

VOJTĚCH KESSLER & DAVID SMRČEK

(2021)

DĚTI KŘTĚNÉ DUNAJEM
ČESKÉ VZPOMÍNKY NA MEZIVÁLEČNOU VÍDEŇ

[Children Baptized by the Danube
Czech Memories of Interwar Vienna]

Praha: Historický ústav AV ČR, 324 pp.

Since the 1970s, autobiographies have been compiled and used as source materials in the humanities and social science scholarship. This trend has also impacted historical scholarship – in the European states which we call “Western European”, interest rose during the 1970s in researching everyday life and the experience of historical events by individual, “little”, ordinary people. The history of the everyday was born as a specific branch of historical science. At the time, Czechoslovakia stood rather apart from this stream of development. It cannot be said that autobiographical sources were never used at all here, but their use was, from today’s perspective, problematic. The thematic concentrations of the autobiographical sources which were compiled during socialism were rather narrow. The multivocality typical of such sources was frequently replaced with a univocality, since only certain interpretations of historical events were to be officially reproduced, those which corresponded to what the communist regime had in mind. In addition, it has to be said that more ethnographers/ethnologists than historians were working with the memoirs of ordinary people in those days.

The situation changed in the 1990s, and the book reviewed here is related to that transformation. The collection of memoirs which serves editors Vojtěch Kessler and David Smrček as the basis for their source material was created at

the instigation of the Austrian historian Michael Mitterauer. He visited the Institute of History at the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague in the 1990s and instigated the creation of the Archives of the History of the Everyday. It was modelled on a similar collection that Mitterauer established at the University of Vienna which exists to this day (as the *Dokumentation lebensgeschichtlicher Aufzeichnungen*). The Archives of the History of the Everyday in Prague hold almost 600 manuscripts which are gradually being processed into the Database of the History of the Everyday.

Through his activity, Mitterauer influenced not just the collection of autobiographical source materials in Prague, but also the attempt to edit and publish them. Here the inspiration was the series “*Damit es nicht verlorengeht*” [So It Will Not Be Lost], which he established in the 1980s and which served as a model for the series published by the Institute of History of the Czech Academy of Sciences entitled *Dějiny všedního dne* [History of the Everyday]. Three volumes in this series have been published to date. The first is *Tváře války. Velká válka 1914–1918 očima českých účastníků* (2020); the second is the book under review here, while the third is *Babičky očima vnoučat* (2023). Kessler edited all three. However, the book I am reviewing here does not follow the model of the Austrian series, nor does it follow the model of the other two volumes in the Czech series.

The autobiographical materials which Kessler and Smrček make available in this book were collected during the second half of the 1990s by Jana Losová, a sociologist. She reached out to the members of the *Klub přátel Rakouska* [Club of the Friends of Austria] – Viennese Czechs, most of whom had been resettled after the Second World War within the framework of their re-migration from Vienna back to their “homeland”, and who lived in Czechoslovakia in the 1990s. Losová requested that they write up memoirs of their childhood and youth in Vienna. These materials then waited almost 30 years to be published. Kessler and Smrček selected the memoirs of 23 persons born between 1910 and 1930, most of whom belonged to the second generation of Czech immigrants to Vienna. Although the editors write that they are not citing any other memoirs in the book (p. 41, p. 289), there are citations from other works (e.g., from a book published by the Brno-based linguists Balhar, Kloferová, & Vojtová, 1999).

The book is not a compilation of autobiographical source materials which have been edited in the usual way. Kessler and Smrček have taken a rather untraditional approach. Because these “texts were not sufficiently homogenous in either style or scope” (p. 14), they decided to divide the book into thematic chapters, selecting excerpts from each autobiographic source for each theme. These excerpts are then connected to each other by the editors’ own commentaries. Personally, I do not consider this decision to have been an absolutely fortuitous one, but it has its advantages and disadvantages. It may be an ad-

vantage for the reader that the editors offer comparisons to testimonies from various authors of both genders and that they spare the reader having to work his or her way through information unrelated to a particular subject, which can feel like “ballast” and is usually present in autobiographical memoirs. However, readers are deprived of the opportunity to see how each author structured his or her memoir, to see the entirety of their memoirs (however “full of holes” or partial the content of them is), which I consider a pity. We also cannot forget that the very selection of the memoirs and which subjects to focus on is the first step toward their interpretation, in other words, it is a rather fundamental intervention on the part of the editors.

The editors were aware of these pitfalls and did their best to counterbalance them. One of their methods for this was to contextualize the memoirs. The reader thus receives a very well-developed overview of the literature on the subject of the culture and history of Czechs in Vienna, including the academic work of ethnologists or linguists, which must be received with thanks, as historians do not always absorb the output of other fields of scholarship. One component of the introductory chapter is called “The Memoirs and Their Authors” (*Vzpomínkové texty a jejich autoři*), in which the editors briefly (too briefly, in my opinion) characterize all of the collected writings which they will be citing in the thematic chapters. However, it can be said in defense of the editors that if readers want to familiarize themselves with the memoirs in their entirety, they can do so through the online database (Institute of History of the CAS, n. d.).

The chapters’ subjects were selected according to two basic criteria: On the one hand, they were chosen on the basis of the importance of the theme in the authors’ memoirs, and on the other hand they were chosen according to topics related to the life of Czechs in Vienna which have been addressed in the literature heretofore (p. 39). The book begins with a “topography of the memoirs”, i.e., recollections of what it was like to move around in the Viennese space, and continues with memories of arriving in Vienna and subjects related to lifestyle (housing, dining, recreation, holidays and festivities). The other chapters are dedicated to life in associations and social organizations (physical education clubs and cultural/social ones), school and work; they also focus on other themes connected with the Czechs’ minority position in Vienna, i.e., their contact with their homeland or the identity of the Viennese Czechs. Memories of the “great history” in the late 19th century and first half of the 20th century are also included as part of the chapters on the trajectory of Czech-Austrian coexistence, on Viennese Czechs in the vortex of “Austrian” history, or on their departure from Vienna in connection with the events after the end of the Second World War. The editors also dedicate a final, special chapter to nostalgia.

I consider the selected themes to have a bearing on this subject, as they capture the features of the life of Czechs in Vienna which were typical for them as members of a national minority (minority associations, school, relations with their Austrian neighbors, the problems of assimilation and identity) and as a group migrating to a metropolis during the rapid industrialization in the late 19th century (their gradual intellectualization during the 20th century, capturing the life of the tradespeople's and working-class layers of society). Likewise, it is possible to follow the perspectives of these "little" people on "great history" (the economic crisis, the world wars).

In my opinion, the most interesting subjects are those investigating identities. The memoirs oscillate between Czech patriotism and Viennese cultural belonging, they present multiple identities, transnational ties. It is also interesting how, according to the editors, the memoirists hesitate to speak of the assimilation the Czechs certainly went through in interwar Vienna. This lack of memory about assimilation proves the impact of various minority policies toward memory and the memoirists' membership in the "conscious" part of the Czech minority in Vienna. The subject of nostalgia in the memoirs is also a peculiar one. In this context, it is surprising that the editors speak of nostalgia, on the one hand, as the memoirs' predominant subject (including in relation to the memoirists' birthdays, as their residence in Vienna belonged to their childhood and youth) and therefore as an idyllic view through "rose-colored glasses", but at the same time state that negative events are recalled above all (p. 235). Nostalgia certainly also relates to the memoirists' departures from the places they remember living during their childhood and youth, and apparently the fact that the memoirists were unable to return to their childhood haunts as often as they would have liked during socialism also plays a role. At the same time, however, I would be careful when it comes to generalizing about a "specific re-migrant mentality" (p. 29). In this context, what is interesting is where the memoirists look for their roots (p. 277). The vast majority seek them in Vienna (not, therefore, in the "old homeland", which their parents saw as the place of their roots). For researchers working with the memoirs of those born in the interwar period, it is interesting to trace the norms and values which were handed down in these families. One example is the emphasis on diligence, on respect for one's parents and their work (pp. 176-177), which we know from many memoirs of "children" born during that time.

The book is richly augmented with photographs. On the one hand, these illustrate the memoirs quite appropriately, and on the other hand they make the book attractive to readers, including the lay public. The photographs are not just from the memoirists' family archives, but also from historical photographs or those of the current state of the places which figure in the memoirs. The extensive bibliography and list of places is quite a welcome component, as it benefits our better orientation in the content of the memoirs themselves.

Despite the above reservations, I consider this edition of these autobiographical writings by “Viennese Czechs” to be a quality work. The intersubjectively shared interpretations of events, established narratives and notions are well-reflected in it, as are certain differences of the memoirists’ ages, genders, and social positions. In addition, it provides interesting material for comparison, whether across different national minority groups, or levels of society, or age groups and generations.

Jana Nosková

References

- Balhar, J., Kloferová, S., & Vojtová, J. (1999). *U nás ve Vídni. Vídeňští Češi vzpomínají* [At Home in Vienna. Viennese Czechs Remember]. Brno: Masarykova univerzita.
- Institute of History of the CAS. (n. d.). *The History of Everyday Life Database*. Retrieved January 11, 2024, from <https://ddvd.kpsys.cz/>
- Kessler, V. & Smrček, D. (2021). *Děti křtěné Dunajem. České vzpomínky na meziválečnou Vídeň* [Children Baptized by the Danube. Czech Memories of Interwar Vienna]. Praha: Historický ústav AV ČR.
- Kessler, V. & Šrámek, J. (2020). *Tváře války. Velká válka 1914–1918 očima českých účastníků*. [Faces of War. How Czech Participants Saw the Great War 1914–1918]. Praha: Historický ústav AV ČR.
- Losová, J., Kessler, V. & Kršková, V. (2023). *Babičky očima vnoučat* [How Grandchildren See Their Grandmothers]. Praha: Historický ústav AV ČR.