

THE CZECHOSLOVAK POLITICAL TRIALS OF THE 1950S: TRAUMA AND POST-MEMORY IN THE STORY OF A POLITICAL PRISONER'S SON¹

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ABSTRACT

The article contributes to the historiography of the Czechoslovak communist dictatorship. The Communist takeover and stabilization of the regime were connected with various kinds of oppression including political trials. The biggest political trial in that time was that of the female politician Milada Horáková and the twelve members of her resistance group. This trial was followed by dozens of smaller local trials around the country, accusing 627 people altogether. While the main trial was carried on publicly and was used extensively in the state's propaganda, the local trials remain almost forgotten and outside the interest of Czech public. This paper will focus on one of them and its impact on my narrator and his family.

Antonín Městecký jr. was a child when his father Antonín Městecký was imprisoned for 11 years after a local show trial in the city of Hradec Králové in East Bohemia. The imprisonment of his father was his strongest childhood experience; when his father returned home, the son was already an adult and they both kept silent about the traumatic past. They never discussed what really happened in the time of the father's imprisonment, creating a severe trauma for the son. How can the turning point in someone's life be remembered if we have only limited information?

Using the methods of oral history, this paper explores how Mr. Městecký tries to deal with this gap in his family's history by extending his childhood memories with information given to him by members of his father's resistance group or found in books and archives. In the methodology, I will also reflect on how sharing his story with me constituted bridging the gap. His narrative contains rich accounts of life and survival as well as interesting moments and silences, revealing the complexities of trauma narratives and their effect on the descendants of former political prisoners.

Keywords: Czechoslovak communist dictatorship, memory, trauma, political prisoners

INTRODUCTION

The end of WWII brought great changes to Czechoslovakia in the political, economic and social sphere. The short transitional period of limited democracy with several allowed political parties (the Communist party was the strongest and got 40% of votes in the 1946 elections) ended in a Communist coup in February 1948. The newly established

dictatorship, subordinated to the Stalinist regime in Moscow, started rebuilding the society in a Soviet fashion and implementing its class war doctrine.² The great wheel of various political processes started spinning. This systematic elimination of real or imagined opponents of the Communist regime produced about 250 000 political prisoners and 248 people were executed. There were many people and groups resisting in various ways, including producing anti-communist leaflets, carrying out sabotage or co-operating with western intelligence. On the other hand, a large number of political prisoners were sentenced for espionage and treason in fabricated trials even though they never attempted any real anti-communist action; some simply ‘had bad luck’ (Bouška & Pinerová 2009: 12). The level of violence changed over the years and most political prisoners were jailed between 1948 and 1960. Most of them were conditionally released by a presidential pardon before 1960, yet were stigmatized and technically remained criminals. Former political prisoners started hoping for rehabilitation and attempted to establish an association, the K-231 Club, in the era of the Prague Spring. Their hopes ended with the Soviet occupation (Hoppe 2009). The era known as Normalization had its political prisoners as well, but in a different local and international context. The dissident movement of that time had different roots, structure and demands. Even though the former political prisoners from the 1950s and 1960s did not identify themselves with the regime, they mostly concentrated on leading as normal a life as possible and did not actively come out against the regime during the Normalization era (Louč 2011: 79). They were rehabilitated in the 1990s when the process of dealing with the Communist past started (Ash 2002; Rothschild & Wingfield 2000), shaping the social frameworks of memory and identity of former political prisoners (Mayer 2009) who ‘were not convinced that the political structure of their country had changed dramatically’ (Coetzee & Hulec 1999: 92), and sought the state’s acknowledgement of their suffering and heroism (Kopelentova Rehak 2013).

Former Czechoslovak political prisoners have been in the focus of oral historians and memorial initiatives since the late 1990s (Bouška & Pinerová 2009; Bušková & Hunt 2014; Coetzee & Hulec 1999; Louč 2008 & 2011; Kopelentova Rehak 2013). Czech oral history is still catching up after a delayed start of many years, which means that many of these projects were not well-grounded in theory and were under the influence of a ‘black and white’ perception of these periods, which remains quite dominant in the right-wing field of politics of memory. The question of a more reflexive approach was mostly reduced to corridor talk (Louč 2011: 78) described by Yow as ‘The remarks you made about your reaction to your research while you were standing with a colleague in the corridor. You were about to go into the room where you would discuss the really important matters’ (Yow 2006: 55).

Let me return to Stalinist Czechoslovakia. We find ourselves in June 1950. The Cold War is in full swing and the local Communist Party (KSČ – Komunistická strana Československa) has spent the last two years stabilizing its dictatorship, subordinated to the Stalinist regime in Moscow, eliminating its real or imagined opponents (through the doctrine of class struggle) and preparing for a possible escalation of the Cold War.

Czechoslovak press is full of serious stories. One of the main topics deals with resolutions condemning the ‘American aggression’ in Korea. Propaganda is also mobilizing people to fight against Colorado potato beetles damaging crops. The beetles are even described as a biological weapon used by capitalists to damage the local economy.

Dozens of political trials contributed to the dramatic situation. They were designed after the Soviet model, first presented at the show trial of Milada Horáková et al. It was the largest of several hundred political trials organized in Czechoslovakia in the years 1948–1954 (Kaplan & Paleček 2008: 65) and the only one in which a woman was executed (Kaplan 1996: 193). In 35 subsequent trials, related to the main one, 639 people were indicted, 618 of whom were convicted. The judges delivered ten death sentences, forty-eight life sentences and other imprisonment sentences totaling 7 830 years (Kaplan & Paleček 2008: 69). As historian Karel Kaplan noted:

The design of the process had to fulfil two essential principles: firstly, to show the degree of hostility of the political opposition to the state and the working class. For that reason, the prosecution painted the picture of an extensive network of illegal groups throughout the country, controlled by a central body in which all the main anti-communist political movements were represented. Secondly, objectives and methods of illegal activities had to be presented to the public as a large-scale effort, including espionage, treason, preparing terrorist acts and assassinations, sabotage, cooperation with hostile foreign countries, desire to start a third world war and even preparing for it.’ (Kaplan 1996: 125)

As I mentioned before, most of these accusations were fabricated by the state secret police with no real evidence.

The executed politician Milada Horáková and other members of her main group now stand in the centre of popular memory related to this trial. Conversely, there is not enough space in this memory for hundreds of people convicted in subsequent trials. There are still too many unexplored topics in our past. Therefore, I would like to focus on one of these subsequent trials and its impact on the life and recollection of my narrator Antonín Městecký jr., son of police sergeant Antonín Městecký who was sentenced to life imprisonment and jailed between the years 1949–1960.

THE RESISTANCE

The turning point in the life of Antonín Městecký was one of the unremembered subsequent political trials with anti-communist resistance groups, ‘Rudolf Bárta et al.’ (this group was operating around Hradec Králové) and ‘Maděra et al.’ (in the area of the city of Nová Paka). Both groups cooperated and were judged together. The public trial took place in Hradec Králové between 26 June and 8 July 1950 (Kaplan 1996: 298). The prosecution accused the group of having ties with foreign intelligence services, of arming themselves, of carrying out sabotage and even of planning the assassination of Prime Minister Antonín Zápotocký. The court served exemplary sentences to members of both groups. There were 72 defendants in total; five of them received life sentences.

The remaining punishments amounted to 1 350 years (Kuříková 2008: 47). Antonín Městecký was one of the five who were sentenced to life imprisonment. He was presented as an exemplary case of a traitor within the ranks of the SNB in the local press; the SNB (Sbor národní bezpečnosti, or National Security Corps) was the name of the state police between 1945 and 1991. His story was told to me by his son Antonín who experienced the trial as a five-year-old child.

We do not have direct eyewitnesses of the activities of Rudolf Bárta and Stanislav Maděra's groups. There are archival documents, including statements of a key person in the whole case, OBZ agent Jan Šmída, code name Baron. The OBZ (Obranné zpravodajství, or Defence Intelligence) was a military intelligence service controlled by the Communist party. There are also the testimonies of group members Vratislav Číla and Ladislav Leiterman published by historian Veronika Kuříková. I will now briefly summarize the history of this group.

Maděra's resistance group was founded in 1948 in Prague. Agent Šmída quickly became its leader and directed the group until the majority of its members were arrested by StB (Státní bezpečnost, or State Security), the Czechoslovak secret police. Only Stanislav Maděra and Ladislav Leiterman escaped arrest and hid in Nová Paka in order to flee to West Germany, yet they still trusted Šmída and contacted him. Šmída came to Nová Paka and tried to get them involved in other anti-communist activities. As Vratislav Číla noted:

It was Šmída from the city of Jilemnice. I knew him from grammar school in Nová Paka. He often visited my family after the antifascist uprising in 1945, especially when my father arranged his admission to the Military Academy in Hranice. He was commander of the guerrilla intelligence group MAMUT in 1945. Šmída tried to get us involved in guerrilla activity similar to that during the Nazi occupation. He said that we must take action against the regime to the extent that it becomes known abroad. He advised us to rob a shop and also proposed to blow up a railway tunnel near Nová Paka. He informed us that in a short time, a train with the Prime Minister Antonín Zápotocký on board will be going through it. He said it would be no problem to obtain explosives and calculated how much was required. (Číla 1994)

But let us return to our case. Both Maděra and Leiterman, even though Šmída forbade them to do so, fled to West Germany in January 1949. While Leiterman continued to the USA, Maděra met with a representative of the U.S. Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC) in Munich. He found out that the CIC was more interested in military and economic information than in any form of violent action. Maděra returned to Czechoslovakia with this task in June 1949 and once again hid in Nová Paka. He then made contact with representatives of local resistance in Hradec Králové and Pardubice (they were later judged as the group Rudolf Bárta et al.). Maděra's major problem was obtaining a radio station that he eventually managed to get with the help of Antonín Městecký and the brothers František and Josef Čapek (Kuříková 2008: 41). The former lived in a farmhouse next to the church of St. Procopius in the village of Hoříněves where the radio station was deployed. The first short radio contact with the West was established

on 1 July 1949. The group aired a brief comment on a member of the National Security Corps, unpunished for a murder committed out of jealousy two days earlier. Antonín Městecký was on guard during the broadcast and made sure that no one would 'surprise' the radio operator. Besides that, he among other things provided to several people a copy of a resistance magazine called *The Fight for Freedom and Democracy* and arranged shelter for refugees from a labour camp. The group members were arrested by the StB (with Šmída's assistance) in July and August 1949. The second radio message thus remained the last one.

THE FATHER

Antonín Městecký was born in 1916 in the village of Všeštery in the Hradec Králové district. He enrolled at the Business Academy in Hořice in 1932 and was accepted as a volunteer at the 4th Infantry Regiment 'Prokop the Great' located in Hradec Králové in 1933. He joined the army to avoid being a burden to his parents during the Great Depression. He became part of the Gendarmerie Corps in 1937 and served as a policeman in several parts of East Bohemia. He met with Mary Richter during his service in Pardubice in 1941 and married her two years later. Their son Antonín was born on 17 November 1943. The family lived in Smiřice nad Labem after the war and Antonín Městecký served at the local police station. His son described his subsequent career for me:

My father was still working with the police after the Communist coup. He, among other things, tried to help people in need the same way he used to during the war. He tried to find sources of income for families who had their breadwinners arrested. He was also in contact with the resistance. Those were the groups of Hradec Králové and Nová Paka...However, they were infiltrated by informers who were trying to provoke their activity in order to get as many people as possible to join in. Other group members did not know anything about that.' (Městecký, Interview 26 March 2009 and 16 July 2009)

Antonín Městecký became involved in the resistance group because of his older brother František in April 1949 (František Městecký was sentenced to 28 years in the same political trial). Antonín was a member of the group until his arrest four months later. He was accused of collecting intelligence against the SNB, distributing an anti-communist magazine and providing weapons and explosives for his group (Security Services Archive, ABS f. 1906/5a). The court sentenced him to life imprisonment in July 1950. He later described the circumstances of the trial in his request for rehabilitation:

The protocol that I read and signed was signed by me because I had been interrogated, blindfolded and handcuffed – I did it to avoid further pressure, violence and threats. Protocols were based on the testimony of two State Security agents who had constructed the entire case. These protocols became the basis for the prosecution and the entire judicial process. Likewise, even at the main state court hearing, at which all members of State Security were present, it was not possible to

bring in the two initiators from State Security Group. (Městecký, Application for rehabilitation, 1969)

Antonín Městecký was imprisoned from 1950 to 1960, three years of which were spent in the prisons of Valdice and Leopoldov. He was working in uranium mines in the Jáchymov and Příbram district for another seven years. He was conditionally released on amnesty with a ten-year probation period in May 1960 and returned home with broken health and bound by confidentiality. He could be jailed again for the slightest offense and as his son told me: ‘He could not deal with it, they took everything, everything! He had nothing and had to start from scratch again’ (Městecký, Interview 26 March 2009 and 16 July 2009). Antonín Městecký had to work as a labourer and warehouseman in the following years. He fell ill with lung cancer in 1979 and died the following year. He was rehabilitated and posthumously promoted to the rank of major in 1990.

THE SON

I first met Antonín Městecký jr. when I visited the local branch of the Confederation of Political Prisoners (KPV – Konfederace politických vězňů) in Pardubice in 2006.³ He was not the first member who has offered me his life story. He agreed with the recording only later because I kept visiting the branch in the following years. It had to be a difficult decision for him to trust me and share his traumatic story. Some political prisoners perceive the children of political prisoners as second-class members of the Confederation, so my narrator had reason to try not to stand out in the group. I did not know at the beginning how traumatic the story was for my narrator, so I only followed the basic ethical rules for oral historical research. Later I discussed my work with the psychologist Kristýna Bušková; I was discreet and very careful when informing my narrator about the project, its outcomes and its possible impact on his life.

We recorded two interviews and then had more meetings for a joint reading and editing of the transcripts. The narrator has damaged eyesight, so I read the entire finished transcript to him and wrote down his comments. We also visited an archive together to look for more archival materials. My narrator soon became my link to the KPV. He informed me about important or unexpected events and brought me to meetings and to see other KPV affiliates or members of the association of people who used to work in the Army Convicted Labor Forces (PTP – Pomocné technické prapory, the Auxiliary Technical Battalions). On my part, I assisted him in organizing some small events for local KPV members (usually trips to places somehow related to the anti-Nazi or anti-communist resistance).

It was apparent from the first interview that the narrator was carefully prepared – for example, he had prepared a written short introduction in advance and checked all dates with period documents from his personal archive. I was surprised that he also approached the interview itself very carefully, which, in my experience, is not the case with the majority of my narrators. Surprisingly, the introductory text was not about

my narrator, but all about his imprisoned father. In fact, the father's conviction plays a constitutive role in the plot of my narrator's life story. It provides coherence and meaning to the story because it links individual events and incidents into a coherent chain of events (Hamar 2008: 29). It also represents the backbone of family memory, which he passes on to the next generations.

I consider the concept of post-memory to be very useful in the interpretation of my narrator's way of remembrance. Hirsch understands post-memory as an intergenerational transmission of traumatic memory which is shaped by discontinuity between an event and its memory:

I see it, rather, as a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a consequence of traumatic recall but (unlike posttraumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove. Postmemory describes the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural and collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experiences that they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and effectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation. (Hirsch 2008: 106)

To me the whole situation also resembles a combination of trauma and culture trauma. As Clark noted, 'Psychological and physiological trauma events produce very specific emotional, mental, and psychological responses in people who have suffered through them as well as those who listen to their stories' (Clark 2011: 256). He also describes the specific role of the oral historian in dealing with trauma: 'For oral historians – the second witnesses to historic and traumatic events – the challenge is to use the innately supportive and professional context of oral history to facilitate the active process of remembrance' (Clark 2011: 258). Culture trauma, by definition, occurs when 'members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways' (Alexander 2004: 1). This effect extends to the present, because trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence (LaCapra 2001: 41). I can mention two aspects of my narrator's culture trauma. Firstly, my narrator felt the lack of recognition of the acts of his father by the society as a whole which (especially in the 1990s) saw former political prisoners as victims but not so much as heroes. This partially changed with the adoption of the Czech law on anti-communist resistance in 2011. Antonín Městecký acquired the status of a member of the anti-communist resistance from the Czech Ministry of Defense in 2014.

Secondly, the Czech public discourse about the Communist past is quite black and white. There are also strong efforts to use history for political purposes (everything leftist is the first step towards a new dictatorship etc.), which are reflected in the various

politics of memory, very often understanding the Communist past only in the terms of good and evil. This prevents a real understanding of the past and stigmatizes many people, for example members of the Communist Party or persons forced to co-operate with the State Security who did not cause any damage to other people. We found out during our collaboration that Antonín Městecký joined the Communist Party after the Communist takeover. He probably did it to keep his job and did not hold any political office but we know very little about that – only that the StB found his membership card. My narrator was embarrassed about this topic but we agreed that we could not judge his father and instead should try to understand what happened in the past. I do not accept any such stigma. I previously mentioned that Antonín Městecký was officially recognized as a member of the Czechoslovak anti-communist resistance. The Ministry of Defense acknowledged in its decision that his work in the resistance outweighs his membership in the Communist Party. Even this, however, does not relieve him of the stigma. Ironically, regardless of his merit in the anti-communist resistance, Antonín Městecký could not be allowed membership in the Confederation of Political Prisoners after the Velvet Revolution, because it is forbidden to all former members of the Communist Party without exceptions (in fact, some KPV members used to be in the Communist Party, but cannot admit it). My narrator is currently the deputy head of one branch of the Confederation of Political Prisoners, but it is likely that no one knows about his father's party membership. It is probably better to not open this topic because the organization (on the level of its leadership) seems to be too strictly anti-communist to inquire about the historical reality in which Antonín Městecký lived.

The trauma also shapes my narrator's family memory. The crack in memory is caused by the missing years of the imprisonment of my narrator's father, understood by the son as an act of injustice and an irreversible disruption of his childhood and family ties. Most families select a group of stories and storytelling of their past, and their tellers, according to Finnegan's notion, 'are not fully conscious that they are crystallizing their family's heritage, telling and retelling stories that express that family's being' (Finnegan 2006: 177). A family identity is strongly evident in the story, as I noticed; the narrator remembers emotionally powerful experiences from the formative period of his youth. He was only five years old when his father was arrested. On the other hand, he has to deal with the fact that he was too young to have a comprehensive understanding of this event and his own memories are relatively uncertain.

The first interview revealed our different thoughts about what should be its content and meaning. I was particularly interested in the story of my narrator as the son of a political prisoner. Instead, my narrator wraps his own story in the shell of his father's destiny which was constantly present in his testimony. The father's story dominates the story of his son due to the transmission of trauma. As Klempler cited Dory Laub, 'trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through to its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every aspect' (Klempler 2006: 200). My narrator therefore devoted considerable

attention to the fate of his father, but I had to urge him to give a more detailed narrative of his own life. He sometimes pointed out that he talks about a particular subject just because I asked him to and does not consider it important. Often when he returned the corrected transcript of the interview to me, I found that he many times pointed out these ‘unnecessary parts’ of his testimony. In that moment I wondered whether I did not put too much pressure on him during the interview. I later realized that my narrator distinguished between parts of the interview that were more important to me as a researcher and parts that were important to him. He decided to tolerate my different intentions because he was informed about my project quite well and because I gave him as much space as possible for sharing what he considered to be important.

In my opinion, our joint work on the life story gave my narrator an opportunity to rethink and understand this traumatic event, transform it into a meaningful story and return it into the family’s memory. In this context, I would like to mention an interesting concept of re-externalization. Telling the traumatic story trapped inside the narrator’s mind allows a shift in its meaning. As Klempler noted ‘telling the narrative, the traumatic event becomes drained of some of its toxicity’ (Klempler 2006: 201).

He asked me if I could make a small book about his father that he could give to other family members and friends. I think it is important that both sides should benefit from the conversation, so I did make ten books for him, containing interviews, photos and other documents. We even made two ‘trips’ to the places connected to his father’s story (place of birth, place where he was arrested and the court where he was sentenced). While we took the first trip alone, the second time we travelled in a group with the narrator’s wife, daughter and her boyfriend.

Understanding the importance of the interview for my narrator and the importance of his role as a gate-keeper for me allowed me to consider how my work was shaped by our relationship. This problem was very impressively described by Valerie Yow (Yow 2006). Shopes also commented on the risk of ‘liking the narrators too much’ saying the following:

The alternative to ‘liking too much’ is not naïve neutrality or denial of the fact that an interviewer’s posture invariably inflects the interview. Nonetheless, for historians and others engaged in documentary work, there is the ethical problem of, on the one hand, maintaining regard for the people one is interviewing and, on the other, adhering to the disciplinary imperative to tell the truth, not in some essentializing, positivist sense, but by trying to get the whole story, even if following the evidence where it leads undercuts one’s sympathies; by probing hesitations, contradictions, and silences in a narrator’s account; by getting underneath polite glosses; by asking the hard questions, and by resisting the tendency to create one-dimensional heroes out of the people interviewed, for romanticization is its own form of patronization. (Shopes 2007: 147)

I will briefly mention one moment when I reacted in that way. My narrator was talking about his father’s life during the Prague Spring. The Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia disrupted this era and soon after that, the period known as the Normalization started. Many people were asked at work what was their opinion of the invasion, and the only correct answer was that it was a form of ‘fraternal assistance’.

Almost everybody responded with that. My narrator had a completed form that confirms that his father indeed said this in an interview. At first I responded to it very cautiously, thinking that we should not publish something that would put the father in a bad light. Later I decided that this was just another part of our story, but my narrator refused to open this topic again.

I will end this paragraph with a few recommendations suggested by Shopes following up on the previously mentioned article by Yow: ‘As a way of managing problems of over-identification with the narrator, Yow suggests a critical reflexivity when interviewing, monitoring one’s interests and ideological biases, thinking beyond the questions one intends to ask to consider alternative lines of inquiry’ (Shopes 2007: 148).

THE STORY

Now I would like to present some interesting excerpts from the interview. The narrator described his father’s arrest as one of his first childhood memories. That confirms its emotional power and the fact that the traumatic event dominated the narrative that preceded his own consciousness (Hirsch 2008: 107). Also as Thomson noted: ‘Children of this age create very little long-term memory, though they often have a photographic type of memory’ (Thomson 2011: 82). This episode happened when the policemen came to perform a house search at the home of my narrator’s family. At first the whole family did not know where Antonín Městecký had been taken because he was arrested at night while all of them were sleeping.

The first such memory is that of the second day after my father’s arrest. As a five-year-old boy, I am outside playing with sand and I have an upturned tricycle there with rotating pedals. I was crying and watching what was happening in the house. They came, and it was just like people say that everyone did this – the SS or the Gestapo; these men did all of that. They took everything, starting from shorts, pants, shoes, all the clothes. They shouted at my mother and behaved really awfully, awfully. This is the first thing I remember. (Městecký, Interview 26 March 2009 and 16 July 2009)

This memory captures the shock of a foreign invasion to the previously safe home environment (switching from past to present tense is indicative of a not fully resolved trauma), but also the loss of home itself:

Mother was alarmed by father’s arrest and her first concern was for me. The next day she went to Hradec Králové and, by chance, saw a group of arrested people being led somewhere, my father among them. She turned and ran away crying. She did not know anything, but she feared that they would arrest her as well. That’s what it was like back then. We also could be deported to live in some border region. My mother’s brother helped us move in with their parents so I actually grew up at grandma and grandpa in Pardubice. (Městecký, Interview 26 March 2009 and 16 July 2009)

Antonín Městecký was held in custody in the following months. Nobody was allowed to visit him. My narrator saw him secretly several times from the building opposite the jail. Only during the trial were the father and his son in the same room. Recollecting what went on in the court, the narrator characterized it as a mixture of vague feelings of distress, anxiety and information provided later by his mother:

I was in the court as well. I ran to my father, but had to return because they started yelling that they would clear the courtroom. I cannot remember it exactly. My mother told me that there were comrades from factories who shouted: ‘Hang them!’ Women spat on the defendants and their relatives there. Even on my mother. Spat!...I could feel the distress and anxiety. But I cannot say anything specific. I was probably too small. Of course, seeing my dad somewhere and not being allowed to go to him, that was wrong in itself. (Městecký, Interview 26 March 2009 and 16 July 2009)

In the following years, my narrator and his father were in contact only through letters and occasional visits in prisons and labour camps. He was an adult when his father returned home and his interests were different:

I remember I wrote letters to my father when he was allowed to receive them...I remember how happy I was when the postman came and brought me a reply. He told me: ‘Toniček, your father is sending you a letter.’ I really missed my dad...My mom did not want to let me go out anywhere when I was bigger. She was worried about my safety. While other fathers took their boys to ice hockey I was there very rarely as a kid. I just missed my dad, whatever that meant. (Městecký, Interview 26 March 2009 and 16 July 2009)

This shows that he managed to reconcile his memory – coherent, in past tense, showing emotions where appropriate, an integrative memory integrating events with their current interpretation and good self-reflection.

The narrator gave a comprehensive and coherent account of his father’s return in 1960. This memory was almost as detailed as a flashbulb memory. Here is only a short excerpt:

Dad came back on 12 May 1960...I remember that I was reading the book of Old Czech Legends at that time. We had it as compulsory reading. I went to the door to welcome him. Imagine what it is, it’s your father and yet he’s a stranger. (Městecký, Interview 26 March 2009 and 16 July 2009)

The return to society was not easy for Antonín Městecký because of his poor health, discrimination in employment as well as damaged family ties. He, for example, stopped socializing with his brother František who brought him into the resistance group. This in my opinion caused another crack in the family memory. The father’s resistance and prison experience were not something that the family could speak about. The efforts to understand were hampered by his silence:

To be honest, dad did not talk about these things. My mother also did not know anything about this part of his life. What I know I found out mostly from the judicial records. I can get a picture from that, even if it is distorted because in these records, they wrote what they needed. I had nobody to confront it with...I realized that he had been afraid. The released political prisoners were not allowed to see each other. They were on probation. He did not want to let it happen again. (Městecký, Interview 26 March 2009 and 16 July 2009)

The narrator's own story was deeply influenced by the traumatic events which were difficult to integrate into his life story and impossible to recover. His own memories were vague, coloured by his young age. Many facts have been obtained indirectly due to the absence of personal experience. It means the trauma is partially vicarious (i.e., his dad's, not originally his). He has made considerable effort to create a coherent and comprehensible story using the other available sources over the years. This may be explained by the concept of post-memory which is defined as 'the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed culture or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before, experience that they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right' (Hirsch 2008: 107).

Cappelletto reached similar conclusion in his research on the massacre committed by the SS in two Italian villages during WWII. He studied stories told by eyewitnesses and by other people who heard the story told in the years that followed. Cappelletto noted that: 'A web of narrative connections is formed, so that the missing pieces of one's story can be reconstructed and thus a historical memory – the actual act of remembrance – is constructed through the piecing together of these fragments of monofocal experiences' (Cappelletto 2003: 249) My narrator also sought out all living members of his father's resistance group after the Velvet Revolution. He said:

The resistance group from Hradec Králové was linked to another group from Nová Paka. I contacted the living members of both groups in the 1990s. I found seven of them...I found Mr. Číla in Nová Paka and he told me much about my father. (Městecký, Interview 26 March 2009 and 16 July 2009)

It is interesting that despite these efforts he learned very little about the actions of his father. He could integrate many details of memories into his inner memory, use them to make a more comprehensive story and retell it as if the events had been witnessed by him.

The historical documents were another source of missing pieces, and the narrator gathered a considerable number of them. I have already mentioned that at the beginning no one witnessed Antonín Městecký's arrest in 1950. Yet he could describe in detail this event because he read about it in archival documents (especially in his father's request for reviewing his trial from the late 1960s). I compared my narrator's life story with his father's request for review and found almost complete conformity. An interesting point of difference was whether the arresting policemen had been armed with machine

guns. The narrator deleted this detail when editing the interview and told me that this information was missing in the document and that he had probably mixed it up with his own memories of visiting his father at a labour camp where he was forced to work in uranium mines. They were guarded by people holding machine guns there.

CONCLUSION

The traumatic event of imprisonment of Antonín Městecký caused a discontinuity in the family as well as in the personal history of his descendants. My narrator used the act of sharing his story with me to reconstruct and re-interpret this event, expand it using new information and return it to family history. Our recording allowed him to inform the public about the past injustice done to him, his father and their relatives and to transmit it as a fully comprehensive story to his descendants. The remembering was complicated by the specific constraints of his childhood memories and his father's silence on the subject. He had to supplement the narrative structure of his father's story with fragments acquired from other witnesses or archive materials to make it coherent again. The resulting post-memory of this event does not lose any value for me. While the story became less traumatizing and more coherent, it didn't lose anything of its authenticity.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This article is based on paper presented at the 17th conference of the International Oral History Association (IOHA) in Buenos Aires in 2012.
- 2 For more about the social/cultural history of Stalinism see Fitzpatrick 2000; Figs 2008.
- 3 For a more detailed description of my research, see Louč 2008; 2011.
- 4 This interview with Městecký is in the archive of the Politicalprisoners.eu project. The edited Czech transcript was published on the website Politictivezni.cz. Retrieveable from www.politictivezni.cz/antonin-mestecky.html. (accessed 10 September 2014).
- 5 A copy is also stored in the file 1906/5a of Antonín Městecký in the Security Services Archive (ABS), Prague

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