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**THE UNTOLD NEIGHBOURHOOD STORIES
THE HOLOCAUST IN SLOVAKIA
FROM TWO PERSPECTIVES**

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Since the 1990s, Monika Vrzgulová has been the active personification of the combination of the method of oral history with the topic of the Holocaust in Slovak society. The publication under review, “Untold Neighbourhood Stories: The Holocaust in Slovakia from Two Perspectives” combines the author’s knowledge obtained through long-term research into this issue on two levels: that of remembrance parallelism, and that of observing parallel worlds in contemporary Slovak society (where Jews and non-Jews are just one of the examples) which are reflected in the so-called policy of remembrance. She focuses her attention on both topics, and the result at a purely metaphorical level could be seen as a revaluation of the Slovak nature from that of a nation of doves to one of ostriches.

Metaphors aside, the fact that Monika Vrzgulová’s book can be included in a range of specialist publications using the oral history approach in their research in so-called micro-history is of importance. We can see this publication as a contemporary broadening of knowledge from the first salvage research in our society “The Fates of Those who Survived the Holocaust” (1994/1995 – 1997, pp.14-18), in which the author was part of the research team. Following this project, the well-known monograph by P. Salner, “They Survived the Holocaust” (1998) was published. However, it is important to point out that the author’s achievement, which I mentioned above in a relatively simplified manner as broadening knowledge, is not only focused on already recorded, or newly-obtained testimonies of those who survived. What this work offers is in

fact a broadening of the spectrum of respondents, as well as a connection between the series of events in our history and our present.

The worn formula “chapter in our history” comes easily to the tongue and the keyboard, but this is misleading. It suggests a classification of this topic into the category of the past – experienced and overcome. However, the current socio-political situation in Slovakia excludes the closure of the topic, that is a “closed chapter”. The tabooization of Slovakia’s modern history up to 1989 (p. 36) can be held responsible for not finding a way of approaching the period of the 1939 – 1945 Slovak State without theatrical exaggeration (and we can also include the way of approaching the period of 1945 to 1989). However, flaunting freedom of speech without being aware of the need for critical distance, as well as responsibility for one’s words, is in my opinion not the right path for the social discourse of a progressive, European and traditionally-orientated Slovakia (as we like to describe ourselves) to take. Formal acts of the politics of remembrance (the chapter “Politics of remembering the Holocaust – the case of Slovakia”), as the author mentions them in her book, do not have such an impact on the wider public (pp. 36-51), if only in terms of their choice of wording: the initially postulated request to forgive the sins of our ancestors (p. 37) becomes a dry statement of the wrong-doings committed by others (among us) (pp. 44-46). Perhaps this is the reason why the majority of the population feels that it does not concern them, but there are probably several reasons, for example the often discussed insufficient teaching of the issue of 20th century Slovak history in schools.

In any case, in this respect I note the absence of the answer to the question: why such a lack of interest? The author does hint at the fact that state-initiated remembrance is more a formality associated with the ambitions of foreign policy than a real attempt to deal with a traumatic experience and to “close a chapter” (p. 50 – 51), but there is no explicit conclusion. However, the fact remains that this was not her intention anyway. It is probably a question for us – the readers.

It cannot be denied that for non-Jewish personal observers of the period this is a traumatic affair which needs to be approached in a sensitive manner and in small steps. However, it is questionable as to whether the attitude which prevails today is not too sensitive and too slow to arouse in society the willingness to deal with the fact that it is not anyone else, another unknown and third person, but we and our ancestors who have a certain (more or less definable) share of guilt in the events which took place. It is incredibly difficult to settle this fact. The question is therefore: who of us and how are we able to deal with this?

In this respect, another group of respondents joined Monika Vrzgulová’s research in 2011: non-Jewish personal observers whom she describes as so-called spectators (p. 54). Inspired by Raoul Hilberg’s (2002) categorisation, she chose this term which might be suitable to a certain extent, but at first

glance it suggests the complete passivity of the individual who does not influence events around us, and above all cannot influence them (for example like the spectator in a film). In order to understand this concept better, we must take into account the wider definition of its English equivalent, a “bystander”. We should also introduce the triangular model of the “perpetrators – victims – bystanders” relationship suggested by Robert Ehrenreich and Tim Cole (2005). From this we can deduce that bystanders (as opposed to the Slovak term) are not neutral and passive, but become a grey area, a complex entity.

The author, too, approaches non-Jewish personal observers as a complex entity. For this reason, we can agree with her point that the research is not representative (p. 21) if only as a result of the respondents selected. However, the facts are more important: that the research is salvaging, has a significant testimonial value and the informants fully reflect the basic premise of its categorisation, that is that they are not a homogenous group from any point of view. However, when reading the transcribed witness statements (the section called “The perspective of bystanders”), we must bear in mind several problematic aspects which the author points out in the text, for example the selection of memories (p. 86), distancing oneself from the context using selected language (p. 102), as well as the fact itself that each of us presents the facts based on our (evaluated) experiences (p. 85, p. 90).

The motive of their narrative is also questionable; with a certain level of speculation (as well as interest in the issue) we cannot assume that this is exclusively testimony about the period and the people with whom they lived through it. We must therefore take into account an eventual attempt to deal with trauma as a consequence of one’s own (lack of) action and a symbolic reconciliation with the past and its victims. However, if we accept this version, we must point out that this form of therapy lacks continuation into later generations, and in particular into public debate (p. 100). The level of impact, if there is any continuation into the present, is also questionable, as well as whether this does not come too late.

The research carried out by the author (“Crimes against humanity in the civilian population during the Second World War”, 2011 – present, pp. 19-21) using the method of oral history has in my opinion the potential to fight against ingrained stereotypes, mainly concerning the period of the Slovak State in today’s society (pp. 105-107) through direct testimonies of the Slovak majority population. If this appears an unrealistic expectation on my part, then at least it is possible to agree on the fact that it will force at least a few people to think critically, for example about what they say and how they say it. The approach chosen – the oral history method – has a significant impact on this potential, a method which is directly conceived to obtain information which is not stored in archives, since it works with human memory. The latter records alongside audio-visual perceptions also the subjective side of matters; in the case of this

book, it has been able to put across the testimony of the collective of a generation which will not be around for much longer.

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References

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