Remembering the Cold War in Komárom
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Key words: Project by the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute; oral history interviews in Komárom (Hungary); historical research on empirical basis; remembering the Cold War; spoken history, lack of historical memory, deliberate suppression of memory.

1.1) In 2007, the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute in Wien launched a three-year-long historical research project under the title The ‘Long European Post War Period’ in Communicative Memories and (Trans)National Public Spheres. The institution conducted and supervised professional collection and analysis of oral history interviews in order to
- get a more detailed insight into the post-1945 period of European history,
- gather valuable historical data of a significant quantity,
- set up conscious historical research on empirical basis regarding collective memory of some selected features of the Cold War.

The locations where oral history interviews were obtained from, include altogether some twenty border towns throughout Europe, such as Gmünd (Austria) – České Velenice (Czech Republic, formerly ČSSR); Gorizia (Italy) – Nova Gorica (Slovenia, formerly Yugoslavia); Kapikule/Edirne (Turkey) – Kapitan Andreevo/Svilengrad (Bulgaria) – Orestiada (Greece); Salonta (Rumania) – Méhkerék (Hungary); Görlitz (Germany, formerly DDR) – Zgorzelec (Poland); Narva (Estonia, formerly Soviet Union) – Ivangoird (Russia, formerly Soviet Union); Cerbère (France) – Port-Bou (Spain); Calais (France) – Dover (Great Britain).

1.2) Twin-towns Komárom (Hungary) – Komárno (Slovakia, formerly ČSSR) have also been part of this project. The research in Komárno was conducted by Dr. Muriel Blaive (Ludwig Boltzmann Institute), and a similar set of interviews in Komárom was made by me and my team. The conduction, transcription, encoding, and analysis of the interviews had been professionally supervised by Dr. Berthold Molden, institutionally and financially backed by the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute.

Besides the general goals of the project, there were three special points of interest in the research in these two localities. First and foremost, it was the border regime between Hungary and Czechoslovakia as two neighbouring former Communist states that we paid attention to. Secondly we were very much interested in learning more about the ways how Cold War is nowadays remembered by local people and societies. Finally, it is the national dimension of the problem that makes the Komárom – Komárno case so interesting, since their inhabitants are and have always been mostly Hungarians.

As far as methodology is concerned, interviews in Komárom were timed from March to September 2008. Locally, interviews had been recorded in Komárom, occasionally in Szény or Koppánymonostor, at places which have been integrated administrative parts of Komárom for many decades. Interviews were based on a questionnaire, as a set of special questions, compiled by Muriel Blaive and myself in advance of the research, with special attention for local use both in Komárom as well as
Komárno. All interviews were recorded by a digital voice recorder. Their length varies between 20 and 90 minutes. Interviews were subsequently transcribed into a digital word processor in Rich Text Format, and fed into a special computer programme MAXQDA, obtained from the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute. All original digital voice recordings, transcripts as well as texts fed into and analysed in MAXQDA are property of and accessible at the LBI in Wien.

Except for the continuous cooperation with Muriel Blaive, during the project period I had had three local helpers. I am grateful to my team, namely László Deák, Helga Záprel, and Tamás Opris, undergraduates at our Department of History at the Selye University. It has to be pointed out that their participation turned out to be very important since some interviewees would have been unapproachable without their help.

2) How do people in Komárom remember the Cold War? By collecting and analysing the thirty oral history interviews, we have obtained a substantial historical material on empirical basis. This is what we regard as primary source for our ground research. Of course, we have to keep in mind the limits of any oral history narrative, as well as we have to carefully consider professional criteras when handling and using oral history as back-up material for any historical conclusion. In the following study, I would like to give a hint into one particular topic regarding the issue of ‘How People Remember the Cold War’.

2.1) The overwhelming majority of interviewees in Komárom reported ‘spoken history’ that originates from ‘their family’ as the most important source of their historical memory. When referring to their ‘memories from the past’, interviewees tend to rely on their own private experiences, i.e. what they have ever seen or heard, as well as on their family (or some other private circles) as the most significant sources of rememberance or of any historical knowledge. Their attitude defined above is recorded in answers like ,,They say”; ,,I heard it”; ,,Such stories were told”; ,,People hear things” etc.

There are basically two typical ‘private circles’ where historical memories origin from: the childhood and the closest family members: ,,My parents were telling me [...] My Granny told me”; ,,I remember it form my childhood”; ,,In my childhood I didn’t use to hear such a things”; ,,What is living in my memory is...”; ,,This [town] used to be a small place, where information spread like the rain”; ,,I have memories from this from my very early childhood [...] when my Mum told me that...”; ,,We didn’t really use to talk about such a things”; ,,A friend of my Father [...] told us that”; ,,My Mum and Dad and our Grandparents were telling me that...” etc.

In other words, vast majority of interviewees in Komárom rely exclusively on their own personal experiences and ordinary ‘hearsays’ as sources of historical memory / historical knowledge. It is absolutely stunning to learn to what extent people in Komárom ignore external sources of history, such as books, films, or formal ways of learning (education). This statement can be proved by a simple lexical analysis which shows the structure of organs of senses which interviewees refer to: in 80% of cases they refer to ‘audible’ information what they ‘heard’ by their their ‘ears’.

2.2) Interviewees in Komárom tend to strongly prefer informal personal experiences over formal knowledge of history as source of memory of a better quality. For example:
What I already experienced is that...”; „I have sensed it”; „I haven’t sensed just heard it”; „What I heard, so I didn’t live through those things”; „I just heard of these things, I know them from hearing, but personally I have never experienced them” etc.

Parallel with this, serious discrepancy between ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ historical memory is recorded in the interviewees. For example: „Official historical studies used to tell us something different”; „The stories of [our] parents and grandparents who lived through the events show a clearer and more realistic picture. Of course there were information that couldn’t be publicly discussed with our classmates or friends... Yeah, they were topics only in a narrow circle of the family”; „From the heads of the younger ones it has slowly been erasing [...] For them this border means nothing any more [...] For older ones however it is still a stomach cramp”; „There were different things taught at the school, and there were different things in the history books” etc.

Further on, it is typical that interviewees rarely make any comments on quality or importance of the memories. A rare exception was recorded when an interviewee made a cautious but explicit comment on the deportation of Hungarians from Czechoslovakia, saying: „Well, I am not sure if the resettlements of groups or individual people or so would remain as positive things in peoples’ eyes”.

Though there is no sign of deliberate exclusion of impulses different than private experiences from the narratives, it is a fact that neither sources outside the family nor sources different than hearsay are mentioned in the interviews. The exclusivity of such a form of a memory can originate in two major sources. One, a simple narrow-mindedness, that people are simply not aware of potential carriers of historical memory beyond their own experiences, such as education, books, films etc. The lack of memories can also be interpreted as a deliberate decision of an individual who is indeed aware of the importance of historical knowledge beyond private experience but at the same time he or she does not trust such a carriers of memory for different reasons. At this point of the research we can only suspect that one of the reasons of such a defective historical memory is Communism / Socialism as a system which at minimum did not encourage the historical dimension of remembrance, neither on private nor on communal level.

2.3) There is a phenomenon in the interviews that I prefer to name as ‘lack of historical memory’. There can be two typical groups of interviewees identified as such. There was a group of people who simply and firmly rejected answering any particular question, on the grounds that these events concern ‘too contemporary history’. An other and bigger group of interviewees explained their discontent with their own answers by saying that they were simply ‘not in a position to remember’, or ‘[they] weren’t living at that time’ so ‘[they] don’t know/can’t know’. For example: „I can’t remember for I am too young”; „I can’t remember because I wasn’t born at that time”; „I wasn’t living then so I can’t know”; „I wasn’t living then therefore I can’t understand it”; „I can’t remember for I was too young at that time [...] In 1989 I was only one year old, so I can’t know”; „I can’t make any judgements what kind of events happened then [in 1947-1948]”; „I was too tiny then”, etc.

In fact, answers of both these groups derive from a false assumption that valid historical accounts can only be made on the grounds of direct personal experiences. Or on the contrary, that personal experiences are an indispensable condition for deducing
historical truth. If this assumption was true than human mankind would not have been in a position to explore and understand historical past.

A different aspect of the same issue is the question, what is the reason that most interviewees see no link at all between past and present. For instance, when asked to specify the links between the ‘old border regime’ (i.e. pre-1989) and the ‘old political system’ (also the one pre-1989), practically hardly anyone saw any links between these issues. One example: After having had a long discussion over the economical disadvantages of the Kadar regime, and its inferiority to the Czechoslovak economy, the interviewee was asked the question: ‘Why do you think Hungarian people were not allowed to bring over the border more than 2 kilos of bananas from Czechoslovakia to Hungary?’ Interviewee’s laconic reply sounded: ‘I haven’t got a clue.’

Since relevant historiography is having clear evidences to prove the very opposite of some private confessions heard, stating that strict (sometimes even inhuman) border regime between Communist countries had been a direct outcome of their totalitarian type of political leadership, many questions need to be answered. The most relevant is the one that asks for the interviewees’ complete lack of critical approach to the historical events during the Communism. Is it an honest phenomenon? Does it have anything to do with ‘collective amnesia’, applied by historian Tony Judt to metaphorically describe the perception of the Communist rule? (Judt 2005, 776.) What is the reason that people do not dare to challenge or minimally question the Communist system even in 2008? From the position of having a complex overview over all research localities of the project, Berthold Molden gives a possible answer. He is stating a key element of remembering the Cold War on the Communist side when he writes: some interviewees confirmed „our earlier observation, namely that as compared to this experience, the following decades of the Cold War [...] lacked any noteworthy events”. (Molden 2008, 46.)

Besides this, it is highly probable that remembering the times of Communism had strongly been influenced by the propaganda-type mass media. As an American expert on the Cold War media has stated it, „People [from Central Eastern Europe] may have listened to the western radios, but [...] the ‘attention cues’ for what was perceived, absorbed and remembered, particularly on domestic issues, had been by and large provided by the Communists”. (Holt 93.) In other words, peoples attitude to contemporary remembrance that naturally enables them seeing tiny details of everyday processes rather than main lines of great historical forces, had been strengthened by deliberate Communist propaganda in order to make people remember the less possible. The same idea is supported by a statement by Berthold Molden. In his words, newspaper analysis shows that „the Cold War was represented in the local newspaper [...] but it was not connected to the situation of Gmünd itself”, (Molden 2008, 65.) All in all, our interviewees have limited or no memory from the Communism due to factors which were beyond their personal influence, such as the contemporary systems itself.

2.4) Some interviews can be characterised as confessions where ‘deliberate suppression of memory’ is evident. There are interviewees who refer to their ‘imperfect memory’ or ‘lack of historical memory’ due to some kind of suppression. In these accounts, suppression is made by a bodyless political force, or it is a result of somebody’s voluntary decision to avoid ‘unpleasant feelings’ or other ‘difficulties’. Other interviewees explicitly refer to their own ‘imperfect memory’ due to political reasons. Minimally five
people refer to suppressed memories like these. Some explicitly mention that it was ‘the system’ that forced them not to speak about thing and this way even forcing them forgetting things. In these accounts suppressed memories tend to have harmful influence since they ‘make harm’ in people’s relations, regardless whether it was their private or social relations. Some example quotations: „My parents didn’t want to talk about these things because they wanted to bring... me up in peace [...] My parents spoke to us neither about politics nor about history [...] At home, [my] parents didn’t speak about such a things”; „We used to be forbidden to call Komárom Komárom or Bratislava Pozsony [...] We used to be punished for doing so”.

The issue of voluntarily suppressed memory is the most typical when speaking about ‘painful’ or ‘sensitive’ historical issues, such as the Treaty of Trianon, or Hungarians living abroad Hungary. For example: „In those times when I was a schoolboy or a student at the secondary school, it wasn’t really tactful to speak about these things”; „We kept back [ourselves] from speaking about things concerning the situation over the border [...] The situation after Trianon, Trianon itself, and Hungarians who found themselves outside Hungary, then our relation with the neighbouring nations..., it was..., hm, not a taboo but we convinced ourselves not to speak about them too much, and then there won’t be any conflicts”; „We didn’t dare to talk about these things [...] So we wanted to be silent about them”; „[Prior to 1989] Conversation with them [with Hungarians living in Slovakia] had always taken place in a way that man didn’t say any sensitive thing”; „We didn’t use to hear from our teachers that Hungarians were living on the other side of the border” etc.

3) At the present stage of research, we are in a position to make three synthetical conclusions regarding the issue how our interviewees in Komárom remember the Cold War.

3.1) There is a phenomenon in the thirty interviews which can be described as a symptom of a triad influence on peoples’ memory. This symptom is a complex and organic combination of three tendencies making the Komárom case unique:

- there is an almost complete absence of external sources when remembering;
- there is a phenomenon of suppressed memory;
- there is a clear influence of Communism or Socialism as a system on their way of remembering.

3.2) Interviews have confirmed the thesis that overwhelming majority of interviewees remember – if anything – then their own ‘local events’ rather than ‘big events’ distant in space or officially established in history books. This thesis can also be checked validly in the analysis of the contemporary press which shows that despite there had been lengthy reflexive reports on all significant events of the Cold War (and many more), peoples’ memory keep nearly nothing of them today. As Berthold Molden states it in his report on Gmünd, despite „the Cold War is framed in a series of material crisis events” in the established history (Molden 2008, 62.), it is not true when remembering everyday life during the Cold War. This also explains why there is hardly any notion of typical Cold War events, such as atomic warfare, West-East political confrontation etc. in the interviews.
3.3) In the interviews in Komárom, Communism or Socialism is not always but generally seen as something negative. In comparison with Gmünd, where „Communism is equaled with something negative” (Molden 2008, 31.), people in Komárom definitely see more shades of their own past.

As Berthold Molden states: „Peoples of Eastern Europe are described as victims of Communism, innocent of repressions and economic stagnation. Hence, they were seen as European brothers and sisters who had fallen under the yoke of Bolshevik dictatorship, but who were really progressive and friendly people whose suffering had to be pitied.” (Molden 2008, 38.) The account that is being quoted below reports a similar situation, from the viewpoint of a ‘victim’ who used to be a conscript border guard at the Hungarian – Czechoslovak river border: „From the Austrian [shipmen] we only got... gifts. We went on board of their ship to search... Yeah, for we had to search or to handle the passports. There was an Austrian crew of six men, so you can imagine how ‘difficult’ it was to handle six passports, one had just put a stamp into them, and then you came off the ship. It wasn’t necessary to examine the ship, but indeed we had to do it. And then they told us not to go anywhere... Where in the hell we would go on board of an Austrian ship? They gave us... some..., any minor presents..., small ones but it meant very much to us in those times. [...] You got a Fa soap in 1981. You got some friendly words in Hungarian because they spoke some Hungarian. Or... a packet of a Marlboro cigarettes [...] Now looking back, I remember a ship called Melk, and it was visible on the capitan that he felt... deep sorry for us. I don’t exactly know in what way he felt sorry... but he did. He shook his head that it is not true what we want from them. He didn’t even understand it.”

This study was prepared as a result of a historical research project titled The ‘Long European Post War Period’ in Communicative Memories and (Trans)National Public Spheres, organised by the Ludwig Boltzmann Institute, Wien.
tartott történelmi eseményekkel kapcsolatban, mint Trianon vagy a határon túli magyarság ügye; (3) megfigyelhető annak részletei, hogy a kommunista propaganda hogyan gyakorolt hosszú távú hatást a kortársak és a mai emlékezés történemi tudatára.

Holt, Robert T.
Judt, Tony
Molden, Berthold