

THE WAR FROM THEIR MEMORY

Keywords: *memory; war; oral history; Banat; Czechs*

Abstract: *Recalling means a survival lesson, the expression of a higher level of existence, accepting the past, even a painful one. The moment we decide to live beyond the limitations of the present time we turn to a memory which we (de)construct and by which we let ourselves (de)constructed. We retrieve thus history, we re-write it, a narrative which was once an event: now it is nothing but a story, the presence of an absence. This article aims to illustrate war stories, concerning Second World War, in a small community of Czechs from Bohemia, who were colonized by Habsburgs in South of Banat, in the first decades of the XIX century. It is the proof that we cannot separate local or regional history of world history. The Czech community was implicated in the conflict, by sending into the battle field close to 200 soldiers (who fought in the German troops but also alongside the Red Army). We recorded some of their stories, told by survivors and by relatives, overwhelming emotional narratives that give another dimension to the vision we have today about war. In our research, a special place was assigned to the oral history document: this type of history leads to the sharing of a memory that becomes a common good and made possible the recovery of a quasi-unknown life universe, which gained consistency by the stories obtained via the interview technique. Our interlocutors remembered the fear, the fighting, the hunger, the cold, the enemies, the camps, experiences that should not be repeated; however, current generations must know what happened, to draw some lessons for preventing the outbreak of new conflicts.*

Most times, remembering and relating traumatic experiences can be itself a traumatic process. Partaking in the greatest conflict from human history and its remembrance stands for the subject of a literature that gradually became specialized. For some of those directly involved, writing proved to be the best way (or only one) to share the faced horrors. In other cases, oral speech prevails: from our point of view, orality implies a greater inner strength, courage, to confess the painful experiences of the front. The power of storytelling also confirms a kind of reconciliation with that past: an incomprehensible past, settled in time and with a certain meaning, personalized by the story of each individual involved in the event. This study aims exactly to expose a few experiences, or types of perception and inner “adjustment” to tragic events, starting from the premise that the testimony of oral history is just as valuable (as the written or visual one) in the knowledge of all aspects of the great conflagration.

The fall of the communist regime made possible, among others, the recovery of several sequences from the recent history of Romania. Through oral history, especially in the first decade of the transition (since in the latter part, many of the witnesses who were

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born at the beginning of the decade have disappeared), a living archive was explored (Drăgan 127), an archive of the participants¹, of those who created the historical event(s). One of these events, which had a very strong emotional impact, was the Second World War: following next is a presentation and analysis of the memorial discourse generated by the participation in this war in the minds of the members of an ethnical group from the Danube gorge, the Czech speaking *pemi*². Their disclosures complete the image of war memories that became publicly available after 1989. Few of these testimonies have become the subject of scientific research; we mention some relevant studies and research projects (especially in oral history): Adrian Boda, *Allies and enemies in the Romanian combatants perception in the Second World War (Aliați și dușmani în percepția combatanților români în cel de-al Doilea Război Mondial)*; Doru Radosav, *Donbas – a deported history (Donbas – o istorie deportată)*; Florin Tomoiogă, *The image of the Soviet captivity (Imaginea prizonieratului sovietic)*.

The Czech community from the south-western Banat – on the verge of extinction nowadays, counts only 1500 people – includes six ethnically homogenous villages. Situated in the mountain area and watching over the Danube's gorge, some of them were the very places where the fight took place and all of them contributed with soldiers. From these villages, around 200 people were sent to war (Gecse 130-131), thus making the local history and the greater history of the world to meet; this interface has highlighted a particular and special mentality in a community whose existence was confronted, beginning with the 20th century, with global issues which have weakened the protective boarder of the ethnical identity, exposing it (and other ethnical groups from Banat) to the wave of events which followed both nationally and internationally. Our research took place between 2005-2010, and has identified some of the last participants, as well as their relatives who had their own perspective over the experiences of those directly involved.

The wisdom of the elder is the lesson given to the young ones. For the generation who has learnt about armed conflicts only from history books or through the media, the oral testimony completes the written and visual document. Even if it includes a (variable) dose of subjectivity, it “objectivises the real, it gives a new meaning to reality” (Drăgan 127); it also brings to our attention the dramatic dimension of an experience the world is not allowed to forget, in order not to repeat it. Ferdinand Stehlik's testimony³, a villager from Eibenthal, is such an attempt; it is centred on several traumatizing memories which can place the listener in the world of terror and of the impossible turned possible through the force of Evil. First, the witness remembers about the job he had as a translator at the beginning of the war, soldier serving a Romanian captain:

¹ “They are witnesses of the historical event, able to capture in terms of a subjectivity integrated into the event the unusual aspects of it, interpretation keys of the whole”.

² The word indicates the descendance of this population, Bohemia: the German “Böhmen” became “bemi” and later “pemi”.

³ Born in 1916, Baia Nouă, farmer, Catholic; interview was conducted at Eibenthal, August 2006.

Tales of War

I was sleeping in the captain's kitchen and he came during the night and called me: he had heard on the radio that Hitler attacked Czechoslovakia with airplanes and asked me to tell him what they were saying because they were speaking Czech.

In the story of the soldier who fought at Sevastopol and Caucaz, the horrors of the war from Russia never lost their impact, even after all these years. Only those who went through this infernal experience can understand the dimensions of the enormous mistake the war represents and that such an event should never be repeated.

I prayed that my children would never live to see such a thing... We arrived in the town of Nicolaev in the spring, just before Easter, and then we went to another town, I can't remember which one, where many Jews used to live and have factories. And what did Hitler do? Gypsies were also there, close to the Bug River: they gathered them together and made them put their tents there, after which they bombed them and threw them in the water. And what do you think he did to the Jews? He took them out of the town, made them dig a big, long hole and line up in front of it – the people told us – and Hitler's soldiers went there with their machine guns: they killed and buried them; some didn't wait, they jumped in the hole, women and children, and the people from the place where we stayed told us that if we want to, we can go there and see how the blood comes up to the surface; some did, but I couldn't.

The power of the memories which sends the auditorium right in the middle of the action does not need any additional comments:

Crimea was something...my God! We entered Caucasus and it was...we had to cover our noses with handkerchiefs, they gathered the dead soldiers in cars and trucks, my God, and the wheels were filled with...We were hungry, and the boys took the tobacco leaves from people's gardens, and that's how they survived.

In Șumița, the war is seen through the eyes of the last survivor⁴, a man who fought on the Russian front in the battle from Stalingrad and one of the few who returned home ("From our village, small as it is, seventeen soldiers died on the front"). His story is supported by the evidence the authorities brought regarding the widows of those who fell in combat in 1941; we got the names (as well as the number and the date of the pension slip) of seven such women from Șumița (Ștefania Hercul, Maria Veverca, Ana Sicora etc.), as well as the names of two from Eibenthal (Maria Brenic and Francisca Coban) (Severin County Prefecture fund). As a witness of such important and overwhelming events, this man does not focus on his personal experiences, but chooses to render a personal vision of the situation the country was in at that turning point in its history.

King Carol who was, I mean, Romania under King Carol, when he saw that the Germans have started their invasion – they've occupied Hungary, Poland, all these countries – he got scared and run off with the woman, a different woman (than his wife, author's note).

⁴ Francisc Mician, born in 1920, Șumița, farmer, Catholic; interview was conducted at Șumița, August 2007.

Romania's political and military option during the first part of the war is shortly explained:

And General Antonescu joined the German side and we fought with them to occupy Russia and they give us Ukraine, the Germans give us the entire Ukraine. And that's why we went to war on the same side with the Germans.

Although the parts which were taken stayed lost, the effort of those who fought did not get any appreciation after the war was over. The reward came only after 1989, through the veteran pension, because "we, those who fought against the Germans were not very appreciated, but those who fought against the Germans were".

Even if joining one of the two sides was not his personal choice, the witness had to bear the consequences, in a regime of the winners.

(When did you feel you were discriminated because you fought against the Red Army for a while?) – Well...when the Communism became stronger (Were you afraid something might have happened to you?) – Well...yeah.

His fears proved to be justified, since, after becoming the owner of a wealthy household (with the products thus obtained, he managed to support his family – he was never hired to work for the state), he was considered a "kulak" and taxed as such, and has managed to escape deportation to Bărăgan due to one of his cousins "who was in the Party" and who had intervened in his favour.

Other soldiers died in the Russian camps and their sacrifice is kept in the memory of the family. For one of the interviewed women⁵, born at the beginning of the war, the image of her father is made up only by stories, letters and pictures. The strongest memories are those connected to the extreme suffering he was subjected to during the time in the camp:

They put them into camps and they had nothing to eat. When there was grass there, they ate the grass. They try to eat dirt. But they got sick, really bad. There were 20 of them in a stable.

Those left at home had to go through a lot as well, their attempts to hide, having remained in their memories forever.

We were locked in a basement, my brother, the neighbours and a cousin of mine too; we were all locked in there. They were shooting here, it was really bad. We were waiting to die [...]. We didn't have any horses, they took the horses and the carriage as well...it's bad during the war.

⁵ Amalia Veverca, born in Șumița, farmer, Catholic; interview was conducted at Șumița, August 2007.

Tales of War

Only a child back then, a woman⁶ remembers the fear of the families who hid in basements or outside the village “where there were bushes”, in holes dig in the ground, where “we hid with the children, with everything, the entire household.”

The war is not a page from the past. Outside the scientific frame, when the witnesses are asked to tell their tale, trying to make them bring back these memories may be upsetting; still, only “telling the world about the camps represents the best way to fight them” (Todorov 11). Different from the suffering generated by illnesses or natural disasters – Alain Besançon thinks – “the suffering generated by human beings to those of the same kind, is the greatest” (Vultur 21). Noticing that the war was about political games (between the greater powers), rather than about the differences between the peoples (and their aspirations), the elders remember their childhood/youth, so much affected by lacks of everything, from during and after the war.

We had no clothes, we had nothing to eat, there was no wheat, we ate only polenta and cornmeal, even on Sundays, there were no materials to make clothes, I remember my mother made me some trousers out of wool, hard times, yes...⁷.

The young ones were taught to stay away from the soldiers who were sheltering in the neighbouring forests, be them German or Russian.

When the war came here, I went to Berzeasca with my brother and a German ambulance stopped and said: if we want to, where are we going? They’ll take us there. But he only spoke German, and I understood. And I said to my brother: come on, we’ll go with them. But he said no: the Germans will take us somewhere and kill us, no, we’re not going with the Germans. Those Germans asked us if there were any Russians here in our village, but no one was here then⁸.

“It was horrible”: and still, the remembrance also selects less dramatic, even funny moments. Four years old at the time, Amalia Iacubovski cannot remember from which armies the soldier fighting on the neighbouring hills were part, but she does remember the advice her parents gave her:

They told me not to wear my red headscarf, because the plane will see me [...] when I heard the noise from the plane, I took it off and I took shelter like this, so the plane couldn’t see me...

as well as the lice infestation, impossible to avoid given the harsh times they had to go through:

⁶ Amalia Iacubovski, born in 1950, Șumița, farmer, Catholic; interview was conducted at Șumița, August 2007.

⁷ Václav Mašek, born in 1941, Gîrníc, priest, Catholic; interview was conducted at Eibenthal, August 2006.

⁸ Maria Pelnař, born in 1925, Bigăr, farmer, Catholic; interview was conducted at Bigăr, August 2006.

There were lice everywhere; our mothers...we hadn't sprays! They caught them and we liked it, 'cause they scratched our heads! We liked it so much!

Not only this, but also emotional moments lived by the soldiers she supposes to have been Romanian and whom received food from the villagers:

And the soldiers kissed us, they took us in their arms and kissed us, I was four and I think he had a child at home, that's why he hugged and kissed us...

The memory of the family also remembers confrontations collateral scenes which highlight special characters. About the father who fought on the Russian front, the son⁹ tells about the help given even to the enemy, through the rescuing of a Russian family; as a reward, the man was given two diamond-encrusted lighters, which (on the way back to Romania) were given in exchange for food, even if, due to bad health, he was not able to eat it. Many of the details of that story were erased by time, because the son was young when the facts were communicated to him, but the courage which had created a mystical aura around the parent, has left a permanent imprint in his memory.

Humanity is what one can find in all the war stories the hero-parent has left to his son. This is how the story of another tragic character (whom the father of our witness had met) who tried to be correct in any circumstance, no matter what:

The soldiers got to Bigăr, the next day to Berzasca where they would remain...and, you know how soldiers are, they would go to the village in the evening, get drunk and do all kinds of stupid things. And one morning, the captain said to them 'from this day on, whoever is brought back drunk, will be executed by me in front of the platoon'... As a commander of that unit he took his sun with him, to protect him, but...over two or three days who do they bring back? They bring his son. And...being a man of his word and in order to keep the situation under control, because it was a time of war, right? And not respecting the word you gave came with severe consequences.

Aware of the power of the personal example, the captain took the terrible decision of shooting his own son: madness, honour?

My father used to say: 'I don't know how many would do such a...'. That...a man of his word. Today, some may find it exaggerated, but...it was a proof of consistency, of a given and respected word.

An old and wise Romanian saying says that "One cannot choose his teeth or his parents"; and, on another level: the latter are harder to appreciate by relating them to such a complex concept, as that of exemplarity. In many cases, the parents serve as role models for their children, as examples of behaviour and even success. For sure, the former soldier from the Soviet front was a role model for his son:

⁹ Adam Mlezyva, born in 1968, Bigăr, owner of a pub, Catholic; interview was conducted at Bigăr, August 2006.

(Do you consider your father important for the community?) – Well, what can I say? Of course that...not me, not for the community, what he did, he did for the country. And of course he is an important person: everyone who went on the front was important because whether they liked it or not, they had to go to war and fight for the country...

In Eibenthal, quite a large number from the local population joined, at the beginning of the war, the German Ethnical Group, probably in order to benefit of some advantages given by their presupposed German origin suggested by their own patronymic. Their ancestors had indeed come from Bohemia, a region with strong German influences, and German colonists had settled even in Eibenthal; however, not all of those who joined the group were belonging to it. Ferdinand Vențel Havlíček's story¹⁰ unveils the presence of an “organizer called Fikl Josef, a German collaborationist”, who contacted the local school teacher in order to make even the younger ones become attached to Germany and its cause:

The German teacher was here, he taught German to the children, Formitac (Wormitag, author's note), that was his name, he taught them German, here at our school. (Was he Czech?) – No way! He was a German from Arad, he was sent here to teach German to [us] those who had joined the Volksdeutsch, the way we called it here; he transferred us to the German people because we have joined Germany.

The German-like cultural pattern which had left its mark on the Czech colonists from the Banat, the hope for certain advantages which supporting the German advance might have brought, the threatening image of the “elder brother from the East”, all these seem to represent reasons able to justify the pro-German attitude from Eibenthal. Some of the young men even ended up by joining the German army, although what they were first told was completely different:

I have a brother in Germany, he left during the war, I was 3 months old when he left, and he was 18 years older. He didn't know he was going to war: the mine was closed here and there was nowhere he could work so a businessman from Orșova came and promised to find them something to work and they were glad about it, but when they got there, at the train station, the uniforms were prepared for them, they immediately took them from Orșova. (So they didn't know what was going to happen...) – Nooo!! (Do you remember the name of that businessman?) – You see, I can't remember... (Was he German?) – Yes. (Were they sent to war?) – Yes, of course, all of them.

The memories have lost their clarity, but the memory of those days when history hadn't yet established what the real danger for the later development of the country was, is still alive.

¹⁰ Ferdinand Vențel Havlíček, born in 1924, Plavișevița, Second World War veteran/deported to Bărăgan/retired, Catholic; interview was conducted at Baia Nouă, August 2006.

At 16, Ferdinand Vențel Havlíček decides to leave Romania in order to join the Italian army “because I didn’t want [to join the German side]. So they came, they occupied and they caught the youth and took it to Germany”. Despite the fact that he was very young, Havlíček guessed that the German propaganda was hiding a policy and a regime of terror and chose to flee, especially since many of the villagers had joined the German Ethnical Group without knowing anything about the organization or its ideology. One of the files belonging to “Severin Gendarmerie Legion” fund tells about the situation of those part of the Deutsche Volksgruppe; in Eibenthal the members came from all the social and age categories: peasants, housewives, miners, students (in large numbers) etc. The file contains almost 100 persons, mentioned by their names, occupation, date of birth, address and ethnical origin; what we must remember is that part of them were Czech ethnics, regardless of the fact that their names sounded German or that they chose to declare themselves as German ethnics.

The – back then – young Havlíček served 16 months in the Italian army, but after the liberation of the territories previously occupied by the Germans, he chose not to return home, but to join that Czech army, the one formed in exile, in 1943, in Great Britain.

I joined the Czech army and was instructed there to become familiar to the English weapons...and then we went to the French territories. We started to fight in Lille and we fought all over the French territory to Munich, in Germany, until the Germans surrendered.

As about those who stayed back home sympathizing with the Germans, some of them have suffered the consequences of their decisions. Among others, in Bărăgan were also sent those blamed for collaborating with Romania’s allies from before the 23rd of August 1944.

There were no kulaks here, but there were some connected to the German army, to these political problems. And then, those families whose children had been in the German army, they took them all, they took them all away...

From the witness’s point of view, the great history is the result of some actions which took place on the political scene of the world, issues which never take into account the existence of the average people, but whose faith they decide. Those who, at some point, have thought that being on the same side as the Germans will represent a shield in front of the Bolshevik expansion, were going to be disappointed and even punished for their choice, even if they tried, after the 23rd of August, to deny their adherence to the German Group (by joining the “Antifascist Front of the Slavs from Romania”, for example).

Unlike the written reconstitution of this major event in the history of humanity, reaching to the oral history also influences the “person who interprets by making him give value to the experience, relive it from a meta-historical point of view” (Drăgan 127). In this case, the image of what happened – rebuilt with the help of (the oral) history and oral tradition – touches the researcher, and any type of reader as well. The testimonies of

our witnesses move us deeply and, at the same time, give us the opportunity to meditate; they are meant to raise questions about a complex phenomenon which involves and changes many destinies by permanently affecting the human psyche (Boda 78). They draw our attention over the danger of forgetting: necessary – due to its therapeutic virtues – in certain contexts, it must erase only the hate from the collective memory and not its consequences. “When the events lived by the individual or by the group are exceptional or tragical”, recovering the memory „becomes a duty” (Todorov 16). In order to go on, one must overcome the trauma caused by the war, but not by erasing the memory, because it represents a means of identifying the mistakes in order to avoid them, for future generations. Ferdinand Stehlik’s shattering reflections are concerning the people nowadays, lucky that they did not have to go through the same experiences as he, but permanently in danger of falling victims to another conflict, as long as the human race learns nothing from history.

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