

## “Communism Didn’t Touch My Kids Like Me.” Images of Communism in a Family Perspective

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The target of this study is to introduce one particular life story and on the basis of its content analysis to focus on the narrator’s connection with the period of so-called normalization era in Czechoslovakia. Based on oral history interviews with one narrator during the longitudinal oral history project, the author focuses on whether the memories of a given period change over time and how the narrator reflects on his memories. The author maps the narrator’s family background, the extent to which it shaped him and how he evaluated it as a thirty year old man and now, when he is fifty years old. The core of our narrator’s life story stays the same in principle; he did not change it after twenty years. The reason is that the narrator’s experience and the memories have sunk in and are consistent. What changed in the narrator’s story is the amount of self-reflection that was reflected during the last interview. It was confirmed that shifts in the reflection are a common phenomenon and that some variability may not be conscious. Interpretations and evaluations of life can change, but the experiences themselves do not change.

*Keywords:* oral History, memory, longitudinal research, Velvet revolution, communism

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*Life can only be understood backwards;  
but it must be lived forwards.*  
Søren Kierkegaard

Every human story is unique. If the reader of this study is as lucky as me and has the opportunity during his work to study and to follow individual life stories, they surely must agree, that to reveal several layers of biography step by step is a fascinating and never-ending process. During every subsequent reading or listening to every life story

you discover something new and you try to put together all your findings into one meaningful whole piece. Meanwhile you must still remember that you work with “raw material” and you make sure not to damage your narrators because of your work. The life stories intercepted by the oral history method are full of subjective experiences and emotions. I will try to introduce one of those stories full of emotion in the following pages.

## METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF RESEARCH

The target of this study is to introduce one particular life story and on the basis of its content analysis, to focus on the narrator’s connection with the period of so called normalization in Czechoslovakia<sup>1</sup> or more precisely, how the memories of that given period were reflected in the biographical interview, which was fulfilled by one narrator during the longitudinal oral history project.<sup>2</sup> First of all, I focus on the origin of the narrator, how he was formed, how his parents felt about the communist regime and if they passed on some system of behaviour because of that regime. Then conversely: how the narrator’s experiences of that regime and his active engagement in the events of 1989<sup>3</sup> affected the upbringing of his own children. But I view the intergenerational perspective from the narrator’s point of view, since the stories of parents and children of student leaders are conveyed only through the narrator’s narration. Of course, there is a role in narrators handing over to us, even in this regard, primarily what they want, or crowding out what they don’t want. The question is, have the narrator’s experiences determined his own development? What types of past pictures are constructed in the interview? How strongly does he feel about individual experiences and what meanings apply to the context of his life story in the present time? How did the life under Communist regimes influence the values and attitudes of the narrator and have the respondent’s views on the communist system changed?

No history or biography can be changed, but they can be explained or interpreted in different ways. I am going to concentrate on whether the narrator’s view of his past life has changed depending on the external circumstances or remained consistent. The turn of events in 1989 brought up problems of the conflict in discontinuous social development and biographical continuity (Alan, 1990: 324). Not only was the life of our narrator affected by the results of the political and social change.

The core study overlays the analysis of one life story realized in two projects in the Institute of Contemporary History, The Czech Academy of Sciences. In the late 1990’s, the first research was realized based on the method of oral history on the academic grounds of the Czech Republic – *Students during the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia* –

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1 The period of so-called normalization followed in Czechoslovakia after the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops in August 1968.

2 I see Longitudinal research here as a type of repetitive empirical research that is based on long-term monitoring of a specific phenomenon or population sample using a constant technique and unchanged main research theme. [https://encyklopedie.soc.cas.cz/w/V%C3%Bdzkum\\_longitudin%C3%A1ln%C3%AD](https://encyklopedie.soc.cas.cz/w/V%C3%Bdzkum_longitudin%C3%A1ln%C3%AD).

3 For more on the November events of 1989 in Czechoslovakia, for example here Institute of Contemporary History (n.d.) *1989 Democratic Revolution* <http://www.89.usd.cas.cz/en.html>.

*biographical interviews*.<sup>4</sup> The aim of this project was based on one hundred oral history interviews with ex university students, who were actively engaged in the November 1989 events, to analyse their values at that time, family and social background and possibly at that time political involvement. The interviews were aimed at the university student's feelings during the November events, what views and attitudes they had and how they reflected on their experiences after nearly ten years since the 1989 events. Since this was the first oral history research in our country, the team was learning to record and process conversations on the fly at the time, but some inexperience was balanced by spontaneous enthusiasm. The aim of the research was to fill the "white spaces" on the map of November's events and to analyse the role of students in the so-called Velvet Revolution. Interviews obtained in which students described why they had come to Národní třída in Prague in November 1989, what the course of the student strike had been, and how everything had been further organized, had to some extent replaced the lack of written resources. Twenty years later we started the project *The Student Generation of 1989 in Longitudinal Perspective: Biographical Interviews after Twenty Years*<sup>5</sup>. We came back to one hundred ex- active students of the year 1989<sup>6</sup> and recorded the continuation of their life stories (Schindler-Wisten, 2019a: 16–28). Our target was to pick upon the impact of the formative experiences of the November revolution in 1989 on the life journeys of these students in their personal, professional and possibly political lives. The key element became the time perspective, thanks to its use we obtained the vision of how the ex-students spoke and constructed their own life stories and also if their views have somehow changed during that time. Twenty years later, our goal was to recapture a view of the revolution and what was happening around and after it. They're looking at it again with their in-between experiences. We found out how the narrators reflect on the times since the 1989 revolution, the extent to which they identified with the ideals of the time, and how their professional and personal destinies evolved. The experiences and also impacts of November 1989 are linked between both projects and overshadow each other. This time we are interested about not only how the narrators felt in November 1989 but also in their views during the 1990's and today's social and political events, which kept changing during this research.<sup>7</sup> In repeated interviews, we also captured the personal reflections of the narrators on their professional and family life and we were very interested in their important life

4 The project was supported by a grant from GA AV ČR (A 9063601), and was realized in years 1996–1998.

5 The project was supported by a grant from the GA ČR (410 / 17-14167S), and was realized in years 2017–2019.

6 Except for the main researcher of the team, the current team has completely changed (Schindler-Wisten, 2019b: 40–52).

7 At the beginning of the research, we also made it clear that we would conduct the second interview in a way that was not common and recommended in oral history practice – not two to four weeks after the first interview, but six to twelve months later. This new methodological element has brought us an extra dimension of the time-lapse period in the project. The recording of the second interviews over a long period of time showed a number of new and interesting situations that took place not only in the lives of the narrators (events in personal life, e.g. death of parents, birth of grandchildren, change of job, etc.) but also in society, e.g. parliamentary (2017) and presidential (2018) elections (Vaněk, 2019: 52–65).

milestones. The ex- university students formed a specific group of well-educated and some very active people in either political or public life who like to express themselves about various social questions.<sup>8</sup> They belong to the generation who do not remember the year 1968 and they also have an understandable distance from the year 1948.<sup>9</sup> Although narrators did not experience 1968 or only as very young children, in interviews many of them recalled their stated opposition to the August invasion in their families and, later, increasingly outside the family. They were not put through the trauma of the tanks in August 1968 like their parents. There was no backlash but just very strong resistance. It is clear, that every generation accedes to the individual historical events with different experiences and judges it. The generations' circumstances affect how all members of each generation relate to their own past (Švaříčková Slabáková, 2020: 193). However, the same experience can be understood in different ways and cause intergenerational differences.<sup>10</sup> In the original project the narrators were in their thirties, some were already parents but many in their interviews did not mention this. They also did not include the start of their career as a mentioned theme. In the following project there were narrators in their fifties, some of them were already grandparents, mostly at the top of their careers and often very successful. They looked at the events of past decades in interviews with a greater insight than was understandably possible twenty years ago, thanks to the experience of life.

## NARRATOR AND INTERVIEWERS

Before I analyse the interviews with the main character of this study, I would like to describe his biography briefly. Pavel Lagner<sup>11</sup> was born in 1966, he grew up in Prague. His father worked as a labourer; his mother was a nurse. He passed his A levels in the grammar school in 1984. He was not accepted into the university the first time. Therefore, he worked as a warehouseman and cleaner for one year. After that year he was accepted to study Czech language and art at the Pedagogy Faculty of the Charles University. After two years of study he left to study at the Theatre Faculty, The Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, where he experienced the events of November 1989. He became one of the leaders of the students strike; he also helped to organize the

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8 Some of "our" narrators were also approached by the Memory of the Nation organization, which recorded interviews with them focused mainly on their memories of the events of November 1989. See more "Student activist during the Velvet Revolution in the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic." <https://www.pametnaroda.cz/cs/studentsky-aktivista-behem-sametove-revoluce-v-cssr>.

9 The years 1948 and 1968 are important milestones in Czech history. In 1948, the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia took power in the country, and 1968 began hopefully with the so-called Prague Spring, which ended with the Russian occupation. See more for example Institute of Contemporary History (n. d.). *Prague Spring 1968*, <http://www.68.usd.cas.cz/>.

10 For more see the perception of November 1989 as a symbolic centre in the Wohlmuth Markupová's study (Wohlmuth Markupová, 2019: 139–185).

11 Narrators have the option of requesting anonymization when signing an informed consent. In this case, resp. throughout the project, anonymization was meaningless, and none of the narrators used this possibility. As in other Oral History Center projects, where we interviewed public figures, there is a degree of self-presentation to be taken into account in the analysis and interpretation of the interview, which may, however unwittingly, be modified by narrators.

demonstrations. After he finished his art studies in 1992, he worked in the East Bohemian Theatre in Pardubice for one year. Then he worked in the Ministry of Culture for two years as a first secretary to the minister. He also worked for several years for the company AB Barrandov and at the beginning of the millennium he became the manager of the art gallery called Stubborn. Since 2005 he has been the curator of PPF Art Galleries and art collections. At the same time, he has been an actor in the theatre group called Casper and appeared on TV also including parts in several films.

Not only during the recording of the oral-history interview, but also during its preparation and then during the analytical and interpretative part, the person of the interviewer is very important. "...life history research is iterative and the analysis of an interview already begins in the interview situation." (Adriansen, 2012: 44). The interviewer takes a large part in the final portion of the interview and he is the medium to help the narrator discover each layer of his life, which is structured and formed by the questions and suggestions of the interviewer.

For the subsequent analysis of the life story of our narrator, it is therefore necessary to introduce the persons of the interviewers who conducted interviews with him. Milan Otáhal<sup>12</sup> recorded the first two interviews at the end of the nineties and I<sup>13</sup> recorded the other two, twenty years later. Twenty years ago, a 70-year-old man recorded an interview with a 30-year-old man, which is naturally a different situation from that of a 40-year-old woman recording a 50-year-old man. After mapping the narrator's family background and the course of his education, the first interviewer focused mainly on the central event of 1989, i.e. the student demonstration on November 17 and the subsequent course of the student strike through the eyes of the narrator. In these interviews, the narrator's current personal situation was not, with exceptions, taken into account; indeed, even then, it was not the goal as opposed to the current project, in which, on the contrary, we tried to get narrators to reflect on the current public and their own situation. The narrator developed naturally and reflected spontaneously in the current interview. Already during the first interview he told me about his personal problems and experiences with no encouragement or prompting (e.g. his divorce, shared custody of his child, hospitalization in intensive care). You could tell it was like a form of natural specific balancing of his life. Pavel Lagner was also one of those who recorded an interview for *The Memory of the Nation*. In this project the interviewer was a literary scientist who is interested in, apart from other things, the language of the communist totalitarianism. The content of this interview is similar to the one from the end of the nineties but includes as an extra the post November journey of the narrator.<sup>14</sup> The narrator was open in all three projects and also very helpful to the interviewers. In addition, he has featured in several documentaries covering the events of 1989, and, as we shall see, his memories of these events are already well established and his storytelling has been mastered.

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12 A historian of contemporary history and a former dissident; dealt mainly with the period of so-called normalization, born 1928.

13 An anthropologist, since 2002 researcher at the ICH, Oral History Centre.

14 For more on the issue of the position of the interviewer in this project, see Schindler-Wisten, 2019c: 41–60.

## NARRATIVES CHANGING OVER TIME AND THE MEANING OF EMOTIONS

All interviews help people to edit their experiences into meaningful episodes and therefore make sure their life experiences carry on. Simply stated, the stories construct each man's identity. We cannot only see the narrator's events through his own eyes but we have to study everything in the wide social world, which the narrator happened to be in. As Fivush pointed out: "As we tell and retell stories of our experiences with others, and others evaluate and interpret their experiences with us, we create a sense of who we are in the world" (cited by Lohmeier, 2020). Every biography contains different aspects of the social world: the structure and the behaviour, the perspective of the subject and object, the society and the human alone (Fritzová, 2011: 228). The life story pictures not only tell the story of the narrator alone but the historical events at that time and the dynamically changing society. It is a reconstruction of their life story with the context of great history.

The main role in the oral history interview takes its timing in the narrator's life phase. Two life stories of one narrator recorded by same interviewer but during different periods of time will never be the same. The human naturally changes his attitude and his ideas under the pressure of circumstances (Profantová, 2015: 14). As Goodson and Sikes said: "A life story is concerned with understanding a person's view and account of their life, the story they tell about their life." (cited by Adriansen, 2012: 41). The same person can in different stages of his life sense a certain event each time differently and can talk about it in different ways. There are new circumstances and life experiences. The previous ones overcome the perspectives of the interview and are changed and the new information surfaces to the top. The narrator never mentioned them before, possibly because he could not, due to its irrelevant content or maybe because he did not want to, or forgot, or for many reasons he did not want to inform the interviewer as they did not match the political, family or social situation. The time distances from the event to remembering it is a very important factor but not a restricting one.

The memories are often thanks to human high phenomenon, like the recall, forgetting, reassessment and actualization variable. Under the pressure of various circumstances, the choice of presenting important information in the life changes in the life narration (Veselská, 2007: 120). The past is revised from the perspectives of the present, which is affected by actual political and personal events.

As it was told our lives don't take place in a historical and social vacuum but the other way round in the social historical time which has shaped and structured them and also made a certain historical context. During the analysis of each life story it is necessary to realize and accept the context which forms our world point of view and also our biography in a very important way. It is not any different with our narrator who became aware of the determination through the actual optics during the first interview when he evaluated the November events ten years after:

*Well during that time [1989] I certainly believed some things were more important than today. And on the other hand some different things which I didn't treat as high countenance I prefer to remember better, and I memorize them much deeper than*



*things I treated as totally important at that time but some things must be changed anyway* (personal interview, May 1997).

Our memories are of such a specific social construction which has changed during the time and has got its own historical meaning. "It is not only how the story is told, which is relevant, it is also how the story relates to what has happened in the interviewee's life and how the person has reacted towards it." (Adriansen, 2012: 42). It is not important how long we remember each event but why we recall it, how strong were the experiences and how we feel about them now. Also, all of this of course influences our identity (sex, age, education etc.).

The strongest life experience for the great majority of our narrators was naturally the Velvet Revolution, which was due to the very focus of the project. The 1989 events are also the important landmarks for Pavel Lagner as during the first interview he remembered the emotionally strong events directly from the 17<sup>th</sup> November on the Národní třída. During our last interview he highlighted the events following the year 1989, which took place in his personal and occupational life:

*...and I often think about the linking points of my life how they all followed from the right and the left. There were only a few things that I have not tried. [Laugh] In fact I always wanted to be completely different. But the milestone was for me one hundred percent the Ministry of Culture, my arrival and departure there. The film studio Barrandov... all the linking points that happened to push my life somewhere else because always something big happened and this always pushed my life in a different direction. Of course, my first son and my other little children were my main landmarks and there were many more of them like my brother's cancer which he survived. Not all had happy endings, like the death of my friends and then the divorce. The divorce became an unforgettable event too* (personal interview, April 2018).

During the first interview he mentioned his personal events as his most important, including the wedding and the divorce even though the interviewer's question was about political matters and concentration on the perception of the year 1968 (when the narrator was two years old).

*I definitely felt that the landmark was the year 1968. I now believe that until 1989 it was the most important milestone in my life. It is definitely so. Since that time many things have happened, in my personal life, the year 1989, my wedding, divorce and so on. During my childhood, growing up, other political events, that was definitely landmark number one for sure* (personal interview, June 1997).

After twenty years during the next interviews he never mentioned anything about the year 1968. Not even once. The question is how important was the theme for the interviewer at that time and how important was it for the narrator. We come across the problem of the communication of his experiences. It's all about the "meaningfulness" of the experience during its timing (cultural, social) and situations with no context. For the stability of the memory, the important extent of the recollections and emotions, which are closely linked with the process of identification (Vrzgulová, 2019: 142). The

previous experiences we lived through, later on were “only” remembered thanks to the emotions which affect the coding and ability to remember. We remember much more easily what affected us deeply inside and thanks to the strong emotion it got “imprinted into our memories”.

The most frequent emotion leaked out during the interviews with our narrator was fear (fright, scare). The emotion from the fear of the communist regime and all involved in it mingles the interviews of both projects. During the first interview he describes affectionately his first Christmas after the Velvet Revolution and that time he appraised the many years his parents lived in fear. That Christmas he gave them photos of Václav Havel with his autograph which made them cry:

*Both of them by the Christmas tree in December 1989 kept crying and crying for a long time and it was such a purifying cry which kept going for ages, there was no reason for it but it had a whole life input. I suddenly understood how my parents felt during those two hours of crying, what they felt inside... you could see there was the whole life expectation and that this was the end of their fear... (personal interview, May 1997).*

The strong emotions are described by the narrator directly linked with the events which took place on the Národní třída on the 17<sup>th</sup> November:

*I was very scared when I got there ... I ran as far as the building Žluté lázně and they were sitting down on the pavement, some of my school friends, and I believe there were even some of my teachers, five of us got together there and I just stood there and was looking towards, what was at that time the department store May and I couldn't believe my eyes, I just didn't expect it all. We were at the back, with our eyes coming out of their sockets thinking what will happen now, we were in such a mess we were going into a frenzy from it all, how to face it all, we can't surely go back to school on Monday and pretend nothing really happened... (personal interview, May 1997).*

The feeling of fear was exchanged for the feeling of euphoria – which filled all students during the strike:

*In fact in my case it was not feeling only fear but anything else than fright, it was pure excitement... so we are going to face tanks, I am sure there was fear in it too but the strong emotions took over, the emotion was so strong it totally disabled all what we felt, that we were tired as we had hardly slept during the event but we just didn't miss the sleep, we didn't eat much either, it felt as if all our functions had much smaller needs... The excitement was strong and heartfelt. We kept hugging each other as little children, cried and laughed and all of it was full of affection, hysteria, fear, exertion and stimulated emotions... but the euphoria was just unbelievable (personal interview, May 1997).*

When he evaluated his life twenty years later, the emotions of personal luck and happiness took over, meanwhile as a human being interested in today's social situation, he feels very critical towards it and even has some fear still present in his thoughts and this is as far as he thought about emigration. During the last interview he pointed out the re-election of Miloš Zeman as Czech president as the election created from the fake fear.



*It was so awful that I never had such a problem in Czechoslovakia because I kept telling myself – they and I, we and they. It was all absolutely black and white. And plus, I was only twenty-three so I kept telling myself – they [communists] can't be here forever, one day it all will be revealed and the paradise on earth will come and there will eventually be a rest from all damned Bolsheviks. It was so much easier as there was a hope that this has to finish one day and it just was such pure polarity. Even if you had a fear that someone reports on you, and will inform someone but more and less everywhere you turned up, you were amongst yours', it was so simple and obvious. So now it is much more dangerous in certain ways (personal interview, April 2018).*

The memories of the time before 1989 are filled up with fears from the communist regime at the same time also with positive emotions connected with youth, in the narrator's case feelings and emotional changes:

*I started to understand the context, from my own willingness I begun to visit the church. I went through my own conversion so for me it was from one point of view one of the most pleasant periods in my life but at the same time it was one of the worst life stages too, because I lived in fear and I know for sure I was scared a lot (personal interview, June 1997).*

According to the narrator, the fear and apprehension of the communist regime, which he experienced first-hand, is significant in the sense that it affected him forever, unlike the generation of children who didn't experience it. What he fully realized during the last interview was:

*I think it stands that everybody that experienced totalitarianism will never be free in all ways. There is a big difference between us [my son and myself]. I keep inside the suspiciousness, fear and no-confidence and I know it for sure (personal interview, April 2018).*

During the original interviews there is no such strong awareness of the deep-rooted regime but it flashes back during the memories of parents, grandparents and their coexistence with the old regime. These are the early experiences of the narrator which are determining for his future life and create the picture of the world. Through that picture a person can compare all experiences and events. The historic proportions lead the individuals during their youth and have the deceiving influence for his next decision-making and actions (Havlíková, 2007: 186).

## FAMILY AS A REFUGE

The family comes first where everybody meets their past through common experience. From the memories of the older generations they discuss their attitudes, aims and values. The following generations try to understand the actions of their ancestors to put their stories into, for them, understandable boundaries (Vrzgulová, 2017: 83). The family environment strongly affected our narrator; he values the family very much. In

the very first interview the narrator talked extensively about his family background and what he perceived as a very important theme in the connection of the project. The majority of life stories begin naturally with memories of the childhood, parents and grandparents. However, the aim of the project for which the interview was recorded can affect the stream of ideas. During the first minutes of the first interview he pointed out the fact that his family followed the church, which he treated as an important fact in the relation to his active engagement in the student strike in November 1989:

*My family, I should have mentioned* [emphasis my own], *are followers of the Catholic Church* (personal interview, May 1997).

The interview begins with the memories of his father, who came from a family with a farming background which was badly affected during the years after the war, especially due to the nationalization of agriculture. Immediately at the beginning of the interview the narrator remembers the very strong emotions about the nationalization, when he twice pointed out his father's comments which were imprinted on his mind:

*My father carried the memories of the theft of the animals all his life and the moments of the years 1949-1951 and talked about it when I was little and this is why it is imprinted on my mind... I was brought up as a pacifist and to respect life, even when somebody was very bad. So, violence was forbidden in our family, any violence against anybody, this is also engraved in my mind because I couldn't arrange it in my child's brain, because dad also said there was one exception. That during his whole life he realized, that if he had owned a handgun, he would have shot those people to the last one and you could tell he was dead serious about it and that he will never forget it* (personal interview, May 1997).

For the forming of the identity and own life story the first influence comes from the family members and later from other people, from studies, working and public life. The influence of the authority on important life decisions is significant and of that the narrator is fully aware:

*What governed my life were some personalities and people I met* (personal interview, March 2017).

The main character for the narrator was his father, who deeply influenced him and became his moral hero. He appraised his father as embittered against anything official either positive or negative but also at the same time he wasn't a fighter but modest and honest with no ambition:

*We never understand why on one hand he is so honest at work, when on the other hand he hates the work because of the regime and we couldn't as children understand that the work was just there for him* (personal interview, May 1997).

His mother came from Prague, her parents belonged to the higher society and according to the narrator because of her social position during the First Republic and from the fear from the 1948 events they both joined the communist party:

*I always believe that this confirms the spineless personalities of my grandparents but God forgive me I don't want to judge them because I don't know how I would have dealt with it all in 1948. God forgive me* (personal interview, May 1997).

The narrator judged this moment as negative but in the same breath added he doesn't know how he would have acted alone. Later on, he reflects self-critically about his membership in the Socialist Youth Union:

*I was after all a member of the Socialist Youth Union and I know why I was there and what reasons led me there and thanks to that I joined them from pragmatic reasons so I also must admit I screwed up* (personal interview, May 1997).

The children are normally brought up by parents. The question is how much education is affected by the actual social and political situation and how much parents can influence the upbringing. Today we are witnesses of the massive increase of social media and its effects on children and youth.<sup>15</sup> Before 1989 at that time the official ideological norm impacted the child's upbringing. The first thing that made this norm strong was the cadre survey of the whole family and this decides the child's life prospect. For many Czechoslovak inhabitants the family became a refuge in front of the politicized public life and many families built up their own so called "Greenhouse World". During the time of normalization, it was common that the families lived their own lives, they spoke about different things at home and different things at school and the non-defined atmosphere of the psychological restlessness, uncertainties, secrecy and conspiracy got into children's knowledge. The communication was mastered by the package taboo (Alan, 1999: 155–170). The family of our narrator was a typical example of the isolation from the public politics. The parents were afraid; therefore they didn't sign the declaration Charta 77 but at the same time they didn't follow the communist regime either:

*The parents were horrified. They never signed it [Charta77]. They were that type of people who did not get involved as they were so scared to either collaborate or work against it. They resolved it in the total family closure and even so far as we never had television or radio, we also never bought newspapers* (personal interview, May 1997).

At the end of the seventies, the father bought a radio and according to the narrator this was such a strong moment for him – "I will never forget this moment as long as I live".

On one hand from the memories of the normalization, the emotion fear is already mentioned and the narrator evaluates the closure from the outside as a positive aspect, because he was a very happy child which he repeats in both interviews:

*My brother and I had no idea about Charta 77 or what was going on around us, we were very happy people. We had no interest in political things. Dad told us stories from his childhood, war, the political events in the fifties, what we knew about... This is all*

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<sup>15</sup> For more information for example Ševčíková a kol., 2014 or Hauptová, 2019.

*he talked about, we treated it as stories involving dad and we lived in different times and we were very happy children and had different problems* (personal interview, May 1997).

One thing he noticed as a child during everyday life. The family followed the Catholic Church and he was confused that something else is talked about at home and something different at school. In his words he, as a child was inclined towards something he liked and didn't want to live in the negation. He always looked for the ways of how to identify himself with something. He didn't understand that his parents didn't identify themselves with anything. Perhaps one of his ways was his membership in the pioneer union. His father was against him joining but his mother put in a good word and the narrator became a pioneer. He has got very nice memories of it because in this concrete union there was no political propaganda.

It emerged that the family had an influence on the narrator, the unanswered question remains, if the narrator's experiences from the normalization and the Velvet Revolution somehow affected the upbringing of his children, more precisely his eldest son because his twins are still little. The narrator declares he passed some experiences and information to his son unintentionally. Most probably thanks to sharing custody with his wife. After the divorce, he spent a lot of time with his older son and therefore they are "connected with each other". They often debated about life and totalitarianism together. His son also read and studied in addition to this and according to the narrator they both share similar attitudes and opinions.

The narrator strongly felt the contradiction between moral necessity and personal fear which was always present in his family and in the interview in the nineties he pronounced that the fear is still there. It harmonizes with his thoughts twenty years later when he talked about "the communist affects".

*It will affect my life till the end... if we like it to or not, all of us who lived actively in that period remember. We were not little children so nobody will take it away from us...* (personal interview, April 2018).

I am getting to how the narrator judged the reality and how his son who is an adult by now, understands the period of so-called normalization and in fact how the whole new generation feels about it. Unlike the older generations this generation didn't live through communism and so doesn't hold on to it and this experience is not transmissible:

*Undoubtedly, we passed to them something but it is very much thinned down by now... and they don't understand certain things and thank God for that. You can't ever explain some things to them. As with my son, you can tell him... he listens to you and then says – oh that must have been terrible. He places it somewhere in his brain but only as the mediation information, not lived through information. He obviously must keep it in a different part of his brain than I do* (personal interview, April 2018).

## CONCLUSION

Have the narrator's views changed on the communist system under the external and internal conditions during the last twenty years since our first project? Or are his interviews consistent? According to the expectation the basic talks were inked with growing up, the study period and November 1989 identical to the original project from the end of the nineties and the following project and also in the "control interview" for the Memory of the Nation. There were for example the memories of the nomenclatural grammar school, the strong experience during the communal Lord's Prayer during the first strike days of 1989 or the funeral of Jan Patočka in 1977. This event was described in both interviews in the same words describing the same atmosphere and the motive of the huge noise of the police manoeuvres and also the strong anxiety of the narrator's parents.

The other movement, in the interviews is already obvious, that it's about the narrators' self-reflection which is not linked with the period of November 1989 but the nineties. Other interviews from the continuing project show that the 1990s are already perceived by narrators as history, a past during which a fundamental change in society took place (Pehe, 2019: 185–222). In contrast, in the original interviews, narrators were not yet able to reflect the importance of economic and political transformation. But now, with hindsight, it is clear that they are aware of the historicity of the political and social changes of this decade.

The narrator's clear self-reflection was evident in the perception of his personal matters for example the unsuccessful uniting of the family and the career which we never heard about in the interview in the nineties but after the time interval he re-evaluated this problem. Regarding the perception of some life episodes the time interval plays an important role together with newly packed experiences. Shortly before the follow-up project the narrator became a father for the second time and regarding the family issues, he was able to talk more widely and with a detached view:

*I don't think I was at home much. If you have children like... [He kept laughing]. I have got newly born two-month-old twins. I am trying not to make the same mistakes and stay perceptive. The first time I just didn't get it. I just thought it was normal one of us has to go to work... I just didn't take it in at that time (personal interview, March 2017).*

In the beginning of the nineties the narrator worked in the Ministry of Culture and after he left, he realized much later how the high position and accompanying power took him out of everyday reality. In both projects he told us the same story which varies in small details and points out the shift in the narrator's self-reflection. During the interview in 1997 he told us, how his friend said the memorable sentence, that the problem of our state is that some people sit one or two chairs higher than they should. In the first interview he remembers, that his friend said this sentence to his mum probably in 1995 or 1996 and the narrator linked it with the high politics, which none of his school friends directly experienced and that he evaluated positively:

*I am confirming that this is the problem of our state and I think we realized that instinctively, that we cannot touch something that doesn't belong to us or what's above our horizon and experiences (personal interview, May 1997).*

During the interview twenty years later, he linked that sentence in the context directly when his friend visited him in the luxurious offices of the Ministry of Culture where he used to work in 1992–1994:

*Petr once visited me, my friend and school friend and sat in that office and stared at the furniture and the luxury interior and he said – “Do you know what our state’s problem is, Lagoš? Some people sit on a chair, one or two steps higher than they should”, he laughed. This was totally accurate. And I thought... about myself that I am not out of the everyday reality. When I left the office I realised, how people in such high posts lose the concept of life (personal interview, March 2017).*

There’s a natural tendency that the older the narrator is, the more he judges things with more insight, explains them, justifies them, or even laughs at them. We hold the evaluating attitude to the past, the narration has a certain “moral implication” (Švaříčková Slabáková, 2020: 200).

The political and afterwards the social changes in 1989 caused the transformation of the value system regulations at that time in society and considerably affected the life of each generation. Each generation has dealt with some pressure to choose new life strategies in its own way. Rather, for older generations, the phenomenon of discontinuity could represent a high dose of uncertainty that has been reflected both in everyday life and in the work sphere.

For our narrator, 1989 became a very significant experience of life, also because he actively participated in the events that went down in history. An important role for Pavel Lagner’s generation was that social and political changes took place during their early adulthood, when, together with the formation of identity, a favourable situation arises to identify with those groups that represent carriers of something new and forward-looking.

The core of our narrator’s life story stays the same in principle; he did not change it after twenty years. It was very important for his family background strongly affected by the fact that the family was following the Catholic Church when he as a child was ashamed of it but later on in his life, he alone followed the religion. The narrations’ links with growing up, studies and the November 1989 events were the same in both projects. The reason is that the narrator’s experience and the memories have sunk in and are consistent. The recurrent interviews especially after longer periods can bring some movements in the interpretation of life experiences. On the other hand, many sections of the interviews repeat themselves – the core of the biographical interview stay identical.<sup>16</sup> Interpretations and evaluations of life may change, but the experiences themselves do not change. What changed in our narrator is the amount of self-reflection, analysed during the last interview. It was confirmed that the movements in the reflection are common affects and that some variability doesn’t have to be deliberate.

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16 N. Veselská came to similar results in repeated interviews in the research of victims of political persecution from the 1950s: reflections and shifts were noticeable in the memories of her narrators of the recent past, but reflections on political persecutions were stable (Veselská, 2007: 123).



It is natural to make sense from each life period and under the load of new impulses can lead to the update of self-definition which surely isn't the attempt to forge but more or less to move on in the awareness of oneself.

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## INTERVIEWS

- All interviews are available in digital collections of the Oral History Centre of the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences.
- Pavel Lagner, recorded by Milan Otáhal, May and June 1997
- Pavel Lagner, recorded by Petra Schindler-Wisten, March 2017 and April 2018

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PETRA SCHINDLER-WISTEN – earned her PhD in General Anthropology, from the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University. Since 2002, she has been a researcher at the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences. Since 2017 she has been the head of Oral History Centre at the ICH. She is a founding member of the Czech Oral History Association. Her research focuses on oral history and Czechoslovak society in the so-called normalization era. She is author of several scientific articles, author of the book *Of Second Homes and People. Country Home Dwelling in the Czech Lands in Periods of “Normalization” and “Transformation”* (2017) and co-author of the book *One Hundred Student Evolutions. University Students of 1989. Biographical Interviews in Longitudinal Perspective* (2019).