longing for glory or understanding, and so on) materialize themselves in documents with varying degrees of credibility. However, all documents may represent a valuable source of data if the researcher is able to identify and take into account the motivation of their originator.
- *The so-called Pollyanna's principle* (named after the heroine of a novel written by Eleanor H. Porter). This refers to the selection of memories based on the fact that humans suppress negative and traumatic experiences. As psychiatrist Imrich Ruisel (2005) pointed out, historical triumphs or traumas are an exception. In these cases, social memory leads to the stabilization of memories and their anchoring in the consciousness of the following generations. Therefore, Holocaust survivors are generally considered to be the bearers of permanent memory, for example.
- *Selection and character of the story.* This is related to the mentioned need to preserve self-esteem in constructing one's life story. In general, people telling their life story strive to present their lives as a sequence of events that led them to end up in a certain position in which they want to see themselves or in which they want to be perceived by others.

An important question related to distortion of memory arises when using oral history methods and in studying the functioning of memory. Distortion, if we disregard conscious suppression, can be caused by various factors related to the evaluation of the past through the prism of the present. This results in distortion of the remembered past due to facts and events that happened “after” the period in question. In addition, a so-called egocentric distortion can take place.⁷

It is important to keep in mind that the collection of biographical narratives does not represent a simple retrieval of information, and that it may not even represent a “pure” reproduction of information. The construction of memories and life stories consists in the combination of unrelated recollections of older with newer ones and their links with new knowledge and opinions.

⁷ For more details see: Schacter 2003.

COLLECTION OF BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVES AMONG A SAME-AGE GROUP

I started my research at the beginning of 2008 via unofficial meetings and probes “on the spot” that led to the creation of an initial database of respondents of the defined age group or cohort. As these were just initial meetings – a kind of preparation to better know people – I decided to use non-structured interviews. This way I explained my goals and objectives as well as the whole research process and data evaluation to the participants. I used the biographical method and emphasized the chronological order in respondents’ construction of their life stories in the first “real” interviews. My objective was to gain an idea about:

- the verbal skills of respondents,
- the family setting in which they grew up,
- their personal, family and other life situation in the 1960s,
- their interests, strategies, plans and goals that they formulated for themselves in the process of projecting their own future.

When employing the biographical method,⁸ both the researcher and the respondent become parts of the recollection process, which includes the retrieval of memories and the interpretation or reinterpretation of the respondent’s life story. Individual memory is a very specific database of information that people have acquired either directly through their own experience or indirectly. In the process of recollection, the respondent selectively retrieves these data. Individual memory consists of rational knowledge, emotions and attitudes that often do not have a real foundation as well as stereotypes or prejudices. Recollection is a process of actualization of the past. The ability to remember certain events or facts is considered to be the ability of an individual. How an individual remembers, what she or he remembers and what she or he either overlooks or deliberately conceals is influenced by his or her social setting: one’s family, friends, peers, occupational, local or other social group. Therefore each individual memory is considered to be socially, collectively determined. The memory retrieval process is also constantly influenced by current context, meaning, social climate as well as the situation, disposition or ambitions of the respondent. The researcher also influences the process of memory selection – at least indirectly through his/her presence. For the individual act of recollection, it is therefore important when, where, to whom and why the person relates his/her memories. In this manner, various interpretations of certain

⁸ Just as in the case of other social sciences, narrative interviewing in ethnology represents one of the steps in the biographical method. These are interviews of a researcher with a respondent that are most frequently carried out in a semi-structured format. Such a narrative interview usually comprises continuous talking on the part of the respondent (interviewee) while the researcher (the interviewer) tries to minimize his or her interventions. In other cases, such an interview can be composed of questions posed by the researcher and the respondent’s answers. In the latter case, the researcher tries to elaborate and gain more in depth information about the particular problem or issue he or she is pursuing. I employed the latter interview method in my research.

historical events emerge in the process of recollection, and different memories about the experience of the same historical reality are selected.

The respondent ensures his/her continuity in time through recollections that represent the foundation of a biographical narrative. Both individuals and groups confirm their identity and integrity in this manner. The identity of an individual is made up of particular layers of his/her roles that flexibly change or shift in everyday life and that are based on a continuous process of construction and reconstruction of networks of relations with other people and groups.

An individual who defines himself/herself as a member of a certain group adopts its norms, values and mores, regarding them as his/her own. The intensity of this adoption depends on the strength of people's identification with a certain social group. Psychology and social psychology see processes of identity construction as individual processes. Ethnology pays attention to the social and cultural foundations of identity in which memory plays an important role.

My respondents have never formed a formal group with a compact inner structure. What they have in common is the historical experience of the same generation that determined the course of their lives. They represented a specific age group of single young adults in a particular urban space in the 1960s who were finishing or who just finished their studies and were gaining new experiences, knowledge, and skills in their first jobs. Although in terms of their social, ethnic or religious, educational or occupational backgrounds they were a rather heterogeneous group, their age was the common factor that to a certain degree also determined their status and position in the social hierarchy of the town.

What kind of data did I get from the first interviews? In addressing this question, it is important to keep in mind that the context in which I addressed my potential respondents endowed the whole process with a special dimension. The first meetings took place at the beginning of 2008, which was the year of the 40th anniversary of the invasion of the Warsaw Pact troops into Czechoslovakia in 1968. The official state media – television and radio – invoked the date of 21 August in historical documentaries as well as in discussions of experts and historians about the events of 1968. However, they did not offer the public more in depth or new findings. These can be found in specialised historical journals published in those times by experts from the Historical Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences (SAV). Whether these works were made accessible to the general public was and still is disputed. Events connected with the August 1968 occupation and its consequences were also commemorated in an informal or private manner, within families or groups of friends as well as peer groups. For some people, it was an important topic that they needed to address, while others were not willing to reminisce on the given era. This was clearly evident in the first reactions of the respondents – whether they wanted to cooperate with me or not. For my respondents, the tanks of August 1968 were a turning point in their lives. But what did it mean for them – what had their lives been like before and after? How do they remember this historical period, how do they speak about it? These were the questions

in which I was interested. Yet getting answers to these questions represents a long process of which I am completing only the early stages.

The first outcomes of my analysis of the collected biographical narratives allow me to sketch preliminary images common to the “young generation of the 1960s” that can be considered to be part of their collective memory.

At the moment, the material can be divided into the following groups:

- contexts of the life of the youth in the town in the 1960s,
- the moment of the Warsaw Pact troops invasion,
- reactions to the invasion,
- the consequences of the invasion and life after it.

I start from the premise that what we can regard as the memory of a certain group is only what the group members share: information that is repeated and passed on, e.g. shared images, values, norms, behaviors and mutual communication. When we look at the particular narratives through this premise, it is possible to see a common thread in individual narratives.

First of all, we can detect those elements that according to the interpretation of its members were characteristic of the group and were part of the construction of the group in the studied period. These were – besides external features such as clothes, haircuts, manners, addresses and figures of speech – also certain stable meeting places and common activities confirming the existence of the group – both among its members and externally.

Given the roles ascribed to and played by my respondents and the nature of the group to which they belonged, one common theme of their biographical narratives was leisure activities – their forms, the places where they occurred and their formal or informal organization.

Given that its members lived in a small town,⁹ the existence of the studied age-group was confirmed by everyday face-to-face communication of its members as well as both formal and informal inter-group communication. Their meeting places included for the most part the public spaces of the town, particularly in its historical center. The main square with a fenced park and a plaque column in its center was such a “traditional” meeting place. In the 1960s, there was also a promenade (*korzo*) that unfolded in the square, allowing for intergenerational verbal and non-verbal communication among all town inhabitants. For young adults, this was a strategically important place where everybody could be seen and all people could meet. There, according to those who used to go there for a stroll, people could meet with their peers even without prearranging their get-togethers or find new friends or partners.

⁹ The town of Trenčín is situated in the valley of the river Váh in Western Slovakia, 120 km north of the capital Bratislava. At the end of the 1960s, it was one of the top 10 Slovak towns with the most inhabitants. It was the administrative centre of the region and seat of the county. The town was well developed mainly in the areas of textile and clothing industry, machinery and food industry. Trenčín was the seat of the headquarters of the Eastern part of the Czechoslovak army. Large military barracks, military administrative objects as well as military aviation repair shops with a nearby military airport were situated here. Given the topic in focus, Trenčín was a strategically important area also for the occupying armies.

As concerns Trenčín, in that period I had very good times while I was studying at the evening school. We were single and would go to dances, or downtown for a stroll, sometimes we would dine in some of those small eateries. Especially the one upstairs in the movie theater Hviezda had very good kitchen. Dances were organized in Odeva – Rybníčkovci used to play there as well as in Merina – very good balls used to be held there: the athletes' ball, the famous dance orchestras would play there, each year about five balls would take place there. Then there was that unforgettable promenade. One interesting thing is that all of us who would meet in these places are still on a first name basis, and many of them I don't even know by their last name. (w., 1951)

Another “common point” for the studied age group were the so called five o'clock teas – dances at which mostly local music bands played. These dances took place at clubs established by local factories and state-run enterprises (called workplace clubs). The clubs served primarily for the leisure activities of their employees, and they usually hosted a rich plethora of other events in addition to dances. These included meetings of local organizations of the Communist Party, trade unions and other organizations united in the National Front; commemorative events organized for various historical and political anniversaries; exhibits and performances of various artists, professional and amateur theaters, music bands, dance ensembles, and choirs; discussions with politicians, artists, and scientists; and other varied social events such as cabaret shows, balls and dances. The narratives indicate that “each club had its own music band” playing a certain kind of music attracting a certain kind of audience.

We used to play in the city cultural center, the former Bio Zora – that's what we called it. And we would play at “teas” there. The place was usually packed. We had a loudspeaker outside on the promenade. So we played and all listened. There was a great euphoria. The Beatles and the songs from the Czech theater Semafor were popular at that time; those were great times. And later, out of this, six or eight bands developed that would play at “teas” on Sundays – at Merino, Odeva, Toska, in Záblatie too, in Zlatovce at the cotton plant, also at Konštrukta – and all these dances were always full. Those people would come and bands would even circulate. So it was very strong. We enjoyed it and we couldn't care less about having some other life. We would get out of work and play in the evenings, then those “teas” on Sundays and then also some balls – that's what we looked forward to. And ballroom dancing started to be strong in Trenčín then. There were bands that played from notes ... these were all army musicians, professionals, so they knew exactly what we wanted and they taught us, drilled us. (m., 1943)

The most popular and important “teas” took place in the historical center of the town on the main square – in the local cultural center (the House of Culture) informally called

Osveta. That was the place where they “all” used to meet. Hearing the first tones of music, all young people sitting in the park would move to Osveta.

In the current academic and public discourse, the 1960s – and especially its second half – are often, even stereotypically, labeled as a period of political thaw and gradual democratization. Yet what did this mean in the everyday life of the young generation living in one town?

How is this situation reflected in their biographical narratives? One sign of some limited freedom of expression that repeatedly springs up in the narratives is the increasing trend of activities initiated and carried out from the bottom-up – civic initiatives that were only formally carried out under the auspices of some established organization – usually the Youth Union or the management of workplace clubs. It was these workplace clubs¹⁰ that in the second half of the 1960s created a platform for the young people in Trenčín to realize their activities. Having successfully organized unofficial parades of local youth music bands and theaters in the workplace clubs, leaders of youth groups strove to get their own place. So in May 1968, the representatives of the youth met with the representatives of the Municipal Council, the municipal committee of the Communist Party and the district council to discuss the establishment of the Youth Club.¹¹

Besides the workplace clubs, another meeting place was the summer cinema near the Brezina park close to the Town Tower (the Lower Gate – remnants of the town fortification). In addition to movies, the place hosted concerts, dances, theater and cabaret shows. The social thaw was evident mostly in the content of social and cultural events: in music, in showing Western films as well as in Czechoslovak ones, particularly films made by the new generation of filmmakers. For instance, at the end of the 1960s, the Gustav Brom orchestra¹² played jazz and swing which for many years had been prohibited as bourgeois at concerts organized for students. In addition, the local music scene was very varied, and amateur bands would meet at mandatory auditions¹³ at which committees decided about their further existence. The musicians playing in the bands were either local inhabitants or musicians doing their military service in the army band of the Eastern Military Division located in Trenčín.¹⁴

¹⁰ This concerned especially clubs established by state enterprises Merina, TOS, Odevné závody, Bavlnárske závody, AOZ Trenčín – Zlatovce. Venues were also provided by two movie theaters – Moskva and Hviezda (the former Army House), the Regional Museum, the Regional Library and the City Cultural Center.

¹¹ For details see: *Trenčianske noviny*, May 21 1968, 2.

¹² G. Brom opäť u nás. *Trenčianske noviny* 4 (24), 12. 6. 1963, 3; Karol Vlach v Trenčíne. *Trenčianske noviny* 7 (24), 14. 6. 1966, 4; the Gustáv Brom Orchestra played for students in the Trenčín Municipal House of Culture. See: *Výchovné koncerty. Trenčianske noviny* 7 (49), 6. 12. 1966, 3.

¹³ The auditions in Trenčín were organized from 1960 to 1970 by the Department of Education and Culture at the district council. For instance, all music bands had their auditions on the same day in March 1966 with following participants: 5 brass orchestras, 21 brass bands, 5 dance music orchestras, 22 dance music bands, 2 youth ensembles and 3 big beat bands (*Kronika mesta Trenčín* 1966: 52).

¹⁴ People often mention e.g. brothers Ján and Juraj Lehotský – at present famous Slovak pop musicians.

There was a strong enclave of musicians here. It all started of course with the army band that used to be here. These people were good musicians, mostly Czechs. These were young people, all of them, and they wanted to play good dance music. That was the time of the Beatles and swing orchestras and the like. We wanted to emulate them. And there were good musicians here like Ďuro Šícha, who popularized music here, and he had the first orchestra that was as good as let's say Velčovský or Brom, good music arrangements. And we all wanted to play with Šícha, and when somebody succeeded it was a big deal. I also played with Juro Šícha a little, some compositions. But interestingly, there was this nestor of music – Prof. Jozef Kutlík. He taught music and we called him professor. He could play about ten instruments... we would go to Merina, there was a Mr. Stopka, who played brass music there. So we would go there to the music school. I wanted to learn to play saxophone. I had some foundations in playing piano, but I wanted to play saxophone. So Kultík said: come to see me, you can have a saxophone. So I got that saxophone, I played about four tones at two lessons and then he told me: "You're not gonna play this, we need a drummer and you would be good. So come to play drums, one guy just left us. (m., 1942)

In 1968, the activities of young people who fancied big beat music gradually gained a concrete shape, and Trenčín became the venue of the first regional beat festival.¹⁵

The efforts to freely express themselves through artistic means represent a significant feature of the young generation. In the studied period, Trenčín also had several amateur theater ensembles as well as a poetry theater that staged authors whom the communist power deemed controversial – e.g. Laco Novomeský or Vladimír Clementis.¹⁶

The political events of the year 1968 also became the catalyst of civic initiatives in local cultural and social life. "The human face of socialism" with the broad, media-friendly smile of Alexander Dubček regularly appeared in the local daily *Trenčianske noviny*, once also including an interview with his mother. He was presented and perceived as the "guy next door" from the Trenčín region and a guarantor of a freer life – albeit within the scope of the socialist regime. The biographical narratives also reflect the fact that young people believed in the possibility of reforming the regime, and this significantly influenced their opinions, decisions and acts.

¹⁵ Its organizer was the Association of Youth Clubs of Slovakia and the Municipal Youth Council of Trenčín. In 1969, the second regional beat festival also took place, but its further continuation was precluded by the period of "normalization" following the Soviet invasion.

¹⁶ The commemorative event devoted to Laco Novomeský took place in the Workplace Club Merina Trenčín on 19 February 1968. For more details see: Básnik medzi nami. *Trenčianske noviny* 9 (9), 27. 2. 1968, 2. For more details about activities of the youth group that planted a Lime Tree of Freedom in the honor of Vladimír Clementis see: Pamiatka Clementisa. *Trenčianske noviny* 9 (45), 5. 11. 1968), 3. The newly opened Club of Vladimír Clementis organized his commemorative event. See: Za pravdu bojovať, pravde žiť. *Trenčianske noviny* 9 (50), 10. 12. 1968, 1.

August 1968 is another theme of the collective memory of the 1960s generation. Memories about and interpretations of the period concern numerous topics including the moment when people realized that Soviet troops were present in the town or the way in which they learned of it:

I remember that month of August 1968 like it was today. How I woke up on the morning of the 21st and I had a radio with me. My husband was already at work, he worked in Odeva then. I woke up after seven and I listened to the radio: "Be careful, tanks are here". I was thinking: "Now at seven in the morning they are broadcasting some radio play? What can it be? The Red Army?" And now this ... This can't be. I go out to do some shopping and I see – people standing in line. Gee, what's going on? And I look at the army division building, and the tanks are there. And then I don't even remember how my husband came back home from work, I only remember that horror. You wake up in the morning and you hear something unexpected. You turned on the TV; there it was too. I still couldn't believe it, only then when my husband came back home and told me what had happened did I believe it. I was surprised, but with that young mind I even didn't know how I took it, what I was thinking. (w., 1950)

...and then that strange year 1968 came, when I practically started to form my new life because I found my wife...and we as a band, a month before the Russians came, had gone to play to Yugoslavia, at that time it was possible. We were down at the Bay of Kotor in Bosnia and Herzegovina. And we were playing there. We had a great time because with Dubček's badge all doors were open to us. We didn't need any money, Dubček's badge was something special. They would tell us: "Stay here, play. We'll take care of you. The Russians will invade your country." And we would laugh at that, what Russians, what were they talking about, and we were about to return on the 20th. And we told them: "No, we won't stay here. We're going back." Although everything was arranged for us. We didn't believe them, of course we didn't. It was a big shock to us when we came back on the 21st, we met with our families, with my then girlfriend and we wanted to get married, we wanted to live together. (m., 1942)

Other topics include:

- reactions of peer group members as well as the first reactions and strategies of their family members;
- descriptions of and opinions about Soviet soldiers;
- the atmosphere in the town;

- the gradual “normalization”¹⁷ of the local community, with political measures and far-reaching consequences for the young actors of civic “resistance”.

The construction of memories about 21 August 21 1968 reflects astonishment and surprise about the unbelievable nature of the situation; in addition they also contain statements about the inevitability of the invasion. In this case, however, we are rather dealing with consequences of the evaluation of a historical event through the prism of later experiences and knowledge.

21 August 1968 turned Trenčín into a town in mourning.¹⁸ At noon, factory sirens were turned on in protest against the presence of the troops in the town; people hung black flags and placed pictures of Alexander Dubček in their windows. The Czechoslovak flag was placed on the top of the castle. Local newspapers published supportive op-eds and articles expressing trust in the government and communist leaders led by A. Dubček, as did the national media. Protests texts – direct reactions to the occupation – were later used against their authors as well as against the newspapers, which later disclaimed their “August activities” or made excuses for them on the grounds that the situation had been unclear and confusing. Representatives of local and regional organizations united in the National Front would meet at ad hoc meetings and express their support for A. Dubček, the government and their reform agenda.¹⁹

Trenčín, which was the headquarters of the Eastern (or second) Division of the

¹⁷ In general, “normalization” is a term used to define a political orientation of the leadership of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KPCS) after the invasion of the Warsaw Pact troops on 21 August 1968. The democratization process of the “Czechoslovak spring” was abruptly halted with the publication of the so-called Moscow protocol of August 1968 to the XIV. Congress of Communist Party of Czechoslovakia (KPCS) in May 1971, or better yet, with the ideological document on normalization titled “Lessons from the crisis: developments in the party and society”, published in December 1970 after the 13th KPCS congress.

Normalization and its socio-political consequences left significant marks on Slovak and Czech societies that are evident to the present day, despite the change of the social system. It wasn't until recently that November 1989 was considered to be the end of normalization. However, a more in-depth analysis of events in society in the 1980s demonstrates that various foreign political factors as well as problems in the Czecho-Slovak state enabled the Czech and Slovak societies to begin to free themselves from normalization in the mid 1980s. The era of normalization was a more moderate form of anti-communist oppression than that of the era of 1950s Stalinism. For example, although many people were persecuted, judicial murders in political processes did not occur anymore. Throughout the entire era of normalization, Soviet troops were deployed on the territory of Czecho-Slovakia. For more information see: http://www.history.sav.sk/zatkuliak/zatkuliak_normalizacia.pdf.

¹⁸ This picture was recorded also by the local press. See: e.g. articles *Zazneli sirény. Trenčianske noviny* 9 (34a), 21. 8. 1968, 2; *Trenčín v smútku. Trenčianske noviny* 9 (34b), 24. 8. 1968, 2.

¹⁹ This was the case of the district meeting of the Communist Party that took place at Merina Trenčín on 30 August 1968. For more details see: *Naše politické krédo bolo a vždy bude socializmus. Trenčianske noviny* 9 (35), 3. 9. 1968, 1, 4. A similar atmosphere was also at the plenary meeting of the district committee of the Communist Party, during which female participants approved the action plan and sent a gift of flowers in support to the mother of Alexander Dubček. See: (mg), *Ako ďalej v ženskom hnutí. Trenčianske noviny* 9 (38), 24. 9. 1968, 3.

Czechoslovak Army, was a strategic target for the occupation armies. Soviet freight airplanes would bring heavy military machinery – tanks, armored cars, cannons – to the airport and then transport them in other locales of the region.

On the night from 20 to 21 August, we heard the noise of freight airplanes flying over the town. And that was part of the initial frontal attack aimed at occupying all strategic airports in Czechoslovakia: Prague, Bratislava, as well as Plzeň as the seat of the Western Division and Trenčín as the seat of the Eastern Division. In Trenčín, the occupants were landing at Biskupice airport and built a makeshift airport near Skalka, to which they dispatched mostly lighter machinery, and gradually they built their main tent camp there. It could be well seen from the castle. They stayed at Skalka until April 1969. (m., 1946)

The headquarters of the 2nd Army Division was at Sihoľ, there were aircraft hangars there, so military potential there was high. So, those troops here ... I don't even remember whether Hungarians were here too, or some others. I know Russians were at Sihoľ and they also wanted to take the airport. They had some problems there so they moved. One night I was listening to the radio. I lived on the main business street. And then I heard this rumbling so I ran downstairs to the gate to take a look. There were tanks moving to some other place. It was about half past twelve and took about 25-30 minutes for the convoy to pass by. In 1968, I worked at the Public Health Office and when we came to work next day we didn't know what was about to happen. Are we gonna work today? What's gonna happen next? (m., 1940)

The military presence was visible in all important places across the town.

The highly strategic place was the headquarters of the Eastern District at Sihoľ. Paratroopers from helicopters were the first to get there, and during the morning the Russians completely barricaded it with combat vehicles and tanks. Nearby, there where the sport hall is, they erected a 20-meters high antenna. They got to the center through the underpass and enclosed the square; they left the engines running and they were observing the place. As we later found out, their orders had been to take positions without leaving their vehicles. They weren't supposed to meet with people. (m., 1946)

Part of the troops even built their camp at the castle, which was then closed for the entire month of October.²⁰ Despite this fact, or even because of it, the inhabitants of Trenčín organized a demonstration in October to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the formation of Czechoslovakia by organizing grandiose fireworks over Trenčín castle.²¹

²⁰ See: STOP návštevníkom hradu. *Trenčianske noviny* 9 (39), 1. 10. 1968, 2; Trenčín bez cudzích vojsk. *Trenčianske noviny* 9 (44), 30. 10. 1968, 1.

²¹ See: Ohňostroj nad Trenčínom. *Trenčianske noviny* 9 (43), 22. 10. 1968, 2.

Interpretations of direct reactions to the August events in individual biographical narratives can be divided into two main groups. The first contains positions of passive observers of the events, comments of the “silent majority”; the second consists of descriptions of the situation as seen by activists, actors of the protests held in town. Interpretations in both groups have the same aim: to give meaning to peoples’ acts, explain the reasons for their concrete behavior and thinking. In some cases, a rational meaning is added *ex post* to spontaneous acts of unplanned resistance, such as in the case of a group of young men who in their workplace in Odevné závody flung down a huge Soviet star from the roof of the main building. One of the actors explains this action with hindsight of forty years. Although this was a spontaneous, unplanned act, in the context of following events it gained new meanings; however, it also had tragic consequences for the actors and their families in the time of the onset of “normalization”.

The interpretations of active resistance participants are on the other end of the spectrum of memories. Several young people formed a resistance group that consciously and in a premeditated fashion expressed their disagreement with the occupation.

The first hours we were all scared, we didn't know what was going on. Only gradually did we understand the situation thanks to the TV and radio. And that was one of the most important, but also the most beautiful, moments of those sad days: fear was gradually replaced by anger and determination: let's go and do something! (m., 1946)

They distributed pamphlets and posters and hampered the orientation of soldiers in the new setting by turning street and traffic signs. Young, single people responsible only for themselves decided to take on the role of the town “conscience” and mobilize their fellow citizens.

We did what we could. We tried to let the occupants know that they were not welcome. Our main weapons were signs, pamphlets and posters. We posted a huge banner with ten demands of the Trenčín youth and an appeal to the troops to leave on the wall of the municipal house. And people would come to sign them. (m., 1946)

In their memories they underscore the fact that one feature of the period after 21 August was the atmosphere of solidarity and unity of people against the occupants. The biographies contain memories about support of the activities of the young people.

There was incredible unity and solidarity among people ... what was interesting was that, for instance the hospital hid our people (author's note: young people distributing posters and a petition against the presence of the troops). They masked them as patients so the Russians wouldn't find them. (m., 1946)

Although it may sound paradoxical, the narratives equally state that in spite of the controversial nature of the situation and their emotions, they evaluate their “resistance” activities now as the best part of their life during that period: they acted spontaneously in accordance with their convictions and expressed their opinion.

The memories about the Soviet soldiers – descriptions of their appearance and behavior – are very similar. The initial anger of people gradually turned into the feelings of pity for their neglected appearance and poor condition. “Reliable information” was going around that they were hungry and fearful, as if these facts were to magnify the psychological and moral prevalence of the local people over the invaders. The fact that privates were not allowed to speak with people confirmed their conviction that “common, low ranking soldiers were brainwashed by their commanders”.

In a way I felt sorry for them. They didn't even know where they were, and they surely were hungry and thirsty, and people called them names. (m., 1946a)

Trenčín was literally devoured by soldiers. Most Russians were located here, many soldiers were here. Interestingly enough, we - as common people - pitied those boys. People would give them bread, milk and other stuff. And they initially refused, but later they took it and they liked it. But there were also rats among them – all they wanted to do was to grab that machine gun and shoot under your feet. (m., 1942)

Coming from Sihoľ, we would pass by the army headquarters and tanks each day. We'd often speak with the soldiers. Some even didn't know where they were and why. It was difficult to come to terms with what had happened. Until then we'd been friends with the Russians. (w., 1949)

The soldiers of all occupying armies are subsumed under one term – the Russians – in all the biographical narratives.

Other common features of the narratives include statements about similar or even identical reactions to the unexpected presence of soldiers in the town. Almost all respondents talked about the efforts of families to stick together, often even envisioning the break-out of an armed conflict.

I had an apartment at Soblahov as a young teacher, and when I heard what had happened, I jumped on my bike and went downtown to see my parents. To be with them in case something would go wrong. (m., 1941)

...we lived in that square and overlooked the whole place, tanks were driving down there and my wife, who at that time was my fiancée whined: “you're not going to marry me, I see the war's going to break out.” And such.... it was very hectic, and, of course, I wanted to prove I can keep my word. So we got married under the supervision of the Soviets, because when we arrived at the municipal office, and there were two soldiers with guns, standing guard; and we entered between them, and also when we went up to the parish building and to the church, the Russians were there too. So, the steadiness of our marriage was secured this way. (m., 1942)

The year 1969, especially the spring of 1969, meant the beginning of the “normalization of political and social life” that gradually penetrated people’s daily lives. Individual narratives contain similar references to the fact that the atmosphere of solidarity and mutual help disappeared. Spontaneous activities of young people in urban public spaces gradually faded away. Two frequent places where meetings of young people important for their “group communication” had been taking place – the main square with the promenade and the summer cinema – were abandoned.

...the promenade used to be the place to go until the beginning of the seventies. Then it started to fade away. Of course, it was also due to the situation that occurred and strong communism. They started to prohibit everything at that time. They banned songs. Each band had to go to mandatory auditions, and we had to play 70 percent of our songs and only 10 percent could be in a foreign language...but people wanted to hear rock’n’roll so we were looking for ways to please them... (m., 1942)

Spontaneous social events were gradually replaced by organized activities with controlled participation. Grass-root initiatives were suddenly not welcome. Young people started to meet in private apartments. The summer cinema was closed down and it gave way in the 1970s to the construction of the new building of the district council of the Communist Party that local people called “the white house”. Due to this construction, Trenčín lost one part of its suburbs and a small business neighborhood.

The beginning of the 1970s is in the biographical narratives connected to feelings of uncertainty, political “examinations” and existential problems. The examinations are mentioned in connection with so-called “normalization troikas.” Many recollected their experiences with the secret police, police interrogations and laws suits.

People would snitch on one another. So-called “normalization troikas” would go around workplaces and ask questions: “Comrade, what is your opinion about the Soviet Union, what do you think about the liberation and about the intervention of the Warsaw Pact troops?” Those with small kids said it had all been fine with them, but some younger people dared to say what they really thought, and that, of course, had consequences. They were interrogated and harassed on a daily basis. The whole interrogation system was dangerous for people’s psyche. I was “politically unreliable”. And those who were “politically unreliable” were entitled to live but nothing more. (m., 1942)

...when the secret police was going around and investigating, guys from the factory told me they had been asking about me, too. They said: “We didn’t tell them anything about who had flung down that star.” Only later, when they examined me, did I learn who denounced me. But I wasn’t secretive about it: “Sure it was me. The Russians have no business being here. This country can handle its own affairs. And the situation wasn’t bad. Why

should it be otherwise?" So I didn't try to be difficult; I confessed. And now imagine that the court sentenced me to five years for such a trifle. I experienced twenty five years of varied forms of psychological pressure. Those who wanted to harass me could do it anytime. All they needed to do was to say: "He's a right wing opportunist, beware of him!" (m., 1946)

As I mentioned in the introduction, I conducted my field research at the beginning of 2008. All participants in the research agreed to at least one structured interview about their life in the 1960s, reflected through the prism of the anniversary of August 1968. They often labeled themselves as the "lost generation" that had lost its ideals and the opportunity to fulfill its plans for the future. Some even expressed their regrets about not having emigrated to the West.²²

I do not have enough data at present about the intergenerational transfer of August 1968 experiences within families, but I will deal with this question in further interviews.

My decision to study this issue was influenced by the commemoration of the August 1968 events in Trenčín - or rather by were attempts at it. In 2003, some actors of August 1968 in Trenčín established an association titled "Equality – Fraternity – Liberty" as well as a civic association titled MY '68. On the occasion of the 40th anniversary on 21 August 1968, the members of these associations organized a memorial event in Trenčín's main square. They installed an exhibition of documentary photographs that was to present the events that had taken place in the town forty years ago. The exhibition was interesting mostly for present-day young people, but the number of young visitors did not meet the expectations of the organizers. Only several dozens of contemporaries – the youth of the 1960s – gathered in the square. This event was reflected upon by my respondents, who did not hide their disappointment with the low attendance of the exhibit as well as with the disinterest of young people in the recent past.

CONCLUSIONS

The memories of the members of the "youth of the 1960s" group form part of the collective memory of the town's inhabitants. My aim was to find out the nature of the memories connected with the 1960s – and with August 1968 in particular – as well as with their reflections on and interpretations of the given era.

My findings include the following:

The monitored era of the 1960s is remembered in the public discourse of Slovak society as a period of "thaw" when the communist regime loosened its omnipresent control; this was felt mainly in the area of the society's cultural life.

²² Given the fact that my field study is only in its initial phases I focused on memories until 1968 or 1969 in my first recorded interviews. The period of "political normalization" and its impact on the lives of members of the young generation will be studied further in my follow-up meetings with my respondents.

The memories reflect the 1960s as a time of a relative social and cultural freedom when young people could realize their ideas about spontaneous entertainment (the promenade, dances, the beat festival, amateur theater performances etc.). In respondents's memories, civic activities and initiatives organised by ordinary people that led to an enrichment of the town's cultural and social life were perceived as a symbol of the loosened communist control. The entry of the Warsaw Pacts troops into Czechoslovakia, or in our case into the town of Trenčín on 21 August 1968 represented an abrupt end of this era.

August 1968 and the following period are linked in the biographical narratives to freedom of choice to actively stand up against the occupation. Resistance, disagreement or "civic disobedience" was displayed in different forms and based on different grounds. Some such events were prepared and organised in advance, others were spontaneous and not entirely thought through as far as possible consequences are concerned. In the end, all protest participants had to bear these consequences in the "normalization" period. Their reactions to the changed situation included, among other things, emigration²³ abroad or inner emigration understood as coming to terms with life in a world of ambivalence defined by declared and privately honored values.

As mentioned before, the memory of the "youth of the 1960s" is part of the memory of the inhabitants of Trenčín. Members of this group highlighted this fact on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the occupation of Czechoslovakia by the Warsaw Pact troops. Official institutions and organizations representing the town that produce the official image and thus also the official memory of the town through their existence and activities did not pay attention to this anniversary. So a paradoxical situation arose: the town, which was a strategic target of the occupation army (due to the fact that the headquarters of the eastern district of the Czechoslovak army was located there), did not commemorate events related to the occupation. The memorial meeting initiated by the "youth of the 1960s" took place in the central public space of the town. The low attendance especially of young people, for whom the event was organized in the first place, need not point to their lack of interest in the recent history of their own town or country, although this fact cannot be completely ruled out. The low attendance can be interpreted instead as a lack of interest in the chosen form of commemoration – in public gatherings with witnesses of the era.

At present, many young people prefer "non-contact" or indirect forms of communication such as internet portals devoted to this period or chat rooms in order to better correspond about their ideas in more informal and less emotionally charged modes of communication. On the other hand, ad hoc media surveys taken in the streets of Slovak

²³ After the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968, the country was hit by the biggest wave of emigration abroad in its modern history. According to data from the Nation's Memory Institute, to the date May 26th 1970, there were approximately 68 thousand Czechoslovak citizens living abroad, out of which 12 thousand were Slovaks. Estimates says that by November 1989 (when the communist regime fell) 150 thousand people had left the country. After the year 1968 most people left for Switzerland (13 thousand), Canada (12 thousand), Austria (10 thousand), Germany (9 thousand). Read more at: <http://www.sme.sk/c/5098845/stat-terorista-zabijal-a-unasal-aj-vlastnych.html#ixzz28saE0FdT>.

towns confirm a lack of interest on the part of young people in our past and point to a historical “unconsciousness” of the young generation in Slovakia. This fact also underscores the need to continue research and to focus as well on the issue of intergenerational transfer of historical/social memory.

Current research findings point to the fact that the memory of the “youth of the 1960s” remains an unofficial part of the memory of town inhabitants and its infiltration into public discourse is (maybe) yet to be expected. An examination of the ways, intensity and channels through which this group’s memory will penetrate the collective memory of the town’s inhabitants or its public discourse represents yet another issue for further research.

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LETO 1968 V SPOMINU ENE GENERACIJE

Študija o letu 1968 v spominu ene generacije prinaša prva spoznanja o raziskavi, začeti leta 2008, tj. po štiridesetih letih, odkar so vojaške enote Varšavskega pakta zasedle Českoslovaško socialistično republiko. Nasilno dejanje je ustavilo poskuse reform socializma v takratni Českoslovaški, poznane kot »praška pomlad«. Ob okrogli obletnici so se na Slovaškem zvrstili številni dogodki; to so bile konference, nove publikacije, mediji so prenašali zgodovinske dokumentace kakor tudi strokovne in politične razprave.

Avtorica se je odločila raziskati generacijo samskih mladih odraslih in njihovo doživljanje in interpretacijo življenja lastne skupine v majhnem slovaškem mestu v 60. letih prejšnjega stoletja. Z uporabo metode ustne zgodovine je posnela pogovore z izbranimi posamezniki, pri čemer se je osredinila na spomine na življenje v tistem času. Zanimale so jo podobe in interpretacije časa. Prizadevala si je ugotoviti, katere spominske vsebine napolnjujejo njihov kolektivni spomin. V

slovaškem javnem diskurzu veljajo 60. leta za sproščen družbeni čas, ko je komunistični režim navidez razrahljal svoj dogmatski primež. To dejstvo je pogosto argumentirano s kulturnim in umetnostnim prizoriščem, a tudi znanstvenim raziskovanjem in političnim življenjem, kjer je bilo mogoče kritično premisliti in komentirati življenje v državi. Vsekakor gre danes za poglede iz sedanjosti kakor tudi za zgodovino.

Avtorico je zanimalo: 1., kako je ta fenomen shranjen v spominu skupine, in 2., kako pripadniki te starostne skupine pomnijo trenutek zasedbe v avgustu 1968, ko je bil prekinjen proces demokratizacije v državi. Na podlagi vsebinske analize pogovorov predstavlja glavne spominske topike preučevane skupine in posreduje interpretacije značilnosti življenja odraslih samskih mladih v 60. letih, kakor tudi interpretacijo nasilnih sprememb v poteku dogodkov, ki jih je povzročila vojaška zasedba.

Hkrati se avtorica podrobneje posveča dejavni navzočnosti in udeležbi te skupine ob 40. obletnici zloglasne zasedbe. Opiše poskuse nekaterih, da bi odprli medgeneracijski dialog v mestu s komemoracijskim dogodkom in posredovali svoje žive izkušnje ter vplivali na javno razpravo o dogodkih iz leta 1968.

Na podlagi začetnih spoznanj opozarja ne neogibno nadaljevanje raziskave, osredinjeno predvsem na dinamično skupinskega spomina dela prebivalcev mesta, in na poglobitev v javni spomin mesta oz. javni diskurz o dogodkih iz bližnje slovaške zgodovine, kakor se kaže na krajevni ravni.

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