

Recording Life Stories as a Never-Ending Process: Interviewing People by the Museum of the Hlučín Region as a Case Study on Slow Memory

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This article examines the mnemonic work of the Museum of the Hlučín Region in Czechia using the emerging concept of slow memory. It elucidates how the institution endeavours to preserve and transmit the collective memory of the region, establishing a memory canon and disseminating it among younger generations. The mnemonic efforts of the museum are reinforced by its close engagement with the local community, where museum personnel view their role as preserving the region's memory and cultural heritage for posterity – a process one museum employee describes as 'rescue archeology'. This study argues that the museum acts to safeguard the memory and identity of the Hlučín community in response to potential erosion due to generational shifts and the influence of Czech society. This case study provides insights into *longue durée* memory and the institutionalization of memories in the face of accelerated commemoration, emphasizing the significance of the individual agency of mnemonic agents.

Key words: regional memory, slow memory, museums, the Hlučín region, life-story interview

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Introduction

Since the 2010s, memory researchers and activists in many countries have been drawing attention to the last living witnesses of World War II (WWII) and the Holocaust (Spalová, 2017). The memory of WWII is a constitutive part of the heritage of peoples around the globe, but if it is to outlive the gradual sociocultural changes that have happened in the post-war period, it needs to be transformed, reimaged and contextualized into a cultural form (Assmann, 2011). Therefore, memories and narratives of WWII have been collected, archived, and presented in various institutions on national, regional, and local levels.

In particular, this process relates to Central Europe, a site of dynamic actions and changes during the war including genocide, border changes, occupations, enlistments, uprisings, and battles (Assmann, 2010; Judt, 2005). National narratives of WWII differ between countries depending on the role each played. At the same time, within countries, various groups may also hold differentiated narratives based on their distinct experiences of the conflict.

One of the regions with a specific collective memory is the Hlučín region, located in Czech Silesia on the border with Poland. An area with around 80,000 inhabitants (the Hlučíns), it has a history that is distinct from the rest of the Czech Republic and its borderlands. It was a part of the German Empire before 1920 and, unlike most German-speaking populations from the Czech borderlands, the autochthonous Hlučín population was not expelled to Germany following WWII (Binar, 2014). Thanks to that, the region's collective memory has continuously developed and has been carried on by locals. The preservation of memories is also carried out by the Museum of the Hlučín Region (henceforth referred to as the Hlučín Museum). Importantly, the museum conducts interviews with elder generations of Hlučíns and stores the recordings for further research. In this way, the museum forms the region's memory canon.

This article aims to explore the mnemonic work of the Hlučín Museum with regard to social changes that have taken place in the region since WWII. During state socialism, the regime did not allow the Hlučín people to talk about their war experiences openly or to remember WWII victims publicly. Beyond that, the state suppressed the German heritage as something inappropriate or even hostile (Spurný, 2012; Wingfield, 2000). But in private, Hlučíns remembered and have remained proud of their war and postwar experiences. Since the fall of communism, a new wave of collective remembering has occurred in the region. The memory of WWII and its immediate aftermath has helped to construct the Hlučíns' regional identity, as their historical experience differentiates them from the Czech society. Nevertheless, it is also true that for younger generations of Hlučíns who were born in the 1980s or later and have been largely integrated into Czech society, their way of life and values do not differ significantly from the rest of Czechia (Znebežánek, 2016).

This article uses the concept of slow memory to understand the mnemonic work of the Hlučín Museum in the context of perceived changes in the collective identity

of Hlučín. Slow memory (Wüstenberg, 2023) is an emerging approach in memory studies that explores *longue-durée* changes that impact our present. The concept reacts to the need to slow down our perception of history in a time of accelerated commemoration, not to focus on single historical events and their afterlife but rather to explore everyday practices and long-lasting changes that are invisible in the short-term. In terms of methodology, the slow memory approach motivates us to engage with 'slow practices of remembering' (Wüstenberg, 2023: 63), such as oral history or autobiographical narrations, and to work closely with respective individuals and communities.

This case study explores one of the key activities of the Hlučín Museum, namely the process of interviewing Hlučín of older generations and recording their life stories, and recognizes this activity as a slow memory practice in its theoretical and methodological approach. I show that the Hlučín Museum responds to the potential loss of memory over time by collecting narrations of residents of the region while maintaining close contact with the local community.

Furthermore, it is also possible to perceive my research process as slow memory. Specifically, I lean on long-term ethnographic research, contact with the Hlučín Museum and its employees over several years, and my familiarity with the activities of the museum. Despite having family connections in the Hlučín region, my interest in Hlučín memory started no earlier than 2016, during my first fieldwork trip to the area to research local war graves and monuments. A year later, I stayed in the museum to do state-of-the-art research for my thesis. I met with the director of the museum and also conducted a minor interview with one of its employees. The results were published in 2023 (Brožová, 2023). Since then, I have visited the region frequently for research stays at the museum or for conferences organized by the same institution. In 2021, I studied the life testimonies of Hlučín recorded and archived by the museum and analyzed the vernacular narrative of WWII and its aftermath. During that period, I started to become more interested in the process of obtaining these personal testimonies. Therefore, I conducted interviews with the museum's director and two of its employees in July 2022 about the process of recording life testimonies and visited the permanent exhibition. These interviews provide the basis for this article.

State of the Art

The specific historical development of the Hlučín region makes it a unique case in the context of Czechia for historical, sociological, or ethnographic research.

Local historians have studied the history of the region because shared history and memory play a major role in the construction of the Hlučín identity. Among them, Vilém Plaček's trilogy *Prajzáci* (2000, 2007, 2016) influenced knowledge about the region's history and its interpretation (von Arburg, 2002). Plaček covered the

timespan from 1742 (when the region was annexed to Prussia) to 1960, emphasizing regime changes between 1920 and 1945. In the aftermath of World War I, the Hlučín region was annexed to Czechoslovakia. The argument for the annexation was the Moravian origin of the population, their Czech dialect, and their Roman Catholic confession (contrary to the Protestant Prussian majority) (Plaček, 2007). Starting in October 1938, the Hlučín region was occupied by Germany and Hlučín became German citizens with all attendant duties, including fighting in the *Wehrmacht*. About 3,300 Hlučín soldiers were killed, and approximately 2,000 were wounded or crippled during WWII. Many soldiers fell into captivity and returned home only after a few years (Kubátová, 2015). At the end of WWII, the Hlučín region was the site of fierce battles between the *Wehrmacht* and the Red Army; the latter ultimately prevailed. However, many Hlučín did not perceive this as a liberation, as Hlučín men had served in the *Wehrmacht*. In the post-war period, the Hlučín identity was encapsulated, and war experiences remained a crucial factor in forming it (Binar, 2020). Ever since then, the Hlučín narrative has been different from the majority Czech(oslovak) narrative, which included the liberation of Czechoslovakia by the Red Army (Brožová, 2020).

Anthropologist Johana Wyss, in her dissertation about the construction of collective identity in Silesia (Musálková, 2018), determined that the Hlučín region is perceived by outsiders as a special area where the expulsion of Germans did not take place and, subsequently, German heritage and culture have been preserved. Wyss explored how people became part of the Hlučín community and negotiated their relationship with the majority Czech society. She discussed the activities of the Hlučín Museum, focusing on the publication strategy of its ethnographic journal and the external presentation of the region by the museum, and explored them as representations of the collective identity of Hlučín. This article, focusing on collecting Hlučín's personal narrations and transmitting them into cultural memory, follows up on the topics raised by Wyss.

Sociologists have focused on intergenerational changes in Hlučín's way of life and values. They differ from the rest of Czech society because of their typical regional endogamy and kinship bonds to Germany. According to sociologist Helena Kubátová (2015), modern changes in the way of life of Hlučín were delayed compared to the rest of Czech society. The conservative value orientation (centred on church, family, and local and regional bonds) of the Hlučín population persisted longer than in neighbouring regions, thanks to the compactness and isolation of the region. The gradual change of social identities, way of life, and beliefs among Hlučín inhabitants was described by Marcel Mečiar (2007, 2008). He divided Hlučín into four generations, finding that the youngest one, born between the 1960s and 1980s, was fully socialized in Czechoslovakia or Czechia and was an integral part of Czech society. Members of this generation still feel a patriotic bond to the region and at least formally maintain regional traditions and values. However, they perceive their national identity as Czech, and some even disassociate themselves from their German heritage.

Sociologist František Znebežánek reached the same conclusions while studying the orientation of values among the Hlučín population compared to the Czech majority (2014, 2016). He studied three generations of Hlučín, with the youngest one born between the 1980s and the 1990s. He followed the increasing individualization of this generation and the gradual disappearance of differences in values between Czechs and Hlučín (Znebežánek, 2014). The rising share of Hlučín who reached high school or university graduation also may have impacted the integration of this generation into Czech society (Znebežánek, 2016).

Kubátová (2016) explored the collective memory of Hlučín, too, and concluded that the unique collective Hlučín memory stems mainly from their awareness of a unique communicative memory that is transmitted to posterity in families. However, generational aspects might play various roles in the production of memory. While significant life experiences are often transmitted in families as communicative memories from older to younger generations, some memories get lost or modified during this process, and some meanings are reimagined. External factors, such as the dominant national narrative introduced in schools and the media, may influence the transmission process (Assmann, 2008). While the role of transmitted values, family traditions, or memory is decreasing, the significance of institutionalized memory for creating regional identity is rising.

Story of the Hlučín Museum

The Museum of the Hlučín Region is housed in the former Hlučín Castle, just a few steps away from the town's main square on the edge of the historical centre. The building belongs to the municipality and accommodates the museum as well as other municipal-funded institutions such as the town library and the Tourist Information Centre. It is typical that the museum is housed in municipal premises, since the post-communist democratic transformation in East–Central Europe empowered municipalities to undertake mnemonic work (Törnquist-Plewa, 2023). Local authorities and institutions led by them are responsible for the memory landscape and are held to account by the resident voters. Institutions such as local museums have become essential actors in the local or regional politics of commemoration and often act from below. Zuzanna Bogumił and Małgorzata Głowacka-Grajper (2019) show in case studies from Polish villages that local mnemonic efforts may take various shapes and fulfil diverse functions, but local communities often make extreme efforts to remember specific local historical events and local victims. However, they also notice a similar dynamic in time, namely that young generations “lose a sense of continuity” (Bogumił, Głowacka-Grajper, 2019: 252) with their ancestors and do not carry the vernacular memory anymore.

The Hlučín Museum is a small institution; aside from the director, Metoděj Chrástěcký, only three other employees are responsible for creating the programme

and exhibitions. The director was born in the mid-1970s and is a professional historian. We met for the first time in 2017 when I was doing research in the museum. Although we had known each other for several years and had spoken informally before, he chose his words very carefully when talking about the museum during our interview in 2022. He came to Hlučín in 2000 to start a family. He noticed that the historical experience of locals was different from what children learned at school about the region's history, and he saw the need to educate young Hlučínians about their own history. He and a group of locals whom he calls 'patriots' founded the Association of Friends of the Museum of the Hlučín Region (*Společnost přátel Muzea Hlučínska*) and the Museum of the Hlučín Region as a contributory organization of the town of Hlučín at the beginning of 2005. However, the museum director said that 'it was a fight because the Hlučín region is patriotic, but also very pragmatic', and it was hard to convince the politicians to give money to a museum because it is a 'superstructure, not needed immediately for life'. The museum was created as an independent organization, but its funder, the city hall, resides nearby, and both institutions frequently contact each other. The town hall trusts the museum and gives it a free hand in putting the program together, but still, the museum has to find political support for its activities, defend its needs, and ask for money from the town budget every year. Thus, local memory politics are in the hands of the municipality and the museum as a contributory organization, although the founding of the museum was a bottom-up process.

Interestingly, there was an ethnographic museum in Hlučín in the 1960s. However, it was dissolved and its artefacts were moved to the Silesian Museum in Opava – a town in the formerly Habsburg part of Silesia with a different heritage. In spite of that, the Silesian Museum claims to represent the whole of Silesia and did not offer to return the artefacts to Hlučín. Therefore, the Hlučín Museum must rely on its relations with local people, who provide their own stories and donate objects, documents, and photographs from their family heritage which become part of the museum's archive and exhibitions.¹

The museum also records and archives interviews with locals and presents the vernacular narrative to the public. It disseminates memory in several ways, such as through public conferences or lectures, publications, temporary exhibitions, and co-creation of documentaries with audio-visual recordings of testimonies. Via these activities, the museum aims to reach Hlučín patriots (to borrow the museum director's term) but also children, young adults, and people from outside the region.

1 For a complete picture of regional mnemonic institutions, I should mention the exhibition in the municipal-owned Kravaře Castle (Kravaře is the second biggest town in the region) dedicated to the history of the region (<https://www.zamekkravare.cz/>, 2024), and a local private museum in the outlying village of Chuchelná presenting WWII experiences and artefacts (<https://www.xn--muzeum-chucheln-1jb.com/>, 2024). Articulating a historical narrative of the Hlučín region is beyond the objectives of these non-professional exhibitions; however, their existence provides evidence of Hlučínians' preoccupation with their history.

In 2014, the museum opened a permanent exhibition called ‘Who are the people in the Hlučín Region?’. It illuminates various layers and topics of Hlučín identity; the search for it is included even in the title of the exhibition. The exhibition is focused on the history of the twentieth century and the effects of historical events and processes on the Hlučín community. The exhibition shows objects, pictures, and documents connected to everyday activities, such as religious feasts and traditions, or people engaged in professions typical for the region. Because of the dramatic history of the Hlučín region in the first half of the twentieth century, enlistment is an important topic of the exhibition. The ethnographic focus of the exhibition and its orientation towards *longue durée* processes is in line with the slow memory approach.

The permanent exhibition at the Hlučín Museum has continued to develop gradually, and since 2022 it has been accompanied by a virtual reality component. The museum offers guided tours for groups and comprehensive pedagogical programmes for schools. The museum’s employees are in frequent contact with directors and teachers at schools in the region. During June 2022 (the month preceding my interview with museum employees), school visits were happening on a daily basis. The museum staff were also involved in the creation of a website for schools devoted to national history and geography with the title *Hlučínská vlastivěda*.² The museum director’s big dream is to create an ‘educational centre’ focusing entirely on educational work with various groups, primarily children and students. This shows how the museum attempts to acquaint the youngest generation of Hlučíns with the collective memory of the region and keep the regional narrative alive despite the loss of family memory in the course of intergenerational transfer.

The museum aims to attract the largest audience possible and to maintain constant contact with the public. The director recalled some successful communication with Hlučíns based on mutual interaction. On the town’s anniversary, the museum asked the public to share old photographs with the museum. In this way, the museum gained valuable archival material, strengthened bonds with its visitors, and made them feel important for contributing to the regional memory. Undoubtedly, one reason the museum seeks to be seen and visited is the need for political and financial support. On the other hand, the museum director himself believes that the institution, as the bearer of the Hlučín memory, is responsible for keeping the narrative alive. The museum, with its permanent exhibition and dissemination activities, relies on the interest and support of Hlučíns and simultaneously helps to shape their memory and collective identity.

2 *Hlučínská vlastivěda*, <https://www.hlucinskavlastiveda.cz/> (2024).

Recording Life Stories

As mentioned, a central role in the museum's activities is recording and archiving the life stories of Hlučín. For this article, I conducted a group interview with two employees of the museum who have been engaged in the process of recording life testimonies. These men are called Jirka and Honza and were born in the early 1990s. As we are of similar age and interests, we spoke very informally during our interview in 2022. Jirka comes from an autochthonous Hlučín family, and the Hlučín collective memory has been passed down to him by his relatives. He studied history in Prague and Berlin and devoted his thesis to the *Wehrmacht* experience of his relatives. He became involved in collecting testimonies for the museum around 2010, when the museum recorded interviews for a documentary film. After his studies, Jirka came back to the Hlučín region and became a regular employee of the museum, responsible for pedagogical work, temporary exhibitions, and other dissemination events.

Honza, on the other hand, moved to the Hlučín region when he was a little child, so his family was not autochthonous. However, he was socialized in the Hlučín historical narrative and became acquainted with it. He studied history in Ostrava, undertook his mandatory practical experience with the Hlučín Museum, and continued to work there on a temporary basis. From 2012, he and a female colleague (who is not a part of the museum team today) were responsible for conducting interviews with the Hlučín population. He also takes care of temporary exhibitions and manages the museum's archive.

The museum began to record interviews with local residents soon after it was founded. The process started in 2006 with interviews led by the museum's director. The number of interviews peaked between 2011 and 2013, but the project continues to this day. The museum's focus on these interviews was based on two crucial assumptions. First, the director states that 'the preservation of the regional memory' has been the primary goal of the museum since it was founded. At the same time, he knew that the museums in the nearby cities of Opava and Ostrava offer interesting artefacts, and the Hlučín Museum could not compete with them. For that reason, he decided to draw on relationships with the residents of the region, noting that 'memories and testimonies of elder locals (*pamětníků*) [...] are the most valuable thing the museum has'.

So far, the museum has recorded almost 200 life testimonies. In the beginning, the interviewers sought to capture the oldest living generation, that is, people born in the 1920s. The director and museum staff considered *Wehrmacht* veterans to be the most important interviewees, as they carried individual memories that are the key to informing regional memory. The narrators were elderly and there was a sense of urgency to give them a chance to tell their life stories before they died. Thus, the staff tried to capture as many life stories as possible. As the director explains: 'The weight was on the men [meaning *Wehrmacht* veterans]. It was one minute to midnight, and it was necessary to visit them quickly.' The museum staff interviewed

more men than women because memories of active involvement in the war were regarded as more valuable than war experiences in the hinterland. The interviewees were selected with the help of mayors of towns and villages and members of the Association of Friends of the Museum of the Hlučín Region. Subsequently, the snowball method of recruitment became relevant when some interviewers or interviewees found participants among their family members or people they knew. The museum employees admit that the quantity of respondents was initially more important than the quality of the recordings. One of the employees, Jirka, called it a 'rescue archaeology' strategy (*záchranný výzkum*). This term is used for archaeological surveys and excavations carried out as part of the planning process before construction. During the rescue (or salvage) archaeology research, archaeologists search for any valuable remnants of the past at a construction site before they are buried forever under a new building (Renfrew, Bahn, 2016). According to this approach, the museum strives to preserve heritage that can still be preserved. This impression is underlined by the fact that some of those interviewed by Hlučín Museum staff passed away soon after sharing their life stories. In such cases, a copy of the archived recording might have been given to the narrator's family as a memory of the deceased person. This reciprocity strengthens the bond between the museum and the Hlučín community.

Jirka further explained that, initially, there was 'no time to deal with it with the classical method', meaning the oral history methodology. Recording an oral history requires rigorous preparation, processing, and transcription of interviews. Oral historical research follows a specified research purpose and leads to analysis of interviews and their interpretation within a historical context. It is also recommended to interview a person repeatedly (Mücke, Vaněk, 2011). Alternatively, the method of interviewing can be described as a life-story interview (Atkinson, 1998). A life-story interview aims to capture a narrative of the interviewee's life and self-perception, while oral history interviews are event-centred and more narrowly focused (Portelli, 1991). While the quick pace and focus on quantity are not in line with the slow memory concept, the focus on capturing life stories – which can include references to everyday experiences – makes it possible to also capture slow-paced changes.

For the Hlučín Museum staff, respecting their interviewees and developing trust was essential. The employees, who were in their twenties at the time of their first interviews, felt it was inappropriate to challenge the older narrators and ask questions that might be considered rude or unexpected. They admitted that 'there was some respect for age and also a certain auto-censorship' and that they 'did not want them to be angry'. The director also said, 'We never push them to speak about something they don't want to.' In this way, the museum gives interviewees the opportunity to shape the Hlučín memory in their own personal way. And while more everyday topics have been gradually introduced into the interviews, even people born in the 1940s have felt they are to some extent expected to talk about WWII. This is evidence that WWII is not considered a closed historical event but rather forms a critical symbolic

element in the memory of Hlučíns and has ‘a meaningful impact’ (Wüstenberg, 2023: 60) on the present of the Hlučín community.

Over time, collecting and recording have moved on from rescue archaeology and been developed into a more elaborate process. Now, as many memories of *Wehrmacht* veterans have been collected, the staff are focusing on collecting a representative sample of narrations and looking for narrators of various genders. Also, residents of all towns and villages from the region have been included. The professions or social status of narrators have also been considered. Gradually, the focus of interviews has shifted to the history of everyday life. Overall, the gradual evolution in the methodology and execution of the life-story interviews can be also linked to the slow memory concept – quality becomes as important as quantity, if not more important.

When I asked Jirka when they would be finished with their collection of life stories, he told me he thought they were still not doing enough, and that they wanted to record as many testimonies as possible over time and proceed smoothly to younger generations. Nevertheless, the museum director said their current goal was to build a ‘solid database that can be used for systematic work’. However, there has not been enough capacity to process the recordings properly. Only about half of the interviews have been complemented with a resume of topics discussed during the interview, and only a few interviews have been transcribed so far. Nevertheless, the narrations constitute a massive archive of Hlučíns’ narrations, and they record the development of vernacular memory over time. In the future, this archive will document slow-paced social changes and generational differences within the Hlučín community since WWII.

Conclusion

In this article, I have provided an overview of the effort of the Museum of the Hlučín Region to institutionalize Hlučín memory with a focus on their activities in recording life-story interviews with residents of the region. The collecting of interviews began spontaneously in the early 2000s and the museum staff initially characterized the work as rescue archaeology. However, this activity has become an integral part of the Hlučín Museum’s mnemonic work ever since, and the museum has been creating a representative archive of the Hlučín memory.

From the conceptual point of view, the work of the Hlučín Museum can be placed within the slow memory approach in a dual way. First, considering the position of the museum within the community and its methods of commemorating, the work of the Hlučín Museum can be seen as a way of ‘practicing remembrance slowly’ (Wüstenberg, 2023: 60). While the Hlučín Museum does not own many unique artefacts, personal narrations are the most valuable cultural heritage of the museum, and tight relations with the Hlučín community are its most significant capital. Collecting life stories in general is a classic example of slow memory methodology.

While the quick pace at which the first interviews were conducted and the initial focus on quantity are not necessarily in line with the slow memory concept, the focus on capturing life stories – which usually include references to everyday experiences – makes it possible to capture also slow-paced changes and reflections on them.

Second, a key objective of the mnemonic work of the museum is to prevent the potential disintegration or loss of regional memory and identity. Specifically, it is a way to face slow-paced changes that have affected the Hlučín community since WWII, namely the passing away of witnesses of the war and growing closer to the majority Czech society. Recording those life stories is an attempt to capture the unique Hlučín narrative in the archive. Also, the museum's permanent exhibition can be understood in the context of the slow memory approach, as it focuses on ethnography of the region within the *longue durée* processes of the twentieth century.

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Interview by the author with the Hlučín Museum director on 8 July 2022.

Interview by the author with the Hlučín Museum employees on 7 July 2022.

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