

BOOK REVIEWS

Monika Vrzgulová (Ed.). *Videli sme holokaust* (We Saw the Holocaust). Bratislava: Nadácia Milana Šimečka, 2002, 132 pp. ISBN 80-89008-13-5

Oral history does not have a long tradition in Central Europe. In spite of several completed and ongoing projects looking at poverty or political elites and dissent during communism, many mainstream scholars do not see it as “proper” history. Central to oral history research in Slovakia is work carried out by the Milan Šimečka Foundation. Indeed, the project examining Czecho-Slovak relations (Radičová 1994-1995), research into the Roma Holocaust *Porraimos*, and particularly the project *Osudy tých, ktorí prežili holokaust* (The Fate of Holocaust Survivors) were carried out under its auspices. The last project about the *Shoah* was an affiliate international and interdisciplinary project based at Yale University, USA. Its aim was to videotape the accounts of individuals with first-hand experience of the Holocaust. The project was conducted in Slovakia in 1995-1997. More than twenty experts of different professions recorded 150 testimonies from Slovakia for the Yale video archive. So far, they have served as a source for ethnological works on the strategies of survival (Salner 1977), on Jewish identity (Salner 2000), and the historical memory of the middle class in the urban environment (Vrzgulová 2000, 2001). After a lapse of time, some investigators reflected what influence the project had on them. The book *Videli sme holokaust* contains the interviews conducted by Monika Vrzgulová with the co-authors and the *Shoah* testimonies. The people, who recorded and conducted the interviews with the witnesses, tell their stories, their views and understanding of the Holocaust as well as the methods used.

The first interview was carried out by the editor with the historian Ivan Kamenec. Kamenec had studied the history of this “tragedy of civilization” since the 1960s but was not permitted to publish the material until after the fall of the regime in 1989 (e.g. Kamenec 1991, 1992). His participation in the project extended his exploratory perspective, based on classical archive sources mostly from the provenance of offenders, by a confidential subjective analysis of survivors. He admits to a dilemma: whether he has right to amend the witness’s account when he is convinced that the witness does not place the events in the “correct” historical context. Thus he points to the misunderstandings between traditional historians and explorers, who use narrative life stories. While the former expect “facts” from the respondents, the latter study their motivation, strategies of survival, identity and other phenomena of mental history on the basis of their unique individual experience. Kamenec repeatedly highlights that the Holocaust began not with placing people in cattle cars, but with eliminating large groups of citizens from society. He proposes to extend the research by pursuing a micro-history of the people who resisted for various reasons “the banality of evil” and rescued the persecuted Jewish people.

The interview with the cameraman Peter Kozmon, who videotaped the testimonies, begins with the description of his preceding contacts with Judaism (contact with a Jewish classmate, finding a book about the murdering of Jews hidden at home on the bottom of a wardrobe). He mentions professional problems with an improvised studio and a low budget. Later he realized

that it did not influence the result. He had to minimize everything that was not directly connected with the content: "It was face, eyes, gestures that was important". The cameraman addresses the reader on the basis of his personal experiences, mainly his powerlessness after the first testimony: "I didn't know how would I be able to live with such knowledge."

The program manager of the Foundation, Inge Antalová analyzes the method of oral history as an alternative way of historiography, whilst also using approaches of sociology, gerontology, anthropology, ethnography, and psychology. She uses the general name 'oral history' but rather it was narrative life stories according to the description of the procedure. The basic principle of this method is emphasized: the respondents can change argumentation and the evaluation of experiences, but experiences do not change—they have to be unveiled and reconstructed. She compares the specific features of the Jewish and Roma Holocaust: in the latter case, it was usually necessary to travel to the places where the people lived to interview them in their family circles and the testimonies were very emotive. Parts of the interviews were recorded in Israel, where about ten thousand emigrants from Slovakia live. Slovak researchers were surprised that the Holocaust was also a taboo topic in Israel, becoming 'open' only recently. The position of the people who survived concentration camps was difficult after moving to Israel. They had to face suspicion, condemnation and derision because they let themselves be sent to the gas chambers without resistance. Those who took part in the war and builders of the Jewish state were the heroes.

The ethnologist Peter Salner was the professional adviser of the project. He outlines his views on the differences between classical field research methods and the method used in the book under review. He admits his initial distrust of the camera and fears the loss of the spontaneity of witnesses. In contrast to the Yale project, the system of the two moderators with a hierarchy of the older and the younger was used in Slovakia. This *modus operandi* of their cooperation worked out well. Younger non-Jewish people asked about Jewish history and thus avoided the answer "You know it, don't you"? Various constellations of moderators influenced the respondents. A great advantage of video records was demonstrated during the work because in addition to a number of historical facts, reminiscences and emotions, the charisma of witnesses was preserved.

The overwhelming majority of interviews took place in Bratislava. Other testimonies were recorded in the Hungarian language in Košice and in southern Slovakia by Eva Salnerová. She has observed that the respondents judge the strategies of their survival also according to the place they come from. People in small towns and villages stressed that they survived thanks to their cohesion. On the contrary, in large towns, everyone had to care allegedly for him/herself, otherwise, there was no chance. Interviews about the Shoah represented an important milestone in the life of many witnesses. The therapeutic side-effect, release and publication of reminiscences strengthened—according to Eva Salnerová—the self-confidence of the Jewish community.

The concluding interview with the editor of the book was recorded by Peter Salner. The ethnologist Monika Vrzgulová speaks about her emphasis on exploring the life of tradespeople (both Jewish and non-Jewish) in towns. She compares contacts with both victims and accomplices of the Holocaust in a particular town of western Slovakia, analyzing different perspectives on and different ways of living the past in individuals with different "cultural-social equipment". She regards "the biographical method" as the most suitable for studying the way of life of the social groups in towns.

In my comments so far on *Videli sme holokaust* I have focused particularly on the methodology and a sort of conceptual lack of clarity of the contributors in this area. These aspects, however, should be pushed to the background in evaluating the book because the major message relates to the culture of memory, coping with the past and its preservation. With regard to the discontinuity of remembering in post-socialist countries, where the topic of the Holocaust has been a taboo for 40 years, Auschwitz is not perceived today as a trauma of

civilization. No change in the paradigm of social recollections has been observed so far. We should be aware of the fact that even for Germans who became “pioneers of recollections” (Aleida Assmann), the Holocaust did not reach the centre of the culture of memory until the advent of the third generation. There was a collective silence on the Holocaust after the war, the Germans were considered guilty from the outside and they lacked the inner freedom for the feeling of responsibility. The following generation distanced themselves from the offenders, but the generation of grandchildren were able to adopt those tragic events as part of their own historical experiences (Rüsen 2001).

What is valid for Slovakia is also valid, according to Éva Kovács, for Hungary: so far there has been no consensual and legitimate narration of the Holocaust; historical narratives in textbooks, political statements, and family histories are fragmented, substituting local recollections by universal narratives and shifting responsibility of personal recollections to collective memory (Kovács 2003, 210). In keeping with the myth of victims, which is a stable part of Slovak national mythology, it is the dependence of the Slovak state on Hitler’s Germany that is blamed for the deportation of Jews. Slovakia has not yet witnessed any strong stimulus for public debate about the Holocaust as seen by the publishing of a book about Jedwabny did in Poland or the discussion about the “Hungarianness” of the Nobel Prize winner Imre Kertész in Hungary. In spite of the formal expression of regret by the parliament, in spite of museum exhibitions, monuments, memorial tablets, reconstructed synagogues and publications of the Documentary centre of the Holocaust, the Slovak approach to the Holocaust is very “cold”, delegated to the state and specialists. The stories of the people who took part in recording the authentic testimonies presented in this book as well as their pedagogical and educational activities (the application of personal accounts of witnesses and experiences of researchers from the project in schools and at courses for teachers and students) have a chance to protect recollections of the Holocaust against generalizing, norm-making and trivializing.

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