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Memory of Nations narrates the Stories of the 20th Century

Wrocławski Rocznik Historii Mówionej 6, 233-243

2016

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

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[Praga]



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Wrocławski Rocznik
Historii Mówionej
Rocznik VI, 2016
ISSN 2084-0578

Four people received the Memory of Nations Awards at the Prague State Opera House on 17 November, the day when we in the Czech Republic celebrate the Struggle for Freedom and Democracy Day. For six years Post Bellum, a Czech non-profit organisation, along with its partners have been bestowing the Awards on witnesses who bring their testimonies to the general public with our help and who have proven with their very lives that integrity, courage and human dignity are not empty words. Last year we commemorated the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, so our nominations focused on people who experienced the war firsthand. Eventually, the Awards were bestowed on Mrs Anna Hyndráková¹ who survived Auschwitz while all her relatives perished in gas chambers; Mr Viktor

¹ See Anna Hyndráková's testimony at the Memory of Nations portal: http://www.pametnaroda.cz/witness/index/id/95?locale=en_GB (accessed December 1, 2015), together with numerous additional sources like photos.

Wellemín² who fought in the Middle East and on the Western Front as a member of the international Czechoslovak army; Mrs Lýdia Kovářová³ who, aged sixteen, concealed guerrillas from Nazi soldiers; and Branislav Tvarožek⁴ who was an active participant in the Slovak National Uprising. More witnesses, including Award winners from the previous years, were present in the audience. Discussing the evening, we realised that this may have been one of the last opportunities where we could encounter so many direct witnesses of the war in one place. That was one of the moments when the purpose of our work – capturing the authentic recollections of people who may not be with us in a matter of months or years – stands out more acutely than ever. We try to capture not only their account of the historical events that we have read about in history textbooks, but also their motivations, trying to get to know them and understand how and why they did what they did at a certain point in time, and to map their life experience.

Post Bellum and Memory of Nations

One could say that it was the frustration of radio reporters⁵ that spurred the formation of Post Bellum fifteen years ago. They often found themselves filling the brief of newsroom editors who needed to “bolster” news programmes with coverage of the approaching anniversary of the end of the war. In situations such as this, a reporter may be sent to an official remembrance event with the following task: “Go there, find a war veteran and record them.” The reporter then approaches a veteran, the veteran is glad to talk and delivers a thirty-minute narration on the spot. The reporter edits this into a five-minute sequence, yet eventually just fifteen seconds are actually aired. That was when the “Founding Fathers” of Post Bellum said: “We capture unique testimonies which, however, are eventually useless.

² See Viktor Wellemín’s testimony: <http://www.pametnaroda.cz/witness/index/id/653> (accessed December 1, 2015).

³ See Lýdia Kovářová’s testimony: <http://www.pametnaroda.cz/witness/index/id/3731> (accessed December 1, 2015).

⁴ See Branislav Tvarožek’s testimony: http://www.pametnaroda.cz/witness/index/id/5203/#en_5203 (accessed December 1, 2015).

⁵ For example Mikuláš Kroupa, who was formerly a reporter of Czech Radio and the Czech department of BBC World Service. About the very beginning of the whole project, see <http://archiv.postbellum.cz/cz/o-nas/o-nas.aspx> (older version of current webpage which are being under construction, accessed December 1, 2015).

What if we documented witnesses more thoroughly and systematically?”⁶ So a team of enthusiasts formed from young journalists, students and historians, who started seeking out and recording the memories of war veterans. Since these documenters often worked with the Czech Radio, a public broadcaster, they were allowed to use radio equipment and archive data-intensive recordings there. The next step in the collaboration was **Stories of the 20th Century** – a documentary series broadcasted by the Czech Radio every week since 2006⁷. These are original radio documentaries based primarily on the recordings made by the Post Bellum reporters. The radio show has become hugely popular⁸ and has been one of the most frequently downloaded shows in the Czech Radio audio archive for a long time⁹.

In 2008 Post Bellum made an agreement with the Czech Radio¹⁰ and the newly established Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes¹¹ on setting up an online archive – the Memory of Nations web portal (www.memoryofnations.eu). Post Bellum is the chief project coordinator and has contributed its entire archive, which at the time included hundreds of audio recordings of witnesses' recollections. The Czech Radio provides a powerful server and technical facilities. The Institute is the chief project editor and the sponsor of international collaboration. Each of the above entities undertook to assign at least one full-time position to the shared project,

⁶ The inspiration and intentions were expressed e.g. at one of the first media articles about the newly born documentary project, see: http://zpravy.idnes.cz/v-unikatnim-archivu-je-i-hlas-prokuratora-vase-fqm-/domaci.aspx?c=Ao60914_192529_domaci_rb (accessed December 1, 2015).

⁷ Up to 50 minutes-long radio documentary, broadcasted weekly and to be found at the archive of the Czech Radio online at <http://www.rozhlas.cz/plus/pribehy/> (accessed December 1, 2015).

⁸ *The Stories of the 20th Century* radio broadcasting format was later on transformed also into a written form, published weekly at the www.idnes.cz news portal, see: <http://zpravy.idnes.cz/pribehy-20-stoleti-ozx-/domaci.aspx?klic=64153> (accessed December 1, 2015). Since 2015, the Stories are being published at the news portal Echo24, see: <http://echo24.cz/s/pribehy-20-stoleti> (accessed December 1, 2015).

⁹ This information was provided upon internal analysis of the Czech Radio, i.e. it is not publicly available.

¹⁰ The only public radio station in the Czech Republic.

¹¹ About the Institute for the Study of Totalitarian Regimes, an institution based on the law 181/2007 of the legal code of the Czech Republic, see <https://portal.gov.cz/app/zakony/zakonPar.jsp?idBiblio=64947&nr=181~2F2007&rpp=15#local-content> (accessed December 1, 2015).

which gave rise to the workgroup that has been at the helm of the Memory of Nation project now into its seventh year.

The brunt of the organisational work and project financing has been with Post Bellum since the beginning; as a non-profit organisation it depends on subsidies and donations. The involvement of state and/or public institutions assures the stability for the project. The current operating model of the team leading Memory of Nation has proven a good example of long-term collaboration between the state and the non-profit sector¹².

The Memory of Nation archive allows Internet users to learn about hundreds of witnesses' stories in a text form (containing a short biography and a larger article referred to as the witness's story), with samples of the recording in the form of audio or video clips, photographs and, as the case may be, links to other publicly accessible resources. Users can also register as e-researchers. They complete a researcher form (similar to the registration in "brick-and-mortar" archives) and then they can study full unedited recordings, accompanied by transcriptions to facilitate navigation in the recordings (often quite long), as well as other material (personal documents, photographs etc.). Researchers can also comment on the various witness portrayals and debate with other researchers. The access to any material is provided only with the consent of the witness and/or the administrator of the recordings¹³.

In addition to the standard full-text search and search by the witness's name features, the Memory of Nation portal currently also enables navigation by related witness topics and categories, or epochs and anniversaries. Every witness should be linked to a certain category and also to a specific event of restricted duration. This allows for singling out individuals or dozens of individuals out of hundreds, based on their recollections related to a specific phenomenon or event.

¹² See: <http://archiv.postbellum.cz/en/annual-reports/annual-reports.aspx> (accessed December 1, 2015).

¹³ See the form of such consent: <http://www.memoryofnations.eu/page/index/title/downloads> (accessed December 1, 2015).

Current statistics for Memory of Nations (figures as of 25 November 2015) ¹⁴		
Category	Amount	Year-on-year increase
Witnesses in the database	5,493	818
Witness testimonies published	2,651	511 (newly published witnesses)
Photographs in the database	33,073	8,033 (or 25 new photographs a day)
Clips in the database (audio and video)	15,023	1,858 (or six new clips a day)
Registered researchers	4,932	522 new researchers for 2015

Number of visitors to the Memory of Nations portal in 2014 ¹⁵	
Visits	224,109
Page views	888,742
Pages per visit	3.97
Average duration of a visit	00:03:12
Share of new visits	63,58%

International cooperation

Since its inception, the goals of Memory of Nations included – aside from archiving the testimonies and making them accessible – to inspire and invite cooperation with similar organisations from Czech and abroad¹⁶. The Office of the Government of the Czech Republic provided support to the development of the portal in several language versions¹⁷ and to the organisation of

¹⁴ See: <http://archiv.postbellum.cz/cz/vyrocní-zpravy/vyrocní-zpravy-post-bellum.aspx> (accessed November 25, 2015).

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ See the list of cooperating organizations: <http://www.memoryofnations.eu/page/index/title/project-partners> (accessed November 25, 2015).

¹⁷ The number of language versions depends on the current grant project including foreign partners, which means that up to date of publishing this article, there were records in 13 languages, including e.g. Georgia or Armenian.

the first symposium shortly after the launch of the Memory of Nations portal in November 2008¹⁸. We offered Memory of Nations to our European partners as a platform where other institutions and projects can present the results of their work in the form of edited interviews with witnesses¹⁹. The system is set up so that the witness's portrait is published in his or her native language, and the shortened biography and sample clip transcriptions are published in English. Also, every recording is linked to a specific documentary project²⁰.

Despite huge effort and the support of other institutions (such as the International Visegrad Fund), our ambition hit its limits. We realised that digitising and processing the Post Bellum collection of recordings, to which the database was tailored, is immensely demanding in terms of time and human resources. Still, since 2009, we have been able to successfully spread our know-how mainly in Central Europe and in the former Soviet Union countries (primarily in Ukraine and Georgia). At present, international cooperation works mostly on the basis of specific shared projects with secured funding, such as the **Iron Curtain Stories**²¹ – a project mapping the lives of people who lived “in the shadow of the Iron Curtain” that used to divide the post-war Europe. More recent projects include **1980 – a Turbulent Year in**

¹⁸ See: <http://www.ustrcr.cz/cs/prvni-badatelske-symposium-internetoveho-portalu-pamet-naroda> (accessed November 25, 2015). In September 2009 a second symposium took place in Prague, which resumed the newly gained experience with the running of the Memory of Nations portal. See: <http://www.ustrcr.cz/cs/druhe-mezinarodni-badatelske-symposium-portalu-pamet-naroda> (accessed November 25, 2015).

¹⁹ All of the Memory of Nations partners are following the technological methodology of unification of archive's outputs, which is accessible online at http://www.memoryofnations.eu/data/page/File/PN_metodEN_200x150.pdf (accessed November 25, 2015).

²⁰ See the list of 48 running or finished projects: <http://www.memoryofnations.eu/project> (accessed November 25, 2015).

²¹ The project “Iron Curtain Stories” was realized by six European institutions on the field of oral history or documentary work with testimonies. The total of 101 recorded witnesses formed the first part at the Memory of Nations portal, see: <http://www.memoryofnations.eu/project/detail/id/41> (accessed November 25, 2015), and second at the webpage on smartphones application dealing with places of memory, i.e. connecting a specific testimony with an exact GPS location, forming together a route through those places, see: <http://www.ironcurtainstories.eu/> (accessed November 25, 2015). Project was supported by the European Commission as a part of the Europe for Citizens Programme.

Poland and the Czechoslovak Reaction²², organised last year in a cooperation with Polish Ośrodek “Pamięć i Przyszłość” with the support from the Czech-Polish Forum.

“Heroes” vs. “normal people”

Despite the quite extensive list of activities of the partners who contribute to Memory of Nations, more than 2/3 of the portal’s content is the work of Post Bellum. As I mentioned, the reporters initially focused mainly on war veterans, but over time they included other groups of witnesses – Holocaust survivors, resistance members and political prisoners, both from the Nazi and the communist eras. But Post Bellum wanted to hear the voice not just from the victims of the totalitarianism of the 20th century, but also from the people who were part of the ruling or reprisal system²³. Finding such a witness who is willing to speak openly is much more difficult, but we succeeded in recording a few, among others the former communist state attorney Karel Vaš²⁴ who was responsible for some of the capital punishments in the 1950s and until his death remained convinced that he had done the right thing.

Some might suggest that we are only interested in “heroic” lives and disregard “normal people’s” stories. We believe this is not the case²⁵. The

²² See: <http://www.memoryofnations.eu/project/detail/id/58> (accessed November 25, 2015).

²³ E.g. the testimonies of the Communist Secret Police interrogators, see: <http://www.memoryofnations.eu/category/detail/id/25> (accessed November 25, 2015).

²⁴ The testimony of Karel Vaš, see: http://www.memoryofnations.eu/witness/index/id/200/#en_200 (accessed November 25, 2015); M. Kroupa, *Tichý obyvatel domova důchodců* (A silent inhabitant of a retirement house), “Lidové noviny” from November 15, 2007, http://www.lidovky.cz/tichy-obyvatel-domova-duchodcu-dmv-/zpravy-domov.aspx?c=A071115_125852_ln_bezpravi_hel (accessed November 25, 2015). See also the chapter of the radio documentary *Stories of the 20th Century*, based on Vaš’s testimony, <http://prehravac.rozhlas.cz/audio/2790083> (accessed November 25, 2015).

²⁵ A highly interesting speech on this topic offered the director of Post Bellum, Mr Míkuláš Kroupa, at the Czech local variant of TED project (TEDxPrague) on 3 March 2012, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4n5Wpaeiry0> (accessed November 25, 2015). Kroupa quoted the story of Pavel Macháček, who ended up at concentration camp due to a complicated combination of events, in which the main role played his friend František Listopad, see the testimony of P. Macháček: http://www.memoryofnations.eu/witness/index/id/224/#en_224 (accessed November 25, 2015). There’s a chapter in a documentary comic book *Ještě jsme ve válce* (We’re Still at War, the English translation is being prepared for publishing), based on his story, published in 2011, see: <http://jestejsmevalce.cz/> (accessed November 25, 2015).

hundreds of witnesses told us dramatic and often incredible stories of resistance members and war veterans alongside the stories of people whose lives were swept away by history when they lost their farms in the collectivisation, were forced to relocate, or accidentally witnessed a gunfight at the end of the war. We always want to know the witnesses' full story: about their childhood, youth, and everything what formed their life and how the experiences like World War II were reflected in their lives. This is also why we try to meet with every witness at least twice²⁶.

Some time ago, there were lengthy debates on who “belongs” and who “does not” to the Memory of Nations²⁷. Eventually we settled that we are interested in the narrations that transcend strictly private confines and reflect history in one way or another – whether this involves a conscious act on the part of the narrator, being a victim (or even an agent) of the ruling power's arbitrariness, or being a passive witness to an event, albeit one who takes an attitude towards it. We adopted a statement of Daniel Kroupa, that the “human life has several dimensions within which we live – and some of those dimensions are historical, while others are unhistorical, so to speak. The unhistorical dimensions are those where we focus on satisfying our needs [...]. Such “unhistorical” life is cyclical. [...] You cannot write a story about such a life – there is nothing to write about.

²⁶ The Memory of Nations' approach to the oral history method was by historian David Weber in *The narrated Memory of Nation[s], or what is the oral history method*, see: <http://www.memoryofnations.eu/page/index/title/oral-history-method> (accessed November 25, 2015). Post Bellum, however, doesn't follow explicitly the oral history rules established in the Czech context e.g. by M. Vaněk, P. Mücke, H. Pelikánová, *Naslouchat hlasům paměti: Teoretické a praktické aspekty orální historie*, Prague 2007; or M. Vaněk [et al.], *Orální historie. Metodické a „technické“ postupy. Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci*, Olomouc 2003. Post Bellum established its focus more likely as a “documentary journalism”, while the “method” itself is being created at the exact moment of the interview with the witness, rising from his/her ability of narration or specific life experience. Each of the interviews is being held on different levels – both of the “history segment”, i.e. focused on facts and connotations, as the “psychological segment”, i.e. an attempt of the interviewer to lead the witness into open expression of his or her motivations and feelings, both negative as positive. This way, Memory of Nations provides a wide mosaic of historical explanations by individuals.

²⁷ Those debates were held mainly at the meeting of the members of the Memory of Nations Collegium, a community of philosophers, university teachers and scholars, historians, documentarists and journalists (the full list of participants see <http://kolegium.pametnaroda.cz/>, accessed November 25, 2015).

[...] History begins when you transcend this limited framework you are closed in, when you step out of these confines that keep you immune to all of the unpleasant things that may bother you. Sometimes you step out voluntarily; sometimes someone may help you to. Only then does something happen that a story can be told about.”²⁸

We try to retell the stories

Aside from making audio recordings of interviews with witnesses to history and storing them in the Memory of Nations’ base, over the last two years Post Bellum has been developing further documentary activities, like **shooting video interviews using the EyeDirect technique**²⁹. Two HD cameras are used for the shoot in a soundproof mobile studio (using suspended screens, acoustic panels, and sound and light systems). The mirror device shows the interviewer’s face to the witness, so the witness does not feel the discomfort of having to look into the camera lens. The big task in the next months is to reconstruct the Memory of Nation database so as to allow for presenting the data-intensive video recordings to the same extent as audio files.

The project titled **Stories of our Neighbours**³⁰ has yielded a considerable amount of interviews with witnesses in recent months. It is intended primarily for the students of the second stage of primary schools and has taken place in dozens of Czech towns. Working with a teacher and a trained Post Bellum instructor, student teams seek out witnesses in their neighbourhoods and record their stories. In doing so, children aged 13–15 learn to use recording equipment and work with archive documents. In addition to teaching modern history “in a different and more fun way”, the goal of the project is to make space for civic education, to inspire teachers to use witnesses’ testimonies for teaching, to give schools technological

²⁸ A lecture of D. Kroupa given at the Post Bellum’s office on 24 April 2014; transcription available in the archive of the Memory of Nations.

²⁹ This technique was invented by the documentarist Errol Morris and applied e.g. on his documentary *The Fog of War*; see: <http://www.errolmorris.com/content/eyecontact/interrotron.html> (accessed November 25, 2015). A deeper explanation of the technique’s use at Memory of Nations, see: The Annual Report for 2014, <http://archiv.postbellum.cz/en/annual-reports/annual-reports.aspx> (accessed November 25, 2015), p. 13–14.

³⁰ See: <http://www.pribehynasichsousedu.cz/pp/novinky/> (accessed November 25, 2015).

know-how, create an environment for students to discuss the essence of totalitarian regimes, instruct the participants about resources broader than history textbooks, and facilitate contact between teenagers and the elderly who often suffer from loneliness and isolation from the modern society.

Let me briefly introduce some other activities of Memory of Nations through which we want to bring the stories and the topic of memoir culture to the general public. We have completed several exhibition projects in the public space. The biggest success was the **Heydrich 70**³¹ exhibit on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the assassination of Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich. We built a structure evocative of a Nazi concentration camp on Karlovo Square in Prague and used it as a venue to show 70 stories of the protagonists of the period's events. An estimated 45,000 visitors saw the exhibit within five weeks³². Our most successful publication is titled **We're Still at War**³³ – a set of 13 original documentary comic stories based on the recollections accessible on the Memory of Nation portal. In 2003 we developed the **Memory of Nations mobile app**³⁴ enabling smart phone and tablet users to learn about hundreds of stories set in specific locations. Based on the stories and locations used in the application, we created the **Memory of Nation Sites**³⁵ publication – a guide instructing readers on the places associated with World War II history in all Czech regions. As mentioned before, we have been bestowing the **Memory of Nations Awards** on the witnesses whose stories appeal to us and inspire us. This is our way of saying thank you to people who brought their stories to the general public with our assistance. There is also the **Memory of Nations Club of Friends**³⁶. It brings together hundreds of people who support our work – the Club of Friends is a broad community of people with acute interest in our past. We regularly organise

³¹ See: <http://heydrich70.pametnaroda.cz/> (accessed November 25, 2015), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U73UF6d5BFA> (accessed November 25, 2015).

³² The exhibition was open to public from May 27 to June 30, 2012.

³³ See: www.jestejsmevalce.cz (accessed November 25, 2015).

³⁴ To be found online, also with possibility of downloading into any smart-device at www.mistapametinaroda.cz.

³⁵ *Místa Paměti národa* [Memory of Nations Sites], ed. by P. Nosálek, Prague 2015.

³⁶ Currently, the Memory of Nations Club of Friends consists of almost 900 members, and the number is increasing steadily every week. Its members meet regularly during expeditions around the Czech Republic, organized by Post Bellum approximately every three months.

discussions, tours and trips to memorable sites for Club members. These regular meetings give us valuable feedback which we use in our work.

In conclusion, let me quote philosopher Daniel Kroupa once again, as I believe his words capture the essence of our work: “If there are to be people in our society who will do more than just look on the current developments, who will use their heads to think and rate the options, and then act based on such options, then those people need to see the stories of people who acted this way in the past – in the times when others cared about securing their little lives and privacy. For example, take the people who fled to England via Poland or to the Soviet Union back in 1939 when the Nazis occupied our country and made it their Protectorate, because they wanted to fight the Nazi regime. It can also be the stories of people who refused to have their farms collectivised somewhere in the country, and it can also be the stories of young people who wanted to pursue, say, independent theatre careers in the 1970s and 1980s while the regime was trying to discourage them and yet they endured. This is why I believe that those individual stories are testimonies to the meaning of human life.”