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BOOK REVIEW:

A MYRIAD OF SMALL HISTORIES AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

Profantová, Zuzana (ed.) 2006: The Small History of Great Events in Czechoslovakia after 1948, 1968 and 1989. Bratislava: VEDA. Publishing House of the Slovak Academy of Sciences. 468 pages.

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Though the founding of oral history is commonly pinpointed to specific projects, events or people, according to Ronald J. Grele (2008) the international development of oral history is more about oral historians in different parts of the world discovering one another than about the growth of oral history in different parts of the world. In recent years the practice and research of oral history has been particularly strong in the Czech Republic, Poland, Estonia and Latvia, but is gradually gaining ground also in other parts of Eastern Europe. In Slovakia, oral history and memory studies and the use of autobiographical materials are still regarded as rather new and even radical approaches to explore the country's turbulent past. At the beginning of the 20th century Slovakia was part of the Habsburg Empire and has since gone through massive political changes. The collapse of the Habsburg Monarchy in 1918 resulted in the formation of Czechoslovakia, the First Republic. From 1938 to 1945 the country – Czecho-Slovakia, the Second Republic – was occupied by Nazi Germany. In 1939 Slovakia was declared an independent state, but was in fact a satellite state under the rule of Nazi Germany. In 1944 Soviet troops, depending on one's point of view, liberated or took over Czechoslovakia and the Third Republic was established a year later. In 1948 the communists took power and Czechoslovakia was declared a People's Democracy. The year 1968 was full of promise; but ended otherwise. The reform movement known as the "Prague Spring" was suppressed and Czechoslovakia was invaded by the Soviet Union. The era of the communist rule lasted for twenty

years, and was brought to an end by the non-violent “Velvet Revolution” or “Gentle Revolution”, as it is called in Slovakia, in 1989. The Independent Slovak Republic and the Czech Republic were founded on 1 January, 1993.

SMALL HISTORY OR SMALL HISTORIES?

The Small History of Great Events in Czechoslovakia after 1948, 1968 and 1989 is a reviewed collection of thirty-seven quite brief articles by ethnologists, folklorists, historians, sociologists, and students of other fields interested in the study of memory, oral history and new history, history from below or, as in the title of the collection, small history. Most of the authors are Slovakian, but not all. Since the independent Slovak Republic was established in 1993, Slovak historians have published a number of history studies in which they have rewritten the history of Czechoslovakia and the Slovaks. However, Chief Editor Zuzana Profantová phrases the objective of the collection as going beyond that and enriching and deepening “the knowledge with new facts, opinions and testimonies which have not been published so far”. To achieve this goal, the articles in the collection examine historically important events from the perspective of individuals and different groups. Most of the studies presented in the articles are based on oral or written materials (also on graffiti). Particularly in the first introductory articles, much effort has been put into explaining the benefits of using these materials not yet customary in Slovakia.

It is not said out aloud, but it seems that the publication is actually a collection of conference proceedings – a rather uneven collection at that. One cannot help wondering if in this case less would have been more? In some cases it is quite difficult to see how some of the articles relate to the subject. While most of the articles deal with issues concerned with recent Czechoslovakian history, there are also some that do not. For example, there is an article on online rumours and conspiracy theories concerning 9/11, and another on German Ossie/Wessie jokes. Though neither of these articles deals strictly with the topic, they do however exemplify how to examine political folklore. I can also see that the article on the values and attitudes of the Polish towards the socio-political and economic system in New Poland after 1989 may serve as a useful point of comparison to the situation in Slovakia. Although the article on the belief of supernatural tales is intriguing as such, its relation to the topic is far-fetched. Approximately half of the articles deal with methodological issues concerning the use of oral history, memory, or autobiographical materials. Several of these fail to be more than descriptive presentations of interview or autobiographical materials under study, but fortunately there are also some exceptions, and some articles offer thoroughgoing and insightful analyses. For example, ethnologist Ľubica Herzánova examines how elderly people handle ageing and old age, doing it in a subtle way in autobiographical texts.

Another major problem is the uneven quality of the translations and the haziness of the used terminology. For example, *small history* is opposed to *big history* in many of the articles, though I am quite sure that the authors of these articles are actually

referring to *History* (with a capital H). Big history is a term used for the so-called universal history, the one that examines history from the beginning of time to the present day. History, then again, stands for academic history based on archival documents and represented in written form, and a marker for dominant versions (grand or master narratives) of the past. Another problematic concept is *memory*. Since the 1990s, an overwhelming interest in memory has swept through the humanities and social sciences to the extent that we can today talk of a *memory turn* or *memory boom*. This immense increase in memory studies also presents side-effects: the concept of memory has turned fuzzy, as David Berliner has stated in his review on memory studies (Berliner 2005; see also Beiner 2008). On the one hand, the term memory has become a kind of common noun, which can be used about nearly anything related to the past in the present. On the other hand, the number of memory-related terms is countless and conceptual imprecision is far too common. A more matured notion of memory is something that we all who do memory studies should strive for.

PARADIGMS ON THE MOVE

In her article Hana (Anna) Hlôškava points out that oral history research is not as established in Slovakia as it is in other post-communist countries. For instance, in the Czech Republic, the status of oral history is totally different, like Miroslav Vaněk, the director of the Czech Centre of Oral History, demonstrates in his article. Large-scale oral history projects have been carried out in the Czech Republic since the 1990s. The Czech Oral History Association was founded in 2007 and will be hosting the International Oral History Conference in Prague in 2010. In many of the articles by Slovak authors; the tone is quite defensive in the same way that oral history was justified elsewhere in the 1970s and 1980s. In some, the author even takes a skeptical stand towards the use of memory and memory-based recollections are opposed to “official” history. Oral historian Alistair Thomson (2007) has outlined four paradigmatic shifts in the theory and practice of oral history: “the postwar renaissance of memory as a source for ‘people’s history’; the development, from the late 1970s, of ‘postpositivist’ approaches to memory and subjectivity; a transformation in perceptions about the role of the oral historian as interviewer and analyst from the late 1980s; and the digital revolution of the late 1990s and early 2000s” (Thomson 2007). However, as Thomson himself points out, these paradigmatic shifts have not followed each other chronologically, but are often interconnected and overlapping, and may therefore be found in different national and regional contexts. In the case of Slovakia, where oral history research is still a newcomer without an established position in the academia, it is understandable that the practice of oral history and the use of autobiographical material are considered to need justification in the local context. With all due respect to this fact, I still find it difficult to see why this defending is required in a collection aimed at international audiences. These audiences, after all, do mostly agree with the oral historian Sean Field (2009), who, in his IOHA debate earlier this year, noted that oral history nowadays is by all means a “respectable” field of study and cannot

be considered in any way “unreliable” or as the “stepchild of academia” anymore.

All in all, the collection offers absorbing perspectives to less known events and experiences of Czechoslovakian history. Czechoslovakia consisted of many different ethnic groups, of which especially the Sudeten Germans had a politically strong and influential position. Sociologist Olga Šmidová’s article discusses the way Czech Germans have identified themselves as German or Czech, depending on the political situation. In her article, historian Marina Zavacká tackles the difficulties of studying memories of officially non-existent matters, for example problems concerning healthcare and unemployment in the 1950s. All mentions of these issues were censored in a society which declared to offer free healthcare and full employment for all its citizens. In his article, Jerguš Sivoš maps the history of the labour and concentration camp Nováky (1941–1951) by combining interview and document material in a fruitful way. The outcome is an interesting presentation of everyday life at the camp, which was not only about struggling against continuous hunger and sickness, but also coping with boredom and secret visits outside the camp to visit relatives or to ensure basic necessities needed for survival.

The reviewing of so many and diverse articles was not an easy task and has led to unintended generalizations of some shortcomings of the collection under discussion. In spite of my somewhat critical comments aimed mainly at the method of implementation of the publication, the collection shows without doubt that a change in research paradigms is sweeping through the academic field in Slovakia. In the near future; we will hopefully be hearing more of the research of small histories in this country.

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