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**Women's Memory: Searching for Identity within Socialism
International oral history project co-ordinated by
the Gender Studies Centre, Prague**

Women's Memory is the first international long-term oral history project to take as its aim the identification of specificity of gender-based experience during various periods of the totalitarian regime in the region of East and Central Europe. The research team, coordinated from the Gender Studies Centre (GSC) in Prague and directed by Pavla Frýdlová, seeks to move beyond historical facts in order to understand their meaning and significance for women's everyday lives. That is, big historical events are seen, articulated, and evaluated in the context of individual life stories, and historical upheavals, such as those of 1948, 1968 or 1989, are given importance only in so far as they are embedded in the personal concrete experience of women of various generations and social origins.

1. History of the Project

The idea of the project originated in the early 1990s when the countries of East and Central Europe became a focus of interest of many Western feminist scholars and activists who came to the region eager to learn more about the emancipation of women in socialist societies. Some of them admired the achievements of local women which they themselves had to fight for in the course of the 1970s (social status, equal access to education, economical independence, maternity benefits, pre-school facilities for children, etc.). Others were astonished by what they saw as a lack of self-esteem among women and the persistence of a deeply rooted patriarchal society regardless of the officially claimed equality.

In a relatively short time, a number of essays and even monographs were published on these topics, particularly in the Anglo-American academic context. Most of this work was not only based on a completely different cultural and social experience from that of the women who were the object of study, but it also applied to the region quite inappropriate discourses and analytical paradigms. Most of these early studies only served to create misunderstandings in the West about women from East and Central Europe and vice-versa;

Eastern European women could not recognize themselves in their “Western” portraits.

It became clear during our many discussions with women of the numerous women’s regional organizations that it was highly important to evaluate our own history according to our own criteria rather than importing these from quite different contexts, and to embrace our own “otherness”. The idea of women’s identities during the socialist area became the centre of our attention.

The idea of a large-scale international comparative project entitled *Women’s Memory* was first formulated by a prominent Czech human rights activist, Jiřina Šiklová, professor of sociology at Charles University. Over fifty women’s organizations expressed interest in joining the project, but it soon became obvious that an ambitious project of this size would require resources comparable to Spielberg’s Holocaust project. The enthusiastic members of the GSC, however, decided to take off without any funding and conducted the first pilot interviews as early as the autumn of 1997.

Aims and Objectives

The socialist model of the emancipation of women was a unique systematic and complex concept of the liberation of a woman, or rather, an experiment in both theory and practice. Our aim was to record the life experience of women of three generations: those born before 1920, those born during the 1930s, and those born between 1950 and 1960. Our main interest is to document how women who spent most of their active lives in the area of socialism, reflect today upon their lives. The aim is to dismantle many myths related to the notion of a “socialist woman” and in the light of individual testimonies to see how their own experience differed from those of their mothers and grandmothers.

Methodology

Feminist sociology challenged the traditional male dominated interpretation of the world by introducing new themes. At the same time it developed new methods of interpretation while emphasizing the importance of personal experience, as well as the self-reflection of both the interviewer and the respondent. Feminist social scientists give preference to narrative and biographical methods. History, in their understanding, does not represent a set of events, but is a result of interaction between individuals, who give meaning to what is going on. It is the meaning and significance attributed to events by individuals which retroactively shapes historical “reality”. Our interpretation of events does not depend purely on facts of what happened, but on our evaluation of them. These

evaluation patterns do not depend on our school education but are passed down from generation to generation. Parents, and particularly mothers, play an important role in deciding the selection of the values to be transmitted, which are those considered essential to the formation of the attitudes of future generations. It is primarily women who influence this selection of the memory of a nation, that is, of the memory of humankind.

The choice of biographical method and the method of oral history for this project seems to us quite logical, since these methods are rooted in the oral transmission of information and particularly of family narratives. We are interested in lived experience rather than so-called objective truth.

Autobiographical narration proves the capacity of women to describe and reflect upon their experience, to verify and re-examine the experience, to keep coming back in circles, no matter whether they are talking about their crises, the important decisions they have taken in their lives, or their memories of childhood. As the Montenegro writer Ljiljana Habjanovic-Djurovic¹ puts it in the motto to her novel *Women's Genealogy*, women always spin the web of their experience, "threading it like pearls on the string of the eternal genealogy of women". Women's genealogy is not only a process of discovering women's codes by following the female line in the family history. It is also a process of developing feminist epistemology, which is always focusing on women's identification and self-awareness.

This project is understood to be an *open model* of testing feminist methodology as well as our own roles within it. Feminist methodology is a challenge as well as a process. This process is a dynamic one, and by no means can it be measured by any quantitative method, or compared to other related processes. This, of course, does not mean that it cannot be subject to criticism. On the contrary, a critical re-examination of the methodology as well as of the participants themselves is an integral part of this process. We understand this process to be emancipatory, anti-ideological, feminist, and most of all open. The feminist character of the project lies primarily in our attitude to the respondents: they are by no means the *objects* of the project; rather, they are its *raison d'être*.

Following the assumption that the "personal is political", the aims of the project are not theoretical, but practical. They could be seen as serving "public enlightenment"; they target a wide public audience, civic society. The major characteristics of the project are the inseparable connection between two leading criteria: on the one hand its political orientation towards the practical needs

¹ Ljiljana Habjanovic-Djurovic, *Ženski rodoslov* (Narodna knjiga Alpha: Belgrade 1997).

of civil society, and on the other the need to meet academic standards. The project is oriented not towards the “product” or a “result” but the process itself.

The methodology has been thrashed out at five international workshops that took place in the space of one year. From the very beginning it has been clear to all of us that this was a process of mutual learning through an ongoing re-reading of each interview and through an ongoing international communication.

Interview: This is understood as a process of interaction between the interviewer and the respondent, based on a mutual trust, which is seen as an irreplaceable condition of the communication. The absolutely equal position between those involved in the interview is a key ethical question of the project. The purpose is not just to collect “data”, but also to bring women to a reflection on their own identity. A basic scheme of the interview was elaborated. There is an outline which we keep in the back of our minds and which serves to each of us as a supportive tool of communication with the interviewed woman. Some of the interviews may last for several hours; often it takes several meetings to complete the testimony. Without a deep commitment of each of us such a demanding task would be impossible.

Selection of the women interviewed: This is one of the main conditions of the quality of the interview. Each life story is important to us, but not every woman is able or willing to present it. Needless to say, a full anonymity is guaranteed; only the initial of the family name is included in the records of the interview, and women are free to change their first name or the names of places they talk about. There is a variety of ways of searching for the women to be interviewed. We started with women in our social circles, and followed contacts of friends. A personal recommendation is often crucial for the success of the interview as it would otherwise be nearly impossible to ask about intimate issues such as sexual relations, child birth, abortion, family planning, etc. We also use the snowball method, asking the interviewed women for to suggest women they know as candidates, but we never went through the way of media advertisements. The process of getting to know the woman before the actual interview takes place is equally important. The interviewees often call several times, write letters or even visit the GSC. Some of them participated in a recent congress on the project in Berlin.

Transcription of the Interview: This is never a literal transcript. We have reached a compromise between accuracy, readability and comprehension. Even though we leave out all interjections or uncompleted words, the specific character of the oral communication must remain in the text.

The research teams are interdisciplinary groups of philosophers, linguists, historians, ethnologists, psychologists, sociologists, politicians, journalists and

fiction writers. The themes of interpretation (identity, self-development, women's politics, values and attitudes) can be developed only through the repeated re-reading of the interview material from a variety of points of view.

2. Outcomes: two categories

I. PERMANENT, CONCRETE OUTCOMES

A. *International Archive*

This includes all the original records and transcriptions. Each interview includes supplementary materials (protocol, biogramme, key word index for archival purposes, and résumé in English or German). Access to the Archive is defined according to the general law on archives of the Czech Republic. Particular national archives are either based in the respective women's organizations or affiliated with universities (Bratislava, Belgrade). In the future, all the materials collected as a result of the project will be available to experts of different fields and to future generations.

B. *Lectures, seminars, conferences and publications*

At both national and international levels, related to particular themes, or inter-regional (Czech-German, Czech-Polish, Czech-Slovak).

II. LONGER-TERM OUTCOMES

These can be defined as the permanent impact on the participating women both in the role of interviewers and of interviewee.

This consciousness-raising process begins already in the actual process of interviewing. Many of the women we interviewed were genuinely surprised that we were interested in their lives at all. Others were trying for the first time to recapitulate about their own lives; the interview enabled them to see themselves from a new perspective. The very fact that somebody else is interested in their life boosts many women's self-confidence.

The impact of the project on the participants in the processes which take place outside of the actual dialogue, such as transcription, completion of the text, often accompanied by further discussions with the respondent, mutual reading of the interviews and their evaluations in the workshops, mutual enrichment and self-education at both national and international levels. Throughout the project we are learning what *multiculturalism* really means, while all the clichés about the grey uniformity of life in East Central Europe are rapidly being eroded. Despite some similarities, each of these countries is, indeed, very unique and different.

3. What has been accomplished

The first pilot set of interviews was conducted in the Czech Republic in 1996-1997. The experience was shared with teams in the former GDR and the Polish group in Krakow. These teams were working together on methodology, evaluations and techniques of conducting and transcribing the interviews. Regular working contacts with teams from Yugoslavia, Croatia and Slovakia resulted into a joint workshop on the island of Brac in the Spring of 1999. The six national teams who took part in this first workshop (Czech republic, Slovakia, Germany, Yugoslavia, Croatia, Poland) still represent the core of the project today.

The project is co-ordinated at GSC in Prague, an institution which is also building up the project's archives. Each national team has autonomous status and does individual fund-raising (grants from H. Boell Foundation, OSF, Phare programme EU, etc.). Only the German project is fully funded by the government (Ministry for the Family, Seniors, Women and Youth).

All the participating teams have agreed to conduct 30 interviews with women of each generation before the end of 2002, including supplementary material if their financial resources allow. All teams work very closely together. Their highest co-ordinating body is the meeting of national directors. Any new national team wishing to join the project must adopt our methodological consensus and the rules of cooperation. (Teams from Monte Negro, Bulgaria, Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine have joined the project.)

The working languages for the international project coordination and communication are German and English.

Brief account of the outcomes

At the present time (July 2002), the international team have conducted approximately 350 interviews which have generated around 13 000 pages of transcription. Depending on finances, the whole project should be completed by the end of 2004.

There have been eight books published in national languages, namely in Czech and Serbian. Three interviews have been published by the journal *One Eye Open* in the GSC and two volumes of interviews have appeared: *Vsechny nase vcerejsky. Pamet zen I., II.* [All our Tomorrows. Women's Memory I & II] (Nadace Gender Studies: Prague 1998). Two booklets have been published in German and English.

The members of the Czech team serve as multipliers and trainees in a number of similar projects; the most recent include *Memory of the Roma Women* in co-operation with the Museum of Roma Culture in Brno.

The interviews are gradually being complemented by supporting materials and studies which are meant to explain the historical context. Other supporting materials include those relating to legislation regarding women, available statistical and demographic data, historical discourse on the question of women, the history of the most widely read local journal for women, *Vlasta*, including its representation of women, etc.

The first outcomes of the project were presented to an international expert audience in Berlin in May 2001 at the congress *Women's Memory – the Future Needs Memories*. The congress included an exhibition of historical documents and materials. Among the Congress guests was Margarita Doer, a German historian whose three-volume study of National Socialism *Wer die Zeit nicht miterlebt hat* was based on a similar methodology.² Her support of our project as well as the interested of both the academic and wider audience provided a great deal of support to our work.

After the period of collecting materials – which will differ in the individual countries – is finished, the period of evaluation of the material on both the national and international levels will begin.

Women's Memory ist das erste internationale Langzeitprojekt für *oral history*, das die Besonderheiten der je nach Geschlecht unterschiedlichen Erfahrung während verschiedener Zeiträume totalitärer Regimes im Gebiet Ost- und Zentraleuropas beschreibt. Das Forschungsteam, das vom Zentrum für Gender-Studies in Prag koordiniert wird und unter der Leitung von Pavla Frýdlová steht, beabsichtigt, über die historischen Fakten hinaus zu gehen, um deren Bedeutung für das Alltagsleben von Frauen zu verstehen. Das heißt, große historische Ereignisse werden verstanden, artikuliert und evaluiert im Kontext individueller Lebensgeschichten; historischen Aufbrüchen, wie denen der Jahre 1948, 1968 oder 1989 hingegen wird nur insoweit Wichtigkeit beigemessen, als sie in die persönliche, konkrete Erfahrung von Frauen verschiedener Generationen und sozialer Schichten eingebettet sind. Dieser Beitrag stellt die Methodologie und einige Forschungsergebnisse des Projekts vor.

Mémoires de femmes est le premier projet international à long terme de tradition orale ayant pour but d'identifier la spécificité des expériences faites par chacun des deux sexes durant diverses périodes du régime totalitaire dans la région d'Europe de l'Est et Centrale. L'équipe de recherche, coordonnée par le Centre d'Études du Genre de Prague et dirigée par Pavla Frýdlová, cherche à comprendre, au-delà des faits historiques, la portée de ces expériences dans la vie quotidienne des femmes.

² Margarete Doer, *Wer die Zeit nicht miterlebt hat* (Campus: Frankfurt am Main 1998).

Certains grands événements historiques sont consciemment vus, articulés et évalués uniquement sous l'éclairage de destins individuels, et ce sont les expériences personnelles de femmes de diverses générations et origines sociales qui donne leur poids aux bouleversements historiques de 1948, 1968 ou 1989. L'article présente la méthodologie de ce projet et quelques uns des résultats déjà obtenus.

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