¿Rupturas o continuidades? Acercamientos a la investigación en Historia Oral de la sociedad checa de los años 70 hasta la actualidad
Disruptions or Continuities? Approaches to Oral History Research of the Czech Society from 1970s to Present

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Miroslav Vanek (Czech Republic)
"We and They: Identification with the Political System."

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“There is Nothing Better in My Life Than the Moment when I can Freely Create a Piece of Graphic Art.”
We and They: Identification with the Political System.

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Abstract: The author concentrates on the topic of the division of Czechoslovak society between us and them, those who control and those who are controlled. From a historical perspective, this division corresponds to the typical Czech pattern based on the dichotomy between the masses and elite. If we look at the period before 1989, the prevailing feeling in the public sphere was that of the helplessness of the majority under rule. Decision-making on important issues was concentrated in the hands of a relatively small group of people at the top of the pyramid of Communist power. Some hope began to dawn only in the first half of the 1990s; later that same feeling of alienation between ordinary citizens and politicians again returned. This crisis of confidence has been coming to a head in recent years. Politicians are accused of unscrupulousness, favoritism and a high level of corruption, all of which greatly exceed the levels registered before the revolution. Many people feel that to be successful, they need either a party membership card or partisan connections, both of which are situations that should have long been relegated to the past. The topic will be followed through three broad dividing lines which came up most frequently in the interviews: 1) “ordinary people” versus “those politically active”; 2) us without connections versus them, people in the right places; 3) “us who after 1989 are again without influence and economic resources” versus profiteers, shady businessmen, “economic elite”.
"We're not like them!" What is this slogan, so frequently repeated during the mass rallies in November 1989, actually trying to tell us? During revolutionary days, it meant the rejection of violence and revenge against the communists who had held power up until then. A clear message of this slogan was, "We are different. We are not taking revenge on them." But who were the people included in the "us" group? Was it the rest of the nation as a whole, the "silent majority," everyone except officials of the communist regime and members of the repressive state bodies? Or was it just the non-communists? What common feature was the basis for determining who belonged to "us" if "they" seem to be so clearly defined? And finally, has the distinction between us and them been made obsolete by the Velvet Revolution, or is a new dividing fault line already emerging or already there? These are the main questions I would like to answer at this paper.

To get the most comprehensive answers I will use a rather extended basis of several researchers done with a help of the method of oral history; for this research I used approximately 200 interviews recorded mainly with so called ordinary people (it means, not exclusively élites, dissidents or students active during the Velvet Revolution but a lot of other people living their "ordinary" lives). In addition, their stories are framed by the public opinion polls, both from the period before and after year 1989.

If we look at the period before 1989, the prevailing feeling in the public sphere was that of the helplessness of the majority under rule. The results of public opinion before 1989 certainly illustrate the decrease in the faith of the people in the Communist officials and their policies. In the Czech lands, these policies were not trusted by 33% in 1986, by 43% in 1988, and by 46% in 1989.

Still what is very important – that based on results of different surveys and with a certain amount of speculation we can venture the theory that the inhabitants (us) were then and are now dissatisfied not only with the decisions of their political representatives (them) but also with their own involvement in public life. The question is, to what extent does this feeling pertain to humankind in general? Or is this kind of experience peculiar just to that segment of Czechoslovak and Czech people who perceive themselves as us?

In our initial debates, we assumed the interviews would help us find dozens of fault lines that divide society. Although there were memories of differences along the line of ethnicity, gender, and education, what clearly prevailed in the interviews were three different main divisive lines, namely membership in the Communist Party, the network of connections, and economic background. Many thought that the division of society into us and them ends with the fall of communism. Distribution or rather, mentioning split them and us in the new guard, however, we heard in interviews describing today’s time.

Discussing the "us and them" issue, I would like to present you the topics which came up most frequently in the interviews:

1. The dividing line between “us, non-communists” and “them, communists”, or “them, communist officials” (or simply, “ordinary people” versus “those politically active”);
2. “Us without connections and opportunities to take advantage of clientelistic networks” versus “them, people in the right places, heads of offices, people with the power of the round stamp, head waiters, greengrocers, and generally dealers in scarce or luxury goods” (or simply, “ordinary people” versus “greengrocers”);
3. “Us who after 1989 are again without influence and economic resources” versus “profiteers, shady businessmen, people with the necessary access to information from the era before the Velvet Revolution, or “those who know the right people” (“ordinary people” versus an “economic elite”).

1 The rallying cry of people chanting during the Velvet Revolution, first used by Václav Havel on 22 November 1989 during the demonstration on Wenceslas Square.
US, NON-COMMUNIST AND THEM, THE COMMUNISTS

After the communist revolution in 1948, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia became the leading force in society.

Let me here to make an important note about Communist Party Membership in 1960s: In January 1968, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia had 1,690,977 members out of the population of 15 million; after the purges related to their opposition to the invasion by the Warsaw Pact Armies, more than 330,000 members were expelled from the Communist Party. In October 1970, the Communist Party had 1,217,246 members. By 1989, this number had increased to some 1.5 million members. 

The Communist Party anchored its position firmly in the fourth article of the Constitution. There is a question whether this statement actually holds true universally for each and every individual Communist Party member. Before 1989, when people spoke about the Communist Party, they generally had its top leaders in mind: its headquarters, its Central Committee and the Bureau, the Secretariat, and the caucus at all levels. “Rank-and-file members were the last to come because they were just as easily manipulated as the rest of the people,” says the Czechoslovak philosopher and literary critic Milan Šimečka.

In the life stories the narrators obviously did not fail to mention how they perceived the ruling Communist Party. It is probably not surprising that their assessment was in general largely unfavorable. Almost every family had some sort of negative experience, for which rightly or wrongly they held the Communist Party and its “bigwigs” responsible.

The worst assessment of Party membership came from those who remembered and compared various injustices and harassment on the part of the Communist Party members, especially in the case of some position in the workplace, compliance with working hours, or remuneration for work. Another stumbling block for non-members of the Communist Party was also the discrepancy in access to information.

The most interesting finding concerning this matter seems to be the different approach in narrators’ assessment of Communist Party membership. Generally, people criticized almost everyone who joined the Communist Party; however, when they talked about their acquaintances, neighbors, co-workers, or even relatives who became communists, the non-Party members were much more conciliatory.

Those communists during normalization, they weren’t... they had nothing in common with the 1950s and 1960s. They were my own age group, and something totally different was at stake for them. They simply worked and served as models, but they didn’t harm anybody. In the 1970s, no, never. (J. C., born 1950, bricklayer and amateur archaeologist)

For example, we also had colleagues who were in the Party, but then they were a different breed of Party members... We always teased them for being that kind of Party members. It was more like they were able to warn us. “This or that is coming. Don’t do this and that.” We were no Party members, and I’ve never been one, but those Party members who were at the meetings, they told us this and that, be careful, and stuff. (M. F., born 1935, female, historian in museum)

It is necessary to note that for many narrators the motivation to joining the Communist Party was and still is a very sensitive issue. Some of them did not hesitate to call these proposed memories a “skeleton in the closet.”

I was afraid that we would get on the topic of Party membership. And that’s the skeleton that bothered me. It really upset me, this issue. I’ve lived through worse situations, but that was stupid...

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Well, originally I didn’t want to give you this interview, but I had already said yes. And when I say yes I mean yes. (J. H., born 1946, fireman)

Ideology was almost never offered by “ordinary people” as the main motive for joining the Communist Party. When ideology indeed was mentioned, then it was accompanied by an apology: although they were committed communists, they tried in the first place to be good people. Their argumentation betrays an effort to justify their own failure.

My husband was a communist... and I think he even believed in the ideology. If everybody had been a communist of the kind he was, people would have gold knobs on their doors, you know? He helped everybody. He was a terribly good person. (G. S., born 1936, female, laboratory technician)

Another construct of narrations was as follows: There was no choice: we were predestined. I grew up in that environment. My family convinced me. Through this construct, the narrators wanted to explain that they had had no alternative to joining the Communist Party and continuing the family tradition.

I was born into a family of hard-line communists. There were three pictures in our living room: Gottwald, Lenin, and Stalin. Sometime in the 1950s Stalin disappeared, and in his place I hung a picture of cowboys at an Apache fort. My parents addressed their friends and acquaintances as “comrades.” They’d never say anything like “Look, Mrs. XY is coming.” She was always called a “comrade.” Everybody was a communist in our house. Whenever there was a communist meeting, the flats were empty. [...] So well, this was how I grew up. (J. H., born 1946, fireman)

In the interviews it became clear that many people joined the Communist Party exclusively for profit, and some of them, sometimes apologetically, mentioned this fact in the interviews.

I became a Party member, I admit it. I’m not saying this as an excuse or an apology, but the fact is that on the one hand a person would just like to have a bit of a career; I wasn’t ready to give up on my education and all I had learned. On the other hand, I told myself that if a person gave some evidence of... some identification with certain ideas, that’s not necessarily the same thing as selling one’s soul to the regime, so it’s... well, a person just took part in various events... If I wanted to be on that Committee for Work Safety, members of the Party got preference. What can we say? That’s how it was. And that was part of the reason why there were so many people in the Party: they simply thought it might bring them some benefits in the future. (V. H., born 1943, administrative assistant in a metal roller factory)

In addition to a better career and the better pay it entailed, the highest triumph for the system occurred when it could reward membership in the Communist Party with a flat. Joining the Party in exchange for getting a flat is understood by a number of people who did just that not as a compromise but rather as a pragmatic step which gave them a way out of a disadvantageous or even highly frustrating housing and family situation.

Entering to the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia could change the whole life. It was mentioned by one of female-narrator. She had pursued her career from her youth, knowing she might have to make some compromises in the interest of her career and life progress. In spite of having top marks, she was not accepted for university studies and started to ask herself where she had made a mistake.

[...] so I started to think very hard about what conditions I had failed to meet so that I didn’t get into university. And then I simply did my best to meet those conditions, OK? Those conditions involved mainly having some kind of an acquaintance, some string-pulling, and if possible an excellent political profile. (V. S., born 1955, female, senior manager in the textile industry)
LIFE INSIDE AND OUTSIDE CLIENTELISTIC NETWORKS

An obvious problem in the division of society on the economic level, especially in the citizens’ can be seen in problematic and unequal access to goods and services. Czech sociologist Ivo Možný claims that there were three basic levels of the distribution of goods, both material and immaterial, but that only the lowest and worst of those supplied were freely accessible. People had access to the other things through their social and family networks. The right to first choice was reserved for the members of the nomenklatura and the communist apparatus, who laid claim to the scarce goods for themselves and their families, sometimes exchanging them for other goods and services.3

The surplus from the first market (a relatively large assortment of products) went to stores, but even there they did not come straight to the counter. They appeared on the market at a second level after they had passed through the hands of employees of the distribution networks (wholesalers, warehouses, and stores), who again took advantage of their right to first access and supplied themselves and their relatives and sometimes exchanged the goods available to them for goods and services from other families. “And only what was left over got out on the shelves and counters, to create the third market, the only one that officially existed and was visible from the outside.”4

In terms of this hierarchy, the people who worked in services (managers or salesclerks) had access to a valuable commodity: scarce goods or any other kind of valued goods they could make available to their acquaintances. When we talk about scarce goods, we mean a relatively wide range of things which included not only certain items which were in demand on the market because the amount available could not satisfy the public demand (e.g. bicycles, cars, consumer electronics, or books) but also goods which did appear in stores but not every day.

These kinds of goods, e.g. tropical fruit, were in demand, and people had to queue up for them. Those who worked in services gained numerous benefits and favors from the fact that they could make these goods available to a limited group of people. One might expect that one of the main favors was money. However, in normalization (i.e. the period after the invasion of the Warsaw Treaty armies in 1968) times, money was not the main means of procuring goods and services in the general sense of the word. On the contrary, the main favor was making other goods and services available.

During the last century, connections became an almost structural principle (and corruption too) shaping force of whole social groups and parallel structures. For many people they merge together with groups of their friends and often replace them. The significance of parallel structures rises with one’s standing in the hierarchy of power. The most frequent tool of corruption was a bribe, which was actually the only tool available to the lower strata of society.

Some people who accepted or offered a bribe did not consider it an act of corruption if the amount did not exceed a hundred crowns. They would sometimes shove a crumpled one-hundred banknote into the pocket of an overall or a medical jacket and call this amount a tip.

Corruption flourished abundantly. The people who were best off were the greengrocers, butchers, and those who traded in scarce goods. If you wanted to get tomatoes or oranges, especially oranges, you had to know the salesperson really well. Then it was like “Come on, come on, I’ve got two kilos of oranges to spare. I’m keeping them for you, but don’t tell anybody else, etc.” It was all in exchange for a favor or a bribe. [M. F., born 1935, female, historian in museum]

Bribes were not the only illegal form of procuring scarce goods much in demand. Another possibility, widely used in the normalization era, was a sophisticated system of favors. The difference was only in the position of the people offering and receiving the favors. Salespeople usually saved time, and often wear on

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3 Ivo Možný, Proč tak snadná... Některé rodinné důvody sametové revoluce (Prague: Sociologické nakladatelství 1999), 66 f.
their nerves, through the reciprocal exchange of goods because otherwise they would have to stand in a queue. Moreover, they actually had no time for shopping because they worked as salespeople themselves, and the opening hours were more or less the same all over the country. When it came to enlarging one’s social network capital, store and warehouse managers and some other lucrative professions definitely had greater opportunities.

At a certain level on the pyramid of power, bribes and favors were no longer needed; a telephone call sufficed. The network of social relations opened up countless non-cash benefits to the people at the top. Some narrators mentioned in the interviews how they acquired tickets to theatres through their acquaintances with important people or established contacts with renowned medical facilities. Access to scarce goods determined social status. Much more important than the actual access to scarce goods was making this ability visibly manifest to others. The narrators strove to win social prestige in the circle of their acquaintances, and this desire, it would seem, had more importance for them than all their other needs, often more even than the effort to accumulate economic capital.

The real socialism of the 1970s and 1980s allowed all kinds of things to flourish that it had denounced in earlier “unreal” times. Corruption became part of life and what is worse, was even perceived as something normal. People had no problem forgetting the slogans about the equality of all [an idea that possibly appealed to them right after the war and in the early 1950s]; but now they wanted to become “more equal” than the others, perhaps precisely because they were not supposed to and perhaps because the desire to try to make it further and higher than others is something intrinsic to all humankind.

During communism, nobody was allowed to stick out too much. If they were below the position of mayor or manager of a business, they would all be at the same level or at the very most maybe one class higher. When it was on the district level, they could be two classes higher. But it was impossible for anybody in our small village of Polná to be a millionaire. That would have been bad...

(J. K., born 1943, electrical engineer)

Divisions based on wealth were yet to come although its outlines had started gradually taking shape. To really take off, those who were prepared needed a system different from the one in force in our part of the world before 1989.

US AND THEM AFTER 1989

After 1989 people believed that corruption will finish with the change of the political system. And so the disappointment was all the greater when not even democracy and the free market (which some politicians had sworn would solve all problems including corruption) could deal effectively with this phenomenon.

Moreover, those who knew or at least suspected that there was also a dark side to neo-liberal capitalism failed to warn the public that one old “historically discredited” ideology would just be replaced by another ideology or rather by a simplified form of it, in which the all but universally celebrated idol of money rules supreme. Ordinary Czechoslovak citizens did not know much about capital and did not think much about the capital market and financial investments. They had no savings from the time before November 1989 nor the necessary knowledge and skills and contacts with people who did own free capital.

At a time when “ordinary people” outdoors on the squares were still reveling in their newly acquired freedom, people with the necessary connections were already set, poised at their starting blocks, prepared and waiting for the starting shot. These were runners with the right connections and a clear idea about where they would run in this race and especially about what kind of prize they would get. The goal was to win and make it into the company of the rich and the powerful. It was an uneven race from the start; some “ordinary people” did not even make it to the starting line, and others were pushed off the track by sharp elbows. References to inequitable conditions, stealing, and corruption are a leitmotif in most of the recorded interviews.
Developments after November 1989 unfortunately cannot be described as entirely positive because they have also brought along some measures which were not motivated by pious intentions but rather to serve personal goals involving money. That was also one of the features of the times, and it’s partly related to corruption. How citizens vote is once again determined by the power of money and contacts with powerful people. (V. J., born 1950, lawyer)

The interviews betray disappointment over an opportunity terribly wasted when everybody was ready to “tighten their belts” in the name of improving the economic situation of the country and a better life for future generations. Indeed, the highest representatives of the land persuaded them to take this step.

Afterwards, when people had become convinced that the “belt tightening” was meant only for some people while others were exempt from it and that others were pardoned even for irregular practices in acquiring property, they stopped believing the politicians’ promises, just as they had before November 1989. Very soon society was once again divided between “us” and “them.”

In the second half of the 1990s, there was strongly hear warning of Václav Havel’s words, when he described the economic system of the second half of the 1990s as “mafia capitalism” or the evaluation of the World Bank, which recommended that countries in which the state had been the dominant owner should privatize their national wealth in some other than the Czech way.

The Czech environment (as well as that in other post-communist countries) was rather atypical. In practice, it connected the (often merely formal) logic of the market with patterns of behavior established in the times of real socialism. From the very start we were in for a corrupt environment, where the determining elements were not abilities and technologies but contacts with representatives of the Party, the politicians who allocate state contracts and are involved in selling the state property.

Well, looting took place day in, day out. It was actually a system which permeated the whole economic sphere. Basically, it consisted in using the resources of companies which had originally belonged to the state for private profit and enrichment, sometimes quite blatantly, because it was all covered over by their relationships with powerful people. (V. J., born 1950, lawyer)

Freedom and free economic competition rightly brought wealth and perhaps also fame to many honest businesspeople just as it did to those who after 1989 recovered through restitution family property that had been stolen by the previous regime and now manage it to their own and their neighbors’ benefit. Unfortunately, the “invisible hand of the market” did not prevent many other businesspeople from maximizing their profits at the expense of transparency, flouting the accepted rules of the game. It is these people who are a thorn in the side of “ordinary people.” This people, unfortunately “help” to divide our society again to “Us” and “Them.”

Jiri Hlavacek
(Czech Republic):

Abstract: The Czechoslovak People’s Army was one of the largest, best trained and best equipped armies of the former Eastern Bloc. In a possible military conflict its role consisted in forming a strong borderline between East and West and in preventing enemy units from advancing. The Czechoslovak ruling communist regime attributed crucial importance to the Army since it represented one of the most influential powers in the totalitarian society. In November 1989, after the fall of the communist regime, a lot of political and social changes occurred. Inevitably, these changes also had a great impact on the formation of the Defense sector during the subsequent period, the so-called transformation. In his paper, the author briefly introduces fundamental changes in the organization, structure and doctrine of the Czechoslovak Army in the period 1989–1993. Afterwards, using information from oral history interviews, he presents a closer reflection of the soldiers’ everyday life transformation as well as changes in their value orientation. All these topics will be discussed in the context of transition from the “Eastern” idea of People’s Army to the Western democratic concept of Armed Forces.
Czechoslovak People’s Army (CSLA) was in the period of so called “normalization” one of the largest armies in the former Eastern Bloc and, according to some authors, even the second best trained army after the Soviet Armed Forces in the Warsaw Pact. Primary task of czechoslovak army in a possible future conflict was based mainly on the internationalist obligations, i. e. the military doctrine of the Soviet Union. CSLA (and whole territory of Czechoslovakia) had to create a “buffer zone” between the camp of socialist countries and the Western (imperialist) states. This task was also adapted to a long-term plan for the overall development of the Armed Forces of Czechoslovakia after 1960. The number of members of the Czechoslovak army in the next three decades was around 200,000. For this, the now unimaginable, amount consisted of approximately 60,000 professional soldiers and students of military schools, the rest were soldiers in basic service (conscripts). The army also employed a further approx. 75,000 civilian employees. Large numbers of troops and combat equipment before 1989 burdened the economy and represented a significant item of the state budget during the whole period of normalization.

The aim of this paper based on oral-historical sources is to describe not only the daily lives of members of the CSLA in the period of normalization and “transition”, but also the process of transition from the “Eastern” idea of People’s Army to the Western democratic concept of Armed Forces.

This research is based on interviews with former military professionals who were recorded by research team of the Centre for Oral History Centre in 2011–2014 as part of the grant project “Czech society in the period of normalization and transformation: biographical interviews”, but also from other sources such as the commemorative work or other ego-documents dealing with the theme of the post-communist army. These historical sources are always somehow stylized. Oral history method is beneficial in this case, because research is primarily focused on reflecting the surveyed period, including the role of a (self-) presentation of a narrator in story. This approach allows a better understanding of the overall attitudes and behavior of members of the group. Therefore, this contribution does not want to submit “objective” picture of the situation in normalization or transformation Army, but wants to be a rather excursion into subjective or collectively shared ideas of soldiers about their profession. During the grant project was recorded 52 interviews with 31 narrators, the main criterion for their selection was the performance of military profession in the Czechoslovakian People’s Army (after 1990 in the Czechoslovak army and since 1993 in the Army of the Czech Republic) after 1969. The research sample of the interviews was well balanced and covered all major types of troops of the former Czechoslovak Army.

Professional soldiers can be regarded as a special socio-professional category of the population for several reasons. This is not a job in the traditional sense, but a kind of mission and ministry. A soldier is expected to be ready to lay down his life for defense of his country or nation. As British historian Richard Holmes noted in his study Acts of War, the primary function of a soldier (use of force or threat of force) is precisely what distinguishes him from all other people. It is a profession that assumes identification with a certain ethos, a set of principles and rules, which members of group follows. Traditional value for members of the profession represents a concept of “military honor”, which is based on historical traditions “spirit forces” (espirit de corps) accompanying the soldier’s career. With this shared set of values and rules, professional group of soldiers usually forms a stable structure with relatively low rates of staff turnover and a high degree of self-identification. Military service is in the most cases the job of a lifetime, because it is perceived as a higher calling (“patriotic duty”). The aim of military training is to

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1 The term “normalization” is understood in this text in the broader concept as a continuous phase of Czechoslovak history in the years 1969–1989.
2 Defense spending in the years 1969–1989 were on average about 6% of national income (from 18 to 35 million Czechoslovak crowns). KRC, Miroslav: Vojenske vydaje v letech studene valky a po jejich skonceni. Ustav mezinarodnich vztahu, Praha 2000, p. 74.
3 Due to the inconsistent use of the term “transformation”, I use it here as an umbrella term for social changes since the fall of the communist regime in Czechoslovakia until the establishment of Czech Republic (1. 1. 1993).
4 This fact should be kept in mind also in the research sample, as it is in all cases a narrator, who decided to give his life story on a voluntary basis (i. e. responded to the request of members of the research team).
5 It is nearly 2,300 pages of transcripts and 92 hours of sound recordings that are stored in the collection of interviews (Rozhovory) at the Oral History Center at the Institute of Contemporary History, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic.
ensure that individual values, which are prevalent in civil society, will be replaced by a group identity, uniformity and loyalty, which is crucial for any military organization.

CSLA was the state organization which is in current media discourse called for main support of “criminal” communist regime. The predominant strategy of narrators in order to deal with this fact that in 1989 they served in army has a dual character: ideological or pragmatic. In the first case, the narrators need to convinced an interviewer that they had actually believed the ideas of socialism. From the perspective of the witness is this kind of defense always understood as morally correct and honorable:

“I have absolutely no regrets that I served the communist regime. I’m sorry, what the regime did, but I’m not one of those who would act against him in some way. I did not believe everything, but in any case it did not affect the fulfillment of my military duties. I filled out their duties responsibly and I did not think about what is right or not.”11

In the second case, on the contrary, the narrators rather prefer to adapt to new conditions and ideology is reduced to “shell” of everyday life in normalization. Ideology is seen as a kind of practice. Participation in regular political training of soldiers for a few hours in a week is seen as a necessity. Basically, it is seen as a ritual which confirms by collective participation of professional soldiers their own loyalty. The soldiers participated in ritualized negotiations from a purely pragmatic reason to avoid problems (i. e. losing a job that is satisfying). Loyalty to the regime is part of the military profession, if, by higher authority ordered to perform training of Marxism-Leninism, the soldiers are obliged to fulfill it:

“Political lessons were given to the whole army. There was no way to avoid it in this time [before 1989]. Political education was planned, topics of teaching as well. We did not go there with enthusiasm. It was an obligation. When it had been possible to avoid it, we would have done it.”12

The narrators during this form of justification create an image of a group of military professionals, which they themselves do not act like “faithful and loyal communists blindly following orders”, but rather as rational individuals, who officially using political and ideological practices, but they are not convinced of their truthfulness. This attitude of former soldiers also emphasizes the particular narratives: for example, the futility of the political system [references to the importance of a qualified political officer], hidden resistance to ideology [solving labor issues during political lessons] or the absurdity of the whole ideological system [individual stories about how someone outwitted “stupid communists”].

Pragmatic perception of ideology is the most clearly manifested precisely by the isme of membership in the Communist Party. The leading role of the Communist Party in society was guaranteed by the Constitution of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic from 1960. Approximately three-quarters of Czechoslovak army officers were members of Communist Party (90% of them were Party members before the year of 1968). Narrators got their Party licenses mostly between the ages of 18–25 (the older generation during the 50s and 60s, the younger narrators about a decade later). Members of the party according to their words today were often in order to ensure their own career growth.13 For the older generation the offer of partisanship was something that still had a character of a privilege because it was offered only to the best (e. g. top students of military schools or professionally skilled soldiers). On the contrary, younger narrators remember that offer of Communist membership was quite common in 70s and 80s.

13 In the army also served a tiny percentage of non-members of the Communist Party who were tolerated for purely practical reasons: the idea of a socialist army that offers equal opportunity to everyone, regardless of political affiliation. These soldiers usually did not get a higher rank than captain or major.
In both cases, however, membership was retroactively perceived as a problem that needs to be legitimized in life story. Partisanship (nowadays perceived as a social stigma), cannot be refused narrators, and therefore they are trying it in some way to detract its significance at least – although "I had been party member, I had never been interested in politics". This method of defense is not built on moral grounds (opportunism cannot be seen as a positive feature) as in the previous case, but purely on rational consideration. Communist membership served in witness’s narratives only as an effective tool to achieve their goals: higher education, rank or function. It would be a mistake to think that pragmatism on the issue of partisanship is a feature which would be typical for the narrators from the beginning of their military career. Conversely, this shift is reflected in memories as a natural and logical outcome (long term) of decision-making process based on observations and negative experience with previous role of non-partisan member of CSLA. Narrators were almost “forced” to join the Communist Party by external circumstances. Rejection of membership would mean to leave the place for someone else, in many cases that would be a professionally and personally incompetent Party member:

“I handed the application to the Military Academy in Brno. I took the entrance exam and I failed. Man who sat next to was successful. He was a laborer and I graduated from high school. I was upset because I helped him with the test. For a month I met our political worker, who told me: if you were a member of the Party, you did not have write the test. Over the year, I applied to join the Communist Party and re-application to the school. It was true. I came there, Commission looked at me and told me that I do not have to write the test, because I was successful previously. Regarding the military school, knowledge was not important. Factor of Communist Party membership was crucial!”

After twenty years of the normalization, the communist regime in Czechoslovakia (but also in other countries of the Eastern bloc) had been already visibly “losing breath”. It was the most clearly manifested especially in the second half of the 80s. The three basic pillars of the Soviet Union – the Party’s leadership, social engineering and centrally controlled economy – had begun to crumble. Reform attempts to rescue the Soviet empire (Gorbachev’s “perestroika” and “glasnost”) had paradoxically the whole process of disintegration rather accelerated. Shortly afterwards there was a fall of communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Czechoslovakia became part of this domino effect in November 1989.

The beginning of events on 17 November were according to the narrators in many ways similar to 21 August 1968. There was the same situation in the army as before the occupation by Warsaw Pact troops: “the calm before the storm”. The soldiers were busy with preparations for the start of the regular winter training and therefore they were practically isolated from public life. It was also the main reason why they were so surprised by the following events of the Velvet revolution. It is a bit of a historical paradox that a lot of people in “ politicized” CSLA were not interested in politics (supposedly):

“We lived in isolation. Almost nobody was interested in politics. On 17 November 1989, we came to the classroom and we were very surprised that someone like Vaclav Havel or dissent movement has existed.”

In autumn 1989, caution prevailed over activism in the army. Prudence was based on officer’s worries about the effects of “participation” of CSLA members in the demonstrations. It should be noted, that the unit commanders were not afraid of “bloodshed”, but rather [after the experience from the early 70s] from cadre sanctions that could result from sympathy with demonstrations on Narodní Street, Wenceslas Square and later with the general strike. Senior officers soothed junior officers, and then they did the same at the level of conscripts. As it turned out, the best solution was to take neutral stance. Avoid

15 Narrators describe in this context the period of 1986–1987 as a “release”. At this time, it was possible to speak openly and criticize the situation in the army (alcoholism, bullying, etc.).
confrontation, keep calm and be drawn into the demonstrations only in case that there is no other option (i.e. at the request of the Government or in case of emergency). In the army, therefore, wasn’t declared combat alarm or emergency state.

Schizophrenic and paranoid way of thinking, that was the result of standardization purges in the early 70s, persisted in thinking of some soldiers long after the fall of the communist regime. Narrators, who had courage to “step out” of the Communist Party in January 1990 were paternally advised by their older colleagues to not do so:

“I remember [January 1990], it began by massive returning Communist Party membership cards. Older colleagues told us: we have already experienced it once [1968], you should not do it because the revolution will fail. In 1968, it was the same euphoria. If you do it, it will turn against you!”

The political apparatus was officially dissolved immediately after the demonstrations at the beginning of December 1989 by the newly established Minister of National Defence, General Miroslav Vacek, who was for a long time the last active Minister with military career. Witnesses welcomed canceling of the leading role of the Communist Party with relief, because they understood it as a necessary condition of the army continuation. Smooth adoption of the new status of “apolitical soldier” fits into the narrative empty ideology and compulsory membership in the Communist Party as discursive practices.

The democratization of the army in 1990–1993 was marked by several key processes: depoliticization (canceled of the political system and implementation of lustration) submission to civilian control (demilitarization of high command at the Ministry of National Defence), reduction (radical reduce the number of military personnel and combat technology and shortening the length of compulsory military service), reorganization (change of structure, mergers and interference units) and relocation (even distribution of forces in the national territory). Political leadership through democratic reforms sought to transform in a democratic army, which continued the tradition the interwar period and get rid of Soviet indoctrination.

Democratization was significantly influenced by one specific event – the disintegration of Czech and Slovak Federal Republic in January 1993, which caused the necessity to divide “the newly built“ Czechoslovak army. The democratization process was generally reflected very inconsistent in memories of narrators. The first systematic steps of the new management were good, but in the long term prevailed between the narrators a feeling of disappointment. Narrators understood dissolution of Czechoslovakia as an unfortunate event, but the only possible and correct solution of political disputes. The process of dividing the army was according to the narrators conducted fairly.

“Dividing of the Army, I rate as one of the best and the most precise operation of our army ever. It was not just about budgeting, division, but the tricky part was to convert all the tanks and aircrafts. It was a huge movement of military equipment. Then when I went abroad, I heard high praise from colleagues from NATO. They were afraid that the situation was going the same way as in Yugoslavia war between Czechs and Slovaks.”


Act No. 74/1990 Coll. launched from the name of the Czechoslovak army adjective “people’s” and the text of the military oath was also changed. Rather symbolically removal of Soviet troops from Czechoslovakia from January 1990 to June 1991 could be considered as part of the democratization process, but narrators don’t surprisingly speak about it (as well as the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact in June 1991) in their memories.

18 The interviews show that the dissolution of Czechoslovakia has been regretted mostly by the federal Slovaks, who had lived before 1993 in Bohemia and who became for a time “foreigners in their own country”.

19 For the distribution of forces and resources was adopted ratio of 2:1 according to the size of successor states and number of population. The estimated value of military property was about 418 billion Czechoslovak crowns.

In terms of working conditions, democratization in army has brought many positive changes. Earlier compulsory political lessons were canceled and the remaining time could be devoted to training and maintenance techniques. Likewise, permanent combat readiness with the disintegration of the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union became a thing of the past. Its disappearance has had a positive impact on reducing working time of soldiers and therefore their leisure activities. Soldiers also had the first chance to engage in international missions (the Gulf War, Yugoslavia etc.). The experience of participating in a real conflict was positively evaluated by all narrators. This finding can be related to military identity [i.e. narrators are proud to demonstrate their readiness also in combat conditions, and not only on the training ground].

A new trend was “cautious” rapprochement with civilian population, in contrast to the constant concealment, which was typical for the socialist army. Poor image of the military in society has improved very slowly. Therefore it is not surprising that the most frequently mentioned change in the daily life after 1989 was the abolishment of the obligation to wear a uniform to work. Most soldiers welcomed this change and used in most cases. Surprisingly, in most cases, this change was the only one visible in the everyday lives of soldiers:

“There was a time, after 80s, when the public openly criticized the army, claiming that it is a parasite of society and so on. After the revolution of 1989 came a period when the uniform was not worn only at the workplace. I went to the barracks in civilian clothes, there I changed and I was at once a beautiful soldier. I finished my work, I changed back into civilian clothes and just went home. In the 70s and 80s you could meet a soldier everywhere, because he is not ashamed of his profession. There was no reason. But today you cannot meet a soldier in uniform on the street. Maybe you it is possible at least in front of the General Staff in Prague.”

Another problem was the way in which the reduction of combat techniques and number of troops were carried out. Narrators, of course, accept or reject the reduction depending on how they have been personally affected by this process. The prevailing view is that the military was oversized and therefore it was necessary to decrease its numerical condition. They have different views on how the individual units should had been canceled or transferred. The fact remains that the Czechoslovak army was during the short period 1990–1993 decreased by almost half. Witnesses on the basis of their own experience recall that interference units and decommissioning combat equipment took place rapidly and often under the influence of euphoria, without any coherent future vision, which was caused by substituting the incompetent civilians to the Ministry of National Defence.

Those people had very little (if any) experience with the management of the army and the principles how it works. It should be noted that decline of morality of soldiers due to the uncertainty of their future destiny played also a role in this process, as well as efforts to ease their work. Incompetence and laziness, however, were still those “better” reasons, why after 1989 the Ministry of Defence fell into great material and financial losses. The second and worse possibility was intentional enrichment in compliance with popular socialist (or perhaps purely Czech?) slogan: “who does not seize the wealth of state, robs his own family!” Lots of people were quite surprised by the incomparably greater possibilities of self-enrichment which social change (i.e. implementing democracy and capitalism) offered in the early (“wild”) 90s:
“Before 1989 thefts were something else entirely. We had a lot of fuel for MiG23 fighters. A time to time someone stole some fuel into the stove to heat up. It was normal behavior and the option was always there. Previously, everything was managed centrally. You could not affect anything as a storekeeper. You got a hundred screws and that was it. After 1989, everything changed. Suddenly you had a bank account and you could buy what you wanted. Everyone had somewhere contacts and got a commission. November came and we all wanted to rake in money. What if the revolution failed? At the time, control mechanisms didn’t exist. It is not about morality, but about the possibilities. In 1989, uncertainty played a large role. Everyone wanted to secure himself and his family.”

Almost half of the narrators left the army at their own requests to 1995. Some reached retirement age, but most of them (especially the officer cadre in the rank of captain or major) were, according to their own words “frustrated, tired and disappointed” from the post-November development. The reason was not only the already mentioned ill-conceived reform of the armed forces, but also the level of interpersonal relationships, which in many aspects reminded the atmosphere of the first phase of normalization in 1968–1970. In particular, high-ranking officers were afraid that the leaders of “the new regime” want to revenge themselves and it wont be possible for them to stay in the service. These fears, however, proved to be unjustified. The second half of the narrators served in the rank of colonel or general in the Army of the Czech Republic to the period after 2000. In their narrative military professionalism completely prevailed over ideological issues of their previous work in the army. A lustration certificate had become for them a shield behind which they could hide themselves at any time during the 90s. After 2000 the lustration has become something that was not almost ten years needed. Narrators in post-communist period showed that they identified themselves completely with the new concept of the democratic army. In their narratives again dominates their military duty – to fulfill the order, which for them is not primarily a political issue, but a matter of professional honor.

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Abstract: With the formation of (post)modern consumer and leisure society, broad masses of citizens have acquired the unique right and freedom of choice as to how they spend their “free” [i.e., “non-working”] time. Along with the open-ended category of “not doing anything,” there is, for example, travel, cultural and sport activities, a widespread phenomenon of weekend housing, gardening, do-it-yourself projects or all kinds of other individual non-working ways of entertaining oneself (e.g., collecting or miniature modeling). Indeed, the research environment of socialist and post-socialist Czechoslovakia and the Czech Republic offers an ideal field for monitoring changes in attitudes in these matters, given the fact that the operation and development of many of them was often highly regulated or even restricted by the regime [e.g., travelling] before 1989. How did the situation in this very broad sphere change after the fall of the communist regime in the transformation era, and what value is placed on free time today? Taking stock of the interviewees’ views of self-fulfillment in their free time, its quantity, its forms and possibilities – all this will be the subject of this paper.
INTRODUCTION

Free time can be imagined as a space-time “bubble” between work on one hand, and the time being necessary for basic physiological needs (sleeping, eating, etc.) on the other. Its extent and content depend on objective circumstances (working hours stipulated by law, the nature of the job, family situation, financial resources, etc.) as well as on the subjective decisions by the people who possess and consume this “bubble.” Historically, free time as a mass phenomenon in society belongs to the modern era. Especially the second half of the twentieth century and first years of twenty first century brought significant changes in this regard to the Czech lands.

This paper is based on the outputs of our recent project called Czech society in the Era of so-called Normalisation and Transformation. Biographical interviews (Czech Science Foundation, No. P410/11/1352) which is since 2010 realized in the ground of Oral History Center, Institute for Contemporary History (Czech Academy of Sciences) in Prague. Whereas in our the previous conference contributions (IOHA 2012 in Buenos Aires, OHA 2013 in Oklahoma City) we discussed in our fifteen-headed team (led by Miroslav Vaněk) different thematic aspects of oral history interviews content (e. g. value of work, „image of West“, memory of management members, memory of armed forced members), the scope of this paper will be the value of the “foreign” in terms of ethnicity, nation, and nationality. For these purposes I used in my analysis and interpretation generally 150 interviews with narrators (women and men, born generally between 1935 and 1955) coming from all socio-professional groups (e. g. workers, intelligentsia, employees in services, armed forces members, managers, employees in agriculture) and living in several Czechoslovak and Czech regions. Frames of analysis are formed also by using other primary and secondary sources (especially relevant monographs, articles and several public poll surveys).

Since the end of the Second World War, Czech and Slovak areas have become a venue for the gradual development of a (post)modern consumer society, as has also been the case in other countries. Legislative decisions during the interwar years demonstrated this trend significantly: in 1918 Czechoslovakia was one of the first countries in the world to adopt the eight-hour day and the six-day week for all employees. In socialist “leisure society,” broad masses of citizens acquired this unprecedented right as well as the freedom to choose how to spend their free (i.e. non-work) time, the extent of which has significantly increased with the introduction of the five-day working week in 1968. The amount of free time was also determined by the length of paid annual leave, which depended on the profession and the number of years worked (before 1989, usually from two to four weeks a year). After 1989 it was lengthened by two more weeks a year, i.e. about four to six weeks, and in some professions (e.g. teachers) eight weeks a year. These provisions were meant to ensure the highest and most efficient performance at work through guaranteed recreation; and directly or indirectly they also influenced how people spent their free time. How show the results of public opinion surveys, at the present time the amount of free time is without question the most in recent history. Even before the Velvet Revolution, there were many possible ways for people to use their free time, how it will be described later. Furthermore, some trends in leisure activities show the influence not only the political frames and ideology, but also influence of modern technologies and the concomitant general rise in the standard of living. One example is the increase in automobile ownership or TV viewing, which continuously grew up from the mid-1960s with a sharp rise after 1989. Among the social phenomena which changed people’s lives after the Velvet Revolution we can name the widespread use of personal computers and the internet and of mobile phones.

PLACES OF FREE TIME IN INTERVIEWS

The topic of free time bubbled under the surface of narrations, and only occasionally some remarks came up from the depths of memory. However, in a number of interviews in which the narrator only shortly referred to non-work and free-time activities or even did not mention them, we asked a pointed question: it almost always showed out that the person had in some measure taken part in leisure activities.

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1It should be mentioned that one of the final outputs deriving from these project will be a book for English-speaking readers) manuscript was already submitted in Oxford University Press and its Oral History Series in March 2014) which opus (co-authored with Miroslav Vaněk) is trying to interpret in general a change of the most relevant values in Czech (Czechoslovak) Society from 1960s till present.
Just as in the definitions and interviews mentioned above, free time is in many times perceived as the opposite of work and employment although particularly in the case of keen men good with their hands it was often supplemented with more work. For many women it was almost taken by their “second shift” taking care of their household and family. However, both men and women more or less remembered free time although of course each group from a different angle. There are also memories of the “required voluntary” public involvement in various political, trade union or special interest organizations, the activities of which often took place during our narrators’ leisure time. Neither of these activities can be actually considered freely spent leisure time, at least in the period before 1989 (although many of our narrators remember them with sympathies). As with other issues, how leisure is remembered depends on one’s generation. And yet it must be said that many narrators can very accurately distinguish the periods in their lives during which they had more free time (e.g. their childhood and adolescence or later their retirement) from those when they felt the lack of it (when they were starting up their families, raising children, working in demanding jobs and positions, etc.). Many times they structured their life stories according to these chronological criteria. Stories about free time also represent the necessary “cement” in the conscious (re)construction of memory and reflection on the past and the present. It would seem that in certain contexts this topic can serve not only as a source of memories but also as a rhetorical instrument that significantly helps narrators to “humanize” and integrate their memories into the overall picture. When analyzing the interviews related to the topic of free time, we must also take into account the fact that in communist Czechoslovakia the influence of public discourse and collective memory on shaping an ideal image of “how to spend leisure time” was relatively strong (e.g. to popularity of films and of TV series). After the Velvet Revolution, similar constructs reflecting the new situation began to appear very quickly.

EVERYDAY “LEISURE” REGIME

When our narrators remember their childhood, their experiences are often framed by stories about certain children’s games. The vast majority of narrators have connected these memories with his relatively carefree time, and some remember it with great nostalgia. Many older narrators from towns who were born before the Second World War or shortly afterwards still experienced the middle-class (“petty bourgeois”) style of leisure. This might mean, for example, the children of the family being brought up by nannies, learning to play a musical instrument, or belonging to traditional sport or scout associations (Sokol, Junák), maintaining contacts within the extended family, etc. In many families, some of these customs were passed on to the next generation. By contrast, with some of the younger narrators we already find memories of a somewhat different style of spending free time that was typical of the post-war new housing estates, which from a child’s perspective was much less attractive. The narrators who grew up after the Second World War often mention their after-school activities in various sport, art, or technical hobby groups. Not only did they devote their free time to them, but they also developed abilities and skills which they consider very important for their future careers and life in general.

Unlike the narrators from the cities, people who grew up in the country described the traditional everyday (and virtually year-round) rhythm of their families who earned their living by farming. From a very early age, children too were involved in this cycle, which meant they did not have much time for other free-time activities for their own development. If they did have such opportunities, they remembered either the great number of outdoor activities and games involving movement or else joining the adults who got together in the evening after work.

As they got older and started attending school, in particular, secondary school, gymnasium, or trade school, they gradually lost interest in childhood games, and these narrators spent their free time pursuing their hobbies and other kinds of entertainment more appropriate for adolescents and even adults. Typical favourite activities were reading, listening to music of various genres and many individual hobbies (e.g. amateur radio and collecting various items). These interests often stayed with them with minor changes into their later years, sometimes even throughout their whole lives. Besides individual interests, there were memories of cultural and social activities: dance and etiquette courses, going to restaurants and cafés, parties and concerts, playing musical instruments, which were all remembered as witness from
groups and collectives. Popular group activities include competitive or recreational sports (football, ice-hockey, volleyball, basketball, etc.) and pastimes involving physical activity and being outdoors in general. The narrators from major cities and industrial agglomerations mentioned in particular their interest in more or less organized hiking and backpacking, the latter often suppressed by the regime (because of "free-thinking"). The common denominator of many group activities was interest in establishing closer contacts with the opposite sex, something that was often very intense and sometimes so successful that many partnerships and later marriages ensued. Chronologically, the adolescent memories of many narrators fall in the second half of the 1950s and especially into the “golden age” of the 1960s when as in other countries, a large generation of baby boomers was growing up in post-war Czechoslovakia, enjoying the relative prosperity and a gradual easing up throughout society. As a consequence of their blending in with memories of the political events of the 1960s, especially the Prague Spring and the Warsaw Pact invasion in August 1968, these recollections take on in many interviews a very specific and markedly emotional charge. Of course, through their involvement in various hobbies and free-time activities, many narrators were shaping their preferences in studies and their future career.

Taking up a job and also starting a family is often accompanied by a significant change in a person’s lifestyle. The value of “time commodity” in the everyday routine gains in importance because adults have less of free time than they had in their childhood and adolescence. Seen from subjective perspective, women mentioned that they did so usually in order to take care of their families, men frequently mentioned their “second jobs” as a welcome contribution to the family budget. Before 1989, many narrators had to spend a part leisure time on non-work activities related to political or public engagement, activities and volunteer work which might or might not be freely given. One such specific and very frequently mentioned limitation on time is the building or remodelling of family homes, flats, and second homes, which often necessitated restrictions in the life of the whole family (and actually it was often the only possible way to improve the family’s standard of living).

When our narrators did have some available free time, in their adult age many of them preferred less physically demanding, less time-consuming and perhaps even more “settled” hobbies. A typical example is watching sports instead of actively playing them, frequently in a pub with friends. Another example is the shift from hiking (including camping) to driving, village and cottage weekend or gardening, which are frequently mentioned (and perceived) as Czech “national specialities” and specifics in abroad comparison. But even when they had relatively less free time, some narrators still pursued their hobbies, active sports, or their more intellectual, cultural, and social activities (reading, music, singing, amateur theatre, concerts, entertainment, cinema, etc.) just as they had done “when they were young.”

Even in the normal routines of people in their productive age, free-time activities had their inter-personal character. Moments of relaxation were often a part of taking care about children and of the activities pursued together as a family but were also an opportunity to maintain existing and establish new friendships and partnerships. Something frequently mentioned is the formation of professional groups away from work – coming together for sports, social events, and hiking, in which their families also took part.

Free time was also used as a space for maintaining the neighbourhood community and for building up a sense of public space through membership in organizations and associations. From today’s perspective they might seem pro-regime and pro-communist. However, many narrators believe that they managed to instil in this “minor form” of required participation some genuine meaning. Thus many times they did not see their activities as purely pro-regime, especially when the continuity of these organizations and activities has been preserved up until today. From such memories we can feel a hint of nostalgia and pride of narrators in doing work for the benefit of the local community.

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2 In this connection we need to add that for many years the Czechs have led the world in per capita beer consumption. Historically and statistically, according to the data of the Czech Statistical Office, in 1948 consumption was 76 litres per capita; in the early 1970s, it was already 160 litres per capita; and since then it has remained on the level of 140-160 litres per capita annually (with a peak in 2005 – 163.5 litres).
Some of the narrators have passed beyond their productive age and they are going to be accustomed to their new roles as pensioners. Obviously, in their post-productive age an important factor was the material conditions that they had achieved and their actual health. Many of them admit that they continued to work even after they had retired, some of them part-time and others even full-time. Remaining in the ranks of working people meant not only a welcome source of income, but also an opportunity to maintain physical and mental energy and a regular routine in their life. From the perspective of leisure, retirement age represents a totally new period for many of our narrators when they feel “they can do everything but they don’t have to do anything.” Such a perception is very frequent with those who retired after 1989 with a relatively high standard of living. Many of them can still pursue their hobbies and even take up some new ones. A typical example is a renewed passion for travel abroad, which after the collapse of administrative barriers is restricted only by material possibilities and personal preferences. Various gatherings and reunions with former collectives have taken on special significance in retirement age.

Unfortunately the retirement years bring along with them many less joyful feelings and problems, whether they be declining health, loss of a partner, alienation from former friends by newly created social differences, feelings of loneliness, or financial worries. No in every case of witness, the enormous effort put into work and material gain are not always seen as positive. Keeping these words in mind, we see that the value of free time in “the autumnal years” is quite relative and largely dependent on the current physical and mental state of the narrator.

REMEMBERING HOLIDAYS AND VACATIONS

In our Euro-American civilization, holidays and vacations have a special distinction. Children, teenage students, working adults – they all have the opportunity to change the year-round routine of weekdays and weekends and ideally to pursue for some substantial time extracurricular or non-work activities. The temperate Central-European climate with the rotation of the four seasons favours the summer months of July and August as the natural time for holidays and vacations. Children and young people (and to some extent even university students, with an extension to September) have a school holiday, and most Czech working people take their vacation during these two months. Behind the Christmas and New Year Holidays in winter, these structures thus became important points in time determining the “bio-rhythm” of modern Czech society.

In the childhood memories of our narrators, there is a difference between holidays in town and in the country. Whereas children from villages, especially during summer months, were involved in agricultural work and their free time was devoted to all kinds of outdoor activities and games depending on the season, children from towns had a different kind of experience. Theirs was dependent on the efforts of governing bodies (state, school, community organizations, parents) to propose children change of routine to which they were accustomed for the biggest part of the year and get away from the urban environment. For that reason, thus, when they recollect their summer holidays, some of our narrators remember their more or less pleasant stays in summer camps, organized by the Scouts and later by Pioneer organizations, by the trade unions of their parents’ employers, or by their close relatives. In particular, those narrators who had relatives outside the place of their permanent residence remembered their stays with their grandparents and other relatives in small towns or in the country, spending time much like as the local children.

Very visible is the fact that families were an essential framework for the life of every individual, which can be seen also in spending holidays. As some of our narrators point out, their parents were not always able to look after them during the summer months, particularly because of the shortness of the work vacations. Years later even, some of them bitterly recall necessity to stay in an organized collective and their feeling of “being abandoned” at the summer camp.

When the narrators speak of family holidays in their childhood, their memories are positive through and sometimes with added comments and self-expressed comparison that the generation of their grandchildren after the Velvet Revolution is being raised differently, in a more liberal spirit, and with completely different options for leisure and holidays. Some of our narrators (either covertly or openly) mention the fact that they have adopted many of the habits and stereotypes of their parents into the lives of
their own newly founded families. When parents sent their children to summer camp, it might have been an attempt to bring the children up with modest expectations as to material things and with the physical and mental toughening that comes with camping out home, an attempt to encourage them to be independent but also capable of working together within the collective of their generation peers. Similarly, family habits from the past may have simplified the choice of a place for family holidays.

As has already been mentioned, not all families had the means to provide their members with opportunities for self-development during the summer months. Some narrators have pointed out that as teenagers, they had to find a summer job, which was not only financially profitable but also educational.

From the perspective of the state, seasonal holiday jobs in farming or temporary assistance in mines and industrial enterprises were not only welcomed but often even required as a condition for enrolling in certain types of schools. It thus took place during the holidays but these "labour help" was in fact organized in the course of the school year for whole classes of secondary school and university groups, under the supervision of teachers.

In adult age, one important aspect of which was taking on a permanent job, the style of holiday leisure depended on the type of one’s employment, on the number of years worked, and on individual possibilities and preferences. The length of a holiday was a by no means unimportant indicator which people in real socialism and later in democratic society too used to evaluate and measure their social status. As often happens, it could become a source of appreciation and admiration but also of plain old envy, with the “privileged” narrators then attempting to relativize these benefits, to justify themselves, and to offer their version of the matter.

In the recurring images in their memories there emerges a very distinct contour of holidays organized by trade unions of individual enterprises, special interest groups, or in certain cases even by the nationwide Central Council for Recreational Care of the Trade Unions. Special group travel at subsidized prices (or even totally free of charge) was an important and well supported form of tourism throughout the whole post-war era until the collapse of the communist regime in 1989. In retrospective, our narrators praise the accessibility of these holidays as one of their main advantages, however, not everyone agrees that these recreational excursions undertaken most usually in the collective spirit and often with a corresponding ideological agenda were their dream of a perfect holiday. It was their “pro-regime” and collective character and the impossibility to choose freely that discouraged some people from using these recreational vouchers. Individual or family ways of spending holidays are another very frequent theme in these memories. These possibilities grew stronger with the weakening level of ideological control and the regime’s gradual abandonment of efforts to manage people’s free time. Another factor was the increasing standard of living (e. g. ownership of car), although it could hardly be compared to the standard of living of Americans or Western Europeans.

Depending on their possibilities and interests, the narrators often travelled not only within the Czech lands but also to Slovakia; thanks to the affordable prices of recreational visits and tours, spending their holidays abroad became quite commonplace, especially in the 1970s and 1980s. In the summer, their favourite destinations were often localities by rivers and lakes that offered swimming, and in the case of foreign travel seaside resorts. The sea was in fact the only tourist attraction Czechoslovakia and later the Czech Republic could not offer tourists and vacationers. Many narrators also mention their sightseeing tours: visiting various sights, cultural and historical attractions, and natural beauties both in their own country and abroad. Those who enjoy doing sports often remember hiking, cycling, and in winter also travelling to the mountains and skiing. In the times of occasional shortages of certain types of consumer goods in their homeland, an extra benefit of foreign travel was the opportunity to shop. In particular, from the second half of the 1960s on, quite a few narrators used the services of travel agencies. Compared to the later expansion of this type of industry, the travel agencies offered only a limited number of destinations; and yet, it is still clear from the interviews that these offers were rather frequently used, especially because of the relatively small amount of administrative efforts.
A major limitation on travel before 1989, which was painfully reflected in the interviews, was the limited opportunity to travel outside the country, especially to the West and to the former Yugoslavia. This was partly due to geo-political and ideological reasons but partly also to economical ones because the socialist dictatorship all throughout its existence faced a shortage of foreign exchange which people had to ask for before every trip abroad. It was not easy for a person without any political connections to get through the complex bureaucratic application procedure, which was once aptly described as a “paper wall”.

The topic of freedom to travel after the 1989 was quite frequently mentioned in the interviews. If we evaluate the frequency and forms in which these ideas were expressed, we can assume that many people tried en masse to fill in a “travel debt” caused by the strictly regulated traveling, especially to western countries or to seaside resorts in the era before. The increased opportunity to travel is often mentioned as one of the most significant changes after the Velvet Revolution.

Another visible part of memories about traveling during communism (and to some extent later) is the attempt to travel extremely cheaply, with strictly rational use of foreign exchange and with an emphasis on self-taking care while travelling at the expense of personal comfort (sleeping in tents, taking and preparing food from home, etc.). Only when some narrators are remembering their travelling abroad in the late 1990s and later, they refer a shift in quality and comfort of travel. From their point of view old cars, vans or buses were replaced by luxury coaches and planes; sleeping in the open or in tents in camping sites was replaced by apartments and hotels; preparing their own food is replaced by visiting local restaurants or buying their food in local supermarkets. Some narrators even pointed out that after the collapse of communism, they have spent all their holidays abroad. From these statements it seems that the standard of living is raising after 1989 and also that the opportunity for at least a part of the Czech population to travel after about 2000 is going up rapidly. In the eyes of the narrators, the Czech Republic ranks among the countries with a highly developed tourist trade (including influence of modern communication technologies), where people can spend their holidays freely and according to their possibilities, even travel abroad. This fact is recognized both by those who make use of this opportunity and by those who for various reasons are not interested in travelling, and even those who cannot afford it.

CONCLUSION

In our statements we are in agree with other historical writings that members of the generation born between 1930 and 1955 became in a sense witnesses of huge socio-cultural changes, which also influenced the area of free time. Perhaps never in history has Czech society objectively so much free time, something that is clear from different historical sources. There is, however, no clear answer to the question how much free time our narrators actually had. We see that there exist several differences such as generational (youth vs. older generation), gender (free men vs. married women with children) or regional (countryside vs. town) ones. The question which appears as historically crucial – whether it was before or after Annus mirabilis [1989] that average citizens had more free time – we shall have to leave unanswered. Our interviews seem to indicate that the correct answer is the latter of secondly mentioned period; but in question is a matter of one’s generation remaining. Future interviews with younger narrators could possibly make this issue clearer. Despite existence of communist regime, from our point of view, Czech lands belong to Euro-American family of countries which are going the way towards “post-modernism”, towards change of life style, including of free time spending. This change in lifestyle also undoubtedly corresponds to the significant reduction in mortality, increased life expectancy, and development and acceptance of a healthier, active life style by an increasing number of people during the second half of the twentieth century. Among our “real-socialist” specifics we can count especially the regime accent to ideological “free time spending” activities support, which on the other side had temporarily their opposites on the West (e.g. collective style of recreations, social tourism, etc.) It seems that leisure society, with all its attributes and values, has rooted in our part of the world very deeply.
There is Nothing Better in My Life Than the Moment when I can Freely Create a Piece of Graphic Art.

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Abstract: The paper will reflect work conditions of graphic artists, photographers, painters and sculptors in the period before and after year 1989. Year 1989 as a rupture moment in their lives and work has brought two significant changes: freedom [censorship was abolished] on one side and established market environment on the other. What does this change has brought into artists’ lives? In the paper there will be followed life-stories of seventeen narrators of artistic professions and their coping with new work conditions. The author will observe how these men and women coped with modern technologies, with huge amount of possibilities causing that almost “everyone” can become an artist, and with market conditions. The author will also reflect some of the specifics of artistic production before year 1989.
In this paper I follow the value of artist freedom through outputs of oral history interviews recorded with people who worked (and still work) in the graphic art sphere in the periods before and after 1989, i.e. in the period called normalization (after the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies in 1968 and continuing in the 1970s and 1980s) and the period of transformation (towards democracy and market economy) after the Velvet Revolution.

I will analyze and interpret oral history interview recordings made with eleven men and six women to better understand the differences between living and working conditions of ordinary artists. I focus on painters, photographers, sculptors and graphic artists regardless of the artistic quality of their work. The point is that artistic quality is a topic apt for a professional art historian rather than an oral historian.

I strive to depict the mechanism of art production as a whole. For the period before year 1989 this production should be reflected mainly in the context of:

a) full mandatory employment required (and punished) by the law, with respect to some exceptions;
b) censorship executed by the communist state on one side and control of artistic quality performed by specialized artistic commissions on the other. For the period after the Velvet Revolution, the context of artistic production has to be depicted in a reverse situation: a) no mandatory employment required; b) cancellation of censorship as well as of artistic commissions; and transformation of the society not only towards democracy but also towards market economy has to be taken into account.

Describing the mechanisms of artistic production can show then if only pieces of art of high quality can be presented to the public (and appreciated by professionals of the branch) or whether the opposite is also possible. This issue will be followed for each period, i.e. before and after 1989.

How did (still do) the control mechanisms of artistic creation run? How did artists experience the control and restriction of their artistic freedom in the past? Are they today “totally” free? Which are the pros and cons that the democratic regime has brought to them? These questions I will try to answer in this paper.

For a comprehensive understanding and embedding the topic in historical context, I will first present the system of institutional control of (here graphic) art production. After the communist revolution in February 1948, the communist leadership, in order to be able to control the cultural sphere, “had to map the situation, get an overview about those authors with whom the regime could count on implementation of its ideas about socialist art.”

In response to this “social order” the Union of Czechoslovak Artists was founded in 1948. This Union was then several times renamed and reconstituted (its most serious restructuring was executed after the invasion of the Warsaw Pact armies in Czechoslovakia in 1968). Its activities, simply put, essentially mirrored the political situation in Czechoslovakia: in some periods (mainly those of slight political liberation) emphasis in its activities was put more on quality of work than on political considerations and vice versa in more tough times. Until the fall of the communist regime, the Union of Czechoslovak Artists remained an umbrella organization (in fact the only one possible) of artists in Czechoslovakia. However, membership in the Union became (“on the basis of selectivity”) also a certain certificate of artist’s qualifications.

Beside the Artists Union, in 1953 there was constituted (running from January 1, 1954) another institution highly important for artists’ being – the Czech Fund of Fine Arts. The Fund was a monopolistic organization aimed at providing services for artists, including sales of pieces of art (it arranged invoicing for independent artists). The scope and content of the Fund’s activities were defined by the law as a

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30 The situation in Slovakia was similar, with its own national fund. However, this paper does not reflect the Slovak experience in the graphic arts branch.
supporting organization "for creative activities in the field of literature, music, and fine arts." Artist’s evidence in the Fund (or his/her membership in the Union) was a prerequisite for work without a permanent employment [general work obligation enforced by a law].

Activities of the Czech Fund of Fine Arts on one side and the Union of Czechoslovak Artists on the other can be perceived in a certain hierarchy: the Union’s members controlled the Fund in that way that they proposed (and enforced) members of the Fund’s Committee [its management].

Beside these two organizations, in 1961 the Ministry of Education and Culture established a system of artistic commissions. Its main aim was to ensure high ideological and artistic criteria for evaluation of pieces of work. Based on the Ministry’s regulation the commissions were formed from: representatives of the Artists Union (here we see that the Union controlled not only the Fund but also the commissions), representatives of other art institutions if necessary and "competent authorities of the Communist Party, Trade Union, and Youth Union." In addition to institutional constraints of artistic creation following from the Union’s and artistic commissions’ activities, pieces of art were also a subject of communist censorship measures and interventions.

After 1989, the Union of Czechoslovak Artists was transformed into Union of Visual Artists (as national decentralized professional organization); the law on the Czech Fund of Fine Arts was abolished in 1992; the Ministry’s regulation on system of artistic commissions was cancelled in the same year.

Having been presented the institutionalization of art creation, we can move forward – and look how people, artists “coped” with the system of institutions and control in the past. As already mentioned, membership in the Union or in the Fund “liberated” artists from the obligation to have a permanent job, thus it allowed getting so valuable freedom, at least in the sphere of independence at work. But it was not just about opting out of mandatory work; this membership brought also an access to material, working equipment, technique [often mentioned by photographers], services [e.g. film development], and also a possibility to get a studio [that was often used also as housing for family – i.e. a great benefit following from the membership].

Graduates from art universities were admitted to the Union automatically, unless they were unacceptable for the communist regime. It is necessary to take into account that even for admission to art schools, the decisive factor was not (at least exclusively) one’s talent, but also political or – as the contemporary terminology stated – cadre profile; and a nepotism also has to be concerned here. Applicants for membership in the Union [the Fund] who did not complete university studies had to go through a complicated (again discriminatory, and some people remember that also humiliating) procedure of admission to the Union. As the same “selective” process for admission was used in high schools as well as in universities, applicants [often people with talent] had to go through an imaginary two-stage discrimination process – either when applying for high school and then at the entrance to university; or when applying for high school and then when applying for membership in the Union [Fund].

On one hand, only people not threatening the communist regime were assigned with membership in these organizations [regardless of their education]. On the other hand, membership in the Union represented also a certain reputation, background which served as a recommendation, as a guarantee of professionalism and quality of artist’s work.
But things are not so obviously black-and-white. There were people excluded from this structure as unacceptable for the regime, or they “preventively” excluded themselves – refused to accept the system of control and censorship. There were people who were able to move through the system, utilizing a network of connections, regardless of quality of their work.

And there were people able to survive the system. Some narrators remembered various tricks on how it was possible to get an approval for implementation of a piece of art (i.e. mainly its realization and invoicing). One painter, for example, witnessed the situation when both artists and artistic commission members were waiting until the most stupid and most politically engaged member of the committee left for a toilet and then the committee quickly approved some pieces of art. I heard also memories related to a kind of “barter”, i.e. politically engaged work in exchange for approval of other pieces of work (“I made a poster for the Anniversary of February 1948 communist revolution and they let me do.”). But people remembered also bonds of friendship when members of the Union/Fund helped non-members to invoice their works, to buy material in specialized shops for artists etc.

The most important finding here is that artists today do not perceive activities of artistic commissions only negatively – some of them (mainly artists in graphics and design branch – designers making posters, labels, preparing book layouts etc.) reflect also a positive part of this, mainly in relation to quality of work.

The fact is that despite the ridiculousness of [the artistic commissions’ activities], the approval process caused that really dilettante works were rejected, that [process] was not just about the ideology, they [members of commissions] really hold back things that were bad. Artists might seek to do things honestly because of artistic commissions’ functioning.

Commissions supported the artist when a customer asked for a really crap, tasteless piece of work, or kitsch. When I look at old photos of poster sites, I have to admit that actually there is no poster absolutely shit. Even a political poster had to be painted well at least, if not awesome.

The narrators’ message here is not to idealize artistic commissions’ activities (still they represented a kind of control and censorship); rather they stressed that in addition to control and restrictive functions the commissions’ members also made efforts to maintain a certain quality of artistic creation, particularly in “applied” arts, such as packaging, book covers, posters, promotional materials, labels etc.

All the obstacles to art creation mentioned above (selective admissions to art schools, selective membership in visual art organizations, censorship, artistic commissions) disappeared after year 1989. How artists perceived this change? How they remember the period of transformation of Czechoslovakia (later the Czech Republic) towards democracy and market economy? I will concentrate only on reflection the transformation topic within the art creation framework.

After oral history interviews’ analysis and interpretation people can be divided into three groups. Firstly, there are artists, painters primarily, who can afford to work only “for pleasure”, have their regular customers buying their works, galleries presenting their paintings, and sufficient funds for living. These can create independently. Their independence follows from the fact that they have resources enough to do what they enjoy.

Secondly, there are people who actually moved away from their art profession because the transformation and market economy have brought them new opportunities to take full advantage of it (one successful developer, one successful businessman in advertisement branch).

Finally, there are people, mainly younger narrators (those born between 1950 and 1960), who had to cope with new situation, find new employment and way of living in changed social conditions. People who had to deal with effects of market and an advent of new technologies. They had also to cope with increasing competition in the branch; either because of new people entered the field after 1989 (new independent

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34 Interview with Radomír Postl, graphic artist.
35 Interview with Miroslav Jiránek, painter.
36 Interview with Petr Palma, graphic artist.
artists who in the past did not work in the field for various reasons) or due to the fact that art schools every year spout dozens of new graduates who are looking for employment within a relatively small market.

Let’s look in more detail at two greatest challenges the narrators-artists have to cope today – technology and market economy. Unsurprisingly, the deepest impact of technology on artists’ work is in the case of photograph – transition to digital photo. For some photographs, this move was partially “painful”, others fully used it (one of the oldest narrators – born in 1935 – has begun to make digital graphics and fully used all possibilities the latest technologies offer). Despite some initial problems, finally all narrators use technique in their favor. However, some of them still do not like it: When it happened to me that I went on computer [started to work with computer], and when I recovered from the most tragic feelings after this moment, when I thought I would not even live, I have begun to be more fixated on these “classic” manual technologies; they help me to maintain so-so mental balance.37

Reflecting pros and cons of today’s freedom and market environment, now artists appreciate that they are no more limited by any officer and any commission in their work. But they also become aware (some of them rather unconsciously) that today they are constrained in another manner – by market needs and customer’s wishes. Because today market environment and customer’s taste have the absolute priority (customer is always right), it really can causes problem for artists, since they are people with artistic feeling, trying to comply with certain standards of the craft. Sometimes they perceive that “new” constrains to their work are even more limiting than those experienced in the past. And some of them feel that it is much more difficult to cope with new conditions. [Communist functionaries were stupid. But they needed to impose a ban on some pieces of work and I needed them not to interfere in my work. So I made a big white horse which should be ban and that was it. To those who have money this method cannot be applied.]

A new dilemma appears (which implicitly answers the initial question if artists are today “totally” free). In the past, artists had to decide whether to make e.g. politically engaged poster in order to get an “approval” to create some other work (approval to create at all). And today, sometimes they have to decide whether to accept an order which brings him/her money but which is – in terms of art and craftsman – at least problematic. But they have one indisputable advantage in comparison to “non-creative” people: they have to be free in the process of creation itself.

Remember quotation from beginning of this paper: The most wonderful feeling is experienced when the piece of work is being done. I am seldom satisfied with the results. But the creation process – it cannot be replaced by anything else.38

Another woman experiences something very similar when being created: When it grabs you and you have a theme, it is such euphoria; I cannot describe what is happening in you in that moment.39

37 Interview with Petr Palma, graphic artist.
38 Interview with Zbyněk Hraba, graphic artist.
39 Interview with Blanka Lamrová, photographer.