

ABSTRACTS

Péter Apor: Authenticity and Scepticism: Memory, History and Coming to Terms with the Recent Past in East-Central Europe

In post-communist East Central Europe even the most dubious historical constructions seem to be able to gain significant credibility in the public. One of the most striking – often also shocking – features of the societies emerging after the fall of the Berlin Wall is a pervasive and strange disorientation, some kind of confusion that prevails in broadly conceived public manifestations on matters of history. There seems to be no broad social agreement about the condemnation and denial of fascist and communist dictatorships, the terror that these regimes imposed, the Holocaust, and the institutionalized state violence. The problems with history in this region have been recognised and the distortion interpreted as the result of various political attempts to appropriate the right to interpret the past. The scholarly discourse about the ways of coming to terms with the recent past in East-Central Europe, initially focused on the cultural and social frames that shape the images of history, has recently turned towards the concepts of collective memory. This approach offers an explanatory model that integrates the aspects of social practices, cultural codes and power.

While this explanation is valid, there is more at stake in this case. The various representations of the recent past in the region elucidate the conspicuous uncertainty of the criteria of authenticity of historical representations in the region. Historical argument, evidential work and archival verification are arbitrary and contingent operations for broad segments of East-Central European societies. This condition opens the floor for odd para-historiographies, political justification and self-appointed prophets offering reference points that further increase the state of confusion in Central and Eastern Europe. The image of shaping the past in terms of collective memory, however, undermines the relevance of evidence-based criteria of authenticity. The concept of memory as a social and cultural product inimical to evidential procedures, therefore, is not sufficient as a valid explanation for the problems with contemporary history in the region. In fact, scholarship based on the concepts of memory, unintentionally, albeit regretfully, is part of the problem rather than solution.

Zsuzsanna Bögre: ‘My generation is quite a sullen one...’: Trauma and Remembering in Life Stories

This study is searching for answers to the question how personal memory is affected by a crime committed in the past. How do people who were forced to commit betrayal remember their past? How does the tragedy of the past become the trauma of the present and future? The microhistorical study presents the dramatic life story of a woman participating in the 1956 Hungarian revolution. E. V., a single mother at the time of the revolution, got involved with the revolutionaries of Corvin street in Budapest, where she worked as a nurse and kitchen hand. It was here where she met and fell in love with László Iván Kovács, one of the leaders of the *corvinista* fighters. After the suppression of the revolution, Iván Kovács was arrested and jailed. To save his life, even at the price of her own, E. V. followed him to the jail voluntarily.

According to our sources, the political police enrolled E. V. as a ‘patriotic agent’, between the first and second hearings, right before Iván Kovács’s execution on 30 December 1957. The agent network employed her services until 1977, when her supervising officer initiated her release due to what in police terminology was termed a ‘lapse in employment’.

The study traces the developments in her personality across the sources. What can a woman say about herself after betraying the man she loved and the case he died for, to be able to return to her home and children?

Tamás Dobszay: Memory, Remembering, Biography: The Memoirs of a *Civis*

The historical value of memoir-type sources has been reassessed after the recent anthropological and cultural turn in historiography. Following a short survey of the most important trends in memoir research, the study analyses the memoirs of a nineteenth-century *civis* (market town burgher) of an aristocratic descent.

Ferdinánd Jeszenszky began his career as a tailor until he was forcibly conscripted into the National Guard in 1848/49. In the second half of the century he worked in agriculture, both as a farmer, and as a superintendent of an estate. Later in life he became a teacher in village schools. The study examines the admitted aims, motivations, and circumstances of the author at the time of writing, as well as the characteristics of the structure, narrative and language of the reminiscences. In addition, the study reconstructs the ways remembering and narrative processes have shaped the account of past experiences, the contents of Jeszenszky’s memoirs.

The work provides a more nuanced insight into the trends than previously seen in scholarship. It sheds light on the individual’s own experience of historical

processes and the personal history of the author directs the reader's attention to phenomena that diverge significantly from the directions and pace of mainstream history.

András Keszei: The Layers of Memory

Recent studies in memory and remembering emphasize the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration. Sites of memory, the symbolic cultural toolkit and the social frameworks of memory contribute to the construction of individual and collective memories. Neurocognitive research found that memories exist in our brains as imperfect imprints of original event experiences. Consequently every single recollection is a kind of reconstruction, which is governed by the current aims, self image, strategies and situation of the working self. Culture serves as an external source of identification, which strengthens the community's collective identity anchoring it to past times.

Both for individuals and collectives, one of the main functions of remembering is providing an enduring identity that makes individuals feel comfortable, „at home” in society. Just like autobiographical memory in the case of the individual, the selective workings of collective memory help to create a coherent self for society. Remembering as an inherently social and communicative process, which is mediated by cultural artifacts (narratives, symbols, objects) is the product of group work. Ingroup memories through regular commemorations bring community members closer together, stressing common fate, feelings, orientation. As inherently social beings humans almost spontaneously form groups of collective memory that strengthens their identity and sense of belonging.

People make sense of their life in time and community, with the help of a society's cultural narrative frames. The community members' identity in space and time is located by culture-specific narrative templates, making remembrance a crucial activity on the individual and the collective level. It is through this activity, that we experience our sameness and continuity in time.

Gergely Kunt: Reconsidering a Child's Diary

The present study offers two different points of view of the book *Éva, my daughter*, published by Ágnes Zsolt in 1947. Ágnes Zsolt was the mother of the eponymous Éva Heyman. Shortly after Éva's birth her marriage with the father, architect Béla Heyman, ended in divorce. The mother got married again, this time with Béla Zsolt, a civic radical writer. The couple moved to Budapest, but the girl remained in Oradea with her maternal grandparents. Ágnes Zsolt and her husband managed to escape from the ghetto of Oradea and eventually travelled to Switzerland with the Kasztner Train. The diary-writing child Éva died in Auschwitz.

On the one hand, from the angle of what may be called the traditional approach, the book is a child's diary written by the thirteen-year-old Éva. On the other hand, the book can also be understood as a memoir of the mother, Ágnes Zsolt. In the latter case, the volume is monument to a complex mourning process, that of a mother who lost both her old parents and her only child at a very young age. When Ágnes Zsolt found out about the deportation of her daughter, her first reaction was a suicide attempt. Éva did not have a grave in the cemetery, the grieving mother did not know where her body lied. The fact that she was unable to give her only child a funeral exacerbated her pain.

Ágnes Zsolt wrote this book as part of the mourning-process, presenting a perhaps greatly idealized picture of the lost daughter. Writing from the child's point of view, she portrayed herself as a bad divorced mother. Her relationship with her daughter is not shown as a traditional child-parent bond: she always appears as 'Ági', never as 'mother', and she is portrayed as someone who is unsuitable for the parent role. Ágnes's pain of loss did not fade over the years. She could not forgive herself that she is still alive while her beloved daughter died in Auschwitz. In 1951 she committed suicide by slashing her wrists and a photo of her daughter was found next to her dead body.

How should we read this book? Is it a child's diary or the memoirs of a mourning mother? The study concludes that due to the lack of original manuscripts readers are expected to formulate their own interpretations.

András Murai – Eszter Zsófia Tóth: How do we imagine it? Remembering the Holocaust and the Reconstructing its Sites in Documentaries

The premise of this present study is the idea that documentaries attempting to reconstruct the 'original settings' significantly influence our understanding of the Holocaust, by way of creating secondary memory. How do we imagine the ghettos and the lagers? Where do we place the series of humiliations and destruction? And what are the methods of documentary films as the means of collective memory? What narrative and visual solutions are deployed to reconstruct the past? These questions are important not only because they are connected to one of the cornerstones of Holocaust discourse, the paradox of the necessity and impossibility of representation, but also because the spatial imaging of past events is indispensable both for our personal and collective memory.

Analysing Hungarian documentaries along with Lanzmann's 1985 *Shoah*, a milestone in Holocaust representation on film, the study highlights four different techniques for the reconstruction of Holocaust sites: returning to the site, the absence of traces of the past, reconstructing the place from narratives, and

the use of archive footage. Place, both in the sense of revisiting it, and being confronted with or finding no traces of the past at the original site, is shown to have an exceptionally important role in the films discussed in the study, some of which were made during the socialist era when this subject was taboo. The road leading to the original site and the passing of time gained symbolic power in these documentaries. The most vivid images were achieved by showing the lack of people and the loss of original sites, by the visual representation of absence.

Tibor Takács: Act of Memory and Historical Event: The Bikszá Murder, 1956

On 10 December 1956 the precinct party secretary was chased across his village, before he was beaten and murdered in Gyón (Pest County). Due to the retributions following the suppression of the revolution, the case of his murder is very well documented. However, the researcher has to bear in mind that this vast documentation was recorded after the events: the documentation is retrospective and entirely consists of products of remembering processes. In order to interpret the real contents of these sources, the main characteristics and psychology of human memory must be considered. Understanding the processes of remembering is invaluable in revealing what happened in the interrogation rooms and courtrooms after the crime and reconstructing the experience of the participating individuals. The historical event on 10 December 1956, thus, cannot be separated from the traces of memory transmitted for the historian through the subjective experience of the eyewitnesses. Consequently, although the answer to the question of what 'really' happened in Gyón on this day is not possible, a very complex and detailed account of the case emerges from these sources.

Zsuzsanna Toronyi: The Stories of a Budapest Garden

The barely one thousand square meters of land next to the archways of the Dohány Street Synagogue in Budapest is a symbolic place in the history of Jewish-Gentile cohabitation in Hungary. Building on the plot began after the First World War, when a cultural centre and park and the Heroes' Synagogue dedicated to the fallen Jewish soldiers were developed there. At the end of the Second World War, the building complex became part of the Budapest Ghetto, where thousands of people were crowded together in inhumane living conditions. At the time of the liberation of the Ghetto, thousands of Jewish bodies, victims of starvation, freezing temperatures, military operations during the siege and the brutality of the Hungarian Nazis, were recovered in the streets. 2281 of these bodies, both anonymous and identified, were buried in this garden.

The park with a pond turned into a graveyard, a monument to a barbarous age, Hungary's most authentic place of remembrance for the Holocaust. However, the fate of the garden did not develop as one would expect: the first efforts to landscape and consolidate the graves were made not until 1965, the first monument in 1984. By now, several different monuments have been erected, dedicated to the memory of the liberators, humanitarians, heroic individuals, and the Hungarian victims, but there is none dedicated to those buried in the garden. The history of this cemetery is a precise reflection of the story of the reception of the Hungarian Holocaust, and the way Hungarian society perceives the victims, the perpetrators, justice and responsibility. The names of the victims are recorded in a traditional Jewish *memorbuch* (book of memory), which has served as a basis for a digital monument dedicated to them on the Internet.