

# The Development of Theory and Method in Czech Oral History After 1989

Paper Presented to the 15<sup>th</sup> International Oral History Conference in Guadalajara, Mexico, 23-26 September 2008

*Miroslav Vaněk*

Abstract:

*This paper deals with specific features in the development of oral history theory and practice after the fall of Communism in Czechoslovakia. Immediately after the November revolution in 1989 a small group of Czech historians found it necessary to apply oral history (OH) methods to research current events as well as the history of the last 20 years (since the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968). We had to start from the ground up, with almost no experience with OH methods or western literature from this field. With help from abroad we worked up our first OH research project about the role of Czech students in the “Velvet Revolution.” Even after the Oral History Center (OHC) at the Institute for Contemporary History (ICH) in Prague was established, we encountered serious problems: some Czech historians (“old” not by their age but their way of thinking) expressed their doubts about the reliability and validity of OH methods, even if official archival material were absent or subsidiary to the Communist regime. Moreover, we found that not all the practices of Western oral history were in accord with specific features of Czech contemporary history. We could not pay attention to social, ethnic or minorities subjects, but to the main poles of Czech society – Communist functionaries and dissidents. 120 interviews with members of both groups are currently archived at the OHC. Simultaneously we have interpreted these interviews (trying to avoid generalizations and keeping in mind social context of individual lives) and prepared a research sample for our present project – more than one hundred interviews with Czech workers. In close contact with the latest literature (von Plato, Portelli) we also take into consideration some new methodological approaches like confronting the narrator. The paper also deals with one of the most important problems in this field: investigative journalism.*

Note: This paper is accompanied by an audio recording of the presentation.

Last year (2007), children born in 1989 in the Czech Republic celebrated their eighteenth birthday, which represent a point in their lives when they are seen as grown up, mature people with all the civic rights, duties and responsibilities. When contemplating a present state and level of Czech oral history I had to ask myself the question whether Czech oral history can be seen as a mature (grown up) approach in current Czech historiography. And I hoped that its results, gained up to the present, allowed a positive answer to this question.

Immediately after the fall of Communist regime in Czechoslovakia, i.e. after the so called “Velvet Revolution” in November 1989, new possibilities, ways and chances opened for development in the humanities and its research methods, especially in historiography. At that time we had only vague ideas about oral history, its theory and practice in the West. Up to 1989 we had only minimal access to Western literature in this field and almost no experience of our own. Only at the end of the ‘60s was there an indecisive attempt among Czech historians to try using individual memories as a supportive historical source. There were several “informal discussions” organized with groups of pre-war Communists and Czech partisans from the Second World War. Yet witnesses of these events were asked direct questions about their memories and expected to give presupposed, ideologically “correct” answers. Moreover, these interviews were only partly recorded, partly stenographed and partly transcribed from notes made by ideologically but not historically educated interviewers. Further on, during the so called “normalization” period even these rare and methodically helpless experiments had to be abandoned and for the next 20 years only the written material of official provenance were seen as historical sources.

Therefore only after 1989 a small group of Czech historians felt – due to the newborn freedom – a chance to start research of not only new and up to 1989 “forbidden” topics and themes in our contemporary history, but also of new ways and methods of research itself. A paradoxical point lies in the fact that from the very beginning our group was being discouraged by our colleagues, by the majority of Czech historians - “old” not only of age but also in their ways of thinking. A part of former Communist historians “changed coats” in judging and evaluating the period of “normalization” itself, but they remained set against the new methods of research. On the other hand, historians from the dissident circles or those who returned from exile may have been more informed about the new research methods in the West, including oral history, but they were far from being familiar with our society, with its problems and current demands. Almost all of these historians, educated moreover in the Marxist-Leninist view of history in their youth, expressed their doubts and skepticism about the reliability and validity of oral history, even if some of these historians were aware of the fact that much of the official archival material was hidden, absent or quite subsidiary to the Communist regime.

In spite of all the difficulties and obstacles, our groups, working at the Institute for Contemporary History in Prague, did their best to get informed about oral history and its use in the USA, Western European and South American countries. Here I would like to express my thanks to the International Oral History Association (IOHA) and the Oral History Association (OHA, based in the United States) as well as US universities that helped us to reach oral history literature and supported our tries with their abundant experience in this area of research.<sup>1</sup> In the second half of the 1990s our group was ready to elaborate the first project based on oral history: a project of narratives of a hundred university students who, in the crucial November days of 1989, represented a motor, if not a leading force, of the revolution. From the methodological point of view it was a good and a lucky choice because our sample of narrators (interviewed students) represented a homogenous group, connected by age, education and life experience. As a result of this three-year-project we published (under the title *A Hundred Students' Revolutions*<sup>2</sup>) not only the transcribed and edited interviews but also our first steps in analysis and interpretation of the autobiographical stories, already feeling that a historian's work does not finish with recording, collecting, transcribing and publishing interviews. So, since we were trying to bring proofs for validity and reliability of the oral history method itself, we found analysis and interpretations of the collected material to be a necessary part of our work.

Thanks to this work, our small, but growing group established an Oral History Centre (COH) in 2000, as a part of the Institute for Contemporary History, and two years later the Center became a member of the International Oral History Association. The next seven years brought a membership of COH in the Czech Association of Oral History (established in 2007), and continuing work on next two oral history projects.

The first of them, published under a title: *The Victors? The Vanquished?*<sup>3</sup> and accompanied by a miscellany<sup>4</sup> of interpretations of tens of researchers was dealing with our society in a period of the so called "normalization" from two adverse poles: about one half of interviews were led with Communist functionaries of the past two decades, and the second half with Czech dissidents and members of various (and at the time illegal) civic, peace, religious and environmental initiatives, groups and movements.

At the same time a growing number of professionals and university students interested in oral history obtained a book written by Miroslav Vanek, *Oral History in Research of Contemporary History*<sup>5</sup> and in the course of the next three years other theoretical books and articles. All of these works show not only the development of oral history from field work up to analysis and interpretations, but also a progress in the theoretical and methodological field. This can be demonstrated best by interviews with the former Communist functionaries of various levels – from district and regional Committees of CPCz [Communist

Party of Czechoslovakia] up to the Central Committee of CPCz (including its general secretary M. Jakeš). In the beginning of the project we were quite anxious whether the former functionaries, i.e. a group of “defeated,” would be willing to give us their true and sincere opinions, standpoints and life stories. We were aware of the fact that these mostly ageing persons (or the younger pragmatics among them) grew up in a climate of natural disbeliefs, were educated to use clichés of their ideology and were experienced in giving only formal, official and auto censored autobiographies – if any at all. Then we were really surprised to see what an open and sincere narration with a well-informed and in oral history educated interviewer could get from them. Some of the functionaries talked freely even about their mutual relationships, about their private and family lives, about small events from their childhoods and building carriers. We made it our principle from the beginning of the project that no interviewer should try to “judge” or “examine” his/her narrators, that we should do our best to reinsure them their openness and sincerity would not be misused. One of these principles (and a strategy as well) was to give the narrators copies of the recorded interviews and ensure them that no part of their narrations would be published without their agreement and authorization. A result of the method was 60 interviews (total 120), containing not only valuable information about the “normalization” period, but also human and freely narrated individual stories incomparable with any project made up to the present in the other countries of the former socialistic bloc of states.

We were well advised from the Western literature (von Plato, Portelli) that the most successful and valuable interviews rose when an interviewer provoked the narrator to a confrontation of opinions and standpoints. Even if we accepted it theoretically, we had to resign of doing it when speaking both with functionaries and with former dissidents. People accustomed for all their lives to subdue to authorities, to censorship and auto censorship, to fear – generally speaking, were not ready for that kind of “confrontation” in interviews.

So when working at this project, we gradually realized that not all the ways of Western oral history could be directly applied to the Czech projects. Even earlier, when we discussed questions and problems of oral history at OHA conference in Durham (2000), we saw that there would be certain distinctions between the Western and our own ways. When present trends of the American (and Western European) oral history were focused on social, ethnic and other minorities and proscribed social groups, or groups “on the edge” of society, our indispensable and the most pressing task was to “open” our society first from its political poles, and second, from its very core.

That is why our third broad project applying oral history is devoted to the Czech working class on one side, and Czech intelligentsia on the other side. The project (we are now finishing) contains about 120 interviews with real workers

and with members of intellectual professions. Analysis and interpretations of biographical stories obtained from workers (born between 1935 and 1950) upgraded our theoretical knowledge as well as our methodological approaches. At the same time we are working with information that, to a certain extent, can alter our views on the last twenty years of Czech history before November 1989. In these interviews we are repeatedly confronted with the fact that the “great events” of history do not form an axis for individual lives, at least for the majority of our population. Inner periodization of history that usually derives from important, mostly political events, seems to be absolutely unimportant for the courses of our workers’ lives, at least those parts of their lives they consciously remember and recall. Our narrators in this group talked spontaneously about events important and meaningful for their private lives. While men usually emphasized stories from their work, their careers (if any), building up family houses etc., women spoke about their weddings, divorces, births of their children, deaths and illnesses in their families. A great part of their narrations was devoted to the everyday stereotype of unending work, in their households after returning from work in a factory. Many interviews show their tiredness, even disappointment from the course of their lives, much more when they were speaking about the present (the period since November 1989) than when they were recalling their youth (even in the condition of the socialistic system). Most of the interviewed workers seem worried about their employment (or the chance to be employed), their standard of living and the life standard of their families or children. It is not that workers are not informed about the main political events or processes, but these events are not understood as a real part of their lives. Political development and changes are seen as “external” and the most interesting and worrying for them are their real or expected impacts on their life standard.

The so called “working class” was in the period of the Communist regime proclaimed as “the ruling” or “the leading” class in socialistic society. No one of the interviewees mentioned anything to do with that spontaneously, and when they were asked directly to express an opinion about this slogan, they mostly laughed at it, commented it as a “crazy lie” written in the press of the Communist regime or did not express any opinion at all. On the other hand, they spoke openly about advantages (or even privileges) given to them by the former regime. Their wages or salaries were at least average (when compared with salaries of other social groups), they were afraid they would lose their jobs and benefits. New problems (and even chances) that rose after November 1989 they see mostly as troubles and disturbances in their up to November calm lives. A bigger part of the interviewed workers (namely women) are convinced that their children and grandchildren have bigger chances and opportunities than they had themselves, even if they often mention “the old times” with a sort of nostalgia – since it was the time of their own youth regardless of the regime.

These three broad projects we spoke about represent two thirds of our understanding of theory and methodology of Oral history itself. Gradually we turn from political events to the real course of individual lives seen in their social, economic and cultural context. We also pay – led to it by our narrators themselves – more and more attention to everyday lives of individuals. In this trend leading to micro history, we are in full accord with the leading trends of Oral history in general.

For the next development of practice and theory of the Oral history we see as necessary that this general trend would diversify, divide itself into a line of various topics and themes, including even small and up to now “unheard” social groups. We also find as one of our main tasks, to prepare conditions for such diversification. After more than ten years of working for these conditions, we can see positive results of our attempts and concerns. A growing number of Czech universities and their faculties of philosophy, humanities and social science accept oral history courses or classes as a standard branch in history (as anthropology, ethnology etc). At the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy at Charles University in Prague a new course for graduate students has been launched. Even high school teachers attend special courses in oral history and bring their students for basic training. In 2007 the Czech Oral History Association (COHA) was not only established but also found its collective and individual members (now in number of 25 and 70) in numerous researcher and scholarly institutions in the Czech Republic. These groups of professionally educated oral historians already started their own research programs and projects including now such social groups as gays and lesbians, drug addicts, or single mothers. COHA welcomes all of these independent projects and is ready to support them with the necessary literature, seminars and lessons. Simultaneously it is limiting and specifying its borders, leaving outside any form of investigative journalism as a branch of culture that can be valuable and useful for its own aims, but cannot be confused with oral history as a research method. The development of technology, enabling communication, will doubtlessly lead to new and specific forms of leading and recording interviews and collecting individual life stories. It is possible that we shall see interviews recorded via internet and issued on web pages of various institutes, groups and individuals. While we do not want to stay in the way of such development, we are all the same confident that the “face to face” contact between narrator and interviewer is a valuable, if not an indispensable part of oral history. Up to the present no technological instrument can fully substitute a direct human contact in which a relationship of mutual trust is building up, not only on a conscious, but also subconscious, subjective and spontaneous level.

A broad scale of current independent projects based on oral history is and will be even more in the hands of various research centers and institutes. The original group of Czech oral history specialists and founders of COHA is now

preparing quite a new and even a broader project: approximately four decades of the Communist rule is a historical experience not only of the Czech or Czechoslovak population but of all the former “Soviet,” “Eastern” or socialistic bloc of states. Through our three previous projects we mentioned we have made quite a well-arranged and even detailed map of life of that period in our country. Yet we still do not have any comparison with lives of various social classes, strata, and groups in the neighboring countries. This is why we have opened and initiated a broad discussion among oral history professionals and specialists from six countries of the former socialistic bloc (East Germany, Poland, Bulgaria, Rumania, Hungary and our country). Aim of this discussion is to find ways, institutes, universities and oral history centers in these countries that would welcome an opportunity to cooperate on a four-year project which would bring together our knowledge about the real course of lives in all of these countries. We have in mind that every participating country could make its own research, independent but united by a common aim to collect and then compare interviews broadening and deepening our mutual knowledge of each other. We believe firmly that such a project would bring new understanding and knowledge not only in a circle of countries taking part in the project, but also for scholars and historians from all the world. We also hope that our colleagues from other formerly socialistic countries will bring their own new and fresh ideas to the project which could make a valuable reflection (or mirror) of the life “behind the iron curtain” for western uninterrupted democracies from various points of view and from a large part of Europe.

With regard to the present state, level and trend of oral history we believe it is important that all of the oral history centers and institutes taking part in this project avoid “macro” or *prima facie* political history of their countries. The main facts and events are already well known and described in tens of historical surveys in each country. What we would like to trace is the real life of individual men and women, their everyday ways, including hopes and fears, worries and pleasures – that is, such a part of lives that could be best researched in oral history.

Cite the audio presentation (Chicago style):

Miroslav Vaněk, “The Development of Theory and Method in Czech Oral History After 1989. Paper Presented to the 15<sup>th</sup> International Oral History Conference in Guadalajara, Mexico, 23-26 September 2008,” *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale* 28 (2008).

---

<sup>1</sup> I would like to use this way to thank Joseph Mosnier and Beth Milwood from Southern Oral History Project, UNC, and Donald Ritchie and Rina Benmayor for their help in the field of Oral History.

<sup>2</sup> Miroslav Vaněk and Milan Otáhal, *Sto studentských revolucí* [A Hundred Students’ Revolutions:

---

Students in the Period of the Fall of Communism - Life Stories] (Nakladatelství Lidové noviny, Prague, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Miroslav Vaněk and Pavel Urbášek, eds., *Vítězové? Poražení?* [Victors? Vanquished? Autobiographical interviews. Political Elites and Dissidents in the Years of the So-called Normalization Period] (Prostor, Prague, 2005).

<sup>4</sup> Miroslav Vaněk, ed. *Mocní? a Bezmocní?* [The Power? and the Powerless? Political Elites and Dissidents in the Years of So-called Normalization Period. Interpretation of Biographical Interviews] (Prostor, Prague, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Miroslav Vaněk, *Orální historie ve výzkumu soudobých dějin* [Oral History in the Research of Contemporary History] (ICH, Prague 2004). And there are other methodological and theoretical books: Miroslav Vaněk, *Orální historie: Metodické a „technické“ postupy* [Oral History: Methodological and “technical” processes] (Philosophical faculty at Palacký University, Olomouc 2003); , 78p.; Miroslav Vaněk, Pavel Mücke, Hanna Pelikánová, *Naslouchat hlasům paměti* [Listening to the Voices of Memory: Theoretical and Practical Aspects of Oral History] (Praha: Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 2007).