

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jana Losova, ed. *Kindheit in Böhmen und Mähren. Damit es nicht verloren geht...* Vienna und Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 1996. 414 pp. DM 39,80 (cloth), ISBN 978-3-205-98215-9.

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## Memories of Childhood

The collapse of the Iron Curtain has had many important results, one of which has resulted in this book. Since 1989 scholars from the Czech Republic and Austria have collaborated in the collection, analysis, and publication of autobiographies of ordinary people. This process echoes the development of oral history and life history during the 1970s and 1980s in the United States and elsewhere. Using as a model the “Dokumentation lebensgeschichtlicher Aufzeichnungen” at the Institute for Economic and Social History of the University of Vienna, Austrian and Czech researchers established a collection of over two hundred personal autobiographies in Prague under the auspices of the Historical Institute of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences. These documents represent a valuable treasury of qualitative sources which help to provide a clearer picture of recent history in the experiences of ordinary people.

Since 1994 the collections in Prague and Vienna have yielded a series of volumes of which the present work is one. Other works in the series consist either of individual remembrances, such as those of a Communist Jew in the Bukovina, or collected experiences, covering such topics as servants, Christmas, and grandmothers. Several have dealt with childhood, including one on childhood in the Balkans and a second covering childhood in the First World War.[1]

*Kindheit in Boehmen und Maehren* consists of twenty autobiographies arranged chronologically, each with a few paragraphs of introduction, all between a very brief foreword and a longer afterword. The stories include pre-

viously written works as well as some that were especially written or revised at the request of the editor. They concentrate on childhood (roughly from birth through the teenage years) in the experiences of twenty persons born between 1863 and 1933. Although the afterword briefly analyzes similarities in life experience as well as psychological development, the work should be seen as a collection of sources rather than as an analytical monograph on childhood. The overwhelming majority of the book consists of the autobiographies themselves.

The editor selected the autobiographies based on variations in social milieu and geography. Fittingly, the majority describe experiences in the countryside. Here, they are a forceful reminder that societies characterized by agrarian lifestyles persisted until quite recently in Europe. One area which demonstrates this is the extent to which natural forces influenced daily life. In describing their experiences the authors clearly establish the importance of the agricultural calendar in determining the work routine. Jakob Stefan (born 1863) and Josef Svoboda (born 1890) talked about their families' weaving linen during the winter. Svoboda discusses how until 1919 the school year was shortened (to the period from November to March) for students who helped with agricultural work. Josef Hons (born 1907), though living in Kutna Hora, spent his summers in the countryside helping relatives with agricultural tasks which were constantly changing. For the harvest, relatives would gather from city and country, providing crucial assistance. Frantisek Panek (born 1907) also spent summers in the countryside, helping his grandmother and grand-

father with the hops harvest.

Seasonality affected life in other ways as well. For Josef Jesatko, Sr. (born 1973), winter brought both the memory of playing in the stalls at night amid the warmth of the cows as well as the less pleasant one of going to bed hungry because his parents usually could find no work this time of year. Frantisek Kohout (born 1899) remembered winter as a time of evening gatherings to hear story tellers and learn local history. Anna Patockova (born 1879) remembered the seasonal succession of particular plants and flowers. Vladimir Lach (born 1885) recalled fall when the family made *Powidl*, cooking all night long. Fall was also the time for hog-killing, a vivid memory for Jakob Stefan.

While natural seasons represented one major influence on the calendar, religious seasons represented another. The cycle of religious holidays marked the year for the children. Usually associated with these holidays were particular foods. The year began with *Fasching*, which meant lots of doughnuts for Jakob Stefan. This was also the favorite holiday of Josef Jesatko, Sr., bringing with it processions of all the crafts' guilds and ending with a communal celebration on Fat Tuesday. Such celebrations would surely have been familiar to children going far back into early modern times. Jakob Stefan described devotions during the first days of May, consisting of prayers on his knees lasting an hour and a half. Seasonal pilgrimage processions were a huge occasion for Ondrej Ledvina (born 1889). However, the highlight of the year for most children was the Christmas season. It brought the gathering of the family of Marianna Fragnerova (born 1905), during which she was especially fascinated by her fashionable Aunt Karla, whose powdered face made her look like a miller's apprentice. Vaclav Koza's (born 1911) Christmas included a dinner of *Kuba* (barley with mushrooms) and *Dalken* with *Powidl* (a baked good spread with plum jam). Kvetoslava Radvanovska (born 1930) remembered the *compote* made from dried fruit. For Ruzena Vesela (born 1928), Christmas brought neither presents nor even a tree, but was still memorable for the caroling through the village.

Another frequent memory of childhood was work. Nearly all the autobiographies describe laboring from an early age. Josef Svoboda's first job was keeping the geese until he graduated to herding cows at age 10. Vladimir Lach had some difficulty in gaining a position as a tailors' apprentice, turning down his first offer when the master told him he would have to sleep in the attic rather than in a warmer place in the house because of the presence

of the masters' two unmarried daughters! Lach subsequently secured a different position which allowed him to sleep in the kitchen near the oven. Josef Jesatko, Sr. (born 1873) sang for shepherds in return for snacks. He was proud of the fact that he received this food by work, not by begging. Life in Prague during World War I was a struggle for Josef Jesatko, Jr. (born 1907), forcing him into a variety of jobs from carrying bags from the train station to singing carols in front of shops for handouts. Ruzena Vesela's best memory of childhood was the time she spent as a servant at age 15.

Many of the autobiographies describe the strong impression their school days made on them. Ondrej Ledvina tells of his father's insistence that he attend school regularly, though Ledvina responded to the seeming uselessness of much of his Gymnasium education with the complaint that "Wir lebten im Altertum [We lived in ancient times]," learning of Ovid but remaining ignorant of how to fill out postal documents! Josef Svoboda recalled his first day of school, dressed in his holiday clothes, but with no shoes. Frantisek Kohout still remembered the names of all his teachers when he was ninety-three years old.

Several of the stories include references to learning national pride. Vladimir Lach vividly recalled how his teacher taught him love of the Czech nation through stories of Cyril and Methodius, Jan Hus, and White Mountain. When he later went to Vienna to live with an aunt, he described her joy at being able to speak Czech with someone. Ondrej Ledvina remembered the deep impression festivities marking the one hundredth birthday of Frantisek Palacky had on him, describing how he first became aware of his membership in the great Czech nation. For Josef Jesatko, Jr., the demonstrations in Prague celebrating national independence in 1918 were a high point of his childhood.

There are some experiences that only individual autobiographies tell of, some pleasant, some more disturbing. Vladimir Lach describes a traveling puppet theater that set up in the town square and played mostly historical stories. Josef Jesatko, Sr., recalled the offense of the villagers who prepared a large celebration for the arrival of the archbishop only to have the archbishop fete his cavalry troops while ignoring the local people. Ondrej Ledvina tells of the reason behind the local custom of cousin marriage: "... damit die Sache nicht in fremde Haende kommt [so that things do not end up in strangers' hands]." Frantisek Kohout describes how the local brass band played the deceased's favorite song at graveside, ac-

accompanied by many tears. Frantisek Panek's description in sometimes disturbing terms of the appearance of gypsies in his village stands in sharp contrast to that of Russian POWs, who left after the war with the result that "...manches Maedchenherz sehnte sich nach ihnen [many maidens' hearts longed for them]."

After reading these fascinating autobiographies, one might ask, what next? More specifically, how useful are these documents as sources of historical information?

Two questions arise, in particular. First, how reliable is information on childhood recorded so many years after the experiences and feelings they describe? One might be disturbed by the almost universally happy memories of childhoods of which many were clearly very difficult. As Tamara Hareven puts it: "The recognition that interviews are sources of perception rather than of fact has been an important step in interpreting life histories and memories." [2] The editor deals with this question, albeit obliquely and briefly, in the afterword. Here, she discusses "eidetic memory," the psychological phenomenon of being able to remember quite precise details, but even after saying that this ability declines with age, there is no discussion of possible problems for historical research. A second problematic issue concerns how representative these twenty experiences are of childhood during this period. How comfortable can we be in generalizing these particular people's experiences to the rest of the population? This question is not addressed in the book.

I must emphasize again, however, that this work is really a collection of primary sources and not an analysis of childhood. And although historians justifiably worry over issues of memory and representativeness, there remains a great deal of usefulness in these recollections. For instance, while one might question some of the more precise details of particular religious events, the major role that religion played in daily life is far less open to

query. The situation is comparable with such topics as the role of work, the growth of animosity among Germans, Czechs, and Jews in the 1930s and 1940s, and the association of particular foods with particular holiday seasons. Historical anthropological approaches can benefit greatly from these reminiscences when dealing with family or community relationships. The book also contains valuable data for approaching the growth of nationalism and the actual experiences that furthered its development. Several stories illustrate the interactions between individuals and such major events as the two world wars. Many other areas of research can similarly profit from this fascinating collection of childhood memories.

#### Notes:

[1]. Prive Friedjung, ed., *"Wir wollten nur das Paradies auf Erden..." Die Erinnerungen einer jüdischen Kommunisten* (Vienna, Cologne: Boehlau, 1995); Norbert Ortmayr, ed., *Knechte. Autobiographische Dokumente und sozialhistorische Skizzen* 2nd edition. (Vienna, Cologne: Boehlau, 1995); Heinz Blaumeiser and Eva Blimlinger, eds., *Alle Jahre wieder... Weihnachten zwischen Kaiserzeit und Wirtschaftswunder* (Vienna, Cologne: Boehlau, 1993); Erhard Chvojka, ed., *Grossmutter. Enkelkinder erinnern sich* (Vienna, Cologne: Boehlau, 1992); Kristina Popova, ed., *"Ein roter und ein weisser Zwirn." Jugend auf dem Balkan* (Vienna, Cologne: Boehlau, 1996); Christa Haemmerle, ed. *Kindheit im Ersten Weltkrieg* (Vienna, Cologne: Boehlau, 1993).

[2]. Tamara K. Hareven, "What difference does it make," *Social Science History* 20:3 (1996), 329.

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