

Clémence-Julia Martin, *For a New Approach to the Czechoslovak Exile in Paris during the Normalization through Oral Sources* (Diploma thesis, Charles University, Faculty of Humanities: Prague, 2020).

## SUPERVISOR'S REPORT

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The author chose an uneasy topic of doing oral history research with former Czechoslovak exiles, who ended up in France during the post-1968 period. The theory and methodology are very well-grounded within the post-cultural turn concepts of oral history (Passerini and Portelli among others) and the text overall follows these. The author secured six narrators for her study, who were ready and willing to share a wide range of representations concerning their experience.

The opening Historical context chapter is also very well and richly written and elucidates a relevant chapter from the Czechoslovak history, which is not exactly well known, but necessary for understanding the twists and turns of the narrator's experience.

The author achieved without a doubt a certain level of originality, but most especially a convincing insight into narrators's subjectivity as exiles and their perception of their personal experience, which is commendable. This insight is based on meticulous theoretical and methodological readiness, quite rare among MA level students. Besides the Chapter 3 dealing with oral history theory, the Chapter 5 "The notion of exile and the decision-making process" is especially commendable here, because the narrators insisted that there was a stark difference between "*those, who were really political and those who came to the West in search of better living conditions.*" (61) The author is very well aware, that it would not be productive for the interpretative work of the oral historian, to label her narrators according to readily available terms, coming from the field of political science or sociology. She offers a good analysis of the varying scale between "voluntary" and "involuntary" departures and captures the feeling of "*rupture*" when most of her narrators thought they are going to leave for good and never come back. She also traces the family, social and cultural sources for achieving this rupture – like the personal history of suffering political persecution or denial of access to education and work in the post-1968 period. The highly subjective need for a "*rupture*" was understood as a necessary precondition of achieving "*freedom,*" so dearly missed by her narrators inside Czechoslovakia,(67) with economic motivations apparently lagging behind the concept of freedom, of being free from the life in society with "*no future,*" (69) with gaping "*darkness, a giant void,*" which the exiles wanted to escape even at significant costs (69).

The text may be relevant especially for current rather heated debates concerning the experience of living under the post-1968 communist dictatorship, with revisionist historians suggesting high levels of compliance and the existence of informal negotiated settlement between the government and mass of a rather passive citizenry. Martin convincingly demonstrates through her well-grounded interpretations, that her narrators regarding their life in post-1968 Czechoslovakia still remember any such settlement as being either non-existent, unavailable, or personally repugnant and they prominently felt the mighty combination of culturally generated unbearable disgust, emptiness, and fear, which ultimately forced them to exile. So the oral history is again able to disrupt attempts at creating some general, homogenizing pattern of understanding the human lived experience. Moreover, as far as I understood, none of the narrators can be labeled as an explicit "dissident" during their time of departure.

The text moreover in general did not lose its analytic and interpretative style. It shines most during Chapters 6 "The Road to Exile" and 7 "A new start: the life of exiles in Paris". The au-

thor convincingly analyzed the way her narrators managed to achieve the virtually impossible, to “*circumvent the laws*” and made a successful escape. She analyses the process of selecting those to trust enough to help with the escape and those to keep away from all information. The major traumatic points were discovered here: “*All of our narrators chose not to tell their families and all of them... felt ashamed when speaking about the subject.*” (77) In this way the exile was an act, capable of destroying the family circles forever. The question of whom to trust was “pervasive” and quickly escalades into “*fear,*” which “*followed the exiles every step of the way until they didn’t know whom to trust or whom to talk to.*” (79)

Chapter 7 deals with the new start of the exiles in Paris. Despite the administrative problems, the “*cultural shock*” (83) was not an issue, mainly because the omnipresent change in the habitus of exiles for the better, “*I felt like I was seeing colors again.*” (84) They felt energized again, started to learn the language intensively and the future suddenly seemed open. The author managed to discover the fundamental difference between “closed” and “open” concepts of the future, typical for the narrator’s memories of Czechoslovakia and France. This eminently cultural need was overshadowing in their memories even the obvious difference between material scarcity, typical for living in post-1968 Czechoslovakia, and near abundance, typical for their experience of living in France.

The key role of Pavel Tigrid and the journal *Svědectví* is also analyzed within this chapter. The magazine acted as a proverbial hub for the Czech exile community in Paris, effectively creating a self-supporting community. The author also points out the not so nice feature of the exile: a remaining portion of fear, generated by possible intrusions of Czechoslovak communist secret service. Feeling like being followed became also a part of the exile experience. The third category was the “*distance,*” (90) which was understood as a sort of sectarianism of the first and the second waves of emigres, who were coming to France from much more explicitly political reasons, some of them fleeing for their bare lives. For the latest wave of exiles, it was necessary to explain again and again what *Normalization* was for them. So there existed a palpable hierarchy within the community, with several categories of the exiles, clearly defining the social standing of any person involved.

The concluding Chapter 8 “*Reflexions of memories and identities*” offers the deepest oral-historical insight into the subjectivity of the narrators. It discovers the problem of feeling having a “*multiple identity*”, of not being “naturally” included in any community anymore. (97) Another unresolved issue was the “*clean slate*” concept, adopted by various successive Czechoslovak and Czech cabinets after 1989 – the ominous decision not to conduct any large scale judicial proceedings against crimes, committed by the Communist party regime. (99) This concept has remained deeply unpopular among the narrators. The subjectivity of the narrators is again shown as heavily socially and culturally conditioned and co-created, this time by the prevailing feeling of justice not being done.

To sum up the whole Report, the author convincingly demonstrated a very good grasp of the theory and methodology of oral history, also an ability to conduct research based on those, and finally the ability to present the findings in a coherent form. I feel obliged to commend especially on a high level of reflexivity and in general also on author’s interpretative skills.

My final verdict is that I propose this thesis to **pass with the mark “excellent” (1).**

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