

Summary

This wide-ranging and varied collection of carefully selected and sorted papers on oral history represents an example of serious and constructive dialogue spanning disciplines, generations, regions, political, social and cultural entities – or, in more general terms, spanning between the “past” and the “present”. Some of the papers are selected contributions presented between 2011 and 2015 at the Sovinec workshop; the collection also includes extended written versions of presentations given at the Ostrava conference of the Czech Oral History Association in March 2015, as well as several papers translated from other languages, which were presented at other events in the Czech Republic. The common thread uniting all the papers in this volume is the fact that their authors are able – with varying degrees of success, but always to the best of their ability – to balance theory with practice, whether in the narrower sense, with regard to oral history as such, or in the wider sense, with regard to personal witness statements and human experience in general.

This book has two main guiding aims. One is focused “outwards”, targeting readers who are not directly involved in oral history research, yet who seek basic information on the state of the discipline; the volume represents a form of “interim report” characterizing current developments in the field via small-scale case studies or essayistic texts, structured into four thematic areas that are representative of contemporary oral history research. The other guiding aim is focused “inwards”, targeting those readers who are actively involved in oral history research; for this readership the volume collects (orally presented) papers from previous meetings,

capturing them for present-day and future readers, and thus symbolically celebrating milestones in our constantly developing and evolving scholarly community.

The first section of the volume addresses general and cross-border perspectives on oral history research. The opening paper plays the role of a preface. It is authored by Nina Pavelčíková, who has conducted and popularized field research for many years. The paper, entitled *The historian as a witness of history (a methodological essay)*, touches on key issues of relevance to research in the social and human sciences. In this biographical piece, Pavelčíková attempts to sketch the forms and potential ways of “dealing with one’s own existence” through the historian’s own experience of historical processes and events; the problem of reflexivity is a central issue in oral history. The following paper (*“My state ceased to exist so quickly...” The role and importance of the GDR in biographical narratives by East Germans: the conflict of memory and the “decline of identity” 1989–2009*) is a contribution by Agnès Pilleul-Arp, a French historian currently living and working in Germany. She reports on a highly stimulating project involving biographical interviews conducted with inhabitants of Thuringia in 2008 and 2009. This project confirmed the validity of general postulates describing the “politics of memory”, revealing (maybe surprisingly from a Czech perspective, or maybe not) a conflict between individual memories and the official political discourse of memory concerning the former East Germany. The next paper (*Returning Migration to Czech Historiography – The National Czech & Slovak Museum & Library’s Oral History Project*) is contributed by the Scottish historian Rosie Johnston, who is currently working in the USA. It represents a major challenge for the Czech scholarly community. Johnston acquaints readers with a collection of interviews conducted with Czech and Slovak emigres in the USA and curated by the National Czech & Slovak Museum & Library in Cedar Rapids, Iowa – the largest museum of Czech and Slovak culture outside the “home” countries. She also attempts to re-integrate their life stories and experiences into the mainstream narrative of Czech and Slovak 20th-century history. The issue of emigration – though to a different part of the world – also forms the basis of the study by the young Brno historian Ondřej Haváč, whose paper summarizes the findings of a long-term research project conducted among Czechoslovak emigres who left the country after August 1968 and settled in West Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Haváč’s paper (entitled *National identity as narrated by the post-August 1968 generation*)

attempts to analyze and interpret the multi-layered topic of national identity – a topic that is once again coming to the fore in the present day.

The second group of papers focuses on the lives and memories of protagonists from various professions and jobs. In previous decades this area of research remained somewhat neglected by scholars (possibly as a consequence of the post-1989 backlash against the class-based approach to historiography); however, it has recently begun to return to the forefront of historians' interest, including several qualitative studies of this topic drawing on oral history. All four papers in this section are similar in nature, as they attempt to derive certain methodological conclusions from practical experience. The first paper (*Dictaphone and/or document/historical source? Oral history and archive materials in researching the history of socialist-era education*) reports on a research project by three Brno historians – Jiří Zounek, Michal Šimáně and Dana Knotová – which straddles the boundary between the history of education and the “classic” historiography of contemporary history, exploring the education system in the socialist era (approximately from 1945 to 1990) with a particular focus on South Moravia, but also taking into account the nationwide context. The next study in this section is contributed by one of the most eminent and experienced figures in Czech oral history, Petra Schindler-Wisten, who describes herself as “an anthropologist by qualification, but a historian by profession”. Similarly to Nina Pavelčíková's opening paper, Schindler-Wisten's contribution (entitled *The dynamics of oral history research: the narrator and the interviewer as two players with their own trump cards*) recounts the often challenging experiences of an “interested” interrogator in a number of interviews conducted with rural smallholders in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia. Presenting a contrast to the interviewer's role as an objective observer, the author offers an insight into the dynamic interaction that develops between both interlocutors in an oral history interview, as they cooperate to co-create the historical source. The following paper develops a variation on the same theme. The young anthropologist Jiří Hlaváček, an active field researcher whose areas of interest include issues connected with the process of digitalization, presents a paper entitled *Wasted hopes? Practical and ethical problems of oral history research of the “intellectual elites”*. In this contribution, Hlaváček addresses the ethical and legal dilemmas facing researchers in everyday project work involving members of the so-called intellectual elites (scholars, artists, etc.). His paper can hardly offer a universal recipe for dealing with these problems; however, he nevertheless provides a fascinating summary

of the possible reasons why narrators from the intellectual elites tend to be highly reluctant to share information, and offers some tips which may help interviewers faced with this problem. Another young scholar, the Ostrava historian Lukáš Vaculík, specializes in oral history research conducted among members of the Czech ecclesiastical (mainly Catholic) hierarchy. His paper (*Positives and pitfalls of the oral history method in researching recent ecclesiastical history*) will be an inspiration for those interested in this facet of contemporary history.

The third set of papers in this volume all address issues connected to the history of various minorities, subcultures or generations. Unlike the studies of professional groups presented in the previous section, studies of minority groups have always been at the forefront of oral history research – both in the Czech context and internationally. For many years the work of Brno-based ethnologist Jana Poláková has sought to give space to marginalized voices that have previously gone unheard. Her methodological study *Methodology and specifics of research among the Roma population* explores the issues faced by researchers working with the Roma community, pointing out the key problems of such projects – problems of which “outsiders” are often unaware. Another scholar who has been able to gain access to a highly distinctive and closed community is the young historian Kateřina Chlebecová, a graduate of Pardubice University, whose paper presents the tattoo-wearing community. Although this form of body art has enjoyed a boom in recent years, Chlebecová’s small-scale case study focuses on the motivations and experiences of tattoo-wearers in the pre-1989 era, and is entitled *Tattoos as a stigma in Czechoslovakia during the era of normalization (1971–1989)*. The two following papers address issues of generational memory. Petra Adámková, who studied history and is currently involved in public relations, drew on her own experiences and led a team of Prague secondary school students collecting statements by witnesses of the November 1989 Velvet Revolution (*How we won our victory: Former students speak to current students about 1989*). The unique feature of this paper is the fact that the author and initiator of the project has been able to recruit a number of respondents from her own generation – who were secondary school students at the time of the events – and to put them in touch with current secondary school students, who acted as their interviewers. The next paper (*“Socialism” and young people today*), by the Ostrava historian Beata Bednářová, provides an insight into the views of young people studying at seven secondary schools in the Moravian-Silesian Region, using a questionnaire-based methodology. Based

on the results of the research, the author concludes that students' interest in and awareness of the pre-1990 era could be raised by carefully incorporating elements of oral history into the teaching process. The last paper in this section is by Marie Barešová, a renowned expert in film studies and currently the curator of the oral history collection at the National Film Archive in Prague. Her study (*"Today it's just Mr Darcy." The everyday media life of Jane Austen fans*) focuses on the subculture formed by fans of Jane Austen's (1775–1817) novels about family life. Drawing on interviews conducted with passionate fans of Austen's works (whether the novels themselves or their TV and film adaptations), Barešová presents a stimulating analysis of the phenomenon of contemporary cultural fandom, situating it within the context of scholarly literature on relevant issues.

The final section of this volume explores a broad range of issues related to researching social, cultural and regional history, assessing the potential benefits of oral history in these fields. The young Ostrava historian Martin Brychta presents a brief overview of his research into the history of 1960s and 1970s fashion in a regional context (*Fashion from 1965 to 1975: the example of Ostrava*). Analyzing twenty interviews – supplemented by information from a range of other sources – Brychta discusses the extent to which it is possible to research the history of fashion (or lifestyle in general) by drawing on the memories of those who lived through the given period (including oral history). The next study (*Times are changing...? The values of change and the change of values in travelling and tourism in Czechoslovakia at the end of the 1980s*) is by the historian Pavel Mücke. Discussing the changes that affected all aspects of travel and tourism, Mücke describes how these changes were perceived and evaluated by the narrators (protagonists) themselves – whether travellers and passengers or employees of the transport/travel and tourism industries. One of the goals of this paper is to highlight the different perspectives (experiences, memories) of the travelling public and those who provided travel and tourism services. The last study in this section – and in the volume as a whole – is by Lenka Krátká, a versatile scholar of the social sciences whose interests range from sociology and genre studies to oral history and contemporary history. Krátká's paper maps the changes in corporate culture and its establishment in Czech society. This brief yet insightful contribution includes coverage of the immediate post-1989 era in the Czech Republic, addressing topics which are still relevant today in thematic and ethical terms (and which to some extent still remain taboo).

For making a symbolic conclusion, it is incorporated a text of one of the “fathers the founders” of Czech oral history, Miroslav Vaněk. In a form of author’s comments, which are deriving from a dealing with the domestic and international perspectives, he is trying to re-think several key issues of oral history theory, methodology and also research praxis and dissemination.