

# Before and After: the Phenomenon of Czechoslovakia's "Velvet" Revolution in Narratives by its "Youngest Witnesses"<sup>1</sup>

Soňa G. Lutherová<sup>2</sup>

Ústav etnológie SAV, Bratislava

**Before and After: the Phenomenon of Czechoslovakia's "Velvet" Revolution in Narratives by its "Youngest Witnesses"**. Autobiographical narratives of childhood often constitute a part of the research in social sciences, yet there is a long-term lack of methodological debate on this subject. It is clear that autobiographical narratives themselves are not objective records of the individuals' memories. In relation to this, when focusing on adults reminiscing specifically on an era of their childhood, researchers have to keep in mind that their subjects do not merely construct an image of the past - simultaneously, they construct an image of their own childhood as well. The aim of this paper is to consider the basic characteristics of this specific type of data by means of analyzing the narratives of the "youngest" witnesses of the period delineated by the revolution of 1989 in Czechoslovakia. Also, it reveals common traits in the way the witnesses construct their narratives in relation to the phenomenon of the "Velvet" revolution. Thus, the collected material does not only constitute a means for the analysis of autobiographical narratives of childhood as a special type of data, but also of the aspects and features of the myth of revolution of 1989 and its place in the interpretation of the contemporary Slovak society. *Sociológia* 2010, Vol. 42 (No. 6: 671-690)

**Key words:** *autobiographical narratives; Velvet revolution; 1989; childhood; myth*

## Introduction

When adults construct autobiographical narratives about their own childhood, their accounts do not represent a "child's" view of the social reality described. Remembrance is subordinated to their present attitudes and experience. Through the prism of their own memories, adults construct not only an image of the past but also an image of their own childhood.

Simply to formulate these thoughts is to underline the fact that the methodological approach to "child" memories must be chosen sensitively and with due reflection. However, although social scientists throughout the individual disciplines work with similar material relatively often, paradoxically there has long been a dearth of methodological discussion on the autobiographical narratives of childhood.

The primary aim of this study is to outline the basic characteristics of this specific type of research data. I examine the question of autobiographical

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was realized with the financial support of the VEGA grant n.2/0106/10 Socio-Cultural Change and Adaptation: Transformation Processes in the Contemporary Slovak Society.

<sup>2</sup> Address: Soňa G. Lutherová, Ústav etnológie SAV, Klemensova 19, 813 64 Bratislava, Slovak Republic. [sona.lutherova@savba.sk](mailto:sona.lutherova@savba.sk)

narratives, using material which I acquired during oral history research of the “youngest” witnesses of the “Velvet” Revolution<sup>3</sup> in 1989. I recorded the narratives in 2007 as part of a thesis where I analysed how young people constructed themselves as witnesses of this event. At the conclusion of the thesis I stated that the attitudes of “child” witnesses of the “Velvet” revolution were characterised by a large measure of internal inconsistency. Their contradictory attitudes stem first of all from the “limitations” of the child perceiving events, unable to comprehend them or to grasp the wider social and political contexts at the time of their occurrence. At the same time, a significant change of personal values, with the acquisition of new knowledge and new experience, has undoubtedly also contributed to forming the individual testimonies. The narrators, as if seeking detachment from their own “childish” attitudes and behaviour, often distance themselves from those by means of a variety of conscious and unconscious strategies.

However, I take the view that the inconsistent attitudes of respondents also result from the nature of the theme itself – the revolution of 1989, which in both individual and collective interpretations generally is distinguished by a large degree of ambiguity.

Within the thematic context of the research material analysed I define a further aim of this study, namely a scholarly comprehension of the distinctive, authentic recollections of generationally related male and female respondents of the period immediately before, during and after the fall of socialism in Czechoslovakia, construed in relation to the phenomenon of the 1989 revolution.

My study involves two levels of interest which merge in terms of content: an outline of the basic features and problems of examination of autobiographical narratives of childhood, which I characterise using individual accounts of the 1989 revolution as interpreted by its “youngest” witnesses. The analysis of concrete method serves as a stimulus to reflection on the concrete material and its theme, the period of the “Velvet” Revolution and how it is viewed by individuals.

In the first section of the study I analyse the manner in which narrators in the course of their narrative construct the image of their own childhood, and I interpret the child witnesses' specific view of the phenomenon of the “Velvet” Revolution. In a further section of the study I turn my attention to the “leitmotif” of the narratives investigated – the individual conception of the period before, during and after the fall of the socialist regime, as demarcated by the 1989 revolution. In conclusion I give a summary review of the issue of autobiographical narratives of childhood with relation to the material gathered.

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<sup>3</sup> In Slovak the „Velvet“ Revolution is called ‘nežná revolúcia’, which in literal English translation might be ‘soft (or gentle) revolution’.

Autobiographical narratives of childhood are neither worthless naive fabrications nor “exact” apprehensions of reality. And similarly, the “Velvet” revolution was not a mythical struggle of good and evil, nor yet a routine event which could run its course unnoticed by “ordinary” people, “caught up” in the whirl of the everyday. This study is a space for outlining the authentic memories of child witnesses of the large-scale changes in Czechoslovakia (leading up to, climaxing in and resulting from the revolutionary events of 1989), reflected through the medium of the actual daily reality of the respondents. At the same time, however, it may serve as a stimulus for more broadly conceived reflections on the male and female adult respondents’ autobiographical recollections of the period of their childhood.

### “Velvet” Revolutions?

In November 2009 we celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “Velvet” revolution, and the mass media became the arena for a struggle of the dominant discourses on '89. Alongside the positive image of the “Velvet” revolution as the climactic event of modern Czechoslovak history, an alternative view of the events of '89 asserted itself with surprising force in socio-political discourse. Essentially, this second trend of thought made a positive estimate of the presumed qualities of the socialist regime and cast doubt on the extent of the socio-political revolutionary changes, and especially on their positive significance for the lives of “ordinary” people. The factors which form these attitudes must undoubtedly be sought in a wider cross-section of time, beginning with the period preceding the 1989 revolution, then in the transformation years of the '90s, and in the present period also.

The 1989 revolution provoked a relatively large degree of controversy right from the beginning of the revolutionary events. Beyond doubt, this resulted from the revolution’s very nature and its goal as a transition from one social-political system to another, and also from the specific character of the revolutionary change in Czechoslovakia, which was not easy to classify among individual types of transition (Szomolányi 2002).<sup>4</sup> The course of politico-social events in 1989 gave a stimulus to various kinds of speculation, which are expressed even in doubts about the adequacy of the very idea of “revolution” in this context. Such reflections (which to my mind are in great measure irrelevant) are to this day an inseparable component part of the discourse on the “Velvet” revolution. Here I do not seek to give a complex analysis of the reasons for this phenomenon. It may be stated, however, that the collective discourse on the 1989 revolution, along with its individual forms, is

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<sup>4</sup> According to Szomolányi, the continuity of elites indicates that while the transition began with the collapse of the “old” regime, the event is also characterised by aspects of progression negotiated by pact (Szomolányi 2002).

a monumental example of conscious and unconscious manipulation of the image of a historic event affecting all of society, and also (in the context of the event's unfolding) of the roles of individual witnesses.

The image of events twenty years ago does not remain in an unaltered state, but on the contrary is subject to processual change. The sharp edges of individual interpretations are smoothed down over time; it is unlikely that anyone now remembers precisely how the revolutionary days passed in precise detail and how he or she experienced them from hour to hour. Memories are "mechanised". They have become part of events which on a conscious or unconscious level are remoulded in relation to reality and to the contemporary contexts of the narration. In this sense the collective discourse on the "Velvet" revolution forms rather a myth than an image of the event, or an objective summary of its participants' memories. At the core of the modern myth of the 1989 revolution there are ambivalent memories and interpretations of the revolution's events, which are associated with the change of social system and also with the course of the "revolutionary" events themselves.

The indistinct contours of the picture of the revolutionary period are still more blurred in the narratives of people who were children in 1989. The course of the revolution, as they outline it, does not consist of the usual "motifs", among which we could range memories of the "great" events of those days, for example the general strike, or political negotiations on television, or other events which are universally known. Narratives by the children of the revolution seize upon those parts of the event which they were capable of grasping at that time: they are rather a confrontation with their own memories of some aspects of the individual reality of the life of children in a vanishing real socialism and later in the post-November transformation period, when they began to perceive those changes through which later on they also perceive the period of revolution. However, their memories of the revolutionary period itself and the phenomena and events associated with it are in large measure fragmentary and in many cases also notably distorted.<sup>5</sup>

The collective interpretation of events which have importance for an entire society is most often defined by the first generation of witnesses. Using the post-war interpretation of the events of the Second World War in West Germany, Weigel confirms this general rule (Weigel 2002: 265). According to him, the image of the past was constructed by the first generation of witnesses, who imposed the "hegemony" of their own view of the events in question. The members of the first generation are often considered the bearers of the "true" and "genuine" image of events; they determine how things "really" happened. In this connection the question arises: which age group can be considered as

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<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers of this study for a suggestion regarding the formulation of this comment. I thank both of the readers for their valuable and interesting observations.

the first generation of witnesses of the 1989 revolution? Which generation dominates the evaluation of this event? However, even if we were to assign the primacy to the generation then in their forties, or alternatively to the university students, one could not expect that their interpretations would be homogeneously reflected in individual attitudes throughout the social spectrum. Should we not speak, then, rather of “Velvet” revolutions?

Nonetheless, the individual attitudes of the young interviewees, as also their conceptions of the 1989 revolution, unquestionably show distinguishing common factors. They do not belong to the generation which was dominant in creating the image of the “Velvet” revolution in society. The image of this historic event is constructed without taking serious account of their attitudes (Olick 1999). Despite this, the child narrators portray an authentic, distinctive and unique picture of the life of children in a decomposing real socialism; they offer their own circumstantially determined part of the mosaic of events in the 1989 revolution and the changes which directly or indirectly touched them. Their narration thus takes on a dual significance from the point of view of the study – on the one hand it presents the viewpoint of a specific age group, highlighting summary attitudes and evaluations which appear generally throughout post-socialist society, and it also offers a space for analysing methodological aspects in the context of examining autobiographical narratives as research data with specific characteristics and patterns.

### **The (Dis)interested View of the Child**

The ethnographic study of childhood experienced a dynamic development in the social sciences during the twentieth century. Anthropologists focused their interest on examination of the activities and interests of children in a concrete social, cultural and institutional context. Material from the field was confronted with the assertions of developmental psychologists, whom the anthropologists frequently considered Eurocentric and reductionist (Levine 2007).

However, the data which I have gathered in the field do not furnish methodologically satisfactory material for an examination of “the child’s” view of the events of the 1989 revolution. That is to say, the respondents’ narrations do not mediate the view of the child, or indeed of the adult: they are an interpretation of the child’s world from the standpoint of adults, seen through the prism of their current attitudes and the associated realia.

Autobiographical narrations of childhood are frequently used as a source of knowledge in social-research projects, e.g. in the context of events or historic periods for which other direct testimonies are not available. However, as Marianne Gullestad points out, for a long time the narrations of childhood have largely not been discussed theoretically in the field of social science, even

though we are frequently confronted with them in a number of fields from art to psychoanalytic therapy, (Gullestad 2004: 3).

Remembrance is an active process, in which the past is subjected to the individual's current conceptions and needs (Schwartz 1982: 374). Memories in this sense are not and cannot be the objective apprehension of the past – in each evocation they are influenced, among other things, by momentary attitudes, current experiences, and the situation in which the individual happens to be. The process of remembrance is not the reproduction of an experience in its original form, but rather the “creation anew” of memories (Olick 1999: 340). Autobiographical narration is a reconstruction of the past from today's standpoint, influenced moreover by one's plans for the future (Kusá 1995: 17).

While the biographical method has long been questioned in the context of the individual witness's limitations of perception and the consequent relativity of his/her viewpoint, in the case of autobiographical narrations of childhood by adult respondents one must necessarily also take account of the large psychic and personality change which individuals have undergone since the events which they are interpreting. The course of life is influenced by individual ideas of what is considered a “normal” life in society, as also by conscious and unconscious norms of what constitutes a “good” life (Gullestad 2004). The autobiographical narrative is like a sequence of logically and semantically connected pictures, constructed by narrators on the basis of their personal history and experience (Kiliánová 2003: 231).

As mentioned above, in this study I am interpreting material from research which I carried out in 2007 as preparatory work for my thesis. The research consisted of analysis of eight case studies based on interviews, conducted repeatedly and in growing depth, with eight young people. In 1989 the respondents had been 8-12 years old and living in Bratislava.<sup>6</sup> The first round of interviews consisted of free autobiographical narration by respondents, framed by the 1989 revolution. In the second, semi-structured part I focused on the question of respondents' identity in relation to the “Velvet” revolution.

Analysis of the material showed that respondents during the interviews constructed not only the myth of the 1989 revolution and its events but also the image of their own childhood, as well as the manner in which the child perceived and interpreted the revolutionary events.

*Martin*<sup>7</sup>: “I just felt terribly adult. I just had the feeling that I was a completely autonomous person who could form his own opinion on everything happening

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<sup>6</sup> All of the respondents were university graduates. The proportion of male and female interviewees was 4/4. Analysis did not reveal any significant gender differences in attitudes to the 1989 revolution. The choice of respondents was made according to the standard “snowball” method.

<sup>7</sup> The names of respondents have been changed to protect their anonymity.

*around him, and I didn't need to be on anyone's leading strings to know what I ought to do.*"

When an adult speaks of his childhood, what he postulates does not represent the "child's" view of the matter. Rather it is a dialogue between "the child who was" and "the child who is" (Barthes 1975). What information can we gain from biographical narrations of adults relating to events which occurred in their childhood? In this connection Gullestad distinguishes two differing concepts which, according to her, have a mutual relation in social reality – lived childhood on the one hand, and on the other hand textual childhood: that is to say, how the previously-lived childhood is interpreted in the concrete situation.

People construct many transient and situationally specific identities. The modern "I" represents a continual and processual attempt by the individual to combine a variety of roles, identities and associated experiences in a more or less coherent and continual image of his/her own subject. From this standpoint autobiographical narration is an interpretative history of the person him/herself. According to Kusá it is reflexive speech: the words describe the world and at the same time mould it (Kusá 2008: 10)

Childhood experiences are considered the deepest component of human personality, which has formed the present. "Through the earliest perceptions of the world, each person acquires some of the basic ideas, images and metaphors which later structure his or her experiences and meaning-making in the world. The child of the past is therefore in a certain sense the "father" or "mother" of the autobiographer." (Gullestad 2004: 27) According to Behar the value of the autobiographical narrative is in the manner in which the subject "creates forms of embodied knowledge where the (adult) self and the (childhood) other can rediscover and reaffirm their connectedness." (Behar 1996: 237)

To what extent, though, can the material gathered provide an insight into the specific "child's perception" of social reality in the context of revolutionary events? I consider the narratives which I have acquired as a source of information on the self-construction of respondents as witnesses of the 1989 revolution. The narrators' stories represent, firstly, an interesting weave of contemporary and former ideas and attitudes towards the politico-social events of 1989; secondly, connected contexts of the periods before and after the revolution, influenced by their current and former presumptions about the attitudes of their own parents; and thirdly, the ideas of the respondents themselves about their childhood.

## Construction of the Image of Childhood

The respondents often reflected their own ideas of a “normal” childhood in their accounts. Some of them interpreted this concept in terms of opposition to their memories of childhood in the period of socialism, and they related the negative aspects directly to the socio-political reality in which they lived. Others, on the contrary, declared that they had not perceived the totalitarian regime negatively. In their interpretations many phenomena used in contemporary public discourse to describe the life of children in real socialism, e.g. membership of the Pioneer organisation, drill training, or shopping in Tuzex<sup>8</sup>, were core memories of their own “normal” childhood.

*Peter: “Do you know what I remember? That there were really lovely women who went walking with us and we played those sorts of games; it’s as if the symbol of all that for me was that outfit and those stars.”*

*Jakub: “It was unavoidable. It was part... I even thought of myself as a little spark<sup>9</sup>, because I’d only got as far as the little spark, I perceived it as... as part of the school. Not the system, but the school. It was just one of the school duties, like mathematics, physics or beginners’ science, as it was then. And the little spark was supposed to be similar. And I always had it... Because I was only a little spark in the school. I wasn’t a little spark anywhere else. Because as soon as I left the school, I stopped being a little spark, because no one demanded that of me, so you couldn’t see it on me, not at all.”*

Analysis of the material confirmed that memories of pleasant events appear more frequently in narratives of childhood (in standard cases) than memories of a neutral or negative character (Waldvogel 1982). The context of the environment beyond the private worlds of their homes is created by realia, activities and objects, which fill in the picture of their childhood. In this connection respondents’ descriptions are often suffused with a breath of nostalgia, and in analysis the possibility presents itself that narrators may be suffering from so-called “memory optimism”. According to Zavacká, however, such interpretations by respondents may stem from the individual circumstances of their experience of the time, when as children they had a positive feeling of security in the sphere of the home – independently of the situation of the broader society outside its doors (Zavacká 2005).

*Andrea: “And in my case those feelings weren’t bad ones. For me that preceding time is linked with my childhood and the memories I have of it are entirely pleasant and cheerful.”*

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<sup>8</sup> Tuzex was a network of shops where one could purchase mainly western goods unavailable at other shops.

<sup>9</sup> The ‘Little Spark’ was the lowest position in the hierarchy of the Pioneers (Pioneer Organisation of the Socialist Union of Youth).

*Martin: "... but I perceived things then mainly through friendships and doing some sport and pals out of doors, and there it wasn't important whether a Husák or a Bush was in power, or whether we had tomato ketchup in the shop or ketchup from some local factory. We weren't involved in consumer issues, we were involved in things adequate to that age."*

Respondents' memories of the pre-revolutionary period are often situated in the private world of their families, which in narratives contrasts with the outside environment. Again, testimonies in the context of wider socio-political circumstances are in large measure characterised by impersonal, schematically sounding assertions and historical facts, which certainly is a result of the fragmentariness of respondents' memories (Jennings 1996).

Noteworthy in this context is the prominence in narratives of memories of events when the family environment and its broader social background entered into confrontation. Family life under real socialism was characterised by a large measure of inner schizophrenia; the personal political opinions of individuals, as well as their broader perception of the political situation, were frequently in conflict with their outwardly proclaimed attitudes. Respondents' testimonies suggest that children mostly were not given complex information on the politico-social attitudes of their parents, evidently because of the adults' fears that problems might result from their children's loose tongues. One may presume that many parents feared with good reason that their children would not be able to sustain the mask of two-facedness, indispensable for functioning in the world of real socialism. Hence in the testimonies of "child" witnesses those moments come to the fore when they became aware of the distinctive contradictoriness of social reality before 1989.

*Martin: "Yes. It was the 20th anniversary precisely, and my parents were listening to Radio Free Europe in the kitchen, and I heard again and again about 1968 and some occupation. Evidently my parents didn't count on... it was my mother who was listening and my brother, fourteen years older than me, and I heard it, I was upstairs, and I went down to the kitchen, it was night-time, and I just asked, what's all that about? And they didn't want to, they didn't want, and eventually I forced it out of them, and afterwards they gave me newspapers that they had stowed away, so I just had a look over everything and I was in shock."*

*Zuzana: "My mother and I were in Belgium. They only let the two of us go, and we were somewhere in a museum and there were some religious pictures. Stations of the Cross or something were hanging there. And I can't remember now the conversation I had with Mama, but I know that I was really angry. Because she told me something like, that's Jesus, and this is I don't know what. And I was totally angry, because he didn't exist! I'd been told something like that in school. And then Mama said: but he did exist, he lived two thousand*

*years ago, and so on. So when I realised that, that someone like that really did live two thousand years ago, and that he actually existed... that was a conflict, I remember that."*

Nevertheless, through a variety of channels phenomena and material objects from outside came into the seemingly closed, "grey" socialist world of the childhood of the "youngest" witnesses, disturbing the internal order of official conceptions of social reality, into which they were officially inducted. We may take as an example also the construction of an image of the "West" as a "forbidden paradise". This idea is linked in the narratives with the visual stimulus of advertisements on Austrian ORF TV, or with colourful material artefacts (toys, children's magazines, stickers) brought in from abroad.

*Andrea: "I knew that abroad meant somewhere far away – foreign, which you couldn't get to that easily, and something we'd really like to see. Basically something like a forbidden paradise, and for me personally it was associated with presents from abroad which I used to get, and I always felt they were something wonderful that we didn't have at home. And at the same time I knew that beyond the borders it was totally ordinary. Toys, or clothes, and so on."*

*Martin: "I knew all that, basically there was western music and we didn't have it, and you didn't need to be all that clever to realise that we were a bit behind, and that here it was different and not colourful like the ads on ORF."*

*Jakub: "We used to talk about that, and I knew it was better over there, that there was greater freedom. I knew that from my parents and from magazines and so on. That it was more colourful and nicer and so on. I remember that those foreign magazines, they were a sort of fetish. I had them stored away for years, and I used to look at them and all that."*

### **"Child Witnesses"**

Generally speaking, the material shows a notably high measure of discrepancy in respondents' evaluations – and not only in selected statements in the context of individual narratives, but also in the context of the narratives as a whole. Looking at their accounts, it is manifest that the respondents' opinions in the course of their narratives were not consistent. In terms of the chronology of the story individual respondents frequently contradicted themselves, not so much on the factual level but rather in the evaluation of individual phenomena which formed the core of the narrative, e.g. in relation to socio-political conditions before and after the 1989 revolution, and also in the context of the revolution as such. It is a moot point whether this inconsistency is specifically characteristic of "child witnesses" as a specific group of respondents. It may equally result from the contradictory reception of the revolution generally in society, stemming from disillusion, because the expectations which people had placed in the changed socio-political system were not fulfilled (Nosková 2005).

In this connection Kusá speaks of so-called “interpretative embarrassment”, which, according to her, sets in whenever respondents are interpreting events about which they have corrected or revised their own attitudes. For example, with the passage of time they become aware of consequences and circumstances which were previously unknown to them or which they had not taken into account (Kusá 1996: 29). Interviews with the “youngest witnesses” are quite “intertwined” with interpretative embarrassment. This is expressed especially in the context of accounts of the period of socialism, e.g. when interpreting one’s own participation in public, ideologically coloured expressions of loyalty towards the regime, or in recollections of May the First celebrations or Pioneer activities. In the course of narration respondents demonstrated their contemporary overview of the behaviour of the childish “Other” with a humorous (self-)ironising detachment.

*Boris: “But as far as that goes, on the other hand as a child of four or five I was, inverted commas, staunchly pro-Russian. And I wanted to emigrate to the Soviet Union and buy a Russian motor-bike. That was... Because from the age of four I used to go for some sort of treatment to Montenegro, and there they gave us a thorough grounding. There I am... There I have my certificate: first place in “What do you know about the USSR?” Well, yes, that was because I remembered all those things, who was president in all those republics subjected to the Soviet Union, and the Aurora and the Winter Palace, I remembered all that. And that gave them something to laugh at. Like my Mum and her Mum... For them it was a show. But I was committed. A fanatic.”*

*Jakub: “When I was, I think, in second year, I won a quiz about Moscow. And I was terribly proud of myself, because I knew everything. About Lenin, about the Soviet Republics, and all that... And when I came home, well, the family weren’t quite so enthusiastic. I don’t remember what they said, but I remember that they explained something to me about communism and why it was not good. And I was terribly put out by that, because after all I had won. I didn’t understand it very well then.”*

In the narratives as a whole a striking example of interpretative embarrassment, and also of respondents’ ambivalent attitudes, is furnished by the theme of persons in the family being members of the Communist Party. When respondents addressed this theme on a general level, their evaluations were mainly of a negative character.

*Martin: “And so people began to mimic him: that fellow’s just a communist mug.”*

*Petra: “It’s true, yes, but that was also said in the earlier time. Among us in the family it was always a case of – that fellow’s OK, you can talk in front of him, and this other fellow’s an old communist.”*

But elsewhere in the narrative, when they dealt with the issue of their own family members having membership in the party, for the most part they showed a more empathetic, exculpatory attitude, and they tried to justify this fact in some way. Mainly they reflected on the pressure of the social environment, or reasons involving profession or general existence.

*Andrea: "Our dad was in the Party. But knowing how it was and knowing how it happened, I'm more inclined to think of him as a victim. And there were many such victims. Those people had to make a decision, they were either going to live, they were going to work, their kids were going to study, or not. There was nothing special involved. It was about having a normal, active, full-blooded life."*

*Petra: "And in our case the fact was, our grandmother was in the party but she was very anti-communist. And I didn't understand why she entered it. And Mum said, so that they could study. For expediency. Because otherwise my Mum and her siblings wouldn't have got to university."*

In this context respondents showed inability (or unwillingness) to abstract their evaluations from concrete instances to a more general level, or vice versa. Despite the fact that regarding individuals they perceived the situation in contexts, on the general level they constructed an indiscriminate image of communists as anonymous enemies who were manipulating the defenceless mass. This phenomenon is undoubtedly not specific to "child" narrators, rather it generally characterises the approach of "ordinary people" to the question of the relationship between collective and individual guilt in the period of totality. Such a perception, according to Chris Hann, follows from the practical reality of individual lives under any regime. The majority of "ordinary people", in his opinion, "muddle through" life without clearly defining themselves with regard to the socio-political relations in which they live. During socialism people grew accustomed to life in a totality. They lived through it without attaching themselves either to the convinced communists or the dissidents. (Hann 1993) Associated with this is their later evaluation of the measure of their own involvement, or in the case of the "youngest witnesses" the measure of responsibility of their family members for the perpetuation of the totalitarian regime. In their narrations the respondents clearly defined themselves vis-a-vis the regime, externalising it as a foreign, abstract magnitude, an enemy agent that snared its victims in a net of circumstances which they were not able to influence.

The respondent Katka's narration is instructive in this context. No sooner had we agreed to meet than she declared that she had no memories of the revolutionary period itself, and so plainly she would have nothing to talk about. During the interview, however, her interpretation of her own memories did not differ significantly in quantitative terms from the other respondents' narratives.

What was indeed different, however, was her relation to her own narration and her associated memories of the revolutionary period. As distinct from other respondents, Katka did not construct herself during the narration as a witness of the revolution. She rationalised her presumed lack of memories of the revolutionary period by saying that in 1989 she was too small to have remembered anything. On the contrary, in another part of the narrative she did in fact construct herself as a witness of the last years of the socialist regime, and she illustrated her competence with a number of memories of that period. A troublesome issue in her narration was the context of the pro-regime political opinions of a number of her family members, and particularly her father. Although Katka repeatedly distanced herself from her father's opinions and was critical of him, the overall content of her narrative presents an example of the tension between perceptions of the context of personal and collective responsibility, and indeed of how the relationship between the functioning of individual and society is understood.

*Katka: "At times I make a joke of him, even fairly often. It goes to the point of quarrels. The fact is, he never experienced anything negative in connection with the period; he was never forbidden to travel, even at that time. He was very young then and very active – I don't mean active in the Communist Party, but active as a man – he went about, he travelled on business to Germany, Russia, even to London, with a folklore group where he had some managing role. So he has very good memories, and nothing seems negative to him. When we talk about books that were banned, and the ones those other ones which were officially pushed, we always manage to quarrel over whether such and such is true. He says, 'What're you on about, there were no burnings, no bans'."*

On the family's attitude Katka took an inconsistent stance: in some places she expressed defiance of her father, while at other moments she was conformist towards him and distanced herself from the presumed attitude of the post (pro-) revolution majority. Katka interpreted her own position in harmony with her father's opinions and in opposition to what was seen as the conventional or socially preferred evaluation of the phenomenon of the "Velvet" revolution.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> At this point I cannot omit to mention that the interviews were conducted in 2007. In the context of the contemporary development of the political situation in Slovakia and the onset of a discourse which emphasised the positive qualities of the prerevolutionary regime and in contrast suppressed the positive conception of the 1989 revolution, it would be interesting to repeat the interviews and analyse the manner in which respondents' attitudes, and their interpretation of their own memories of the 1989 revolution, have evolved.

## Modern Myths

Individual memories are anchored in social life and in the course of life they are constructed in a wider social context (Koester 1996). Memories of the revolution are not just the individual expression and interpretation of the narrators, rather they present a picture of the content of collective memories. According to Kusá, in an autobiographical narration the narrator comes under the pressure of widely diffused interpretations of historical events. Individual memory, in her view, is in this sense influenced “by the field of public ideas about history, or by the so-called dominant memory” (Kusá 1995: 17).

The concept of collective memory encompasses a group phenomenon manifested in the activities and attitudes of individuals. Collective memory is the mediated consciousness of the group, which results from unconscious ingestion of items of information and also from conscious manipulations practised upon it (Kansteiner 2002: 180).

A number of problems are associated with use of the concept of collective memory on the analytical level. First of all, there is the problematic adaptation of the very concept of “memory”, which originally embraces a phenomenon on the individual level (Olick 1999: 334). Moreover, in scholarly works one often finds a considerable terminological confusion and discordance (e.g. Gedi – Elam 1996; Fentress – Wickham 1992; Olick 1999). The reason for this is the difficulty of grasping the term analytically and the consequent intuitive use of the term, occasioned by the diversity of contents and meanings which it encompasses (Ferencová 2008). For the requirements of this study I understand the term, as functionally used, to mean a myth which is based on collective interpretations of the history of the group in relation to the identity of the whole and its members. Stress on the question of identity accents the political and psychological utility of collective interpretations of history (Kansteiner 2002: 184).

According to Barthes, myth does not originate “naturally”. On the contrary, “... it transforms history into the natural order. It does not reveal or conceal anything, rather it deforms.”(Barthes 2004: 127-128) The revolution represents a transition from one system to another, from the “old” order to the “new”, and it evokes ambivalent reactions in individuals – on the one hand idealising, on the other hand rejecting.

In the case of the “youngest” witnesses, who were children in 1989, this factor is evidently still more emphatic. Their current attitudes are affected by many influences, from their own fragmentary memories and ideas to the sum of knowledge and experience which they have since acquired in relation to the phenomenon. Positive, even idealising elements are prevalent in the individual respondents’ narrations when interpreting their memories of the demonstrations.

*Andrea: "From '89 I remember the demonstrations, which I took part in many times. And then I felt total excitement, the feeling that something important was happening. And that it involved the political system. I knew that, because I understood the broad issue. And I was prepared to stand for a few hours in the cold – a weary small child, because I had the feeling of being present at something which would change our country fundamentally..."*

*Zuzana: "What I remember from that time is, well... gradually, how the... I don't remember all the gradual development, but I do remember that gradually those demonstrations were happening, so at a certain moment people from our family started going along, or whatever. So I too went along with them. I remember how normal those gatherings were. For me it was a totally massive experience. I felt it was absolutely splendid."*

With Marián Kišš, I understand the myth of November 1989 as a story which we tell about "our new beginning, that is to say the events at the end of 1989, their reasons and meaning" (Kišš 2009). The "Velvet" revolution was already associated with myths even while the event was in progress – many of them were refuted, only for new myths to rise from their "ashes" (Zavacká 2005). According to Zavacká, it was from the totalitarian myth of the existence of universal truths that the "November" myth of solidarity and social unity evolved. "After 1989 it was quite common to meet with the expectation that the "sole legitimate" lie of officialdom would be replaced by the hitherto-suppressed "sole" version of truth" (Zavacká 2005: 103) The revolution is often idealised as the climactic event of modern Czechoslovak history, confirmation of the myth of Czechs and Slovaks as peace-loving peoples (Auer 2006: 415). Connected with this, the transformation of society is conceived as a radical breach with the past (Konopásek 1996). At the beginning of the 1990s the revolution figured in discourse throughout the society as a new beginning on the road to a "radiant" future. As the post-November years showed, the result of unfulfilled expectations was a feeling of individual disillusion and frustration. Against the background of dissatisfaction during the post-1989 transformation period, revisionist attitudes towards the communist regime began coming to the forefront (Velšic 2000: 207).

I recorded a similar development in the narrations of the "youngest witnesses". As the chronology of the narratives approached the present, they began to distance themselves from their "childish" point of view, which they ironised. What they expressed was not only a distancing regarding their idealised picture of the 1989 revolution, but also from their own childish "Self". In this regard Gullestad declares that in modern autobiographical narratives generally there is an implicitly present feeling of the loss of childhood and of what it is linked to in our imaginations. "The ending of childhood is an experience of loss. One's own childhood is gone, in the

particular version that implies safety, happiness and innocence.” (Gullestad 2004: 10) In the case of my respondents, the loss of childhood is connected with loss of the particular historical conditions associated with it.

*Martin: “And indeed I had a naive feeling that all of that had come from below, and that now the people had taken power into its hands, and I loved history, so I made all sorts of analogies with revolutions and so on... it was a very romantic period for me.”*

*Zuzana: “But I remember that it was so... that it struck me as absolutely marvellous. That I felt the energy of all the people, and precisely the fact that I didn’t see some real things going on behind them. How, I don’t know... some swine there who... that documents were being shredded, and the people there were the same ones. I wasn’t aware at all of those real things.”*

Inconsistency of content in the narratives gathered appears also in relation to the “faces” of November ’89. The youngest witnesses took an attitude to the revolution’s representatives that was in great measure negative, characterised by detachment and even by a certain degree of contempt. Their evaluation is interesting when compared with their evaluation of members of the Communist Party, mentioned above. While in the case of Party members the respondents expressed a certain degree of understanding towards concrete individuals whom external circumstances had “thrust” into the Party’s “embrace”, in the case of the dissidents the “youngest witnesses” perceptions had evolved from “childish” idealisation to contemporary “adult” scepticism and negative detachment. One may presume that their attitude is not unique in contemporary Slovak society. The revolution was a kind of interim, and the large hopes and expectations which were created during this transitional period had been transformed into disillusion and frustration in the post-November return to ordinary reality. Revolutionary promises and desires, and also the entire atmosphere of the period, were connected with the faces of those people who had engaged in public activity during the revolution.

*Jakub: “Definitely he’s got a long woollen sweater. He’s a bit greasy and he’s an idealist who sits around, smoking and sitting around in cafes; that sums up my idea of a dissident... Something like that has its positive sides, it’s great that there were such people, but I wouldn’t have any great “respect” towards them... I have a feeling that I’m a bit more in tune with reality than they are.”*

*Zuzana: “In a way maybe, those people who took part in it are sort of compromised for me. Because at that time I felt they were absolute heroes, and afterwards in time it turned out that actually... no one is such a hero. But now I’m inclined not to put any trust in them at all.”*

An initial idealisation of the revolution in the narratives of its “youngest” witnesses creates a basis for negative evaluations at other moments of the narration, especially when the chronology of the narrative shifts towards the

years of post-revolutionary transformation. The respondents' negative evaluations are often based on the same aspects of the changes which in other places in the narrative they had lauded as positive. In the first part of the narrative respondents argued that "events ran their course from below upwards" and "the people took the situation into its own hands". They emphasised the revolution's non-violence, which they proudly characterised with the epithets "gentle" and "Velvet". They designated the establishment of democracy as "the common goal" and a victory over the "common enemy", the communists. On the other hand, however, those same respondents scorned the "non-violence" of the revolution as a consequence of the fact that the Slovaks are "a passive nation", and described the shift across the entire society towards individualism as a loss of collective values and the awareness of having a shared lot. Their testimony thus becomes a testimony of the period and a demonstration of the confusion of opinion in society which the transformation period brought with it, and whose results are still noticeable after twenty years. One may presume that it is precisely the young people, among them those from my respondents' generation, whom this inconsistency affects most appreciably, and that this phenomenon throws light on many characteristic expressions and patterns of post-November society.

In this context a question which interested me, when analysing the interviews, was whether and in what way the respondents constructed themselves as witnesses of the 1989 revolution. Irrespective of the richness and quality of their own memories, the majority of them stated that they considered themselves witnesses of this event.<sup>11</sup> The attitude which the respondents formulated is characterised largely by egocentrism. Younger people, according to them, are bereft of specific knowledge and experience and lack the necessary detachment from contemporary political contexts and social development. The older generations, again, are "frozen" in the old system and its associated mode of reflection; they are not capable of using modern technology, they do not speak foreign languages, and therefore they are not as capable of benefiting from the change of system as they might have been. In rare unanimity, the respondents stated that their own generation was the one that had profited most from the revolution.

*Andrea: "As the generation that simply has the opportunities that it has, thanks to the revolution. The generation that actually was the first one to profit from the revolution. Because actually I'm the first one who became aware of those advantages."*

*Peter: "The one thing I'm sure of is that the people of my generation were the ones, maybe not entirely the first ones, but the ones that were caught up in that*

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<sup>11</sup> Except in the case of the respondent Katka, mentioned above in the text.

*wave of leaving for foreign lands. It was then that the mass departure came along. That was a very powerful trend. They just began to travel, to go away and come back and bring back those cultured ways of thinking.”*

## **Conclusion**

Many monographs and symposia devoted to the theme of post-socialism have appeared in the twenty years since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The object of scholarly interest has gradually shifted to other parts of the world and in anthropology voices have begun to be heard questioning the legitimacy and above all the contemporary relevance of using the term “post-socialism”. “Sooner or later, as the generations brought up under socialist regimes disappear from the political scene, the category of post-socialism is likely to break apart and disappear. I have the impression that many young people across a wide swath of the region are already beginning to reject the term, which can be seen as a constricting, even insulting label, something imposed from outside that seems to imply constraints on the freedom of people in those countries to determine their own futures”, wrote Caroline Humprey, one of the foremost representatives of the anthropology of post-socialism (Humprey 2001: 13). The narrations of the “youngest” witnesses have verified that many phenomena in the milieu of post-socialist reality are, whether on the individual or collective level, continually perceived and constructed in a time perspective determined by the year 1989. Despite this, one must bear in mind that this concept may lead to many stereotypes and false ideas.

It may be stated that the “youngest” witnesses’ interpretation of memories related to the 1989o revolution, which they experienced as children, is characterised by a large degree of internal inconsistency, demonstrating the uncertainty and confusion of their personal attitudes and values. One may presume that this condition does not merely stem from the respondents’ young age at the time of the event’s occurrence, but rather that it is symptomatic of post-socialist society as such, across the individual age categories.

The aim of my study was to characterise autobiographical narrations of childhood as a specific type of data in the context of narrations on the theme of the “Velvet” revolution. It has been shown that when respondents narrate their stories they construct their own view not merely of the milieu and contexts in which their narration is situated but even of themselves, their childhood and their subsequent course of life. Their narration is thus in the first instance a story which unfolds chronologically in time, which has its patterns, introduction, core, and “provisional” conclusion in the contemporary present. In the post-socialist milieu individual events unfold in relation to the year 1989, which is the milestone, the starting-point on the way to the present. The life stories of “child” witnesses in this sense are not just socially produced, they

may even be socially productive (Gullestad 2004). In constructing their own stories the “child” witnesses are influenced by the emerging myth of the 1989 revolution, while at the same time they themselves create it.

**Soňa G. Lutherová** is a social anthropologist. In her work, she focuses on material culture, post-socialism and visual anthropology. She has graduated at Department of Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology at the Faculty of Philosophy, Comenius University in Bratislava. Since 2007, she has been a PhD Candidate at the Institute of Ethnology, Slovak Academy of Sciences. During her candidacy, she has spent seven months at Södertörns University in Stockholm (Marie Curie Fellowship) and four months at the University of Vienna.

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