

Dubrovnik Lecture

**Women in History – History without Women**

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**Zenska Infotheka, HBS, Inter University Center Dubrovnik**

**Marina Beyer-Grasse**

**Women's Memory: Searching for Women's Life and Identity during the Socialist Era**

In giving this address, I should like to introduce the international project "Women's Memory: Searching for Women's Life and Identity during the Socialist Era". The idea for this project was developed in the mid-nineties by the Czech dissident, sociologist and foundress of the Prague Centre for Gender Studies, Jirina Siklova. It is, as it were, the constructive response to the post-Socialist East/West debates on the topic of "Women and/or Women in Socialism" which are extremely problematic on occasion.

After the collapse of the Socialist regime, many works appeared in which, above all, feminists from western Europe and the USA tackled this subject analytically, publicistically and polemically too.

In doing so, their interpretations and analysis were naturally based on the attitudes and thinking, experience and debate derived from the political, ideological and socio-economic systems of the western world. In the Eastern Bloc, there had been no critical analysis - independent of the state - of the theory and practice of the Socialist emancipation model during the Socialist era.

It was not until the eighties that the topic began to be discussed in public. That was why the post-Socialist East/West debates that now came about were often somewhat lopsided, to the annoyance of all concerned. One side felt misunderstood and misinterpreted, whilst the other felt inferior to the western power of interpretation.

Women from the former East Bloc countries often had the impression that western feminist paradigms were superimposing a past on them that had little to do with their own perception of it, and which in a sense even dispossessed them of their own history and past. In addition, the interest in the "East" hardly seemed to go hand in hand with a critical analysis of the

connection between private and political life resulting from the political system in the past and present of western societies. Moreover, scarcely any attention was paid to differentiations in terms of the effects of generation and milieu, as well as cultural and historical developments in the various countries, at least not in the years immediately after the end of the Socialist experiment.

It was only natural, therefore, that women who had experienced Socialism for decades "at first hand" should begin to ask themselves what memories the various generations of women associate with the Socialist era, how they lived their everyday lives, what importance socio-political developments and developments in gender policies had for specific biographies.

The women initiators in Prague who conceived the idea had an international project in mind from the very beginning. Several generations of women born between 1920 and 1960 were to be interviewed and asked about their personal biographical memories and experiences.

The object was to reconstruct subjectively the realities experienced from the vantage point of the "women contemporaries" who had spent the longest period of their lives under Socialism.

The purpose of this was to make a feminist contribution to the contemporary discussion of the topic "Women in Socialism" that had hitherto been lacking.

The focus of the project was to be on the women interviewees themselves, their life stories as they remembered them. They themselves, as subjects of their own life experience and narrative were to decide - in as much as this is possible in an interview situation - what they wanted to say about their lives and how. Consequently, the emphasis was not on WHICH political events and developments had influenced the lives of the women as "Objects of Contemporary History" and HOW they had done so. Instead, we were interested to know HOW the women, as "subjects", as active players, had lived their lives within the given social framework. What priorities for action and strategies did they devise, how did they perceive politics, what attitudes, what values did they develop. The narrative form (WHAT is narrated and HOW) of the autobiographical memories was to serve as a medium for seeking connections between "objective" contemporary events or developments and subjective perceptions, actions, experiences, recollections, facts and tales.

The Prague Centre for Gender Studies began conducting its first interviews in the Czech Republic and looking for potential project partners in other Central and East European countries in 1996/97. One year later, a Czech/(East)German/Polish working group was formed and, with the support of the Heinrich Böll Foundation, drew up a common methodology over a six-month pilot period. We - the East/West European Women's Network located in East Berlin - were extremely pleased about this opportunity for co-operation. It was and is all too often apparently "forgotten" that the eastern part of Germany as the GDR was

part of the "Socialist camp", even if it was always in a special position, and that after 1989 in the expanded Federal Republic it underwent a specific process of transformation.

On conclusion of the pilot stage, we began the actual project in mid-1999.

Since then, further project working groups have been set up in Slovakia, Yugoslavia and Croatia and included in the project. We hope to be able to co-operate shortly with women's partner groups in Russia and the Ukraine.

We first concentrated on the generation of women born in the twenties. Given the great age of these "women contemporaries", there is not a lot of time left to hear and preserve their memories and life stories. Born between the two world wars, this is the generation whose lives have spanned several changes in social system, and who experienced Fascism, war, the post-war period and Stalinism. They were the ones who were to build up Socialism on the ruins of war.

The interviews with the older generation were to be followed by talks with representatives of younger generations.

Our methodology borrows from biographical research and "oral history". The discussion begins with an open-ended question intended to encourage the interviewee to tell us everything about her life that occurs to her in reply. Follow-up questions are only asked after she has finished her initial narrative. The first follow-up questions are asked to clarify a point, and they relate directly to what has just been narrated. Then come follow-up questions about memories of specific historical events or socio-political contexts in the respective countries.

Objective, biographical data are only noted after the end of the interview.

Every interview is accompanied by a report on the discussion in which the interviewee records her personal impressions of the interview, its atmosphere and the course of the discussion.

The interviews are based on an internal guideline featuring topics such as parental background and milieu, childhood, schooling, vocational training, employment, personal relationships, the woman's own family and her social commitment. It serves purely to assist the interviewer, however.

The nature of the project requires that the women being interviewed should not be interrupted during their initial account by queries, corrective remarks or expressions of opinion of one's own. What is important by contrast is that they be constantly encouraged, verbally or non-verbally, to delve into their own memories and associations that these give rise to. This is

certainly a challenge for the interviewer because it is not seldom that we hear memories, accounts and opinions that we find deeply provoking.

So far, more than 400 interviews have been conducted with women born between 1920 and 1940, 90 of them with East German women. In the meantime, most of the interviews have been transcribed. The women interviewed so far come from different socio-cultural milieus - big cities, small towns, rural areas. Their education differs, as does their training and the occupations engaged in. They had different professional and social careers, belong to different religious denominations or are atheists, and have organised their private lives and family affairs in different ways.

And they have adopted different attitudes toward Socialist ideology and government policies.

It is intended to develop a central archive in Prague entitled "Women's Memory" in the future.

All the narrative records are to be preserved there and the anonymised transcripts archived. The transcripts are to be made available for further research, publication and educational purposes. In addition to this central archive, national archives are to be set up in each country participating in the project. In addition to the interview material, these are to maintain and make available the appropriate background material. The latter comprises relevant contemporary documents on historical events, the development of important legislation on women's issues and the attendant social debate, social statistical material, and photographic material from major women's periodicals providing information on the development of the official female rôle model in the respective countries. Where possible, the diaries kept by the women's brigades, newspaper bulletins issued by factories staffed by women, women's literature, and personal documents made available should also be systematically collected and preserved.

The very first interviews conducted in the countries participating showed what a tremendous "impact" the memories narrated had both on the women being interviewed as well as on the lady interviewers and project staff in the national working groups and in the international team.

For a great many of the women it was the first time that they had spoken so coherently about their lives, touching moreover on events, experiences and feelings that they had never mentioned before.

Memories going back decades came alive again, releasing emotions that had hitherto been repressed. Most of the women prepare for the interviews carefully. Many of them recall a detail days or weeks after the interview that they would like added. Often the interviewees come to see their lives in a fresh light as they talk about them. Many who first felt that there had been nothing special in their lives worth talking about are then amazed at the wealth of

memories that surface during the telling. It is not seldom that we are asked for a copy of the tape recording so that the narrative life histories so preserved can be passed on to children and grandchildren.

There was much discussion in the national groups as well as the international one about our personal motivation for this project, its objectives, our common interviewing methodology, our perception of what the interviewees said and how they told their stories, as well as what they kept to themselves. These debates made us realise that this project triggered learning processes of a political awareness nature that challenge all involved to ponder on their own biographies and political attitudes.

Our talks with women of our mother's or grandmother's generation brought home to us how differently contemporary history is experienced and perceived. Also how different the women's outlook on life and their strategies for action, developed in the course of their lives, were. We realised from the discussions, which on occasion were extremely emotional, how difficult it is to question one's own knowledge and one's own images of the "past" and even acknowledge other experiences.

We understood that this project entailed far more than the reconstruction of the history of Socialism from the preserved memories of everyday life of such women who otherwise go unmentioned and unheard in the official history books. This project raises questions as to our perception of ourselves and our shared responsibility as those "born later". Irrespective of our political affiliations in the past, we carry the latter in our luggage. We began to see the sentence written by Christa Wolf by way of introduction to her novel "Kindheitsmuster" ("A Model Childhood") in a new light: "The past is not dead; it is not even past; we divest ourselves of it and treat it as a stranger."

It is only now that the comparative, more profound analysis of the discussions with the oldest generation of women from the various countries can begin. I should nevertheless like to make brief mention here of at least a few aspects that have struck us particularly.

As one might expect, memories of childhood and youth take up much space in the narrative. The events, experiences and lessons learned at this stage of life had a lasting impact and, at the same time, differed greatly. This generation's memories of childhood and youth dating from the period between the two world wars or from wartime were greatly influenced by their respective national origin as well as their socio-cultural environment and political affiliations. The environment determined one's lifestyle and influenced the manner in which major political contexts were perceived. Mention is made of the occupation by Hitler's Germany or in Eastern Poland by the Soviet Union by those whose lives were directly affected in a

concrete way. The same goes for Fascist literature, the war, the loss of relatives, homeland and possessions, and for material suffering. This was the case for the majority of women.

A large number of interviews highlight the fact that World War II already and the immediate post-war period brought major changes to the social position of women, opening up new avenues to them. This was the first generation that, voluntarily or not, was given access in large measure to gainful employment outside the home and thus to financial resources of its own. Many women had to learn to manage without a male breadwinner over a longish period of time or entirely, or saw from their mothers that it was possible and how. Although virtually all the women representing this generation took it for granted that they would marry and have children of their own, no small number of them later decided to leave their husbands and provide for themselves and their children on their own. It was, above all, women from the lower strata of society who profited from educational opportunities that had been totally denied to their mothers. The majority went out to work. Many continued working even after their children were born. This was the first generation of women whose class and social status were no longer primarily defined by the status of the family into which they had been born and, above all, no longer solely by the status of their husbands. This was also the first generation of women in which unmarried mothers were no longer automatically marginalised.

From what women from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and East Germany - countries occupied by the Soviets as a result of the war - remember of the post-war period to the end of the forties, it emerges that the way in which the Communist parties established power, as well as the manner in which Moscow exercised supremacy did indeed differ in political practice. In this regard, the term "sovietisation" of the Eastern Bloc, which is often used today, falls short of the mark and inadequately reflects the different preconditions for the development of the later Socialist regimes.

It is common knowledge that the Germany of the twenties and thirties, with its Weimar Republic, inflation, the emergence of National Socialism, Fascism and terror, the outbreak, course and end of World War II and the early post-war period with its millions of expellees and refugees from the former eastern territories and protectorates - this Germany differed greatly from the other countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe. This fact is reflected in the nature of the memories and, above all, in the manner in which they are recounted.

I am now going to pinpoint some aspects which have particularly struck us in the conversations so far. They are examples and, as such, do not lend themselves to generalisation. They are intended to give an impression at least of the prerequisites with which the generation of women born in the twenties, the so-called "reconstruction generation", embarked upon the "New Era" after 1945 and, in the fifties, began building Socialism in the GDR.

- *Diagram 1 Table Interviews East Germany Women born 1920 - 1930*
- *Diagram 2 Survey Historical Context SBZ (Soviet-occupied Zone) / GDR 1945 - 1990*

Roughly speaking, three major stages are discernible in the development of society, beginning with the end of World War II and ending with the collapse of the GDR in 1990:

## **1945 - 1961**

### **Anti-Fascist - Democratic Upheaval**

- Abolition of *Beamtentum* (established civil servant status)
- Denazification
- Expropriation of capitalists, nationalisation of big industry
- Creation of the nationally-owned sector
- Elimination of the capital-owning class
- Land reform
- Collectivisation of agriculture

1945-1948

4.4 million refugees, expellees from Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Rumania and Yugoslavia (proportion of population of the Soviet-occupied Zone - 24%)

1945-1953

Reparation payments made to the Allies: 99.1 billion (thousand million) Marks  
(by comparison: West Germany: 2.1 billion Marks)

SUBSTITUTION OF THE FORMER POLITICAL, ECONOMIC AND ACADEMIC ELITES

MASSIVE UPWARD AND DOWNWARD MOVEMENTS IN SOCIETY

72% OF ALL SCHOOLTEACHERS AND 90% OF ALL TECHNICAL SCHOOL TEACHERS HAVE TO LEAVE THE TEACHING PROFESSION - INFLUX OF NEW TEACHERS

MASSIVE MIGRATION TO THE WEST

(1949-1961 2.74 MILLION - 14% OF THE POPULATION LEAVE THE GDR)

### **FEMALE RÔLE MODEL**

THE WORKING WOMAN; massive "recruitment" of women to go out to work, and undergo training in traditional male professions

## THE MALE RÔLE MODEL

UNCHANGED

### 1961 - End of the 70ies

#### Establishment of State Socialism, Stabilisation

- Building of the Wall - flow of escapees stopped
- Consolidation of the system
- Introduction of the New Economic System (NEC)(1963)
- Scientific/Technical Revolution - qualification offensive - training of skilled workers
- Completion of the setting up of the Socialist education system, entailing abandonment of the social background principle and adoption of the merit principle
- Honnecker era (1971 onwards)
- Victory of Socialist production conditions
- Re-centralisation of industry (formation of combines)
- Unity of industrial and social policy
- Diplomatic recognition of the GDR worldwide
- Rise of young, trained cadres (born mid-1920 to mid-1930) to middle-management positions; the old cadres retain the senior positions of power

## FEMALE RÔLE MODEL

THE WORKING, QUALIFIED WOMAN AND MOTHER

MALE RÔLE MODEL: UNCHANGED

- Women encouraged to work and assume managerial positions
- Introduction of special studies on women
- Major improvement in the infrastructure to reconcile working and family life for women
- Legalisation of abortion within a certain term (1972)
- Falling birth rates

### End of 1970 - 1989

#### Stagnation / Social Re-differentiation

- Growing inconsistencies in the system
- Growing tension between public and government

- Individualisation und diversification of life styles
- Boost to the economy by increased promotion of individual creativity and talents
- Process of social differentiation
- Promotion of elites coupled with compensatory social policies

### FEMALE RÔLE MODEL

#### COMPATIBILITY OF WORKING LIFE AND MOTHERHOOD

#### MALE RÔLE MODEL: UNCHANGED

- Introduction of state and factory support benefits for women
- Cementation of the traditional division of labour in the family
- Relative harmonisation of male and female career structures
- Growing inconsistencies between qualifications - work performed - promotion opportunities - income
- Further fall in birth rates

### Memories of National Socialism and the War

With very few exceptions, the assumption of power by the National Socialists is recalled as an exciting and eventful period. The majority report that they were fascinated by the idea of National Socialism, or at least benefitted from it. Fathers found work again after the years of mass unemployment. Many girls joined the BDM (Bund Deutscher Mädchen)(German Maiden's Organisation). To this very day, they remember the social events associated with membership - the trips, the camp fires, the songs. The Reichsarbeitsdienst (Labour Service of the German Reich) enabled young girls from poor families to get away from home for the first time, and eat a square meal for once.

Only the few whose parents were themselves active in the resistance or at least were opposed to National Socialism report having been critical of the NS regime.

Some women initially skip over the period between 1933 and 1945 in their narrative. Many return to it subsequently; others only talk about it when asked about these years after having recounted their memories. The war years are associated with memories of direct, existential threat and loss. Many lost close relatives in the war. Often, extreme situations have been banished from memory to this very day; the "images" that go hand in hand with them are missing. It is noticeable that the very vividly described scenarios in which sheer survival was at stake are seldom told from the perspective of the victims involved, but from that of the person actively performing the act.

Hardly any of the women interviewed reflect upon what German soldiers did abroad. In the war, the fathers, brothers, school mates, loved ones were people with whom they had a particularly close relationship. To this very day, therefore, it seems inconceivable that these men killed other human beings or committed atrocities. All the more mention is made, however, of the terrible sight of German prisoners of war returning home. Some of the interviewees mention their parents' active resistance and they are justifiably proud of this. The majority, however, stress that their parents were neutral. If these statements are anything to go by, there must have been nigh on no National Socialist sympathisers, NSDAP members and members of SA and SS in the families of the women whom we interviewed.

The astonishing thing is that some women, who were far too young during the Fascist era to have been active perpetrators, see themselves rather than their parents as the guilty ones - some of them to this very day.

Several of the women mention having memories of forced labourers; admittedly, the number has only risen since the topic increasingly became a subject of public discussion in connection with the question of financial compensation. Usually, however, the forced labourers are described as friends of the family who felt at home working for their German masters and were looked after.

Information is seldom volunteered about Jewish fellow citizens and their fate. If it is, then it is once again largely women whose parents were opposed to National Socialism or were active in the resistance, or women who have Jewish roots themselves who do so.

Most of the women have nothing to say about this topic, or they say that there had never been any Jews in their neighbourhood.

For the Germans expelled from the lost German territories to the east, the loss of their homeland was a terrible rupture in their lives. In the GDR, expulsion was a taboo subject. Even today, some people do not use the word "expulsion" but the GDR expression "resettlement". To this very day, many feel pain at the loss of the homeland in which they spent their childhood. At the same time, most say, however, that the Poles and the Czechs also suffered much, and that they accept the situation as it is today.

Some women tell us about having been raped by Soviet soldiers. Almost all of them have heard about this and know women to whom this had happened.

I would add here that the mass rapes committed by the soldiers of the Soviet Army in the Soviet-occupied Zone and the GDR were taboo topics both in public and in the

families too. Consequently, in recounting these memories, the women express not only pain at the violence and humiliation suffered, but above all pain at discovering that no-one had been willing to listen to them for decades.

### **Post-war Era and Reconstruction Period**

When the war ended, the women born in the twenties were between 15 and 25 years old. For the older ones, the years of their youth were over; the younger ones were at the transition stage between childhood and adolescence. For most of them, the focus in the period immediately after 1945 was on day-to-day survival and trying to recapture at least a little of their lost youth. Gradually the men returned, once again there were dances and love affairs, people married and had children. Many had to deal with the disappointment and realisation that they had placed their faith in a wrong cause.

And many soon discovered that most families remained silent about their own failings during the Hitler dictatorship. Many, who before had believed the National Socialist propaganda uncritically, now tried to do things differently and better. Many joined the FDJ (Free German Youth Organisation) or even the SED (Socialist Unity Party), or mass organisations like the Frauenverband (Women's Association). Almost all who before had been simple nominal members continued to be such.

The policies pursued by the GDR leadership generally only feature in the women's narrative if they or the members of their families were directly affected by them.

Even women who came to assume positions of authority or made a career for themselves scarcely mention concrete political events. Those women who disagreed with the regime, who perhaps even hated the Communists, appear somehow to have come to terms with it. Most of those who, despite their reticence toward the GDR regime, remained in the GDR until the building of the Wall in 1961 appear to have found a niche where they could show commitment in their own way. They were active in the parent/teacher associations of the schools, in choirs, workers' theatres, the trade union, factory collectives, in the women's organisation or other mass organisations, and in the church.

The life stories of the majority of women lose their vibrancy. The fifties are drawing to a close. They were between 30 and 40 years old at this time, had started their families, borne their children and most of them went out to work. When talking about the later years, they often just recount facts. Lively stories and memories hardly feature any more, unless in connection with events and experiences that had a deep impact on their personal biographies.

### The Significance of Family, Education and Working Life

Virtually all the women of this generation took it for granted that they would marry and have children, although a not inconsiderable number of the interviewees were themselves born illegitimate. This is almost always considered a blemish. Several rush into marriage on becoming pregnant. There are, however, other women who have deliberately brought up their children on their own and speak of this with particular pride. And there are women who speak of extra-marital relationships with men spanning many years. Some women who have many children intimate that not all of them were eagerly awaited.

As a rule, starting a family, marriage and children only play a peripheral part in the narrative, at least as long as there were no major problems. The husbands too are often only mentioned in passing. What all have in common is their pride in their children and grandchildren. Often, more time is devoted in the narrative to the latter than to their own children.

All the women we interviewed attached great importance to training and work. This shows already in their life dreams which in every case included a desire to work in a particular profession. There were other women, however, well-trained ones too, for whom it was natural to stop working after starting a family because this was the usual thing to do and also because, at that time, there were not enough state child-minding facilities. They too attached importance to those first years of working life and they talk a great deal about them. The vast majority continue working, however. Only a few children attended crèche or kindergarden. Most of them were initially looked after by their grandmothers. Much mention is made of the community spirit in the workers' collective, of praise and awards, courses of further training undergone, of successes and the tremendous exertion. Their stories made us realise what gigantic efforts had to be made under the most difficult of conditions by this, our mothers', generation.

### From the Wende (turnaround) (1989) to the Present

By the time of the *Wende* in 1989, most of the women of this "reconstruction generation" were already pensioners. They themselves were not affected by the mass lay-offs of, above all, older, semi-skilled women and mothers with small children that set in after 1989. Therefore, they did not experience the loss of one's accustomed social bonds that were associated with one's factory and workers' collective, or the feeling of suddenly no longer being needed by society. In the first interviews conducted in 1998, insecurity and fear of crime were frequently predominant. Any fears for the future that were expressed had primarily to do with training opportunities and jobs for their children and grandchildren.

Later the women speak with more pleasure about the new quality of life, the improvements to the home, travel and consumer goods.

The exception are those women who obtained a divorce in the GDR already, brought up their children on their own, worked in semi- or unskilled and thus poorly paid jobs, and who did not work for long periods because of the family. They speak of their very small pensions which make it impossible for them to enjoy even such modest "luxuries" as visits to the theatre and exhibitions, or travel.

Where their health permits, today's 70 to 80 year-old women are creative, artistic, and physically and mentally active, taking part in painting classes, walking groups, language circles, choirs, theatre groups and women's groups.

We have also heard, however, of disappointment at the corrupt government after reunification, of doubts about the new democracy, of a lack of government firmness, and of lengthy and exhausting battles in connection with property claims.

Not infrequently, our interviewees say that not all that much has changed since 1990 after all. Others say that they are now experiencing in the FRG (Federal Republic of Germany) what they originally took for GDR propaganda. Many women mention the social coldness that they see in the new society.

And we also heard of the despair of those for whom the *Wende* destroyed the vision in which they had long believed in the GDR, and which they had fought for. They know now that after experiencing a new beginning, dictatorship and collapse twice, there will not be a third beginning for them.

Seventy-seven year-old Renate Star, today living in Berlin, is of upper middle class/proletarian parentage. Both parents were active in the Communist resistance during Fascism; her father was murdered by the Fascists in 1944. During the conversation she stresses many a time that politically, ideologically, professionally and personally her life had always been "a tight-rope act", and that in the GDR too she had always found herself "between the fronts". This becomes very clear from her biographical memories too. Ms **Star** sums up the ten years after the *Wende* and her long life experience very pragmatically in the following words:

"I knew after all what was in store for us. I miss the security - in every respect, don't you? The right to work, the right to an apartment, education, and health care. But I enjoy the freedom of movement, to the extent that that is feasible financially. Although, in today's society, freedom of movement is, let's say, just a safety valve to siphon off people's frustrations. It will not change anything, because that simply isn't possible under these conditions, is it? You can see where the state can't really do much, can't you. So, in this respect, even if Lenin wasn't always right, he was right about this, wasn't he? The state loses its influence and has to surrender it to the monopolies, particularly in view of globalisation, doesn't it? So I experience the present time as having to make the best of what one has, under

the conditions one is living under. There can hardly be anyone with a vision today. Probably only small steps can be taken. I don't know whether they will achieve anything. One such small step is to bring up one's family or one's children in such a way that they do not add to the store of violence and frustration and annoyance and friction that there already is in the world.

Marina Beyer  
Ost-West-Europäisches Frauennetzwerk OWEN e.V.  
Berlin  
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Translator  
Mary Höcker, Berlin