

THE PLEASURES AND SORROWS OF CZECH ORAL HISTORY (1990–2012)

Pavel Mücke

Department of Oral History and Contemporary History
Faculty of Humanities
Charles University, Prague
mucke@usd.cas.cz

ABSTRACT

This article gives the general contours of the way in which Oral History was established as a discipline in the Czech Republic. Important events and key institutions are mentioned, as well as individuals interested in the research of contemporary history, and in the popularisation of the recent past through oral history. Significant projects (both academic and non-academic) are described. Attention is paid to the thematic, historical, and methodological aspects of these projects, and the way in which other scholars and the media have reacted to these projects is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In Czech scholarly discussion the term ‘oral history’ has become a very common phrase. Two decades ago, however, it was totally unknown¹ (Prečan 1993/1994: 7). The growing popularity of this discipline can be seen as developing hand in hand with the expansion of another very popular field across Europe and around the world – Memory Studies. Nowadays, as a result of increasing public interest in the preservation of life stories, a wide range of different oral history projects (both ongoing and complete) can be found in the Czech Republic. Research activities in this small central European country, inhabited by ten million people, are benefitting from institutional, methodological and technical support, which is getting stronger by the year and, paradoxically, stronger representation in the international oral history movement.² In this historiographical essay, I would like on the one hand to outline the basic specifics of ‘oral (hi)story’ in the Czech Republic and, on the other hand, to highlight points which share, I think, many common characteristics with the establishment of oral history in other countries.

THE SEARCH FOR METHODS AND MEANING: FROM THE VELVET REVOLUTION UNTIL THE END OF THE 1990S

While ‘prehistoric’ traces of oral history can be found in the Czech lands before the Velvet Revolution in 1989 (especially in the very popular ‘work with witnesses’ realised during the 1950s and 1960s), the real ‘history of Oral History’ begins after the fall of the Iron Curtain in Czechoslovakia and with the (re)establishment of freedom of speech and freedom of research (Schwippel & Boháček 2011; Kotalík & Kahuda 2011; Vaněk 2004).

As was the case with other countries that felt the rule of authoritarian or totalitarian regimes, the development of the discipline in the Czech lands is closely related to the era of democratic transformation, which brought with it new research into contemporary history and an interest in hitherto unknown chapters of the recent past, many of which had previously been taboo (Nodl 2001; Kolář, 2004, Jiroušek 2008). Despite these objective factors, there were also subjective reasons behind this evolution. After the fall of the communist regime progressive Czech historians, who were for many years isolated from their profession’s international standards (through limited participation in foreign conferences, the relative inaccessibility of journals and books, especially from the West), started to absorb the latest trends and useful methods in historiography bit by bit. It took until around the mid-1990s for at least some researchers to pick up a general knowledge of oral history from foreign books and articles, and for them to overcome ‘traditional’ historical doubts about new methods and finally realise first steps towards experimenting with the new approach in practical Czech research³ (Musilová, Personal communication 25 July and 3 August 2011).

On the other hand, many historians working in the field of contemporary history were aware that the previous era left many ‘gaps’, which were not possible to fill with traditional historical sources. Archival sources were (with rare exceptions) subjective, indebted to the ideology of the communist regime and derived from the practices of the official institutions in which they originated. Historians found many of these archival materials incomplete because of the verbal means by which many important decisions were made and also because of the ‘wild erasures’ realised by State Security officers and Communist Party functionaries in November and December 1989. The situation with the archives was such that it took a relatively long time to make these materials accessible to the wider research community. Sources originating from those on the other side of the Velvet Revolution (such as the university students who went on strike, or the members of the newly established Civic Forum) were also incomplete. In the hectic atmosphere of these revolutionary days, the key actors paid more attention to ‘making a reality’ (and history) than to ‘describing this reality’ of these great processes and events. Their attention was not directed towards preserving what was going on in written or audiovisual form, nor archiving large quantities of documentation.

In January 1990, the Institute for Contemporary History (ICH) was founded by the Historical Committee of the Civic Forum to be part of the Czechoslovak Academy of

Sciences (later the Czech Academy of Sciences – CAS). Inspired by similar institutions in Western Europe, the institute's *raison d'être* was to document contemporary events systematically and to conduct active and complex research into Czech and Czechoslovak contemporary history with a focus on the period between the years 1945 and 1989⁴ (Tůma 2007). If we analyse the retrospective testimony of employees and the published output from the ICH from early 1990, it can be seen that most major activities were realised by an older generation of historians ('the 1968 generation') who were discriminated against by the communist regime during the 1970s and 1980s, and/or active in dissent or exile⁵ (Křen, Interview 26 April 2011; Otáhal 5 May 2011). For many of them the creation and continual development of the ICH meant a real return to their historical careers, as well as a return to 'normal' civic life and, in many cases, to the country of their birth (Kaplan, Interview 15 June 2011).

The 'prehistory' of oral history began in this early post-revolutionary period, but not in the ICH, instead in the 'rival' Historical Institute at the CAS where, as part of an 'institutional' democratic transformation, a book of documents was published accompanied by the transcripts of recorded interviews with the 'founding fathers' of the Civic Forum and with select communist functionaries. This so-called 'White Book', published by editors Milan Otáhal and Zdeněk Sládek in 1990, was the first attempt to map the recent events of the Velvet Revolution and deal with them in historical terms⁶ (Otáhal & Sládek 1990: 555). The unexpected success of this book had a practical impact on one of its editors, Milan Otáhal, who became fascinated by leading interviews and contemporary historical research – he changed the time frame of his research from 19th century history and became a member of the research staff in the ICH (Otáhal, Interview 5 May 2011).

Using interviews as an aspect of contemporary history research was not only the domain of contemporary history's 'founding fathers', it also soon attracted other researchers such as the historians Dana Musilová and Nina Pavelčíková, the sociologist Ilona Christl, and historians Květa Jechová, Miroslav Vaněk and Jiří Suk, who all conducted their research from a biographical perspective, mapping in this way, for example, the history of Czech society during World War 2 (WW2), the history of Charter 77, and the 1989 Revolution on a regional, or national level (Musilová 1995; Jechová 2003; Vaněk 1993; Suk 1999). The accent on observing 'great events' through the frame of 'individual stories' can be seen as a common aspect of these projects, and this pattern remained a visible constant throughout projects that followed.

It should be stressed that, despite a slightly weak knowledge of oral history methodology, practical methods, the technical aspects and international context of research in the early 1990s, it can not be stated that these projects lacked precedent. Czech researchers often tended towards older and (in Czech historiography) more familiar 'work with witnesses', conducted in the 1950s and 1960s, which can be seen as symbolic precursor of the development of Oral History. In the framework of this discursive practice, the interviews were used in an objectivistic style as a supplementary

source in historical writing (Vaněk 2004). Analysis of interviews with several of the protagonists suggests that the motivation behind working with interviewees came from an interest in getting impressions, explanations or commentary to support facts that they as historians already knew from other sources (Otáhal, Interview 5 May 2011; Vaněk, Interview 25 February 2011). After many years, however, the narrator-historians suggested that their perception of ‘subjective’ personal testimonies that were often recorded intuitively changed, and that these testimonies became an important part of their work and a valuable additional source (Křen, Interview 25 April 2011; Gebhart, Interview 7 June 2011). Analysing several interviews with participants leads us to believe that the aforementioned projects were not systematically coordinated, neither in the ICH, nor elsewhere around the whole republic. On the contrary, they were led independently in parallel with each other, and the interested researchers knew the results of other projects only after the fact, and often by chance (Vaněk, Interview 25 February 2011). As a symbol of the pioneering times of Oral History, several researchers had to save the interviews they conducted in their own personal collections and provisional archives, because it was not possible to give them to authorised archival institutions for wider research and public use (Musilová, Personal communication 25 July and 3 August 2011).

From a retrospective point of view, it seems very positive that during the early 1990s projects that recorded important personal testimonies aroused broader interest, not only among interested researchers, but also among the public. This fact seems a very important source for growth in the future. As was already mentioned, some historians became so fascinated by working with ‘living sources’ that they changed their research interests, and transferring them towards themes that fall under the bracket of contemporary history⁷ (Hanzel 1991: 5; Vaněk 25 May 2011).

An important fact worth mentioning is that, during the 1990s, more disciplines than history alone viewed biographical approaches including oral history favourably. Firstly, there were a number of documentary projects realised by the Jewish Museum in Prague, the Terezín Memorial and later also in the Museum of Romani Culture in Brno. Through interviewing people who survived the Jewish and Roma holocausts during WW2, researchers such as Anna Hyndráková, Milena Hübschmannová and Ctibor Nečas elaborated upon hitherto unknown or taboo chapters of the recent past, which were until that time (because of the communist monopoly on ‘historical truth’) rarely discussed in Czech historiography. In this regard, one of the largest documentary projects ever realised, the Shoah Foundation documentary project (inspired by Steven Spielberg), should also be cited: among the 52 000 video interviews from 56 countries, recorded between 1994 and 1999, interviews from the Czech Republic were included. Today, ‘national’ online access to the entire collection preserved by the archives of the University of Southern California is provided by the Malach Centre for Visual History, which falls under the Faculty of Mathematics and Physics, Charles University, Prague.

Among the other important documentation projects started in the 1990s, work by

the National Film Archive in Prague, should also be mentioned. From 1995, there have been ongoing interviews recorded with protagonists who were active in the development of Czech cinematography over the past two centuries in different levels and professions (such as directors, scriptwriters, dramaturgists, cameramen, producers, film editors, actors, and also other supporting professions). Similarly, in 1996 an international project bridging oral history and feminist studies called 'Women's Memory' was conducted. A project team led by dramaturgist and documentarist, Pavla Frýdlová, tried to capture the main contours of three generations of Czech women's life experiences. Participants were generally born between 1920 and 1960 (Frýdlová 2002; Kiczková *et al.* 2006). Because of the success of this first project, similar ones have followed in more recent years (Frýdlová 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010). For the contemporary history research community, sociological projects from the 1990s (realised by Alena Vodáková and Hana Maříková, Zdeněk Konopásek and Jiří Kabele) and ethnological and folkloristic projects (led by Bohuslav Beneš and by Bohuslav Šalanda), which use biographical and oral historical methods, have proven an inspiration (Vodáková & Maříková 1995; Konopásek 1999; Kabele 1998, 2003; Hájek & Kabele 2008; Beneš 1996; Šalanda 1989, 1998).

TURNING POINT: THE STORY OF ONE HUNDRED STUDENT REVOLUTIONS

In the mid-1990s, seen from a long period of retrospect, very friendly times for the development of oral history began. If I use the analysis of ICH protagonists' memories, it seems that the key moment came at the beginning of 1994. In February of that year, Oldřich Tůma, a member of the ICH's Department for the History of 1969–1989, came back from a research visit at the Institute of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution in Budapest, and his travel reports started debates about using oral history among department collaborators. During his stay he was confronted *inter alia* with a huge collection of oral history interviews (with active participants in the revolution, with Hungarian Communist politicians, with members of the 'working intelligentsia class' and managers, with children of the Hungarian Revolution's victims) recorded by Hungarian researchers from the second half of the 1980s. By the mid-1990s, the sum of this collection amounted to 700 interviews with transcripts (ICH's Department Meeting 14 February 1994; Tůma 1994).

In the spring of 1995, the department's attention was concentrated on preparations for a grant proposal that would focus upon university students – actors of the Velvet Revolution. The proposal was finally approved and recommended by the ICH Scientific Council. It was subsequently submitted to the Czech Grant Agency as a three-year project called 'Students in the Period of the Fall of Communism' (ICH Department Meeting 5 December 1994 and 12 April 1995; ICH Scientific Committee Meeting 23 May 1995; Vaněk, Interview 17 June 2011). The decision to support this project can

be seen as the turning point in the development of oral history not only in the ICH, but in the wider context of the whole Czech Republic. Team research conducted under the direction of Miroslav Vaněk and Milan Otáhal, who tried to map all the life stories of November 1989 students, was found to be very fruitful and inspiring.

The project was realised using relatively uncommon methods for Czech historical research, which corresponded well with the general interest in memory of very recent (and often ‘hot’) events and processes, all elaborated from the point of view of a group in Czech society that had still not been examined – members of the young generation. Despite frequent groping and searching for unknown methodological tools, researchers tried to use the latest and most complex knowledge taken from foreign books (especially from the United Kingdom, the United States and Germany). They were attempting for the first time to use oral history in accordance with international standards⁸ (Otáhal & Vaněk 1999: 31–52). From a more recent perspective, the decision made by investigators to include regional aspects into their research seems very important. It was, however, criticised at the time by some ICH colleagues on the grounds that incorporating a regional historical point of view was ‘too much of a luxury’ and overburdened the already stretched forces of the research team (ICH Scientific Committee Meeting 8 November 1996). In personal and organisational terms, the establishment of close contacts with collaborators in the region was a valuable step, especially because long-term collaboration was instituted with some of them.⁹ Particular outcomes were continuously disseminated in the research community and in the wider public; they were also presented in different media. The majority of ‘traditional’ ills and weaknesses of many Czech research projects realised during the 1990s (such as methodological opacity, unfamiliarity with international trends, an insular, ‘pragocentric’ view, and relative ignorance of ‘public demand’) were remedied not only because of these decisions. In the course of the project’s realisation, a functional structure for team research was established, which was frequently used and improved upon during different projects that followed (at least at the ICH’s). These days, the aforementioned model is perceived as very useful.

The final output in book form was called *One hundred student revolutions*. It consisted of a historical introduction, a methodological chapter about Oral History, and the interpretation of interviews that were added as edited transcripts in an appendix. Because of the good timing of the publication on the 10th anniversary of the Velvet Revolution in 1999, the book was welcomed not only by reviewers but also by ordinary readers¹⁰ (Wooley 2007). A symbolic ‘side product’ of the research grant was a project called ‘Cultural and Social Activities of the Young Generation in Czechoslovakia and the Road to Civil Society’ (between 1999 and 2001). As witnesses suggest, the idea of a new project derived from the analysis of key aspects of students’ life stories, in which they described non-school activities and general memories on the ways they spent free time in communist Czechoslovakia (Vaněk 2002a; Vaněk, Interview 28 February 2011).

AT THE TURN OF AGES: THE YEARS 2000–2006

If we look at the development of an institutional base, the symbolic year one for Czech oral history came in 2000, when the Oral History Center (OHC) was established as one of the ICH's departments. As active participants remember, discussions began among Milan Otáhal, Miroslav Vaněk and Jana Svobodová about the prospective foundation of some form of oral history department during the preparation of the book, *One hundred student revolutions* in the spring of 1999 (Vaněk, Interview 28 February 2011). From the analysis of the archival sources available, it is clear that the three-year grant proposal put to the Czech Grant Agency was prepared by a consortium of three academic institutions (the ICH, the Institute of Political Science, Faculty of Arts, Charles University in Prague and the National Library in Prague), which were trying to garner support for the creation of a 'methodological center', specialising in the development of oral history in an interdisciplinary way. Although peer reviews were generally positive towards this idea, viewing it as a pioneering attempt towards the enrichment of Czech research, education and archives, in the end, the proposal was not recommended for financial support (losing out to the Center for Archeological and Paleological Studies) (Vaněk, Interview 28 February 2011). These very positive evaluations, however, had visible results behind the scenes at the ICH, where the new director Oldřich Tůma decided to create an OHC supported by the institution's own budget. The ICH Scientific Council symbolically approved this proposal at a meeting held on 'the date of the revolution', 17 November 1999, and the direction of the OHC was handed to Miroslav Vaněk (ICH Scientific Committee Meeting 21 April 1995, and 17 November 1999; Tůma, Interview 21 June 2011).

Aside from being active in primary research, collections building and the subsequent necessities of archiving these materials, an important role for the OHC is to foster international relations with partner institutions, to educate, and to promote in different forms oral history in the Czech Republic¹¹ (Vaněk 2002b). The development of international relations brought financial aid when, after Miroslav Vaněk's stay in the United States, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill donated a support scholarship to the OHC, which furnished the Centre with the necessary technical and material equipment¹² (Vaněk, Interview 28 February 2011). A very important role of the OHC's everyday work was to offer consultation on methodology; Miroslav Vaněk in particular participated actively in this field by writing several methodological monographs and methodical guides. Without a doubt, the impact of these books played an important role in the creation of an oral historical discourse in the Czech Republic (Vaněk 2001, 2003, 2004; Vaněk, Mücke and Pelikánová 2007) The importance of the Centre's activities to popularise the field is clearer when we take into account the criticism that, for many years, Czech historiography was ruled by a matrix of shyness, a lack of interest towards methodological issues and, even when new approaches were discussed, these discussions only rarely had a tenable effect upon practical research. Due to the OHC's foreign contacts, Czech oral history methodology was formed under the

influence of Western (especially U.S.) methodological inspirations. As Miroslav Vaněk noted after some years, without these contacts the OHC's research activities would have been less wealthy, if indeed they did exist in any relevant form¹³ (Vaněk, Interview 28 February 2011).

The next project undertaken by the OHC, ultimately called 'Political Elites and Dissidents in the Period of so-called Normalisation – Historical Interviews', proposed to the Czech Grant Agency by Miroslav Vaněk and Palacký University (Olomouc) archivist, Pavel Urbášek, has a long history. This grant proposal was inspired by the 'White Book' documentary project and not all colleagues supported the planned realisation of the project, especially as it aimed to 'give a voice' to ex-Communist functionaries. One of the historians at the ICH recommended that the OHC consider the aims of the project carefully because, from his point of view, the eventual controversy resulting from coming into contact 'with communists' could dent the credibility of the ICH irreparably in public discourse. Another historian went even further when he suggested that he would not be able to shake hands with leading protagonists of the communist regime, let alone record their memories (Vaněk, Interview 28 February 2011). Eventually, the historical aspects and the expected positives outweighed the temporary prejudices, and the project was recommended by the ICH's Scientific Council and submitted in 2000 (ICH Scientific Committee Meeting 5 April 2000). Despite very positive evaluations by external reviewers, the proposal was not approved by the responsible sub-committee of the Czech Grant Agency for support. In 2001, an amended application was submitted for the second time, this time successfully. For the first time, the research team included a Czecho-Slovak aspect due to collaboration with a partner research team led by historian and ethnologist Lucia Seglová. Slovak colleagues, supported by the Open Society Foundation, undertook parallel research on the same methodological basis with narrators around the Slovak Republic (Vaněk and Urbášek 2005).

Among the most significant methodological specifics, the process of contacting the narrators should be mentioned here – in particular the process of approaching ex-communist functionaries, where the key role was played by the gatekeeper, sociologist František Zich, himself an ex-communist functionary. His intermediation was greatly appreciated by team collaborators in retrospect because it was crucial in the successful approach of 43 of a total of 73 functionaries addressing and recording their stories. From the circles of dissidents, more favourable towards remembering the past, OHC researchers recorded success in 77 cases, out of a total of 79 approached (Vaněk and Urbášek 2005: 19). Through the collection of more than 120 interviews, not only did the worst-case scenario (that not a single ex-communist would speak to the project) fail to emerge, in fact, the results surpassed all previous expectations (Vaněk 2011). The publication of the final results sparked a good deal of interest in the Czech Republic and abroad. The main publication, a book of edited interviews called *Victors...?! Vanquished...?!*, was chosen as the book of the year 2005 in a readers' survey for the popular historical magazine, *History and Present*, and in 2005, the project was nominated for the Czech Academy of Sciences prize (Vaněk 2006; Burget 2006). Moreover, the research team was able

to defend the project's results not only in the face of traditional scientific criticisms that questioned the 'clarity' and relevance of the method used, but also in the face of journalists, who attempted to create controversy through the misappropriation of select interviews with communist functionaries (Bílek 2004; Petráš 2005). For the medium and long term, these 'small' victories were very valuable because different opinions were finally clarified, especially those held by historians and scholars. Professional, ethical and legislative standards were maintained, which was a very important factor going forward.

At about the same time, the potential for using oral history was also demonstrated by a young generation of scholars coming from different institutions and conducting research in different regions of the Czech Republic. While Lukáš Valeš, a political scientist, historian and regional collaborator of the OHC, focused upon regional aspects of contemporary history, especially on the history of the Velvet Revolution in 1989 and later democratic transformation, another OHC 'external' collaborator, Jana Nosková, an ethnologist and historian, concentrated upon an ethno-historical study of post-WW2 Czech re-emigrants from the Volhynia region (formerly Poland and U.S.S.R., today in Ukraine) (Valeš 2003, 2005; Nosková 2007). Notable projects from the field of the 'history of science' from that time were brought to light by ICH historian Doubravka Olšáková. She recorded interviews over a long period with participants of semi-official Jan Hus and Comenius symposia held in the Bohemian town of Tábor and the Moravian town of Uherské Hradiště during the 1970s and 1980s, when these meetings served as a place of 'positive deviation', where free discussions and meetings between liberal-thinking scholars and those persecuted by the regime or 'hidden' in manual professions after the Warsaw Pact Invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 were possible (Olšáková 2004, 2012). Through the use of Oral History, Martin Jemelka, a young historian from the University of Ostrava, researched a theme bridging historical geography and the history of architecture. On the topic of everyday life in coal mining colonies in Ostrava from the late 1890s until the 1950s, he analysed the life stories of living witnesses very successfully (Jemelka 2008, 2009).

As a side product of the OHC's research into 'elites and dissent', an annual meeting aimed at researchers and 'supporters' (mainly university students) of several oral history approaches was inaugurated. These semi-formal meetings, often with international participation, have been held at Sovinec Castle since 2002. Discussion covers not just different projects' concrete results, but also general issues deriving from the practice of oral history (like conducting interviews, ethical or legal aspects, archival possibilities, dissemination). After a decade these legendary meetings, perched on the castle walls, have more than ever become an open platform for lively discussion among different people (historians, anthropologists, archivists, political scientists, ethnologists, lawyers, theatre and literary scholars, journalists, NGO workers), and a symbolic place where the Czech oral history community is built on the basis of democratic equality, of fair collegiality, and often on the basis of friendships (Vaněk, Houda and Mücke 2011).

DISSEMINATION OF METHODS IN THE RECENT PAST AND IN THE PRESENT (2006–2012)

Paradoxically, despite its promising development, its expansion across many disciplines and, last but not least, its fruitful results, oral history as a method (or a domain) has not had it easy in the Czech Republic. In 2005, for instance, the OHC was faced with a very difficult situation. Three of its grant proposals were rejected and it was threatened with a termination of its research and the dissolution of its team, including its network of regional collaborators¹⁴ (ICH Internal Newsletter 5/2006; Schindler, Interview 20 July 2011). With only the slightest bit of exaggeration it seems that the development of academic oral history was at a symbolic crossroads. In this critical situation the director of the OHC entered into very intense negotiations with the directors of the Czech Academy of Sciences and finally he managed to gain support in the form of a one-year bridging grant, which temporarily saved a core OHC team (Vaněk, Interview 28 February 2011). The next year, subsequent grant proposals were successful and, from the first months of 2006, the OHC could continue on with its primary research.

Its first initiative was a project called ‘An Investigation into Czech Society During the ‘Normalization’ Era: The Biographical Narratives of Workers and the Intelligentsia’, which was conducted between 2006 and 2008. After gaining research experience with the ‘history making elites’, the OHC team under the leadership of Miroslav Vaněk, turned its attention towards the ‘anonymous’ actors of economic and social history, the history of everyday life and key elements in the history of society as a whole. Among the peculiarities of this project were the relatively wide definition of ‘research groups’ (encompassing both workers and the intelligentsia), the possibility of gender parity throughout the interviews, and also a generational definition of narrators (the focus was on those born between 1930 and 1950). A total of 113 interviews were conducted (61 with narrators belonging to the ‘workers’ group, and 51 with members of the intelligentsia). This number surpassed the OHC’s expectations of 80 planned interviews. The main form in which the results were published, a three-volume book called *Ordinary People... ?!* combined interpretations with 40 representative interviews in edited form (Vaněk 2009). In comparison with previous projects, the reviews and reactions were less enthusiastic; they did, however, appreciate that the book contributed indisputably towards a historical understanding of the lives of the ‘invisible majority’ in Czech society in the past. It was probably for this reason that, in 2010, this project was nominated by the ICH’s Scientific Council for the Czech Academy of Sciences’ prize again.

With the accent shifting towards the history of everyday life and leisure history, a project called ‘The Social Aspects of Cottage Culture in the Study of Everyday Life during the Era of so-called Normalization’ was led by the young anthropologist, Petra Schindler-Wisten at the OHC between 2007 and 2009. This junior project, which succeeded in the competition for funding at its second attempt, was to investigate a uniquely central-European phenomenon, the popular Czech hobby of building and

owning cottages in the countryside ('second homes') during the second half of the 20th century. From a historical-anthropological perspective, using Oral History, interviews were conducted with more than 30 cottage owners from the Czech lands. These interviews further extended the richness of the OHC's collections. The final result was a Ph.D. thesis in the field of Social Anthropology. This was defended by the author in 2010 at the Faculty of Humanities, Charles University, Prague. It has been submitted for publication (Schindler 2010).

The second most recent project, realised at the OHC by Miroslav Vaněk between 2006 and 2009, was based not only on Oral History, but also on the analysis of archival and media sources. It was a grant called 'The Social and Political Aspects of Rock Music in Czechoslovakia from the 1960s until 1989'. This project also gained funding at its second attempt and was focused on a theme not so frequently elaborated by Czech historians, but rather documented by musicologists, music publicists, sociologists and mainly the witnesses themselves. Some 46 semi-structured interviews were recorded in total, of which 21 are archived in the OHC's collections. From Vaněk's book, *It was only rock and roll... ?!*, it seems clear that the interviews were used in two ways: first, for the reconstruction of unknown events that were impossible to reconstruct from other sources, and second, to provide 'additional' sources, used to 'humanize' historical texts (Vaněk 2010).

The most recent OHC project is a five-year initiative called 'Czech Society in the Period of so-called Normalisation and Transformation', planned to run between 2011 and 2015, which also continues to build upon previous research. Among the main aims, the OHC plans to map other historically 'invisible' groups in Czech society, namely employees in the service industry, members of the armed forces (soldiers, policemen, firemen), managers in enterprise and agricultural workers. In the second phase, the research team will shift its attention towards reinterpreting all of the OHC's interviews with members of different groups and will focus on writing a synthesis interpreting the historical experience of Czech society over the last 40 years.

Oral history research and dissemination in the Czech Republic after the mid-2000s was not only an opportunity for the OHC. On the contrary, as contemporary history research expanded, oral history was increasingly used by other groups, academic institutions, universities, civic associations and individuals.

In response to public demand for recordings of and initiatives to publicise the life stories of Czechoslovak political prisoners from the Stalinist 1950s, the producer and documentarist Zuzana Dražilová worked to gather oral history interviews. Upon the request of the civic association called Daughters of 1950s, she started a project with her team called 'Documents, Youth and Society', which recorded memories of daughters who remembered the persecution of their parents at the hands of the communist regime. A documentary movie based on this project was finally honoured by the European Commission's 'Golden Star' prize in 2008. On a similar theme, the multidisciplinary team at Political prisoners.cz (under the leadership of young historian and political

scientist Tomáš Bouška, historian Klára Pinerová and anthropologist and historian Michal Louč are conducting a project that places a strong emphasis on analysis and interpretation (Bouška, Pinerová and Louč 2009).

In recent years, projects in related fields have been developed, which seem very relevant to contemporary history. As part of a Charles University grant project the students of the Institute of Sociology at the Faculty of Social Sciences interviewed their teachers in search of the history of their field (Kopecká 2010). For a long time now, oral history has been used in a wide, interdisciplinary manner by several research teams at the Institute of Film and Audiovisual culture, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University in Brno. This is due to support at the level of the institution's directors (led by Jiří Voráč, an ex-interviewee from the aforementioned project, 'Students during the Period of Communism's Fall'). Among others, a unique historical documentation project called 'Film Brno' should be mentioned. The project is directed by Pavel Skopal and Petr Sczepanik, who tried to analyse local popular film culture and its place in the history of everyday life after 1945 through interviews led with filmmakers and viewers.

Over the years oral history has also provided great potential for international research and collaboration. Of note is a Czech government project implemented between 2006 and 2008 by a consortium of academic institutions (the ICH, the Municipal Museum in Ústí nad Labem) and the popular association, Living Memory (funded by the Czech government), which documented the life stories of German-speaking opponents of Nazism who hailed from Czechoslovakia. These elderly people and sometimes their relatives were all affected by Czechoslovak 'anti-German' laws (and often expelled to Germany and Austria) after WW2; they were interviewed by a group of oral historians led and coordinated by David Weber (ICH), Barbora Čermáková (ICH) and Alena Wagnerová (an independent scholar who emigrated to Germany after 1968). Their testimonies, which were ignored, repressed and deemed taboo by the communist regime for a long time, were summarised in an edited book of interviews (Weber and Čermáková 2008; Wagnerová 2010). The other 'government' project initiated by the Czech Ministry of Foreign Affairs was to mark the 40th anniversary of the Prague Spring and the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact Armies. Between 2006 and 2008, under the auspices of the ICH and through the leadership of historian and political scientist Lukáš Valeš, the international research team worked with Czech and Austrian narrators coming from political, economic and cultural elites who were active in their professions during the hectic year of 1968. The importance of the Czech-Austrian relationship at that time was underlined by the fact that after the Prague Spring thousands of Czech and Slovak émigrés to Western countries were welcomed by Austria in a very friendly manner. The country served for years as a notable place for Czech anti-communist exiles until 1989 (following Germany, France, the United Kingdom and the United States) (Valeš 2008). Historians from České Budějovice in Southern Bohemia (Jiří Petráš) in co-operation with the Austrian Waldviertel Akademie in Waidhofen an der Thaya (Niklas Perzi) proved that a form of international oral history

project can be useful when researching ‘non-elite’ narrators, such as people living on the both sides of the Czech-Austrian border during the Cold War era (Petraš 2010). Unfortunately, an idea to conduct an international project called ‘We lived in Socialism’, comparing the experience of ‘ordinary people’ who experienced ‘communism’ or ‘real socialism’ before 1989 and then the democratic transformation around eastern Europe (in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, the former East Germany, Bulgaria, Romania, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Croatia) has still to come to fruition. This proposal was submitted by an international research consortium led by the OHC to a European Union grant competition on three occasions (in 2008, 2009 and 2010); it has yet to succeed, however, due to the wide range of other, competing ‘cultural events’ and ‘social and humanities’ projects.

Especially after the year 2000, the environment of academic liberty and freedom in the Czech Republic has presented young generations of students and prospective scholars with an opportunity. The systematic dissemination and popularisation of work undertaken by the OHC is the proof of this long-term process. At the initiative of Miroslav Vaněk, as a result of his recent experience teaching at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, the first oral history university course began in the Czech Republic in 2001. This was taught at the Collegium Hieronymi Pragense, a college for U.S. foreign students gaining experience ‘over the Ocean’ in Prague. This meant, somewhat paradoxically, that the first oral history graduates in the Czech Republic were U.S. students. Another ‘side effect’ of the aforementioned project ‘Political Elites and Dissent’ was the establishment of an intensive collaboration with Palacký University in Olomouc, where the main researchers, Miroslav Vaněk and Pavel Urbášek, led the oral history course (with the assistance of regional historians Josef Bartoš and Ivo Barteček) at the Faculty of Arts between the years 2001/2002 and 2002/2003. This effort was perhaps not in vain because several graduates were recruited as collaborators in future grant projects. Unfortunately because of a disagreement with the Department of History’s leadership, the idea of creating an Oral History Center at Palacký University in the winter semester of 2003/2004 was not implemented (Urbášek, Interview 22 August 2011). These circumstances resulted in Miroslav Vaněk’s move to teach in the Czech capital, where he led oral history lectures in several departments at Charles University (at the Institute of Czech History and the Institute of Political Science). Finally he took a job at the Faculty of Humanities. Because of the very positive response to his courses there, and thanks to the support of the faculty’s administration (especially the support of the dean, Jan Sokol, the vice-dean Zdeněk Pinc and the later dean, Ladislav Benyovsky, all three of whom were philosophers by specialisation), a unique Master’s programme was launched in ‘Oral History – Contemporary History’. In 2008 this course was formally accredited. Today, this programme boasts of 41 graduates and 91 active students pursuing their studies.

It can be generally stated that every year the total number of bachelor’s, master’s and doctoral theses based on oral history methods written at universities around the

Czech Republic is growing. What is also hopeful for the future is the fact that the use of oral history is not rare at a secondary or even primary school level. Students from J.K. Tyl High School in Hradec Králové, for example, achieved some remarkable results when they researched the fate of their institution during the communist era. Likewise, under teachers' supervision, pupils at Karel Čapek Elementary School in Prague 10 used oral history to map the 100 years that had lapsed since the school's founding (Dulíček, Hutla and Ruffer 2008).

If recent achievements at an institutional level should be summarised, it is worth mentioning that a number of other oral history centres, besides the OHC, have been established at several universities, such as for example in 2010 when, as part of the Department of History, at the Faculty of Pedagogy, in Pilsen's University of Western Bohemia, the Society of Oral History was founded with historian Naděžda Morávková at its helm (Morávková 2011). As well as primary research, this Society began to build its specialisation in improving and developing new methods in education through Oral History. The Pilsen team also helped support the expansion of oral history as a discipline when they began to edit and publish the journal, *Memo*, which was the first oral history journal in the Czech Republic. The culmination of long-term efforts to integrate the community came when the Czech Oral History Association (COHA), a national platform for support, propagation and dissemination of oral history in the Czech countries, was founded in January 2007.¹⁵ In contrast to neighbouring central European countries such as Germany, Austria, Slovakia and Hungary, where there were, for different reasons, still no such national oral history associations, the Czech oral history movement profited from solid positions and from a basis of 30 institutional and 80 individual members.

All the protagonists of the Czech oral history movement were greatly honoured by decision taken by the IOHA Council, approved by the General Assembly at the 15th IOHA Conference in Guadalajara, Mexico, in September 2008. This favourable decision meant that the next opportunity to meet would be in Prague in July 2010. For the first time in IOHA history, the 16th Conference was visited by more than 500 delegates from 57 countries from each continent. The conference programme was scheduled to span nine concurrent sessions, in which a total of 434 papers were presented. From the point of view of personalities, the Prague conference was honoured with the participation of a number of top oral historians, including one of the 'founding fathers', the English historian and oral history 'guru', Paul Thompson, who took part in the IOHA conference for the first time in almost 20 years. The proverbial cherry on the cake was the election of Miroslav Vaněk as the President of IOHA between 2010 and 2012 (Freund 2010; McDoughall 2010). In retrospect, this successful conference was not only a magnificent source of inspiration and networking with the international community, but it also meant a symbolic end to the 'foundation phase' of the Czech oral history movement.

In conclusion it can be said that oral history in the Czech Republic experienced some hectic years. Dealing with many doubts, experiencing many failures, worrying about results and experiencing feelings of disappointment were all part of the journey.

But oral historians in the Czech Republic also defended the discipline's existence, created institutions, disseminated numerous results, established many contacts (and friendships) and felt a lot of joy. To make a prognosis for the future is very difficult. Should it be possible to develop the research activities mentioned here at a high standard, to maintain or better them, step by step, to increase the number of members of the oral history community and their supporters, and to continue to network successfully internationally, then oral history in the Czech Republic can expect a very hopeful future in the coming years.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article was created with the support of Czech Grant Agency's grant project: Czech Society in the Era of so-called Normalisation and Transformation. Biographical Interviews (No. P410/11/1352). I would like to thank my colleagues from Oral History Center for their comments and support, and to our Scottish colleague, Rosamund Johnson, who very patiently did the proofreading for this article.

ENDNOTES

- 1 The term 'Oral History' was promoted for the first time in the Czech historical community in the journal *Soudobé dějiny* [Contemporary History] from 1994, when, in an editorial, a plan to 'publish edited oral history examples' was mentioned. Unfortunately, in the years that followed, the idea did not come to fruition.
- 2 For example, the most experienced Czech researcher and one of the 'founding fathers' of oral history in the Czech Republic, Miroslav Vaněk, served as a member of the IOHA Council as a representative for Europe between 2008 and 2010, between the years 2010 and 2012 he served as IOHA president, and for the years 2012–2014 he holds the position of IOHA past-president.
- 3 After years of inspiration from German sources, historian Dana Musilová expressed the influence that German methodological articles had had on her. It seems that her source of inspiration came from Lutz Niethammer, who at that time was finishing his vast project on German workers in the Third Reich.
- 4 A similar organisational structure was used in similar institutions in Western Europe, such as the Institut für Zeitgeschichte in Munich (Germany), L'Institut d'histoire du temps présent in Paris (France) or Instituut voor sociale Geschiedenis in Amsterdam (Netherlands).
- 5 For example, the first director of the ICH, Vilém Prečan, was exiled in the German Federal Republic, as was the *spiritus movens* of the ICH Karel Kaplan. The first vice-director, Pavel Seifter, and another very active member of the 'founding father' generation, Milan Otáhal, were signatories of Charter 77 and active in dissent. The first chief of the ICH's scientific council, Karel Jech, and the council's vice-director later, Jindřich Pecka, were fired from their jobs in 1968 and had to work in manual professions.
- 6 The edition was conceived as a successor to the 'Black Book'", an edition of contemporary documentation that criticised the Occupation of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw Pact Armies. This publication was edited by historians Milan Otáhal and Vilém Prečan following August 1968.
- 7 Behind Milan Otáhal was Miroslav Vaněk, who, because of his interest in the history of the 1989

- revolution, decided to leave his profession as a high school teacher and join the research staff of the ICH.
- 8 For their methodological inspiration, Miroslav Vaněk and Milan Otáhal used foreign books by Steinar Kvale, Paul Thompson, Herward Vorländer, Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, Jürgen Straub and Peter Salner, for example.
 - 9 Among the first regional collaborators were the historian and archivist Pavel Urbášek from Olomouc who recorded interviews in Northern Moravia, and historian Jiří Petráš who interviewed narrators from South Bohemia. Both played an important role in the research team in the future.
 - 10 Among ‘side products’ hailing from the project the famous public proclamation, ‘Thank you, go away!’ (addressed in November 1999 to leaders of Czech political life) should be mentioned.
 - 11 Concerning primary research, the OHC focused upon the history of different social groups from the 1970s and 1980s, especially political elites, dissidents, members of the young generation, workers, the intelligentsia. Furthermore, it researched the history of Czech exile and emigration, the phenomenon of cottage-ownership/ summerhouses in communist Czechoslovakia etc.
 - 12 To support the development of oral history education, the OHC in collaboration with Collegium Hieronymi Pragensis, an American college for U.S. students studying a ‘semester abroad’, obtained a Burch Scholarship from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill amounting to US\$10 000.
 - 13 In the development of his growing career in the field of Oral History, Miroslav Vaněk attributes great importance to his two long-term stays in the United States (in 2000 and 2004). Equally, he cites several conference presentations and informal consultations at multiple Oral History Association meetings.
 - 14 As well as the major project focusing on workers and the intelligentsia, smaller grant proposals by Petra Trypesová (‘Life stories of Czechoslovak Foreign Soldiers from WWII’) and Miroslav Vaněk (‘Cultural, Social and Political Aspects of Rock Music in Czechoslovakia between years 1956 and 1989’) were submitted.
 - 15 It should be noted that the *spiritus movens* of Czech Oral History, Miroslav Vaněk, enthusiastic after his return from the 14th IOHA Conference in Sydney in Summer 2006, inspired his colleagues to the extent that, in January 2007, the Czech Oral History Association was finally founded.

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Corresponding author:

Pavel Mücke

Department of Oral History and Contemporary History

Faculty of Humanities, Charles University, Prague

E-mail: mucke@usd.cas.cz