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Czech and German Memories of Forced Migration

Individual memories are neither a simple mirror of the official narrative of memory nor are they simply its photo negative. In this essay the author examines the ways in which the Czech and (Sudeten) German master narratives of the post-war forced migration of the German speaking inhabitants penetrated into individual memories. Collective remembrance often replaced the memories of actual experiences. However, examples taken from particular interviews from recent years reveal that individual experiences and memories, which earlier were not considered acceptable in the public sphere and in some contexts had even been dangerous, can at least be integrated as exceptions into the structure of national master narratives, which in consequence lose their incontestability. The study of the memories of the post-war expulsion of Germans has been an important task for historians over the course of the past twenty years or more. But this has been a topic of interest not only for historians. These often contrasting memories have figured prominently in one of the most important post-1989 political and identity debates in Central and Eastern Europe. The article compares the development of memories and narratives of post-war flight and expulsion in Czechoslovakia and (West) Germany. The author considers how the individual memories of flight and expulsion compare with the collective memories, and he also attempts to identify the circumstances under which the individual memories offer an alternative vision of the past.

keywords: individual memories, collective remembrance, expulsion, Sudeten Germans, identity

The Post-War Politics of Memory

The politics of the memory of the flight and expulsion began to take shape before the expulsions had come to an end. The participants, whether victims or the people of the states responsible for the expulsions, sought to shape collective memory to fit their interpretations. The historical narratives of “victims of world history” on the one hand and “guilt and punishment” on the other played an important role. And just as the opposing camps began to stake their claims, the Iron Curtain fell, hindering all further exchange of memories and perspectives between East and West.¹

1 The (West)German post-war conservative perspective represents the introductory texts of the documentation of flight and expulsion edited by Theodor Schieder in the early 1950s (For the case of the expulsion from Czechoslovakia see: Theodor Schieder, ed., *Dokumentation der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Ost-*

West Germany: The Europeanization of the Discourse of Victimhood?

Even in West Germany the integration of millions of refugees and dispossessed individuals was an unavoidable task. In a democratic society this cannot be accomplished through a relativization of identity. Conservative politicians quickly realized that the large number of refugees constituted an important demographic problem. Their exceptional position thereby gained some political support, and their painful losses, the loss of the homelands from which they had been expelled and belongings and properties of which they had been stripped, were not only officially acknowledged, but also frequently brought to the fore. From the political perspective this took concrete form in the so-called “*Lastenausgleichsgesetz*,” a law adopted in 1952 that provided financial compensation to refugees for their losses. The law was testimony to the prominent position of the refugees and the dispossessed in West German society in the Adenauer era.²

The remarkable attention that the victims of the expulsions were given was not merely part of a political strategy to curry their favor as voters. The sufferings of the German casualties of war also played an important role as “a functional equipollent to the massive confrontation with the horrors of the Nazi persecutions.”³ As Constantin Goschler persuasively demonstrates in his article on reconciliation and the question of victimhood, in the first decade after the war little distinction was drawn in the public life of the West German state between the victims of National Socialism and the German victims of the war or the period immediately following the war. By portraying the larger part of German society as victims, an attempt was made to place all responsibility for the crimes of the Nazi regime on a small group of party elite surrounding Hitler and Himmler.⁴

Mitteleuropa, Bd. 4: *Die Vertreibung der deutschen Bevölkerung aus der Tschechoslowakei* (Bonn: Bundesministerium für Vertriebene, Flüchtlinge und Kriegsgeschädigte, 1957). Concerning the perspective of Czech postwar discourse see Christiane Brenner, “*Zwischen Ost und West*”. *Tschechische politische Diskurse 1945–1948* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2009).

2 The Equalizations of War Burdens Act of 1952 provided compensation for those who had lost real estate as a consequence of the war, as well as for victims of the bombing of German cities and refugees from the Soviet occupation zone of Germany. The expellees from the former German territories were the greatest beneficiaries of the Law.

3 Constantin Goschler, “‘Versöhnung’ und ‘Viktimisierung’ Die Vertriebenen und der deutsche Opferdiskurs,” *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft* 10 (2005): 873–84, 875.

4 The historiographical discourse on the perpetrators began to become dominant in the 1980s, see for example: Harald Welzer, *Täter. Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2005), Christopher Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland*

This approach to the questions raised by the immediate past should by no means be misunderstood to imply that the individual memories of the refugees were acknowledged automatically, nor did it mean that the refugees themselves were actively integrated into German society. The experiences of pain and loss to which the refugees gave voice became a part of the German master narrative of the post-war era, and yet there was often a lack of empathy for the sufferings of those who had been forced to leave their homelands and resettle in Germany.

In the 1970s the discourse regarding the war began to change. The National Socialist regime and, first and foremost, the Holocaust itself began to be treated as unique and incomparable phenomena of history.⁵ The victims of the expulsions were thereby cast as “second class” victims or even “undesirables.” The feeling, common among many of the victims of the resettlements, that even in West Germany their fates were a taboo topic (even into the 1990s) stems from this period. The associations of refugees began to disappear from the political sphere. While the idea of the victimhood of the German casualties of war, which in earlier decades had been widespread, gradually was divested of its legitimacy, the discourses through which this notion found expression were preserved in refugee circles, very much as if in a hall of mirrors, where un-interrogated images of the past could proliferate unhindered by any exterior influences.

In the 1980s the question of the expulsions again began to emerge as a topic of discussion in public discourse, strengthened in part by the question of the reunification of Germany. The revival of the debates regarding the expulsions, however, by no means meant a return to the 1950s. They have taken place in a pluralist society in which the influence of the refugee associations has clearly been far less significant than it was in the first decade after the war.⁶ Although according to surveys almost half of the population of Germany still considers the subject of the forced resettlements of Germans important and in some manner or another occupies itself with or reflects on the questions the forced

(New York, HarperCollins, 1992); Christian Gerlach, ed., *Durchschnittstäter: Handeln und Motivation* (Berlin: Assoziation, Schwarze Risse, Rote Straße, 2000).

5 For more literature on these debates see Mathias Brodtkorb, *Singuläres Auschwitz? Erich Nolte, Jürgen Habermas und 25 Jahre “Historikerstreit”* (Banzkow: Adebör, 2011); Jürgen Peter, ed., *Der Historikerstreit und die Suche nach einer nationalen Identität der achtziger Jahre* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1995).

6 See various articles in Thomas Strobel and Robert Maier, ed., *Das Thema Vertreibung und die deutsch-polnischen Beziehungen in Forschung, Unterricht und Politik* (Hannover: Hahn, 2008).

resettlements raise, only a small minority associates this topic with the refugee associations, which for the most part are assessed quite critically.⁷

Following the reunification of Germany and the fall of the Iron Curtain, the topic, which until then essentially had been a question of interest really only for Germans and Germany, gradually became a subject of European interest, and indeed on different levels.⁸ On the one hand the master narrative of the Sudeten Germans was transformed into the language of political demands, which had the emphatic support of the provincial governments of the Christian Social Union of Bavaria and the more half-hearted support of the Christian Democratic Union of the federal government. In this context, memory was linked to lost properties or at least the rhetoric of the lost “homeland.” At the same time, however, attempts were being made to put the historical scholarship on the expulsions into a new spatial and temporal context. This scholarship, which in the 1950s (primarily because of the influence of the refugee circles) had documented the extent of the tragedy and in the 1970s and 1980s had been pursued with less intensity, in the meantime had been liberated from the confines of a monologic perspective. This gives reason to hope that we may yet see a more nuanced discussion of this part of German history, incorporating differing perspectives, a discussion that avoids both forced forgetting and a-critical discourses of victimhood.

Czechoslovakia: Between National Master Narrative, Taboo, and Mediation

In Czechoslovakia the master narrative of the righteous first Czechoslovak Republic emerged very quickly, even simultaneously with the events of the expulsions. According to this narrative, the Germans had rejected the generous offer of the Czechs and in the end had betrayed the Republic.⁹ The expulsion of

7 For more on this question see Thomas Petersen, *Útěk a nucené vysídlení z pohledu německého, polského a českého obyvatelstva* [Flight and Forced Resettlement from the Perspective of the German, Polish, and Czech People], (Bonn: Stiftung Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, 2005).

8 Concerning the historiographical debate, see the works of Norman M. Naimark, Alfred-Maurice de Zayas, and the more recent book by R. M. Douglas (Ray. M. Douglas, *Orderly and Humane: The Expulsion of Germans after the Second World War* (New Haven–London: Yale University Press, 2012). One of the important political aspects of the Europeanization of the topic is the ongoing debate about the so called Beneš decrees in the European Parliament. See Christian Domnitz, *Die Beneš-Dekrete in parlamentarischer Debatte: Kontroversen im Europäischen Parlament und im tschechischen Abgeordnetenhaus vor dem EU-Beitritt der Tschechischen Republik* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2007).

9 See Brenner, „Zwischen Ost und West.“

some 3,000,000 Sudeten Germans (referred to in Czechoslovakia as “*odsun*,” in German “*Abschub*” from the verb “*abschieben*,” meaning to deport) thus was cast as a logical consequence of earlier events. The flight of some 250,000 Czechs from the borderlands in 1938 was also referred to as “*odsun*,” in harmony with this interpretation, in order to blur the differences between the two. The second “*odsun*” was from this perspective merely a logical consequence of the first. While the first was interpreted as a sign of German cruelty, the “*odsun*” of the Germans was considered an act of historical justice. It is worth noting on the one hand that this Czech version was an appeal in support of the argument for the international recognition of the forced resettlements of the Germans, although the separation of the Sudetenland in 1938 had also been the result of concerted international negotiation and therefore, in principle, endorsement. On the other hand, the claims regarding historical justice and the contention according to which the expulsions in no way contradicted or belied the notion of the Humanist Czech tradition should be re-interrogated.¹⁰ Although in 1947 some people who had been brutal in their treatment of the Germans were publically accused, thereby making it clear that at least (and at most) members of the state army or police would be held responsible for the excesses against the Sudeten Germans, in the collective memory these acts were considered minor transgressions on the part of some “criminal elements.”¹¹

Following the rise to power of the Czechoslovak Communist Party certain elements of the historical narrative were no longer tolerated. The first Czechoslovak Republic was critically reassessed because of its alleged “bourgeois nationalism,” and thus the notion of a just and generous attitude on the part of the state towards the German minorities lost its foundations. At the same time the party was anxious to integrate the some 200,000 Germans who remained in Czechoslovakia into the new socialist society, as well as to maintain good relations with the German Democratic Republic. Given these considerations, it is hardly surprising that the anti-German rhetoric began to

10 For more on the different standpoints in the debates on the expulsion and remaining Germans between 1945 and 1948 see Brenner, *Zwischen Ost und West* or Matěj Spurný, *Nejsou jako my – česká společnost a menšiny v pohraničí 1945–1960* [They are Not as Us. Czech Society and the Minorities in the Borderlands] (Prague: Antikomplex, 2011).

11 If trying to reconstruct the Czech “collective memory” of flight and expulsion, public debates immediately after 1989 might be of great importance. Many newspaper articles from the first half of the 1990s on this topic were published in: Petr Pithart and Petr Příhoda, ed., *Čítanka odsunutých dějin* [A Reader of the Displaced History] (Prague: Prago Media News, 1998).

abate after 1948.¹² The interpretation of the expulsions, which from the start had had the unambiguous support of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, could not be substantially rewritten, however, without a considerable loss of credibility for the Party. The forced resettlement of the German speaking minorities was still cast as a historical necessity, and the expulsions were now seen from the perspective of the events that followed them.¹³ The national “Revolution,” in this interpretation, had been a necessary precursor to the genuinely meaningful social “Revolution.”

The Czechoslovak Communist Party found itself in a precarious position between conflicting ideologies, the nationalism of the immediate post-war period and the internationalism of Marxist dogma. This balancing act and the general awareness of the entanglement of the state in the events of the expulsions gave rise in the early 1950s to an anxious urge to eliminate any memory of the expulsions from the collective consciousness.¹⁴ This state-led push for forgetfulness reached its zenith in the 1970s and 1980s, as a generation came of age that had had no personal experience or knowledge of the events of the immediate post-war period, but also often no real knowledge of the role of the Germans in the history of Bohemia in general. The topic simply vanished, both from school textbooks and from public discussion.

The attempt to expunge all knowledge of the Germans and the expulsions from historical consciousness, however, was unsuccessful, for there were individuals who remembered the events and historians who were not content to remain silent on the matter. In the landscapes of the regions vivid traces of the forced resettlements of the German communities remained. After 1968 the question of the expulsions could only be raised in so-called Samizdat publications¹⁵ or in the journals and newspapers of the exile circles. These

12 For more on the (anti)German discourse in Czechoslovakia after 1948 see Matěj Spurný, “Political authority and popular opinion: Czechoslovakia’s German population 1948–60,” *Social History* 37, no. 4 (2012): 452–76.

13 See for example Miloš Hájek and Olga Staňková, *Národnostní otázka v lidově demokratickém Československu* [The National Question in Socialist Czechoslovakia] (Prague: Státní nakladatelství politické literatury, 1956).

14 The topic disappeared from history school books, newspapers and to a great extent also from internal Party ideological debates.

15 Samizdat, one of the most important forms of dissident resistance in the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc, refers to the spread of censored publications through unofficial channels, for instance in handwritten or typed transcriptions or photocopies, first in the USSR and then later in other communist countries. Most of the samizdat and exile Czech debates on the post-war expulsion of Germans were published after 1989 in: Jan Křen, ed., *Češi-Němci-odsun* [The Czechs, the Germans, the Displacement] (Prague: Academia, 1990).

publications contributed to the formation of a critical discourse on the expulsions, however, that later played an important role in the debates that took place following the changes of 1989–1990.

After 1989 the question of the treatment of the Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia again began to garner public attention. This was in part due to the long suppression of the topic as taboo in public life, but also in part to its international political brisance. The debates were polarized from the outset. Former dissidents, with Václav Havel at the vanguard, shocked the public by presenting the question of the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans as an unsolved moral problem.¹⁶ The notion of the necessity of protecting the country from the “Sudeten German revanchists,” an idea that had been propagated for years, suddenly flared up in the minds of many politicians. In part for this reason, the majority of Czech politicians did not consider it their role to mediate and nurture a critical reassessment of this difficult subject, but rather saw themselves as advocates and champions of the post-war order. They met with widespread support in public opinion. Defense of the post-war laws, which were described as the “cornerstone of our rights,” became something of a mantra in the political posturing regarding the events of the early post-war years.

The public discourse regarding the expulsions of the post-war period took shape both through the earlier critical discussions of the dissidents and through the widespread ignorance of the general population, in which there subsisted an intuitive fear of the return of the “German peril” and an un-interrogated faith in the justice of the forced resettlements, a notion that had been a pillar of the official interpretation of history for decades.¹⁷ By the second half of the 1990s, representatives of the younger generation were able little by little to revive the discourse and bring it back into public discussion. It was significant that they managed to link a critical engagement with the events of the post-war period with the actual problems of the region and society in the border areas in which German speakers had lived, and thereby to de-politicize the topic, at least to some extent.¹⁸

16 In December 1989, before his election as president, Václav Havel expressed in a TV program his regret concerning the expulsion of the Sudeten Germans and declared that the Czechs were “under an obligation to apologize to the expelled Germans.”

17 The standpoints in the public debates of 1989–1995 are analyzed and most of the newspaper articles on the topic published in: Pithart and Příhoda, *Čítanka odsunutých dějin*.

18 See the introductory texts in: Petr Mikšíček, Ondřej Matějka, and Matěj Spurný, ed., *Zmizelé Sudety* [The Lost Sudetenland] (Domažlice: Nakladatelství Český les, 2006).

Individual Remembering and Forgetting

Individual memories are neither a simple mirror of the official narrative of memory, nor for that matter are they simply its photo-negative, as it were. In interviews with contemporaries, individual experience and collective narratives of different times are intertwined, so that it is nearly impossible to distinguish one from the other. This combination of authentic and adopted memory makes individual memories an exciting topic for anyone who seeks to understand how both history and identity are constructed.

One of the most significant attributes of human memory is that people usually remember injustices (perceived or actual) and sufferings that they had to endure themselves more vividly than they do the sufferings of others. Having been one of the privileged is regarded as “normal” or insignificant, while the experience of having been discriminated against often becomes a milestone in the narrative of one’s (remembered) life. In this sense, individual and collective memory is similarly structured. In other words, the structure of memory tends to appropriate the national master narrative if the master narrative is constructed as a discourse of victimhood. However, contemporaries sometimes contradict or resist collective memory and the manipulation of memory because of individual experiences that complicate the simple plotline of a master narrative. As is the case in many other narratives of memory, in Czech and German memories of forced migrations individual experience and an appropriated master narrative (into which this individual experience is in principle supposed to be integrated) are entangled, even if they at times actually contradict each other.

As a result of narratives of victimhood and the suppression of the memories of the sufferings of the others, National Socialism doesn’t play any noticeable role as the actual prehistory of the expulsions in the memories of many Sudeten-Germans. Until recently, publications were printed by the so-called *Heimatismuseen* or *Heimatarchiven* in which there is little mention of the time between 1938 and 1945.¹⁹ These peculiar narratives portray the Czechs as wild barbarians who suddenly, after years of peaceful cohabitation, came to the homeland communities of the Germans to torture, rob and expel them. In interviews, Sudeten Germans in general speak in great detail about the war years. As people who had been

19 The various regional and local Sudetengerman groupings published thousands of so-called “*Heimatbriefe*” with many individual texts on the recent history of “their” places in the former Sudetenland. Moreover, in recent years more complex books about municipalities in some regions, such as for example the “*Braunauer Ländchen*,” have been published.

children at the time, they speak about growing up without a father, about prisoners of the war, and about “*Bombenflüchtlinge*” [bomb refugees] or *Wehrmacht* soldiers who spent their vacations in the picturesque Sudetenland. However, they speak less or not at all about the repression of Czechs, Jews and others. The years between 1945 and 1947 are the symbolical center of the memories of the great majority of Sudeten Germans, and therefore also the symbolical center of their identities. Alongside the authentic memories of what were often very dramatic experiences, one can identify many appropriated collective images of camps or transport trains. To divide the events that were personally experienced from collectively shared images that were appropriated is not always possible for the people who lived through these events themselves, and even less so for the historian. However, especially after 1989, many Sudeten Germans endeavored to contribute to efforts towards reconciliation. This included giving voice to experiences that contradict the master narrative of their community, such as the following:

A troop of Czechs came, they smashed the door and got in the stationmaster's apartment, who lived below us. They damaged the flat, we heard the children screaming and crying. Then they came up to our place. We were all trembling with fear. And then something happened—something that one cannot forget: other Czechs who knew us came, they stood in front of our door and said: Mr. Czerny lives here, and he was one of the people who behaved kindly and helped the Czechs. No one will hit him.²⁰

Of course, people had cherished memories like this long before 1989. It seems, however, that experiences that relativize national or community narratives and stereotypes of victims and perpetrators have been given more attention since the fall of the Iron Curtain.

An interconnection or contradiction between the appropriated master narrative and the memories of individual experiences or people are very characteristic for Czechs who came to the borderlands immediately after the war. These people came to know the Germans either before the Germans found themselves compelled to leave their homes or at the time of their forced resettlement. The Czech narrators, if speaking about “the Germans” as a

²⁰ Johannes Moser, Karsten Jahnke, *Dieser Schmerz bleibt. Lebenserinnerungen vertriebener Polen und Schlesier* (Dresden: Institut für Sächsische Geschichte und Volkskunde, 2004), CD-ROM, CD 1.

collective category, primarily seem to be attempting to justify moving to the borderlands and appropriating property that had belonged to Germans. While constructing the story in this way, they use the Czech master narrative, which is very useful in the legitimization of the post-war decision to settle the borderlands. They contend that the Germans “did not want to live with us,” “betrayed our state,” and had been punished justly. According to this story, “the Germans” had transmuted into fanatical Nazis, and it would not have been possible to live alongside them anymore.²¹

However, many of the same early Czech settlers had lived with a German family under one roof, usually for several months, before these Germans were displaced. Speaking about the everyday lives with “their Germans,” they essentially tell a story about “kind people, who helped us a great deal.” Sometimes they even admit that they “cried when our Germans had to go.”²²

As is evident, individual experience that contradicts the master narrative of collective memory does not necessarily prompt an individual to reject this collective memory. It is likely that, on the contrary, the motifs and plots of collective memory in many cases replaced memories of events through which individuals had actually lived. In many cases, memories of kind Germans or the brutality of their forced resettlement were driven from the minds of the people who had personal experience of the events because they didn’t fit into the widespread, even officially sanctioned story.

In this context it is significant that problematic aspects of the forced resettlements of the post-war years have been discussed and have become a part of the discourse in the Czech Republic. This questioning of the collective memory of the expulsions has enabled the people who lived at the time to speak about some of their experiences, experiences that in some cases they had suppressed almost entirely. Because this didn’t prompt them to refuse the master

21 These statements were made in the course of interviews done by the author of this article in the years between 2004 and 2010. Some of these interviews were published in: Matěj Spurný, ed., *Sudetské osudy* [Sudeten Fates] (Domažlice: Antikomplex/Nakladatelství Český les, 2006) and in: Sarah-Schol Schneider, Miroslav Schneider, and Matěj Spurný, ed., *Sudetengeschichten* (Prague: Antikomplex/Universität Augsburg, 2010).

22 Statements that were made in the course of several interviews with people who settled in the northern borderlands (*Litoměřice, Žatec*) immediately after the end of the Second World War. The interviews have been recorded and translated by the author of this article. One can read of similar experiences among Poles from the former German regions in: Johannes Moser, Karsten Jahnke, *Dieser Schmerz bleibt. Lebenserinnerungen vertriebener Polen und Schlesier* (Dresden: Institut für Sächsische Geschichte und Volkskunde, 2004), CD 2. CD-ROM.

narrative, however, which had been appropriated and had become a deep-seated part of their memories in the meantime, it is interesting to analyze how people deal with the contradictions. Often, the contradictions create a defensive reflex. Fragments of the master narrative appear again and again in the flow of individual memories, even when they seem to contradict aspects of the personal story, as ritual formulas.

As an example, I cite an excerpt from an interview with Mrs. Kučerová, an old Czech settler from Osek, a town in the predominantly German region of northern Bohemia. She had to leave her home in 1938, when the region became part of Germany, and returned in May 1945. She described the expulsion of her former neighbors:

The people here did not take part in the bad actions against Germans. Revolutionary Guards from Kladno came and they were really the mob. As they expelled the Germans, our people stayed at home, because they were ashamed, because we have a different character than the Germans who had oppressed us! The guards took the Germans somewhere, to the market or I do not know exactly. On one occasion they had to cross the mountains on foot. I remember a disabled boy in a wheelchair who lived next door, he was maybe forty or fifty at that time and the others had to wheel him all the way. And many other bad things, but that was the war! We were not the only ones who did things like that. And we did not want this war... In Teplice there are two streets near the railway station where all the Germans committed suicide. But that is how it was, for everything, you have to pay... I understand that the Germans felt miserable, and I know what homesickness is. But they had been so unkind to us! They held pogroms when they came in 1938.²³

The so-called Revolutionary guards were not the only group to become a target of criticism among Czechs in recent years. Many old Czech settlers from the borderlands, who like Mrs. Kučerová had known the displaced Germans personally, also criticize the new settlers in the former Sudetenland. The main target of this critique is the desire for German property. Memories of how Czech newcomers had robbed and plundered flats, houses or hotels hardly would have been mentioned some thirty or fifty years ago, as the resettlement of the Czech

23 Marta Kučerová, born in Osek (Northern Bohemia), comes from a Czech family. She had to leave Osek with her parents in 1938 and came back after the war. The interview was held and translated by the author of this article. The complete interview was published in Czech in Spurný, ed., *Sudetské osudy*.

borderlands had been decidedly celebrated as a part of the construction of the new, better society.

Epilogue

In general, of course, collective memory is really a collage of differing individual recollections. Although the collective master narratives that had been passed on by no means vanished after the fall of the Iron Curtain, they did however lose some of their earlier, unquestioned authority. This process can be seen quite clearly in the Czech Republic, but also in other post-communist states of Central and Eastern Europe. This pluralization of memory is less visible, however, among circles close to the associations of refugees or displaced persons from the Sudetenland. Their master narratives seem to have survived the end of the Cold War without having undergone any significant revision. Yet even in these circles, one discerns the traces of some doubts regarding the collective narrative of their past, which over the course of decades grew rigid. These doubts have arisen in part through an engagement with the realities of life in the Czech Republic today.

Memories that in previous decades were “undesirable” or possibly even dangerous for anyone who gave them voice today can be integrated into the national master narratives as exceptions to the general flow of the “plot.” It seems that historical consciousness, conditioned by a recognition and acknowledgement of personal recollection, is becoming plural, and even collective narratives are shifting. Indeed it seems that the collective memory is subject to change by individual memory. To give individual memory space for expression is to be prepared to accept the recollections of others with empathy. The tension between communities with contradictory collective experiences can be lessened not through forgetting or denial, but rather through the pluralization and complication of memory.

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