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THE CLOSER WE ARE, THE HARDER IT GETS[1]

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Abstract: For the researcher, long-term qualitative investigation of a given subject matter represents an opportunity to acquire comprehensive knowledge of that subject matter in all of its dynamism and complexity. The author of this paper has been carrying out such research among Holocaust survivors, mainly employing the oral history method. This paper is an impressionistic story, a genre not commonly found in Slovak ethnological literature. It constitutes a first attempt to revisit material emerging from years of collaborative investigation with one particular female survivor. The paper alternates between reflections of selected situations and interpretations of events and processes which resulted from the research partner's activities between 1995 and 2015.

Keywords: oral history; Holocaust survivor; reflection; communicative and cultural memory; ethical dilemmas.

In December 2015, I lost a dear friend – a research partner with whom I had spent years conversing about matters both professional and personal. Her daughters asked me to say a few parting words at her funeral. It was a difficult task. I could not imagine giving my first funeral speech at the burial of someone who had taught me so much. In the end, I somehow managed and discovered what I was capable of doing in emotionally taxing situations.

I have conceived this paper as an impressionistic story[2], which is not a genre commonly found in Slovak ethnological literature (Wiesner, 2017, pp. 47–48). It represents a first attempt to revisit the research material I compiled together with Mrs H[3]. I hope that I will soon be able to process, analyse and interpret this unique archive in greater depth. However, considering how close Mrs H and I had become, it was extremely hard for me to work rationally and dispassionately whilst experiencing the deep loss of her passing.

This is my first attempt as a researcher to write down a reflection of certain situations that arose during my long-term relationship with a Holocaust survivor, which gradually

[1] This study emerged as part of the APVV 16345 project Current Images of Socialism.

[2] Impressionistic stories are often incoherent, inconsistent and unfinished. They are rich in alternating styles: reflexive passages/auto-ethnography, often written in the first person and focus on unique sections of the field. (Van Maanen, J., 2011, p. 102, pp.106–107).

[3] Even though Mrs Hilda Hrabovecká was well known for her writings and interviews in the media, in this paper I refer to her simply as Mrs H.

evolved from a professional into a personal one (Zembryczki, 2013, pp. 129–144). As is typical in Slovak, Mrs H and I always addressed each other in the formal second-person plural. I called her Mrs H; she called me Mrs. Vrzgulová, and later Monika.

Mrs H was a lifelong left-leaning intellectual with a strong sense of social justice. She only began to apply her knowledge and talents once she had retired – in the 1990s. She unwearyingly directed the public's attention to the recent totalitarian history of Slovakia as well as to the Holocaust, which she had personally survived. In this paper, I alternate between describing events which Mrs H instigated, influenced, or observed on one hand and discussing my personal reflections on the other.

Research work brings ethnologists into various environments. For many of us, it leads to encounters with difference, with people from varying social and cultural milieus, with diverse worldviews, philosophies, and personal histories. Every time I set out on a field research project, I feel a curious joy and anticipation coupled with a sense of concern: What lies ahead? What challenges will I have to contend with, and will I be able to hold my own? As time goes on, the knowledge, experience, and skills I have acquired allow me to be better prepared and more relaxed—more myself—during interviews. I have begun to view each interview as a kind of adventure, where I get to learn much about my research partners as well as about myself. My partners' stories stay with me forever, even though they do not all resonate to the same extent.

For me, the most formative research projects have been related to several subjects. One that had a particular impact chronicled the situation of craftsmen and tradesmen in my hometown between 1918 and 1948 (Vrzgulová, 1997). Another was an oral history project devoted to the stories of people who had survived the Holocaust (Vrzgulová, 2005, 2007, 2013, 2016, 2020).[4] As part of the former project, I got to explore my own family history. The latter led me into an environment which had previously been very foreign to me. Initially, because of my ethnic origin, family history, and personal and professional background, I felt I was a stranger in it. But with each passing interview or meeting with Holocaust survivors, I felt increasingly self-assured. My partners/interviewees let me know that they accepted my work and approach. I was a stranger no more.

Scholars and survivors have written many books and papers dealing with the following question: How could we possibly understand stories depicting inhumanity, torture, and brutality on such a scale as to be inconceivable?[5] We cannot understand because we did not experience it —"memories can be raw and emotional, either for the interviewee or sometimes for the interviewer" (Sheftel & Zembrzycki, 2010, p. 192). I agree. We can never fully understand, but what we can do is to listen with empathy and sincere interest, helping the interviewee to feel safe and comfortable. As part of the oral history research project carried out under the auspices of the Fortunoff Video Archive, I adopted the interviewing techniques

[4] Oral History: The Fates of Those Who Survived the Holocaust was a Milan Šimečka Foundation project (1995-1997) which was part of an international research project led by Yale University.

[5] For example, Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz* (1996); Charlotte Delbo, *Auschwitz and After* (1985); LaCapra Dominick, *Writing History: Writing Trauma* (2001); Shoshanna Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimonies: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (1991); in addition to many others.

and philosophy of that institution and its representatives. As G. Hartman says: "not everything in the interview… is controllable. In fact, the one dogmatic principle we have for the interviewer is: never take the initiative away from the witness" (Hartman, 2002, p. 497). I used all of my knowledge and skills to create a safe space for my interviewees. This technique gave the witnesses primary agency and authorship over the testimony, creating what Dori Laub has described as a nondirective, or open, interview that encourages a testimonial alliance between the interviewee and the interviewer (Shenker, 2015, pp. 29–30).

Meeting and getting to know each other

I first learnt about Mrs H through her Holocaust story, which I gathered from her oral history interview[6] and her autobiography (Hrabovecká, 1998). It was only later that we met in person. Mrs H had been one of the first one thousand girls deported from Slovakia to a Nazi concentration camp on the basis of the race laws adopted by the Ľudák regime. Her transport left the station on 25 March 1942[7](White & Hecker, 2018, pp. 878–880).

As far as I can recall, we first met during the handover of the interview footage to our research partners. The handover was an important part of the project. It took place at an informal gathering where the witnesses met with the researchers and the moderators who had interviewed them. We discussed our experiences and impressions of the project, as well as the broader socio-political situation, over refreshments in a friendly, sociable atmosphere. I was a new addition to the team, and I could feel the gazes of the participating witnesses. It was in these situations that I was most acutely aware of my own identity, my family background, and the related experience and view of the past. I come from a gentile family. I was different – 'not one of ours', as one of the women I interviewed said to me (Vrzgulová, ed., 2005, pp. 107–130). This continued experience of my own difference—the experience of being a minority, with which I was faced throughout the whole project—became an important determinant of my professional and personal perceptions.

Mrs H was a concentration camp inmate (koncentráčnička), which is what our witnesses who had been through the Nazi concentration and extermination camps called each other. They made up a special caste among the survivors. They were the ones who had really seen and experienced the Holocaust first-hand. At the handover meetings, the Holocaust survivors formed natural affinity groups based on their experiences during the wartime era. Those who had been put through the camp system were 'those who survived'. The other survivors, who had, for instance, been interned in Jewish labour camps on Slovak territory and later went into hiding, who had lived under false or assumed identities, or whose families had been granted so-called exemptions for being economically valuable to the regime – were all clearly conveying that it was the former inmates who should primarily talk about their experience of the Holocaust. Even the concentration camp inmates themselves acted as though they were more important than the people who had simply 'bunkered down', lived in illegality, or otherwise attempted to survive the horrifying wartime period. Those who had

[6] Interview No. 5, NMŠ Video Archive, 1995, interviewers Z. Bútorová, M. Bútora.

[7] The train left from Poprad railway station, which served as a transit point and concentration camp during the Wartime Slovak State (1939–1945). (White & Hecker, 2018, pp. 878–880).

been through the camps—especially those from the 1942 transports—also formed informal assistance networks. They were in constant contact, often phoning each other to provide 'first aid' if one of them was having a difficult time containing their pent-up trauma. They knew each other's stories – and each other's nightmares. The division between the two groups was evident, and it informed all of their mutual exchanges. It also seeped into our research interviews. Our questions were frequently met with the answer: 'You'll have to ask someone who survived Auschwitz about that'.

The first professional meeting where I had the opportunity to talk to Mrs H was held on the premises of the Milan Šimečka Foundation (NMŠ)[8], where she was part of a group of expert consultants for the Fates of Those Who Survived the Holocaust project. Her voice was strong, insistent, and slightly raspy—a consequence of many years of smoking—and it contrasted with her very short figure. I gradually came to see it as an expression of her personality; her inner, ostensibly hidden energy and indefatigability. From the very beginning, Mrs H's principal ambition was to found the Holocaust Documentation Centre (DSH). She wanted to create an institution that would document and analyse the Holocaust era in Slovakia while at the same time educating the youth—independently of the governing regime or prevailing political conditions.

It was the late 1990s, half a century after the end of the Second World War, and Mrs H felt it was high time for the Slovak majority and its political representatives to face up to the country's past and publicly reconcile with it. She referred to this process using the German term Wiedergutmachung.[9]

The DSH was supposed to be an integral part of that process. Although Mrs H was convinced that an institution like the DSH should be established by the state—as an attempt to address the injustices of the Holocaust—she was realistic about the prevailing situation and focused instead on raising funds and enlisting the moral support of such authorities as would allow the DSH to be founded within the nongovernmental sector. She threw her whole being into this ambition, approaching different people at home and abroad and making use of her own social networks to reach international decision-makers and dignitaries with connections in various foundations that could support her goal. Her tireless efforts were not in vain: the Milan Šimečka Foundation ultimately received funding for a project called the DSH. The project was carried out in partnership with the Bratislava Jewish Religious Community (JRC). One of the first related tasks was to process the interviews with Holocaust survivors for archival, research, and education purposes. I was deeply involved in this effort. Another pioneering accomplishment in which Mrs H had a part was the launch of the Holocaust in Slovakia book series, which was a compilation of archival documents relating to the Holocaust in Slovakia annotated by leading Slovak historians (Vrzgulová, 2004, pp. 462–463).

All the while, Mrs H never abandoned her ambition to transform the DSH into an independent, self-contained institution. She campaigned, argued, and used every opportunity

[8] NMŠ is one of the oldest nongovernmental organisations in Slovakia, established in 1991. I have worked with this organisation closely since 1995.

[9] *Wiedergutmachung* – the reparations the German government started paying to the immediate victims of the Holocaust in 1953.

to explain why it was necessary. Representatives of the broader Jewish community, who had given up hopes for state support, ultimately embraced her vision. In 2005 they approached me to write a declaration of purpose for the DSH. I did so, and was subsequently invited to set up and lead the institution. I am not sure if it sufficiently embodied Mrs H's original idea—I mean the fact that the DSH was established under the auspices of the chief representative body of the Jewish community in Slovakia, the Central Union of Jewish Religious Communities. Like me, she was convinced that the founding and stewardship of an institution devoted to the critical reflection of the Holocaust in Slovakia, which would serve to improve and cultivate relationships between the Slovak majority and the Jewish minority, was principally incumbent upon the state. That said, everyone who took part in the process was a realist, and they concluded that the prevailing conditions in the country at the time were inconducive to such an ambition.

Wiedergutmachung the Slovak way

Mrs H kept in touch with her former fellow inmates, and she followed the process of reparation of the prisoners of Nazi concentration camps by the German Federal Government. She was also a member of the Union of Anti-Fascist Fighters, which brought together former members of the ARP (Association of the Racially Persecuted), an organisation which had itself brought together Holocaust survivors from the end of the Second World War until 1948, when it was dissolved by the Communist Party (Bumová, 2013, p. 9).

Mrs H thought it unjust that the symbolic financial atonement did not reach those who lived in countries formerly bound together under Soviet suzerainty. The Iron Curtain had long since fallen, and Slovakia was attempting to integrate into the European institutions, principally the EU. In 1993 Mrs H began writing letters to representatives of the unified German government. The correspondence grew, but failed to produce any results. During our later meetings, Mrs H often looked back upon this time with unconcealed bitterness. In 1995 she and Mr Alexander Bachnár[10] had given an extensive interview to a leading German weekly, in which Mrs H provided a detailed account of her endless and futile communication with the German Federal Government, hoping to finally accomplish change. In the end, the interview was never published, which was an immense disappointment to her. In one of her later essays, she wrote: "The reporter came to see me and Mr Bachnár in Vienna. We posed in front of his camera – I even showed him my camp tattoo. But the unpublished 1995 interview does not merely encapsulate my experience with so-called Wiedergutmachung; it can be viewed from a variety of different angles. I wonder if Norman G. Finkelstein[11] would consider my obstinance and fruitless wrangling with the German government as an act of exploitation of Jewish suffering" (Hrabovecká, 2008a). Only when the Claims Conference[12]

[10] A. Bachnár, a Holocaust survivor and commander of a Jewish partisan unit (Bachnár 2019).

[11] Author of *The Holocaust Industry*, whose thoughts were often the subject of Mrs H's frequent polemics in the press.

[12] The Claims Conference (Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany) was founded in 1951 by Saul Kagan, whom Mrs H repeatedly approached, pleading for his support for her efforts. She eventually succeeded in acquiring a small grant which helped to start off the DSH project in 1999. For more, see: http://www.claimscon.org/; https://www.facebook.com/ClaimsConference/.

joined Mrs H in her efforts did she and other Slovak former prisoners of the Nazi camps finally succeed in claiming symbolic reparations.

I was not yet there to witness these struggles in person. In 2005 I started working at the DSH, and gradually, step by step, I began to fulfil its programmatic goals. Thanks to successful fundraising and the immense support of Jewish institutions and various dignitaries, Jewish and otherwise, we secured steady funding. For any NGO, this is a major achievement. It allows one to devote themselves freely and creatively to professional work, which is exactly what I did. My first mission was to create a systematic education scheme about the Holocaust for teachers in Slovakia. At the time, the Slovak Ministry for Education was eminently interested in implementing such a scheme, for it was one of the conditions of membership of the IHRA.[13] The DSH thus became a partner of the ministry for a period of nine years. It was during that time that my relationship with Mrs H really began. In the beginning, we mostly spoke on the phone. She reached out to me first, asking how I was doing. I felt that her interest was sincere, and we began to speak more regularly.

The Holocaust as a historical and moral challenge

In 2007 the DSH was preparing to host a large international conference. The historian Ivan Kamenec suggested entitling it The Holocaust as a Historical and Moral Challenge.[14] It was meant to create a space for discussion between experts, influential authorities, politicians, and Holocaust survivors. The three-day event ultimately drew participants from Slovakia, Austria, Germany, Israel, the USA, and the Czech Republic. The experts (historians, social scientists, psychologists, and psychotherapists) presented the current state of Holocaust research in their countries and the challenges they faced. They also spoke about the place of the Holocaust in the public discourse and cultural memory of their nations. The politicians discussed various forms of Holocaust remembrance and their place in the respective states' education systems.

The speakers had a remarkably attentive audience – the survivors. They actively contributed to the discussions and often used their own experience to expand upon or confront the claims advanced by the scientists and politicians. Mrs H spoke as a member of the audience. She emphasised the duty to systematically educate and sensitise the younger generations not only to the Holocaust itself but also to the socio-political circumstances which had rendered it possible. Several survivors, who had participated as guests in various school seminars and therefore had direct experience with the level of knowledge exhibited by a typical student, spoke in a similar vein. During the discussions, I was struck by the weight of the survivors' arguments, which were informed not only by their own inquiry into the subject matter but also, primarily, by their personal experience. During the conference, history and memory came into confrontation, and it was clear that this confrontation was productive and contributed to our understanding and knowledge of the complexities of

[13] The International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance brings together countries of the world with the aim of coordinating their approaches to Holocaust research, education and remembrance. Slovakia applied for membership in 2001 and was admitted into the organisation in 2005.

[14] The conference proceedings was published under the same title (Vrzgulová & Richterová, 2008)

bearing witness. That is why I continue to consider the conference a milestone in my work. It also had a profound effect on the relationship of the survivors in the Bratislava Jewish community towards me.

From the late 1990s, I was regularly on the premises of the Bratislava JRC, where the DSH was based. I had done interviews with the survivors, so the community knew about me and my work, but it was only after the conference that they truly embraced me. I received my first invitation to be a guest at their Seniors' Club. I started attending more frequently and graduated from being 'not one of ours' to being 'our friend' (Vrzgulová, 2020, in press). Mrs H never attended the club's meetings. I think there were several reasons for this. After returning from the concentration camp, she went to the local JRC in her hometown of Prešov and asked to be struck off its membership list.[15] More importantly, she objected to the club's agenda. She thought it only served to promote social interaction and gossiping and failed to stimulate or provide new information to its members. She would have preferred to discuss books, the socio-political situation, the state of Holocaust research, and so on. It was only later that the club's activities underwent a qualitative shift (Vrzgulová, 2020, in press). One of the leaders of the club, Mrs E. M., had started inviting scientists, artists, but also politicians, who would talk with the survivors about a variety of subjects. At the time, Mrs H was no longer able to come to the meetings, though I am convinced she would have liked to.

I mentioned this qualitative shift in the club's activities during our phone calls, and she sounded pleasantly surprised by it. I also mentioned that I had started collaborating with the club—I had suggested that they hold a discussion about the survivors' return to the homeland after the liberation and about the subject of the homeland itself. These things intrigued Mrs H. We later revisited them in our conversations, and she even wrote a short essay about her understanding of the word 'homeland' (Hrabovecká, 2008b).

Visits with Mrs H – nine years of discussions about the Holocaust

Sometime in 2006, I received an unexpected offer. Mrs H had invited me to come to her home. I was quite honoured; I remember having butterflies in my stomach when I first rang her doorbell. After a while, a voice came through the intercom, and Mrs H buzzed me in. She explained that she had trouble walking, which is why she took a long time to get to the door. She led me into the living room, to her work desk. It was strewn with books, newspapers, and paper scraps littered with handwritten notes. I was surprised to see an open laptop – Mrs H had just been reading an article on the Internet. She immediately asked me what was new; whether I had read Finkelstein's book The Holocaust Industry (2000) and what I thought of it. She barraged me with questions and arguments. Meanwhile, she made tea and offered me biscuits. I felt like I was attending an oral examination. I could not relax; I was nervous that I might give the wrong answer. Mrs H scanned me with her piercing eyes and tested my knowledge and attitudes in a conversation.

Our meetings continued. In the beginning, we mostly talked about my work. We discussed Holocaust research in Slovakia, books that Mrs H was reading, and things she was thinking about. Mrs H's medical condition was getting worse. She had increasing trouble

[15] Later, after the fall of the Communist regime, she joined the Bratislava JRC.

walking and delegated all household chores to her nurse. Her daughters took exemplary care of her and her husband despite being busy with work. I had the pleasure of meeting them on several occasions. It was also a pleasure to meet Mrs H's husband, although he always tactfully retreated to another room upon my arrival so that he would not interrupt my conversation with his wife.

Mrs H also had increasing trouble breathing and required the assistance of a special breathing machine. It was clear that she could hardly make it out of her flat. That was when I came up with an idea: I proposed that we devote our meetings to conversations about subjects she was interested in, which I would record. Mrs H eagerly agreed.

At the first of our redesigned meetings, we discussed her understanding of the liberation and her return home to Prešov. She lent me a book by Gior Amir, which contained his recollections about the Prešov Jewish community (Amir, 2004). For Mrs H, it brought back memories of her childhood in the city as well as of a teacher who had had a profound impact on her. In the end, we co-authored a review of the book (Hrabovecká & Vrzgulová, 2006).

We both enjoyed this thinking out loud, I believe. The butterflies in my stomach, as well as the fear that Mrs H would find my (lack of) knowledge and arguments underwhelming, quickly dispersed. All that was left was the pure joy of meeting with her, having an inspiring discussion, and acquiring new impulses. Two women separated by two generations, family background, and life experience, spoke about their views of the world, their interests, and discontents. During the Holocaust, Mrs H was in her late adolescence and early adulthood. Her experience in the Nazi concentration camp became a lifelong prism through which she viewed the world around her. I remember once, when we were sitting rather close to each other, separated only by the edge of a desk that we were working at, she gazed into my eyes and asked, 'What do you consider to be the most important value in life?' I answered without hesitation: 'Inner freedom'. 'I thought so,' she replied contentedly. 'Me, too.' From this moment onwards, I started to feel a new sense of kinship and sorority with her, which only deepened the respect, admiration, and gratitude for her trust that I had already felt before. She became a natural part of my life, like breathing.

At another meeting, we were discussing recent political developments when Mrs H suddenly changed the subject. 'I assume you're familiar with my interview for the Foundation'[16], she said. 'I would like to do it again – with you'. She explained that she was not satisfied with how the interview had turned out. For her (as well as for most of the other witnesses who had taken part), the oral history project had been the first opportunity to provide a complete account of her life during the Holocaust. The emotional intensity of the situation caused Mrs H to not finish certain thoughts and to stray from what she believed was the main narrative. She was unhappy with the end result. Mrs H had always held herself to a high standard, which is why she wanted to tell the story again, ten years after the original interview. Eventually, this led to Mrs H weaving several newly-constructed memories of her life[17]. The interviews were led completely by the interviewee (Sheftel & Zembrzycki, 2010, p. 194; Hartman, 2002). At the same time, I should emphasise that our conversations

[16] Interview from the NMŠ video archive.

[17] It is necessary to study the conditions under which the testimonies were produced and how changing conditions could influence oral history narratives over time (Wiewiorka, 2006).

represented the process of 'knowing with' the survivor, as opposed to 'knowing from' or 'knowing about' her (Greenspan, 2010, p. 218, emphasis original). I still have not processed these interviews with Mrs H. After her death, whenever I listened to the sound of her voice and tried to make a transcript, I was unable to keep a level head. I was hurt by her passing. I can still feel the physical heaviness of processing an interview, of someone whose life has altered my own (Norkumas 2013, pp. 94–95).

The theatre play, or how individual memory becomes cultural[18]

Starting in the 1990s, Mrs H became publicly active. She was a voice of those who had survived the Holocaust and a representative of the women from the first transport. Her articles, interviews, and essays in the press remain well-known to this day. During our regular meetings, which had begun in 2006, she always circled back to the question of how the phenomenon of the Holocaust should be presented to the younger generations – what form would best convey its legacy? She ultimately concluded that a theatre play would be the most suitable medium. She went on to draft a premise and create characters intended to reflect the complex reality of life in Slovakia before, during, and after the Holocaust – the interconnected relationships between people from the Jewish community and their non-Jewish neighbours, classmates, friends, and enemies. We discussed the premise several times. Mrs H subsequently polished the characters and their stories. The resulting synopsis concluded with the following thought:

> The message should be that unless society reorganises its priorities— unless Being takes precedence over Having—the possibility of something like Auschwitz remains all too real. This subject matter necessitates deep thoughts capable of evoking similar emotions as Schiller did with his Robbers. (Hrabovecká, 2010)

Mrs H was thinking about which writer or dramatist to approach with the project. I know she was considering Eugen Gindl[19], but I am not sure if she ever sent him the premise in the end. At the time, the Aréna Theatre in Bratislava was playing the successful monodrama Tiso,[20] which was written and directed by Rastislav Ballek. The same theatre also staged the plays Dr Gustáv Husák (2006) and Communism (2010), both of which were written by the author and playwright Viliam Klimáček. Mrs H was unable to go see these plays in person because of her deteriorating health, but she knew about them; she followed their reception in the media and the debate they had sparked in Slovak society. She viewed them through the same rubric as her own project – they were attempts to reckon with the past; they provided an impetus for critical reflection of the nation's history. That is why, one day, she informed me that she was planning to invite Mr Ballek and Mr Klimáček to her home. She did, however, ask me to meet with them both in advance, introduce them to her artistic vision, and determine whether they might be interested in bringing it to life. Our first meeting took place at the DSH. I presented both authors with Mrs H's premise and explained her goals and motivations. It was a meeting

[18] I understand these terms in the same way as Assmann, 2016a, pp. 9–45.
[19] Eugen Gindl (1944) is a Slovak journalist, activist, and playwright.
[20] The play premiered in 2005. For more, see Hanzelová, 2016, p. 179.

of three people from the same generation—all from the non-Jewish majority—who gradually adopted the thoughts of a single survivor and processed them into a final product filtered through their professional experience, their skills, and their own identities.

Both authors found the premise and the subject matter compelling, and they agreed to meet with Mrs H in person. The meeting took place one spring morning in 2011. We were sitting at Mrs H's desk, which was characteristically strewn with authentic documents, notes, and texts. Mrs H did most of the talking. I observed the two gentlemen's reactions, gestures, and speech acts. I wondered whether they truly understood what Mrs H was after and whether their interest was genuine. I could feel their deference, their focused attention, as well as the sense of honour they derived from the fact that she had approached them. When the gentlemen left, Mrs H turned towards me. 'Well?' she asked. 'What do you think?'

I thought that Mrs H's efforts had struck a chord – at the end of the meeting, the gentlemen concluded that they were interested and promised to think about the project further. Mr Klimáček decided to expand the synopsis and refine the main characters. Because he wanted to draw on true stories, we agreed that I would furnish some according to his criteria. I went to see him once more, on my own. I told him about my research, about the survivors' biographical testimonies, and about the themes and information they contained. I believe I also recommended some history books. I felt as though I was a mediator for all the survivors I had interviewed. I was trying my best to convey all the knowledge, impressions, and emotions I had regarding the Holocaust era—everything 'that had happened back then'—to someone who was going to translate them into a work of art.

After about a year, the theatre play The Holocaust: The Story that Slovakia Would Rather Forget became a reality. I really wanted to go see it together with Mrs H. We were thinking of ways of getting her to the theatre and allowing her to stay throughout the whole play. Alas, her condition did not allow it. I therefore went to see the play by myself.

I must confess that I walked into the theatre filled, in equal parts, with anticipation and dread. However, my apprehension soon gave way to a pleasant satisfaction. I could see, hear, and feel that the author of the script and the director had understood what Mrs H wanted to achieve. The play—even though its form was different than Mrs H would have imagined—bore clear marks of her thought, story, and original intent.

After the play, I scrupulously prepared for a debriefing with Mrs H. I wanted to give her an exact account of what had happened on stage, what the main characters had been like, and what ideas they had conveyed. It was a challenge, and I am not sure that I succeeded in tackling it. Of course, all of Mrs H's friends and relatives who had also seen the play were faced with the same task. Mrs H was given a tape of the play—she showed it to me—but to this day, I cannot tell whether she saw all of it. Her ever-worsening hearing and vision put stark limitations on her.

The Holocaust theatre play was met with positive feedback on the part of both the expert and the broader public. By virtue of its complexity, it represents an important and unique artistic attempt to come to terms with this grim episode of Slovak history.

My meetings with Mrs H continued. I was doing my best to make them as meaningful and engaging as possible. Our conversations linked her traumatic experience of the Holocaust with the Communist era, as well as with the hopeful, post-revolutionary 1990s and other contemporary challenges.

Mrs H frequently commented on the forms of Holocaust remembrance in the media and in political life. She had a clear vision of how complex historical reflections should be. She was fretful and concerned about the rise of extremism in Slovakia and the mounting nostalgia for the Wartime Slovak State among part of the public. On numerous occasions, she resolutely declared that 'evil must be confronted; it cannot be tolerated'. She always had an example at hand, whether it was the international volunteers who had fought in the Spanish Civil War, or the underground resistance in the Nazi extermination camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau. As a young woman on the brink of adulthood, Mrs H was taken under the wing of political prisoners and joined the resistance. In the camp, she went through a unique rite of passage involving confronting human weakness and strength, recognizing the power of friendship, and learning strategies of survival and means of combating evil. Analysing contemporary societal phenomena, she frequently used analogies to her life in the camp. No obstacle, apart from her medical condition, was insurmountable. When Mrs H set her mind on something, she subjected the entirety of her being to achieving it.

Our later conversations were more personal in nature, and I cannot yet say whether I will ever be able to analyse and interpret them publicly. This process entails numerous ethical quandaries, and I am taking my due time figuring out how to tackle them.

Funeral speech

In December 2014, Mrs H's condition took a dramatic turn for the worse, and she ended up in an intensive care unit. Her elder daughter summoned me to her bedside. Walking into the special hospital room, I was shaken and sad. When I barely recognised Mrs H's face hidden under an oxygen mask, I was nearly paralysed. When she saw me, she addressed me for the first and last time in the informal second-person singular. She asked me to get her out of the hospital. Even in her condition—she was dependent on a whole array of machines and medical monitors—she yearned to make the autonomous decision to get up and leave. She was looking for an ally and a reason for the doctors to let her go. I still cannot tell the degree to which she realised the seriousness of her condition, but I know that I promised to come up with something, and that promise I could not keep. Rationally, I had to nip the idea in the bud, but as an ally in the resistance movement against personal unfreedom, I failed. Fortunately, thanks to the doctors' unremitting care, Mrs H returned home and never reminded me of my treachery.

After coming back from the hospital, Mrs H likely realised the gravity of her condition. Our meetings had changed – she always awaited me with a batch of documents which represented a specific chapter of her life, and she handed them over to me, accompanied by a thorough commentary. She believed that I would put them to good use. These written materials allowed me to further assemble the mosaic of her life, which I still only carry in my head. Mrs H also gave me her favourite books, knowing that she would not be able to read them again.

Mrs H was given another year of life. She died in December 2015, several days after her 91st birthday. As I have already mentioned, her family asked me to say a few parting words at her funeral. In my speech, I sketched an image of the departed. In the conclusion, I said:

> I am convinced that if [Mrs H] had lived in more conducive social and political circumstances, the world would have gained an important philosopher. An unrelentingly critical philosopher who fearlessly and tirelessly pointed out the traumas of human society and explored the means of their mitigation; who openly spoke of the moral dilemmas people faced in extreme situations with a deep understanding derived from her own lived experience. (Vrzgulová 2015)

The speech was just a rough draft of Mrs H's personality. I am still working on the whole painting. Some may find that I am taking too long, but resolving the related ethical and professional dilemmas requires time. I view this paper as a kind of beta version, which I am using to test the extent to which I can balance the two elements of the whole story: one professional and the other personal; one ethnological and the other deeply, fundamentally human.

Conclusion

For a researcher, long-term qualitative investigation of a given subject matter represents an opportunity to acquire comprehensive knowledge of that subject matter in all of its dynamism and complexity. The author of this paper has been carrying out such research among Holocaust survivors, mainly employing the oral history method.

In the beginning, I used interviews to collect biographical narratives which represented the first sum of knowledge regarding the various fates, attitudes, and values of Jews from Slovakia before, during, and after the Holocaust. That is how my deep and long-term friendship and partnership with Mrs H started. Delving into the sample of survivors, I was putting together an image of the manifold things which, 50 years after the end of the Second World War and the Holocaust, made up the collective and communicative memory of this specific group of Slovak citizens (Vrzgulová, 2020). The earliest interviews represented a way in which, after decades of silence, eyewitnesses of the Holocaust were able to speak about their experiences from the wartime era. It should be clear that the personality and identity of the witness played a key role. Biographical memories always bear an imprint of their creators, as well as of the era in which they were conveyed and of the (lack of) skill of the researcher who co-authored the interview.[21]

Mrs H was not satisfied with her first interview, which she had given in 1995. She was convinced that it did not contain everything important she wanted to say and therefore failed to adequately capture the entirety of her experience. That is why she continued to strive to give a perfect testimony (judged by her own criteria). I closely followed the construction of the narrative in a specific societal context; the search for the right words and analogies that would make the narrative comprehensible even to people without the requisite experience. Concern, perhaps even fear of being misunderstood, or of having one's life experiences questioned or invalidated, is a frequent feature of survivors' communication towards the wider world (Delbo, 1985; Levi, 1996).

[21] The relationship between interviewer and interviewee is an essential point for me. I interview people to find out "what happened to them, how they felt about it and how they recall it" (Abrams, 2016, p. 78).

Another phenomenon I followed was the process by which the individual and collective memory of the survivors became integrated into the cultural memory of society at large (Assmann, 2016a, pp. 38–42). In Slovakia, the survivors' stories were first reflected in the media, the education system, and the creative sphere in the 1990s. The Holocaust theatre play, which was conceived by Mrs H, represents an almost textbook example.

As a researcher from the non-Jewish majority, I have always been interested in the reactions of 'my' segment of society to the Holocaust. I have studied the images of Jewish/non-Jewish relationships in particular biographical sources (Vrzgulová, 2006; 2010; 2016; 2018), the overlapping or parallel nature of collective memories, and the programmatic creation of Holocaust remembrance rituals. I continue to follow the various attempts at reconciliation with the difficult past among different segments of Slovak society, as well as among political elites and other authorities setting the tone of how we speak about the Holocaust. The form and content of remembrance rituals, in particular, reveals much about the state of a given society and its moral foundations (Vrzgulová, 2020).

My long-term collaborative contemplation with Mrs H resulted in a unique testimony about the times, as well as a sum of knowledge, emotions, and impressions (Abrams, 2016, p. 13) that are still awaiting a more thorough analysis.

The longer we continued to meet, the more Mrs H let me into her personal space and spoke about her romantic, family, and professional life. Such a qualitative shift in the relationship between researcher and research partner represents an immense challenge. It entails numerous ethical dilemmas related to questions such as: 'Did I acquire these insights as a researcher, or was I told about them as a dear friend? Which of them can I use in my work, and which not? Won't I betray my research partner's trust?' Everything that today makes up my mental image of Mrs H and her life story is composed of similar insights. Emotional involvement, the feeling of connection and friendly concord, and the need to protect the research partner from misunderstanding, even condemnation, 'from the outside', represents an often difficult problem which the researcher must contend with. In the process, he or she must take extreme care to pick the right words in the interpretation and contextualisation of various statements and to reveal his or her own inputs (Zembryczki, 2013, pp. 129–144; Lutherová, 2020, pp. 74–95; Vrzgulová, 2019). The proper and simultaneously truthful interpretation of the complex image of one survivor and her lasting efforts to process her own experience of the Holocaust for her own sake, the sake of her loved ones, and the sake of society, is a challenge I continue to face. Because the closer we are, the harder it gets.

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