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BETWEEN MEMORIES AND IDENTITY **HOW DOES ONE TELL ONE'S OWN STORY?**

Ludmila Volná

THE Communist regime in Czechoslovakia is a designation relating to the span of time between 1948 and 1989, when the Communist party was in power. During this period, hundreds of thousands of people were imprisoned for political reasons, or interned in work or concentration camps; and thousands of others became victims of judicial murders, or died in prison or while attempting to escape across the “iron curtain.” Some historians denounce the Communist rule in Czechoslovakia as one of the most severe in Europe, besides that in the USSR.

The regime tried its best to destroy what they called “the enemy,” which included people who opposed the regime, religious leaders, and the non-communist intelligentsia. Sometimes one became “the enemy” for much less—for sympathizing with some of the above-mentioned or for making a political joke. Personal matters and/or inclinations also played a role in whether a person would be considered a target of persecution; the uneven status of those in favour of the regime, on the one hand, and those who were not, on the other, made this possible. The present article will focus on a particular person’s experience of persecution during a period called “normalization,” and on her attempts to cope with her past.

As there is not much space here to define the character of the Communist persecution in Czechoslovakia in detail, let me briefly outline it from a historical perspective. The country experienced the most brutal of what was to become Soviet-style “socialism” in the so-called “Stalinist” period of the 1950s, with its abolition of the institution of private ownership, its forced collectivization, and its show trials. After a partial release of that grip, which culminated in the so-called “Prague Spring” of 1968, there was a period called “normalization”—a term signifying the return to the pre-reform period—which entailed thoroughgoing political repression, including purges, as well as a restoration of ideological conformity. As Milan Otáhal explains,

a stratum of the privileged came into existence, on the one hand, where the members of the “nomenklatura” belonged, those who enjoyed special advantages and for whom, in fact, the laws did not apply, and a class of underprivileged citizens, on the other, who, for their social engagement in the 1968 events, paid the price of losing many of their civil rights. Somewhere between these two opposite poles was the vast majority of the population. (1994: 21; my translation)¹

One of those subjected to this post-1968 persecution, and with whom this article is specifically concerned, is a person who, for the purposes of this study, will be called “Elisa K.” She was fifteen years old and finishing elementary school when the “normalization” period began to be firmly established (i.e., in the first half of the 1970s). Her parents had just been labelled “enemies of the regime,” and were left, although educated—thus, part of the intelligentsia—without the possibility of having any profession for a lengthy period of time: they were to be accepted nowhere as work-

¹ “Vznikla jednak vrstva privilegovaných, kam patřili hlavně příslušníci nomenklatury, kteří měli zvláštní výhody a ve skutečnosti pro ně neplatily ani zákony, jednak nerovnoprávných občanů, kteří za společenskou angažovanost v roce 1968 zaplatili ztrátou mnohých občanských práv. Mezi oběma póly se nacházela drtivá většina obyvatelstva.”

ers, despite the country *officially* being one in which unemployment did not exist. On the contrary, it was everyone's duty to be employed; otherwise, the person was officially "a sponger" and, thus, subject to imprisonment.

Elisa was denied the right to study, even at a secondary level, despite the fact that she was acknowledged as the best student of her elementary school, even if only her grades were taken into account. Just after finishing elementary school, she was ordered to join a milk processing factory as a worker. "Forced labour" and "slave labour" are designations that perhaps best express one aspect of her condition. What is even worse, however, is that, at her workplace, she was subjected for ten years to violence committed by a sadistic deviant who was her immediate superior: this violence, which resembled torture, was all done for his own satisfaction. Apart from that, she had further to bear sexual and other forms of harassment from different superiors, as well as hazing-like behaviour, bullying, and stalking.

Her entire family was placed under secret police surveillance for seventeen years, and about two dozen of their neighbours were assigned to spy on them—to monitor and report. It was a life of constant anxiety regarding what would happen, and whether they would be summoned for interrogation or imprisoned. Her father was interrogated many times, and was subsequently detained and held in police custody; and her mother was interrogated several times. Elisa was herself brought for an interrogation publicly—from her workplace, so that everyone there would see—the third day after her eighteenth birthday: she was interrogated by three male agents for seven hours. The event, as she remembers it now, reminds her of the opening scene of Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's 2006 film *Das Leben der Anderen* (*The Lives of Others*), which presents, among other things, the methods used by the STASI, the secret police of East Germany: there was an utter denial of rest, and the same questions were repeated over and over, as if delivered as a form of beating. She was also subjected to intimidation, threats, and other expressions of aggression. Apart from that,

she had no idea how long she would be kept there, and had no right to inform her parents or anyone else of the ongoing proceedings, nor was she given even a drop of water for those long hours. She did not denounce or betray anyone, but instead invented stories to tell her interrogators.

All members of Elisa's family were also monitored at their respective workplaces: Elisa was herself under the surveillance of a person to whose "secret police identification as an agent" was attributed Elisa's first name, and who was none other than the brother of her above-mentioned, sadistic superior.

One might rightly ask why Elisa was subject to persecution even though it was originally her parents who were labelled "enemies of the state." Such practices had become systematic from before the 1950s, such that not only did the children of the "enemy" suffer from the persecution directed at their parents, but the mistreatment was perpetuated towards those children as well. "Dcery 50. let" ("Daughters of the Enemy"), an association that came into existence in 2008 in an attempt to unite the former persecuted children of parents who had been persecuted in the 1950s, officially explains this as follows: "The then society condemned them, too, to lead a miserable existence without *any possibility* of receiving a higher education; condemned them to live the life of 'a culprit without guilt'" (Dcery 50. let, 2008; my translation and emphasis).¹

For Elisa, this was the case even before her prospective study at secondary school was blocked. The report concerning her was clear: "Further study is not recommended because of the parents' attitude towards the regime." Though Elisa's story dates to the 1970s and 1980s, and though her parents were neither executed nor imprisoned for a significant period, she feels that the scope and degree of the suffering caused by persecution reserved especially for her is

¹ "[. . .] tehdejší společnost je odsoudila též k živoření na okraji bez možnosti vyššího vzdělání a k životu, viníka bez viny."

certainly no less important than that experienced by “Daughters of the Enemy.”

Retrieving her own memories in order for an account of what happened, such as this one, to be constituted, has cost Elisa a considerable amount of effort, despite the fact that, as she acknowledges, the account itself is still, by far, a mere approximation and, forcibly, just an attempt at a survey. The sharing of these memories, scrappy and shattered at best, became possible for her only recently (i.e., about twenty years after the persecution ended in 1989), and she still cannot bring herself to speak about it publicly.

Elisa recalls that, during all those years, she felt as if caught between *the impossibility of telling* and *the imperative to tell*, as Dori Laub in his contribution to *Testimony*, a book dealing with the traumatic experiences of Holocaust, calls it (Felman & Laub 1992: 78-79). The latter—i.e., the imperative to tell—has become an urge, one that is almost unbearable for her, which accords with Laub’s claim that “There is [...] an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one’s story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past” (idid.: 78).

Nevertheless, this telling still seemed impossible for Elisa, simply because she found herself not only speechless but, worst of all, also *wordless*. WHAT WORDS was she to use to voice what had happened to her? “There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory and speech*” (Felman & Laub 1992: 78).

If, through *telling* one’s story, one comes, in fact, to *know* it, then what Elisa’s experiences teach us is that to find words for what happened already requires some kind of understanding, identification, and definition. What is first necessary is to recall, to retrieve memories, which, in fact, becomes a kind of re-living. In other words, it is a long process of a circular nature: through retrieving memories and through telling them, that which has happened receives a more distinct shape in terms of identification; and this, in turn, makes further telling easier. It is, nevertheless, not

without a considerable amount of psychic pain which, more often than not, also transforms itself into physical pain and/or some kind of discomfort or other.

Moreover, since “to tell” means to come “to know” one’s own story—and, therefore, “to identify” oneself—Elisa’s urge to tell expresses an imperative, as she acknowledges herself, to “come to terms” with her own identity. Identity coherence and identity recognition had already played a crucial role in what had happened to her. This is apparent in one of her memories, which she here relates:

After ten years and three months of my forced stay in that terrible place—which the dairy-product factory certainly was—I finally managed to liberate myself. It had previously been promised to me that I would be accepted as a cook’s assistant in a school canteen. It had all been arranged. But when, on the first day of my new employment, I came there, I was sent back with the remark that I could not be accepted. It is not their fault; they have been so ordered by the directorate.

Again the same story, I thought. I should have expected it. After all, it was the same scenario as every time before when I tried to find something more convenient than that rotten place of drudgery and torture: be it working as a shop-assistant in a motor-accessories and components shop, or a cleaning job at a music school in which I used to take piano lessons in better times. Preliminary, eager interest in accepting me always turned into an awkwardly expressed refusal once they had the secret-police report. This was, of course, followed by the almost desperate-sounding advertisements on the local radio and elsewhere in the town as they searched for someone for those very jobs.

I should have become used to it, shouldn’t I? This time, nevertheless, I decided I had had enough. I felt I could not remain passive any longer and bear this just going on; I had to do something about it, otherwise I would not remain the person I believed myself to be. In order to remain true to myself I felt I had to speak up and defend myself openly, no matter what conse-

quences I would have to bear. I had had my experiences with the secret police and was sure that I would be put in jail, but I didn't care. I went to the lady at the Regional Directorate of Schools who was in charge of the matter, and asked her to give me the reason for which I could not be accepted. When she said, "But you probably know why," I retorted, "No, I am not aware of any just reason why I could not be accepted as an assistant-cook in a school-canteen. Is the Constitution of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic and the included right to work not valid for me, while it is for other people?" And now, imagine what happened: to my immense astonishment that lady came up to me, embraced me, and started crying. As the two of us cried together, she said: "You must believe me. My colleagues and I have been thinking and talking about you a lot. You are so intelligent; you deserve much, much better than this job. But we could not influence the decision; it was dictated to us."

(“Elisa K.” & Volná, 2009-2010)

Apart from tracing a crucial moment in Elisa's identity coherence, this experience is also interesting because it clearly manifests that *how* “*the enemy of the state*” *was to be treated* had become a matter of conscience and, therefore, a matter of identity coherence for other people, for those who had to take decisions while being aware that how they decided could compromise their own chances to live “normally.” At least this appeared to be the point of view for the vast majority of those who were related to Elisa and her family and for those who looked at the matter through the prism of conscience. Those who seemed not to have any conscience were, however, much more numerous.

Returning to the dilemma of whether to tell or not to tell, there is another important aspect related to it, and that is *denial*. The perpetrators, by having installed a totalitarian regime, made it possible that, within it, what Laub calls a “delusional ideology” was imposed on their victims, one which, expressed in a terse way, made the victims (almost),

in turn, believe that they, in a way, deserved what was happening to them (Felman & Laub 1992: 81, 79). Neither the victim nor the bystanders were capable of stepping outside the frame of enclosure of the totalitarian structure; and, thus, an independent, exterior point of reference was missing. Consequently, there has been a lack of responsiveness, which, in turn, encourages “not telling” (ibid.: 81).

This “not telling,” even many years after the regime was overthrown, plays into the hands of the perpetrators and continues to torture the victims, a point which Laub develops as follows: “The ‘not telling’ of the story serves as a perpetuation of its tyranny. The events become more and more distorted in their silent retention and pervasively invade and contaminate the survivor’s daily life” (Felman & Laub 1992: 79). The result is that, in the end, “the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events” (ibid.: 79). There is then a kind of denial from the “interior,” apart from that proclaimed by the perpetrators; hence, as Laub argues, history has happened as if without any witnesses from either the outside or the inside (ibid.: 81).

Can there be a story amidst a denial of what happened? Elisa has also been trapped in the above-mentioned paradoxical aspect of her situation: she recalls that she not only experienced a lack of responsiveness from “bystanders” at the time the events were happening, but, as the years passed and as she was incapable of telling her tale, she experienced the perpetuation of the invasion of the events in numerous ways, often an everyday tyranny of anxiety, an anxiety of an apparently unspecified nature or for a seemingly unidentifiable reason. Her memory of the events has become a monstrous apparition overwhelming everything else, or the subject of nightmares every night.

She recalls especially one nightmare by which she had been haunted repeatedly: she is in that milk-product factory, but it is *now*. She is there, as she painfully realizes; it is the present she is experiencing in the dream; she has been there all those years and is still there no matter who she has become after the change of the regime; she is there at her cur-

rent age and condition. In the dream, she becomes painfully aware of the fact that she will never be able to liberate herself from this oppressive and desperately rotten environment. She literally cannot move; she is experiencing terrible dread and desperation, feeling frozen and imprisoned until she awakes. In her waking state, she still experiences those profound feelings of anxiety, frustration, grief, injustice, and even of being imprisoned whenever she approaches a subject related to her past suffering, either physically or conversationally. Her physical health has also been significantly affected—most probably, she fears, beyond recovery.

She has also experienced doubts concerning the reality of what had happened—mostly during the post-Communist period—especially when, on numerous occasions, she has observed that there is, in fact and in general, no interest in what had happened to her or how she has been affected by it. The “bystanders” of the past have become the “bystanders” of the present, still imprisoned within a totalitarian or otherwise deformed frame of mind, or else trying to suppress the voice of their consciences.

What Elisa is further suffering from today is what she perceives to be a certain split of, or incoherence in, her identity. This is related to the way her life-course has evolved: she is not what she could have become if she had not had to go through those hardships. She feels an enormous *lack* in terms of what has been taken away from her; she feels it has been lost forever. On the other hand, paradoxically, there is also an *excess* as to what she has experienced, a load too difficult for one person to bear. Also, her identity cannot be an entirely coherent whole, since there is a degree of denial of what happened and a lack of recognition.

To conclude, I would like to quote Jana Švehlová, a psychologist and consultant for the “Daughters of the Enemy,” who is also one of that organization’s members:

Anyone who has experienced emotional trauma of any kind will tell you that one of the worst after-effects is that people do not talk to you, or they do not let you

speak. For the Czech and Slovak children of former political prisoners, not to be silenced by the silence of others can help to heal their emotional wounds. The healing may come because finally their voice is being heard. But who ought to decide whose voice will be heard?

(Švehlová 2010)

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Abstract

The number of those who lost their lives in Czechoslovakia during the Communist regime (1948-1989) is estimated at between six and ten thousand. Those whose lives were severely damaged in

different ways are numberless. The present article will concentrate on one of the latter, a person subject to persecution in the so-called “normalization” period (after 1968). When it all started for her, she was fifteen years old and finishing elementary school. This article will trace the ways in which she is now attempting to put together a coherent story of what happened to her. As she moves between her memories, her feelings, and her present condition, affected beyond recovery, she realizes that the task is not an easy one. This article will use authentic, unedited material from that person’s experiences, gathered, with her permission, through a number of conversations with the present author.

About the Author

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