NOTHING BUT PAST: HISTORICITY AND IDENTITY IN A CENTRAL SLOVAKIAN VILLAGE

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Abstract

The text shows how people in Starov mobilize their past in order to manage the unsure post-socialist reality in the village and enhance their shared identity. The WWII massacre and burning down of the village by the Nazi forces, and the transformation from socialist to post-socialist society, signified by pervasive nostalgia among the villagers are identified as two major landmarks in memory landscape of the villagers. The inhabitants frame the WWII remembering in a way that has the power to shape the very basis of the shared identities of the villagers and demarcate the in-group circle of the community. Through commemoration ceremonies and contrasts with the official narratives endorsed by the state, villagers also use the tragedy remembering to assert their positions vis-à-vis the outsiders and changing memory politics. The chapter on post-socialist nostalgia shows how the idealized images of the past are used to articulate the shared morals of the community. They serve as an anchor in a dynamically changing present and a program for uncertain future in the village. Analysis of the way in which inhabitants relate to the two different landmarks thus provides two diverging, yet supplementary views of how people attach meanings to their worlds and reinforce the sense of community through remembering.

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Introduction

"*There is nothing but past in this village*." the mayor

The road ends in Starov, or as some people in the village like to say using a Slovak idiom, it is the place where 'the foxes wish you good night'. Starov is a tiny village of 200 inhabitants, overlooked by a modest white church tower and stunning surrounding mountain ranges. After spending a few weeks in the community, it is not difficult to understand mayor's quote, as it becomes apparent that the village community has probably seen more prosperous days.

Figure 1 Starov

The number of inhabitants in the village has been steadily declining from 255 to current 209 since the Velvet Revolution. However, mayor told me that only 175 of the official inhabitants actually reside in Starov and 72 out of them are seniors, often living alone in big family houses. The number contrasts with the pre-WWII size of the village, as almost 670 people used to live there. This was dramatically changed by the WWII massacre that will be

discussed later, when many people died and the Edelweiss units burnt down the village. The tragedy and its commemoration has not only had a profound effect on the community itself, it also catapulted Starov into the official historical narratives of Slovakia, bringing the state to the heart of the community. After the war, not everyone returned to rebuild Starov and the second major blow to the population was only about to come in the 1960s, when the communist party issued a ban on new constructions, leaving young families with no choice but to leave the village.

After the Velvet revolution, the ban was no longer in place, but number of inhabitants kept falling with people moving out in pursuit of jobs and better infrastructure and the elderly slowly dying. There is a certain irony to this – if communist governments tried to depopulate the village, it was the market conditions and lack of jobs in the valley that really managed to finish the job. The valley was hit hard by the post-socialist transformation, with predominantly working-class inhabitants losing their secure positions in nearby industrial towns. Along with locals leaving the village, phenomenon of holiday houses reached Starov. People either keep their family houses for weekends and holidays or sell them to outsider holiday makers – and both groups together own about a half of all the houses in the village at the moment. Unemployment, depopulation, lack of infrastructure and the arrival of the holidaymakers – omnipresent signs of change or decline, depending on what framing people choose, have significantly altered the village. When talking to inhabitants, it quickly shows how development in the past decades lead to widespread scepticism about the present and cast a shade of uncertainty over the future of the community.

The aim of this work is to tell a story of how people facing such conditions mobilize their past in order to manage the unsure reality in the village. I will show how remembering takes on a major role in making sense of inhabitants' lives and sustaining the community. As Giordano and Kostova remarked, the way in which people relate to certain markers in their

past tells us about their positioning towards the world. Through the symbols that they use, we can learn about their understanding of identity and belonging and the way in which they relate to the transformations about them (Giordano, Kostova 2002, 77).

In case of Starov, this will be demonstrated through the way inhabitants remember in relation to two major splits – the WWII massacre and burning down of the village, and the transformation from socialist to post-socialist society. Both of these ruptures kept reappearing in the interviews and inhabitants often brought them up naturally over the flow of the conversation. In the text, I will work with them using Paxson's concept of landmarks. In her monography *Solovyovo*, she defines landmarks as points of a "*concentrated symbolic resonance*" in what she calls a memory landscape – a conceptual terrain, where the dynamics of remembering takes place (Paxson 2005, 21-22). Landmarks are points of reference in narratives that informants keep returning to, they are the fluid clusters of symbols that people employ when they wish to talk about their lives. The manner in which villagers recreate their position in history and in present through attaching meaning to such landmarks forms the central axis of this text. The main topics that revolve around both chosen remembering fields and will be explored include such themes as identity, belonging, relationship to the outside world and the tension between the peripheral and central position of the community. In addition to that, an issue of intertwining the past with present and future in the village will be addressed, as both chapters show different ways of handling the past memories to signify villagers' current positions in time and space.

Figure 2 Village Square in Starov

The first chapter is devoted to description of commemoration practices linked to the WWII tragedy that took place in the village. The aim of the section is to show how villagers produce relevance of the commemoration for the present and use it as a crucial boundary-drawing mechanism. Vis-à-vis rapid changes in demography of the village, the tragedy commemorations act as an anchor that delineates and reaffirms belonging to the community. In addition to that, management of the memory of the events shapes the relationship of the community to both outsiders and the state, both now and during socialism.

The second chapter deals with the way memories of socialism are presented and focuses on widespread nostalgia among the villagers. I argue that the recurrent themes in the idealized images of the socialist past reflect the main values of the community and serve as a stabilized program for both its uncertain present and future. In this manner, the inhabitants reassert their position in the transforming world and articulate their identities.

Hirsch and Stewart once wrote that histories could be studied alongside myths and rituals, as they all help us uncover how individuals inhabit their worlds (Hirsch, Stewart 2005, 268). Looking at the two poles of remembering in Starov allows us to get a glimpse of what such worlds are like in the village. Hopefully, the study of memory in Starov will be an addition to discussion about post-socialist remembering at a place that is by definition filled with images of the past and that in certain respect, has little more to turn to.

Methods and access to the field

In my research, I predominantly focused on the village area, as the informants made a clear distinction about who are from Starov and who are not, based on the position of their houses. The sense of territoriality present in the interviews was sometimes striking, as people who moved to Starov forty years ago would initially exclaim that they were not locals and suggest that I go and talk to the ones who were born in the village. I realize that adhering to such territorial boundaries is not in fashion ever since *Writing Culture*, however, as Candea (2007) shows, self-imposed and acknowledged limitations can be a productive way of dealing with our necessarily partial knowledge.

After outlining the background geographic limitations, it should also be noted that on a conceptual level, I never perceived the village as an isolated entity. Starov has strong ties to the nearby urban areas such as a district centre Zarnovica, located only 15 kilometres away down the valley. As such, the village must always be analysed in close relation to the urban centres that it is aligned with. Similarly, it has consequences on an analysis of the life in the villages during socialism – even though the village was not industrialized, the modernity project of the communist party counted on the labour force from the communities surrounding the new industrial centres.

The field research itself was conducted by using a mixture of qualitative methods including a series of unstructured and semi-structured interviews and observation-based field research. The observation opportunities that I had were enhanced by the fact that my room in the community centre had a window facing the village square. Even when I stayed in, I could have monitored the life on the street and often heard parts of the conversations, from an almost god-like position on the third floor. Conversely, especially in the evenings, I was

under tight social control, as the people saw the light and could check at what time I returned home, an issue they often commented on.

My interviewing style lies between semi-structured and unstructured interviews, as it allows covering a general list of topics, while freely reacting to the development of the dialogue and providing sufficient space for the informants to stress whatever they deem important in their narrations. During the interviews, I act as a social person – showing emotions, sharing opinions and sometimes asking about topics not related to the research. Such a role is inherently contained in my understanding of an informant-researcher interaction as a partnership in which both sides enter a dialectical relationship and mutually influence each other.[1] One of the challenges I had to face was how to find the right balance between adhering to such an approach and yet keeping a good relationship with a range of people with political and social opinions that often differed from my own. Similarly, it was difficult to find a way of bringing up statements by the informants as conversation topics without compromising their anonymity. There was one instance when I failed terribly – a very old lady was telling me stories about her past, including an episode with a partisan lover during the war. To my great surprise, when I brought that up in front of her son, he was genuinely astonished, as she apparently kept it secret from her family. Unfortunately, in this case, there is not a way in which I could undo the mistake, but it can only serve as a tough lesson in field ethics.

The research is also amended by minor media analysis and work with archives and existing literature about the village. Media analysis is especially important, since the village is in the spotlight every year and locals are used to performing remembering for journalists as well as the historians. History generally plays a crucial role in my research, as memory discourse and remembering are key aspects of this work. For lack of time and capacities, I

[1] Similar approach can be found in Moller, S., – Tschuggnal, K., Welzer, H. (2010) *Opa war kein Nazi*. Praha: Argo.

skipped the archival study of historical documents[2] and turned to abundance of secondary literature about the tragedy, commemorations and socialism in the village.

As a concluding note, some of the issues connected to my access to the community should be mentioned. Within the environment of a small community, finding the informants turned out to be an easy task from day one of my research, when I did two interviews in the local pub and got several promises and recommendations for further interviews. However, within a few days' time, I realized that my initial casual behaviour among the male informants was on the borderline of being gender inappropriate. Whenever I talked to a male informant or spent more time around someone, it sparked a wave of gossips and teasing in the community, not mentioning that I received several more or less serious romantic offers[3]. Based on this, I quickly understood that conducting interviews in someone's house without the presence of at least one other female person, like I did in the very first days, could have caused unnecessary troubles with accessing other informants. At the time, I was struck by this initial mistake of mine, as I believed that I am as close as I could to doing anthropology at home – a notion that turned out to be quite untrue due to disparities between my background and the life in the village community.

[2] With the exception of the village chronicle.

[3] When a male friend anthropologist visited me by the end of my stay, he got verbally abused and almost physically attacked by the proprietors of the local pub, for whom he clearly constituted an unwanted competition around me. The incident points out to a larger discussion about gender in the field – to what extent would the male inhabitants be inclined to spend time with him like they did with me? And on the other hand, what kind of information did I really manage to access, as a part of some of my informants' narratives were probably performances aiming at impressing me?

Remembering the massacre

When I told Slovak friends about my upcoming research in Starov, for most of them, the name of the village rang the bell as the place of the war tragedy. In the final year of the Second World War, Nazi counter partisan units Edelweiss shot 84 civilians, mostly children, elders and women in the village. Consequently, they burned it down as a part of repercussions against communities, which were suspected of helping the partisan groups that were hiding in the surrounding forests (Pinkova 2012, 44). More than 100 villages in Slovakia were burnt down during the short-lived Nazi occupation that lasted from the autumn 1944 until the end of the war and the arrival of the Soviet forces. However, Starov and a neighbouring village are sad exceptions in the scale of the killings of the civilians, since in most similar cases, villagers were evacuated before the villages were burnt.

Every year, the village hosts commemoration ceremonies, which attract guests and visitors and mobilize participation of the whole community. The ceremonies were especially opulent during socialism, when partisans were glorified as saviours of the nation from the fascist occupants and carriers of communist ideals. In addition to this, many of the partisans were Soviet citizens, providing a basis for a symbolic link about the brotherhood of Czechoslovakia and Soviet Union. After the Velvet Revolution, the scale of the ceremonies was toned down, yet as the text will show, they are far from disappearing or losing their symbolic importance. Description of one such commemoration ceremony will open the chapter and serve as a source of evidence for the claims that I make.

I will further focus on discussing the way the massacre is collectively remembered especially through the commemorations of the tragedy in Starov and present it as a disjuncture in time

and space of the memory of the community, as a landmark of locals' remembering. Over the last seventy years, the massacre has been renarrated and remembered innumerable times and understanding the meanings that are attached to the commemorations is crucial to understanding the community itself. This section will therefore be devoted to such themes as belonging, identity, rupture and continuity in Starov, all manifested through the way the locals handle the memory of the dramatic WWII events. It will be shown how the locals produce the relevance of the past in their present lives through an analysis of the disjuncture between the cold, monumental narratives endorsed by the state and the apolitical, personal collective stories about human tragedy in the village. Furthermore, I will elaborate on the importance of the commemoration day and other remembering practices for what I call a performance of the community in-group and show how its identity is enforced by repetitive patterning of the massacre narratives across the village. The chapter will be concluded by a discussion about the way the locals relate to outsider's massacre narratives and how the politics of memory has changed during the post-socialist transformation. This will allow me to dwell into the tension between the marginality and centrality and an issue of recognition within the village.

Commemoration day

The weather was grim on the day of the 75th anniversary of the 'Bloody Sunday', as the day is dubbed. It was not too cold for the 21st of January, in fact the temperature was barely below zero, but the surrounding hills were covered in a thick fog, plunging the village into a dim grey light. The village was set up for the occasion - a big poster with images of the victims was attached to what usually serves as a noticeboard on the square. Several candles were lit underneath, creating an impression of a small memorial. In addition to this, all the light posts on the main road were decorated with tiny Slovak and village flags.

Figure 3 List of victims

The official program started early. The mass in the church devoted to the victims was scheduled as soon as 8 a.m., so that the church-goers would have enough time to join the beginning of the procession from the house of culture to the monument, where the wreath lying takes place. While the service was still on, first official guests and the rest of locals started gathering around the house of culture and the village square.

On their way to the house of culture, official guests temporarily deposited wreaths in the hallway and proceeded to a special VIP room for the registered, under the careful supervision of the municipal economist at the door. The guests included delegations from political parties, local governance, National History Museum, Council of Anti-Fascist Fighters, twin town Napajedla, and many other institutions. Second special room, the main performance hall, was reserved for the military band. Others would hang around, chat and take bites from the pastries prepared on the tables, keeping their voices low in an attempt to observe the solemn atmosphere of the commemoration. The pastries were baked by the volunteers from the community as a new addition to the event and turned out to be immensely popular among the visitors. To keep the guests warm in the cold morning, everybody received a cup of hot tea, served with an optional shot of rum offered by friendly volunteers.

Figure 4 Official guests arriving

Many guests used the spare time before the ceremony to take a peek into the memory room on the second floor and check the small exhibition about the tragedy. The room has remained more or less unchanged for decades. It includes pictures of the victims, information about the massacre as well as the pieces from the aftermath of the tragedy such as excerpts from the trial with the perpetrators, images of the rebuilt village and the various honours that the community received for its heroism and bravery. The only substantial addition to the inventory is a new screen, where two socialist films about the tragedy (Bloody Sunday and Indomitable Valley) can be watched. On the day of the commemorations, the room was freezing cold and it was clear that it is rarely used besides this event, despite the extensive capacity of seats for lectures that used to take place in the socialist past.

When it was about the time for the procession to start, it turned out that two of the district representatives that announced arrival still had not reached the village, which effectively delayed the ceremony. By then, the whole village gathered around and waited, with many

people not knowing what caused the shift in program and others grumbling about the politicians' lack of respect for the commemorations. This year, none of the top politicians showed up for the commemorations despite the fact that it was 75th anniversary and the villagers therefore expected appearance of someone from the government. A few minutes after the scheduled time and after the arrival of the district delegates, the procession finally moved from the house of culture. As we walked through the village, monumental brass music roared from the municipal speakers, giving weight to the slow movement of the group and attracting even more onlookers, especially among the elders.

Figure 5 Beginning of the procession

Upon reaching our destination at the monument, the military musicians mustered on the side started playing and the honorary guards stood to attention, while the audience dispersed around the monument. After the wreath lying ceremony performed by the guests, honoraries and some of the locals, the national anthem was played and a choir from a nearby town sang a 19th century nationalist song 'Who blazes for truth'. A poem 'Bloody morning' was recited, telling a story of '*human hyenas'*:

"*…traditions, countryside/ We don't care! /Let's burn down the village! / We don't care! / Toddlers, elders.../ We don't care!...*"

The recitation was followed by short addresses of the guests ordered based on protocol, followed by the mayor, local chair of the Council of Anti-fascist Fighters and a leftist intellectual Chmelar, who requested a slot to speak. The speeches revolved around the themes of victimhood, heroism, freedom, democracy, hatred and tolerance. To give a few examples, one of the MPs reminded the onlookers that

"*freedom and democracy come at a substantial price and in case someone wants to take it away from us, we must be prepared to defend it even by spilling our own blood.*"[4]

The regional representative of the Council of Anti-Fascist Fighters said that he has always viewed partisans as heroes and "*their heroism and their important role in battling the Nazi Germany should never be questioned, no matter what some might say*."

Chmelar thanked the victims, thanked the inhabitants for persistence and zeal with which they renewed their homes. He further warned against war and fascism, as they are not "*only a matter of the past and freedom has to be defended in all times*" and remarked that "*an enemy can have multiple faces and sometimes even carry a 'flag of freedom*'", just like we see in case of the current war[5]. His later comment that politicians only remember the tragedy before the elections was met with cheering from the crowd.

[4] Direct speeches from the commemoration are paraphrases of the original quotes, as reconstructed from my fieldnotes.
[5] He clearly hinted that he meant Ukraine, although he never said it openly.

Figure 6 Wreath-lying ceremony

As opposed to guests' proclamations of great ideas and lessons to take from the tragedy, the mayor of Starov merely summarized the events of the tragic day, said that the villagers "*did not want war and yet had to die*" and wished that "*we would never have to live through the horrors of war, like our natives did*."

By the end of the speeches, the audience was visibly tired of standing in the cold and several people started fidgeting or jumping a little to warm themselves up. Shortly afterwards, the ceremony ended with two more songs by the choir and one more by the military band. Some of the onlookers moved with the guests to a neighbouring village for the second part of the ceremonies that was about to commence soon. Meanwhile, most of the villagers chatted a little before slowly returning to their homes to prepare Sunday lunch. In some cases,

mainly male inhabitants brightened up their journey with a stop in a local pub and got a shot of palyinka with their neighbours, discussing the ceremony. The commemorations that they had been through so many times before were over for this year.

Understanding the commemoration and its narratives

Monumentality and intimacy

The description of the split between the rhetoric of the outside guests and the mayor during the ceremony later turned out to be symptomatic for the nature of remembering within the community. As some readers might have noticed, while the outsiders at the ceremony linked the massacre and the destruction to a variety of abstract ideals, the mayor kept his speech down to earth and focused on the events that were suffered through by the "*innocent victims, whose only mistake was that they were in the wrong place at the wrong time*". The choice of the poem that was recited earlier also reflected this approach, as it emphasized the guilt of the individual perpetrators, contextualizing the events as a story of human evil. The analysis of this disjuncture enables me to retrace the central meanings and metaphors that are used within the community to understand the massacre, as opposed to the great narratives endorsed by the state.

The tendency to keep the narrative of the tragedy and its morals at an everyday level could also be traced in narratives of my informants. In most of the interviews, the event itself is presented as a human loss of ‚simple people' who were touched by the war, devoid of ideological background and agency. Every narration about the massacre started with an imagery of a poor, secluded village that was not directly touched by the war and its inhabitants, who worked hard and did not engage in politics. Afterwards a short intermezzo about different life stories with a variety of political choices and war histories was

introduced, only to be replaced by the unified narrative about helpless victims, who did nothing to deserve to die.

Whenever I tried to dig for any politically charged lessons that the informants might take from the events, the answers never included themes of heroism or freedom that the outsiders like to stress. They would be closer to what a young pub owner told me:

> "*It gives you the sense of empathy. You turn on the TV, see what's happening in Ukraine. Can you imagine, they kill your mum, your dad, your children… No such things should happen in the 21st century, nobody should be put through it.*"

She again focused on her position as a mother, the personal aspects of the losses and their tangibility through the commemorations of the Starov massacre. In her account, the memory of the tragedy can represent a stretch of empathy and solidarity from within a group towards the larger society – however, the lesson remains firmly grounded in the personal losses of the individual lives.

As opposed to this, the narratives produced by the state and the outsiders always link the memory of the tragedy to grand metaphors sustained through the official memory narratives. They speak of heroism of the partisans and villagers alike, turning the tragedy into a scene in national history to take a lesson from. This is also demonstrated through the language of the official rhetoric – e.g. the village chronicle has an entry from 1963 describing the commemorations: "*The valley listened to gun salute to the memory of the heroes!*" As a counterpoint to motifs of heroism, the Nazi soldiers in the story are represented as agents of the occupants, who correspond to an archetypal image of enemy that wants to steal the nation's freedom. As one of the speakers said, the enemy can have a multitude of faces and the nation should therefore always be on guard to protect its perpetually endangered freedom, even at the cost of blood. In case of such narratives,

the personal stories of individual villagers do not play a central role; they solely amend and underline the morals that stand high above the actual tragedy in Starov. The village is used as a mere symbol for the national society, which suffered, but eventually emerged as victorious and proud (and in case of narratives during socialism, also ready to build a new society for a new man).

This is especially apparent from the sequence of panels in the memory room, created during the socialism. The exhibition opens up with information about the political consciousness in the village and the first communist sympathizers before the war and tells about the way inhabitants welcomed partisans and "*helped them in every possible way*" in their efforts. Afterwards, information about the tragedy itself is presented, followed by a panel featuring other Nazi crimes in Czechoslovakia; a theme that is rarely touched on in the locals' narratives. In the next panel, the visitors learn about the trial with the members of the Nazi unit. It features information about their confessions, regrets and harsh punishments from the court. Finally, the small exhibition ends with pictures of the newly rebuilt village and this sentence:

"*On the blood-soaked soil, new Starov was built; it is a place where the citizens work to make the village thrive and participate in building our socialist homeland and its peace-making endeavour*."

Such an ending, reminiscent of living happily ever after only emphasized how the memory room exhibition is constructed in a fairy tale style manner. The state demonstrates its ideological presence before and after the massacre, as a guarantor of justice and a peaceful socialist present and future. Furthermore, by including images and information about other Nazi crimes, the Starov events cease to be an isolated tragedy, but get interconnected with the greater fate of the whole country. Through such framing, the visitors of the exhibition learn about the national struggle and the role of the paternalist state that ensures happy

endings – a kind of story that is nearly impossible to find in the narratives of the local informants.

The disjuncture between the inhabitants' emphasis on the lack of agency of the villagers during the WWII events, the kind of morals that they see in the tragedy and the grand narratives that are built up by the outsider entities could be conceptualized with a help of Michael Herzfeld's contrast (1991) between the social and the monumental time. Using his line of thought, it could be said that in a modern nation state, the tragedy does not only belong to the people in Starov, but becomes a part of the monumental conception of a national history. In the monumental time frame, otherwise familiar events are presented as a universal destiny, reduced into basic categories that fit the greater national narratives. On the other hand, the social time of the people recognizes the uncertainty and chance that are always present in the everyday social experience and resists the imposition of the orderly structure that the monumental time attempts to introduce (Herzfeld 1991, 5-14).

In Herzfeld's example, the villagers in Crete resisted the monumental time as a part of their opposition to bureaucratic attempts to control the life of the community. In Starov, such sentiments are rare. In fact, people commenting on the commemoration ceremony seemed to be flattered by the praise they heard about the ancestors and the village. This gives rise to a question what keeps the locals from internalizing a role of a heroic village that suffered for freedom of (Czecho) Slovakia.

A possible explanation revealed itself after spending more time in the field and listening to hours of the individual family stories. The narratives included scenes with both partisan ancestors and the ones, who supported the Slovak state and faced repercussions from the partisan fighters – often the two would be found within the same family, as the people intermarried over time. I heard stories of a man, whose father was executed by the partisans solely for being a member of the governing party. I talked to a woman, 16 at the time, who

returned to the village immediately after it was burnt down and stayed with the partisans until the end of the war, living through a tragic *For Whom the Bell Tolls*- style romance.

Based on such deep divisions running in family histories, the reason behind under-communication of the agency as well as behind the raw descriptions and sober evaluations of the tragedy becomes clearer. After more than seventy years, taking on an official language would pointlessly draw divisions within the community, as not all families and inhabitants could participate in an imagery of a heroic village. Not everyone supported the partisan movement and the multiplicity of stories surrounding the prequel and the aftermath of the tragedy have therefore been bracketed out and toned down as myths of the old days. Understanding this sheds new light on the widespread emphasis on the human aspect of the suffering on the day of the massacre. By retelling the raw events, devoid of ideological setting, the inhabitants more or less willingly contribute to reinforcement of the identity of the in-group, or at least refrain from eroding it. Every person in the village was affected, regardless of their actions before or after the tragedy. In this manner, the commemoration binds the inhabitants together and builds up the solidarity that is especially enacted on the commemoration day.

The way the commemorative practices point towards cohesion within the group could also be understood through Paxson's notions of verticality and horizontality within the memory landscape (Paxson 2005, 22 -24). Drawing on works of Anderson and Turner, she explains how the vertical journeys within the social memory reach upwards in rank, sometimes towards the sacred. They elevate the social status of the individuals and the group, just like the narratives of heroism, freedom and fight for better future endorsed by the outsiders invoke imageries of a great nation through the official remembering of the Starov events.

On the other hand, horizontal journeys aim towards "*solidarity of equals*" and perpetuate radically democratic notions that can be shared by anyone. The villagers' interpretations

of the events could be aligned with such horizontal journeys, emanating a sense of belonging within a village and the society. The explicitly unromanticized way in which the memory of the massacre is handled provides an open basis of the group identity that is fluid enough to accommodate a variety of people, regardless of their actions, actions of their ancestors or their political affiliations. When an elderly Gizka told me that people from Starov remember and will remember, because the tragedy is '*ours*', she confidently included the whole community. It is exactly through framing the remembrance narratives in a way that allows everyone's participation that the commemorations provide a major forum of commonality within the village, the forum through which 'us' is produced.

Commemoration as a performance of the in-group and the narrative patterns

The success of such an approach shows itself in the status of the commemoration day in the community. If various village events and festivities during the calendar year might have problem with volunteers or the audience, the official commemorations are an uncontested must-go for everyone. People offer their help, bake the cakes, guide the guests and most importantly, participate in the wreath lying ceremony. In fact, the commemoration day shows all signs of a total social ritual; one that has sufficient power to solidify shared narratives through its annual repetition and provides a well-rehearsed re-establishment of the sense of community through paying tribute to the victims. This is also why it is so crucial that the ritual is framed in a way that is accessible to everyone. It is through full participation that the ceremony keeps its power and relevance to the group, as the commemoration day is the very place, where the production of 'us' gets affirmed and manifested once per year. Paxson (2005, 269-270) likens such commemorations to "*regularly revisited paths*" that not only reflect how we see ourselves, but also serve as marks in the yearly cycle that signify the time when things are set right for the rest of the year. Similarly, in How Societies

Remember, Connerton (1989, 70-71) elaborates on the importance of the rituals and ceremonies in sustenance of the social memory. He claims that the master memory narratives that are enacted, conveyed and sustained through the rituals, reappropriate the identity of the community. Indeed, the commemoration day in Starov has all the symbolic powers described here. Renata, who moved to Starov from the city with her husband, after they decided to shift the usage of his old family house from a holiday destination to an actual home, offered vivid descriptions of the commemoration day's centrality in the community life:

> *The village still lives with the past. Over the year, the commemoration day is where people meet, the young, the old, everybody attends, no shame, no excuses. Because almost every family was affected.*"

The issue of 'affectedness' that Renata brought up is crucial in the local understanding of the events and their commemorations. Monika, a leader of the local choir elaborated the same theme by saying that people 'obviously' participate, since it is just as if they went to visit the graves of their families at the cemetery. It should be noted that the monument itself is not a grave, as victims of the massacre are buried either at a cemetery or in a mass grave elsewhere in the village. The ceremony during the commemoration day therefore has a largely symbolic character, remembering the fate of all the victims at once and linking the events to the village community as a group. As opposed to this, individual graves of the victims are only visited and taken care of by direct descendants and families. Interestingly, the big split between the state and the villagers' takes on memory that I outlined earlier is thus echoed on a lower level of practice, as inhabitants divide their commemoration activities between keeping the intimate memory of their ancestors as a private family matter and linking their deaths to deaths of other neighbours and community members during the commemoration day. The notable feature of this division is that

the importance of the intimate connections to the dead within the families are slowly fading away, as it is more and more difficult for younger people to directly relate to their predecessors, who died so long ago. It is the older inhabitants, who still remember the victims or are able to draw immediate associations to their lives that encourage this type of emotional memory links. On the other hand, the commemoration practices on the community level seem to be as strong as ever, as if with gradual erosion of the direct connection to the dead, the symbolic one was taking over.

Returning to the quote of Renata, the mentioned 'affected ones' discourse is present as an umbrella concept for both types of commemorations and tightly relates to them. It is through this trope that the memory of the massacre is presented as something private to the community, regardless of the type of intimacy. In their speeches, informants always operated with the issue of affectedness as with a notion that possesses an inner force to draw the boundary between us and them. The 'affected ones', who keep the memory of the events as a part of family histories are considered to be the owners of the story, the ones who actually participate in the narratives. To a large extent, the group overlaps with the family bonds to the people, who were touched by the events. In other words, direct family links to the victims must be invoked in order to be allowed to participate in the symbolic ownership of the narrative. In this manner, the community firmly ties itself to the legacy of the ancestors, fixed at a particular moment in time. Paxson concluded her account of the Victory Day in a Russian village by noting that the power of the day is "*fuelled by deeper powers of the dead*" (Paxson 2005, 329). One could say the same about the commemorations Starov, where the in-group is reaffirmed through the sanguine solidarity of the 'affected ones' in the past and the present. This way of anchoring the core of the community to the tragedy is especially important vis-à-vis current transformation of the village and an arrival of holiday house owners. Through excluding them from

the 'affected ones' performance, the community reasserts its boundaries and continuity amidst the changes.

Definition of the circle of the in-group memory carriers has an immense significance for the identity of the community. When I talked to inhabitants in the village, I realized that even though the tragedy is not a topic of everyday conversations, its intimate knowledge almost goes without saying. Even teenagers can retell the events and locate them with the same precision as older inhabitants. In one of her works, Francesca Cappelletto (2003) provides an account of narrative practices linked to WWII massacres in two villages in Tuscany, perpetuated by the German troops. She shows how the rupture created by Nazi violence was overcome by numerous retellings of the story, re-establishing the sense of continuity (Cappelletto 2003, 257). In Starov, this process takes place within individual families, where the long-term listeners eventually start accessing and using the story as if they lived through it themselves. This makes them equipped to renarrate the events further and engage with the outsiders.

The importance of the families for the continuity of the remembering is enhanced by the fact that there are almost none influential village institutions that could serve this purpose. The nearest school is about ten kilometres away, the church community lacks sufficient outreach and the only functioning clubs in the village are the elders' club and the choir. The accessible meeting and sharing opportunities are thus reduced to a few village events (village ball, barbecue, may-pole building etc.), occasional meetings in the public space and the local pub, that people only start visiting long after they already acquired the more or less thorough knowledge of the tragedy narratives during their younger years in their families.

When listening to individual retellings of the story across generations, I was stunned by the strength of the memory patterning that was passed on in this manner. The narratives bore almost striking similarities, as their numerous repetitions over the decades clearly unified and

polished the divergent versions of the event. Connerton (1989) conceptualized importance of such repetitions. He claims that the cumulative effect they achieve stands behind our cultural habits, as our identities arise exactly from the fact that our daily frameworks as well as commemorations are never for the first time. In other words, when my informants remembered, they did not construct anything new; instead they reproduced the patterned information that already belonged to their identity, to the shared social memory of their community. In case of the Starov massacre narratives, such patterning showed itself in the way informants always followed the four-point framework as well as in what was sometimes word-for-word repetition of the segments of the story.

Opening part of the narratives always includes images of a poor village and hard-working, simple people, who did not and due to their relative seclusion could not participate in political life. In the stories, villagers, untouched by on-going war, only care about their small lots, domestic animals and try to get by.

Second stage of the story featured arrival of the partisans, the Nazi occupation and their respective behaviour towards the villagers, who were caught in the middle of the two military groups. This is also the least isomorphic part of the narrative, as informants added their own family memories, myths and rumours about the life with the partisans and direct causes of the Nazi decision to burn down the village. However, it is crucial to note that the stories of active villagers are kept completely separated from the retellings of the tragedy itself, as if the village past was comprised of the two dimensions that never overlap. Many of these stories included episodes with criminal acts of the partisans or their lack of consideration for the daily lives of the civilians.

Interestingly, such an acknowledgment for multiplicity of lenses for evaluation of this period was often presented as a vernacular, semi-secret knowledge. Jan, who remembers the war years as a boy said to me when we first met:

"*Sometimes it's better to be quiet. Anyway, there are many truths. It was wartime. What can you say. One side did wrongs and the other one too*."

Keeping the negative stories about the partisans under the cover can be attributed to forty years of socialism in Slovakia. Throughout the duration of the regime, partisans were glorified as heroes and the state derived a large portion of its legitimacy from their fight against the 'fascist' enemy. As one of the inhabitants Peter told me, he got into troubles during his military training in the 1960s simply for saying that partisans used to steal civilian food, a well-documented and well-remembered issue.

The multiplicity of memory that surfaces here provides another counterweight to the monumental state-owned stories, as it reflects the inherent ambivalence and uncertainty of the past. Inhabitants have not adopted the streamlined versions of national history that were pushed through by the regime and to a lesser extent, by democratic governments. They have kept the memory of the ambivalence, yet handled it in a way that does not cause harm to the solidarity within the community.

The third stage of the narratives comprises the massacre itself. All inhabitants can retell the events of the day in order, situate them in the space of the village and provide the listener with vivid visual descriptions. This part of the story is absolutely uncontested and gets reproduced in an unchanged way, with emphasis on the innocence of the victims and the bestiality of the perpetrators. This segment also works as a great equalizer, overcoming the differences mentioned in stage two and linking the narrative back to the opening image of simple, depoliticized people.

The last stage of the stories is devoted to a description of the aftermath of the tragedy – an evacuation of the survivors, return to the village and its renewal. The act of building

the new houses after the war is also the first moment, when the survivors in the narratives assume their agency and actively shape their lives.

The general observance of this narrative structure enhances its power within the community, as it provides it with a status of a canonized story, albeit one that allows for a certain level of heterogeneity. Through acceptance of its schema and its successful retellings, the informants reaffirm their belonging to the social circle of Starov natives, as if by reciting words of a magic spell.

Relating to outsiders' narratives

When analysing the stories of her informants, Cappelletto identified a persisting ambivalence found in the outsider-insider dynamic stemming from the tension between the desire to keep the story intimate, 'only theirs' and a hope for public recognition and reaching out towards history (Cappelletto 2003, 247). She shows how the informants view the memory as their private property that can be fully communicated only within the in-group and frown upon any intrusions from the society or the political world. On the other hand, they appreciate appearances of politicians at their events (ibid).

In case of Starov, this ambiguity has manifested itself in villagers' attitudes towards politicians, officials, outsider guests and in case of a daily life of the community, in respect to the holiday house owners. The locals are open to sharing the memory and as I have noted earlier, they do not protest against interpretations of the tragedy that diverge from their own. In addition to this, they are always pleased when someone shows interest in the WWII events and gives the village credit for the past. However, in the interviews, I identified a strong theme of discontent with people, especially politicians, who do come, but do not commemorate the massacre 'sincerely'. Marcel was among the ones, who voiced their frustration with lack of top politicians' presence at this year's anniversary:

"*Come to check the commemoration day next year. Everyone will be there, just before the elections. And then nothing for four years. Some say it would be better to stop inviting them if they don't come for the right reasons*."

The motif of respect for the commemoration and the victims, and disapproval of the instrumentalizing tendencies of some of the actors was also present in villagers' accounts of socialism. Every year, the regime orchestrated opulent ceremonies that were officially called celebrations – reminding everyone of a bright socialist present. As I presented earlier in the case of the outline of the memory room, the memory of the tragedy was used by the regime mostly as a grand parable of a nation suffering through the hardships only to be able to participate in building a socialist utopia after the war ended. The memory politics of the communist party openly attempted to colonize the past in order to support the legitimacy and the feeling of inevitability of the regime (Watson 1994, 1-3). The commemoration day was a perfect time to parade its achievements – the official program was rich and included for example a 15-kilometer march from a nearby town, ski competition, a small fair at the village square (luring people from the surroundings with then-exotic items such as bananas and peanuts) and obligatory presence of students and workers from nearby factories. It was the day, when the village was elevated from its marginal position on the geographic and power map right to the centre of the state and nation's attention, under a careful supervision of the party.

Today, informants denounced what they remember as a socialist 'circus'. The commemoration day has changed a lot over the years. First of all, this is due to the fact that ever since the Velvet revolution, the tone of the official memory politics discourse has been altered. Partisans, resistance against Nazis and fight for freedom are still important themes of the national memory, however, the ideological ethos of the partisan fighters is gone, together with the story about achieving better future. Especially in the 1990s,

the official memory was dominated by strong anti-communist discourse, leading to a disappearance of the past aura of socialist heroism. Because of this, the commemorations became more solemn, devoid of vitality stemming from celebrations of the merry present. Additionally, the events have also shifted towards a more intimate atmosphere, since "*finally it is limited to those, who really want to come*" and people do not show up to do the shopping, as the pub owner remarked. This is caused by the fact that the new governments do not organize obligatory pilgrimages neither to the ceremonies nor to the memory room any longer – see my observation of an ice-cold memory room on the commemoration day. Despite smaller attendance, the locals view the smaller ceremony as a more dignified way to commemorate the tragedy, as it symbolically corresponds to the down-to-earth manner in which they narrate its memory. Another issue that adds to the feeling of the commemoration ownership is that the burden of organizing the commemoration day rests on the village community. If before, the commemoration program as well as the addresses of the speakers were planned by the party and somehow detached from the local commemoration practice, now, the program and its execution is fully in the hands of the villagers.

In such a setting, the centrality that the village gains during this one special day in a year becomes a much more intimate matter than it used to be. It is the day of the most important identity-building ritual, yet the community wishes to share the process with the wider society and gain its recognition. Just like during socialism, locals do not deeply care about the content of the outsiders' speeches. However, they do expect them to play by the rules that they set and show respect for their ceremonies. In the past, it was the party itself that chose the frame of the commemoration day, now, the village commemorates on its own terms – having the pastry and the tea or the military band at the ceremony was all within inhabitants' decision-making powers. The engagement of the locals adds weight to the ritual and draws it

closer to the core performance of the commonality in the village. Due to this close connection between the commemoration day events and the community, the pre-election visits of the politicians as well as late arrivals stick out as particularly arrogant and disrespectful. They infringe on the very day when the in-group of the community is reinstated and asks for recognition from the outside - in what could be understood the once in a year spotlight of the public discourse, on the day, when villagers do not want to be left on the periphery.

Conclusion

This chapter opened with a description of one such commemoration day. I used it to demonstrate that the way in which the locals handle the past of their village has a profound impact on the present of the community. It is through the ceremonies that one can easily identify diverging narratives of the villagers and the state and the themes that either party chooses to stress. While the outsiders often use the tragic events as a symbolic tool to support their grand rhetoric that reaches towards the national community, the locals opt to keep their version of the story on the personal, intimate level. By downplaying the agency of the villagers and ideological dimensions of the events, they create an open space for shared remembering among the locals, who can claim direct affectedness by the massacre.

The remembering practice itself is sustained through transmission within the families, which have the role of the most important institution that prepares their members for involvement in the memory discourse. I showed how the individual narratives follow a repetitive patterning, turning the stories into universal models that enhance and reaffirm group solidarity. The chapter was concluded by an analysis of the way the locals handle the outsiders' engagement in the commemoration practices and how the politics of memory has evolved in Slovakia.

The manner in which people relate to the WWII massacre determines the group boundaries in the village. The inhabitants frame this major disjuncture in the memory landscape in a way that has the power to shape the very basis of the individual identities of the villagers and demarcate the in-group circle of the community. However, if the commemoration of the tragedy provided us with a picture of what is the community, its membership, and relations to the outsiders, the following chapter on the way I which socialism is remembered and discussed will tell more about what the inner fabric of the community is.

Images of post-socialist socialism

"*The village is 100 percent different now*." Jitka

The second major landmark that kept surfacing over and over in the interviews was the identification of the Velvet revolution as the split in the lives of the village. The fall of the authoritarian regime represents a clear juncture, a threshold in the remembering terrain that frames the dominant tropes of 'before' narratives. Almost everything in the village is measured through the lens of this 'before' – when talking about the present, the informants spontaneously come with comparisons between nowadays and the imaginary socialist past.

It is exactly through such contrasts that people create space for new meanings that resonate in the present (Berdahl 2010, 202). Paxson likens this kind of handling of the past to a ruler, by which the charmless present is measured by (Paxson 2005, 118). In case of Starov, the ruler is a symbolic terrain filled with tender memories of the gone pre-revolutionary days. To use Paxson's term, when narrating socialism, the villagers often wander away to what might be called a radiant past; a golden era when the grass was greener and people lived in harmony. Features of such radiance are manifested through comparisons to the present of the village, as it is through contrasts that the villagers highlight topics of salience.

In this section, I will elaborate on how such images of long-gone blissful days are presented, what features are stressed and discuss how to understand inhabitants' metaphors as an integral part of the community-sustaining process. I will analyze the informants' narratives about the sociability and solidarity as presented through such recurring themes as shared labour, mutual assistance, organization of the village events and employment opportunities. The main argument of the chapter is that the pervasive post-socialist nostalgia in the village tells us about the way the inhabitants imagine what a good society, a community and a good

citizen look like and how the images of the past are used as a program ideal for their uncertain future.

The myth of free time

The themes of sociability and a feel of tightly knit community permeate the narratives about leisure and consumption during socialism. Locals describe how before the revolution, people would willingly help each other with work on the fields or assist in house constructions for free – just for food and drink and an assumed reciprocity of such favours. Peter, a hard-working middle-aged man, who splits his time between living and working in a nearby town and taking care of his old mother and their parental house recalls how such shared work in their free time had almost a total character, as there was "*no way you wouldn't show up to help*". The feeling of togetherness and the benefits of being in a collective, with people happily chatting while working, were a sufficient reward. On the other hand, Peter spoke about how nowadays, nobody would come and help in the same way. He described that people expect money for their time and even when you pay a little to the village unemployed to do an odd job, their work is sloppy, if they do it at all.

Just like so many in the village, Peter juxtaposed the ethos of shared labour, signified by reciprocal relationships and camaraderie that accompanied it, to the growing atomization within the village community. The individualization is also linked to a pervasion of a monetary practice into the spheres of life, where symbolic exchanges (that are deemed morally superior in the interviews) used to rule.

The notion of shared work during what informants call free time was very strong in the narratives. Before continuing any further, it should be noted that a free time or leisure organization was an inherent part of the socialist structures. Crowley and Reid discuss how in Marxism, the split between work and leisure should ideally disappear over time, as

the workers should be freed from alienation and take pleasure in whatever they do. In practice, this meant that the state used leisure time of the citizens as an opportunity to not only enhance ideologically correct self-development of the individuals, but also to officially and unofficially engage the immense pool of free labour in a range of semi-obligatory tasks that addressed the shortcomings of the state and the planned economy (Crawley, Reid 2010, 30 -34).

In connection to that, it comes as no surprise that another issue that kept reappearing in the narratives was mourning after the cultivation of the surrounding meadows and fields in the 'free time' of the villagers, echoing the aforementioned state-imposed structures. The village is situated in a hilly area with soils that used to be full of volcanic rocks, and throughout the year, the weather is too cold to grow most crops. The unfavourable conditions for agriculture were reflected also in the fact that the regime decided against establishing a special cooperative and left majority of the lots in private ownership of the inhabitants. Despite the low yields, locals used to keep the limited subsistence agriculture alive by mowing the grass on the fields and planting potatoes and vegetables all around the village. Farming was a welcome addition for families, who looked for ways to improve their meager family budgets and gain goods that could be used for exchange for other commodities. Needless to note, it was also tacitly welcome by the state that benefited from these private extensions of the otherwise insufficient supply chain. However, the informants never mention free time work as a necessity - instead the emphasis of their remembering lies on how most of the work was done in a group, moving from one lot to another before finishing the day with good food and drinks that were provided by the beneficiaries.

Nowadays, people only use small lots right next to their houses and leave the land around the village lying fallow. The reasons are simple – the yields do not make up to the amount of hard work and villagers claim that they do not have as much time as they used to, as

the two-shift system of factory work, providing free afternoons to the workers, was largely dismantled. This leaves my informants in an ambiguous, almost schizophrenic position, as the traditional village work ethics[6] and morality of inhabiting a land encourages them to cultivate the lots, but the relative material and social benefit of bigger-scale farming rapidly fell after the transformation. The sociality of the work is gone and the crops are no longer suitable for (barely existent) village exchange economy – leaving the villagers with warm memories of the past, when "*things were done the way they should be*", as Paula, a former kindergarten teacher told me.

Similarly, speaking about the cultural life of the village sparks a wave of nostalgic remembering. The social life of the radiant past was signified by numerous events and gatherings that the inhabitants used to organize by themselves. The events were often subsumed under one of the chapters of the state-supported organizations such as the Youth Association, the Firefighters, the Women Association and many other that operated within the village. Such associations were established to foster socialist values and practices and organize the free labour hidden behind proclamations of volunteering as well as self-improvement programs that were mentioned earlier. While some of the people I spoke to criticized a semi-forced nature of participation in such activities, good memories pervade, setting the enhanced sociability as an ideal model of village life.

> "*We would just meet up and agree to do something that evening – a barbecue, board games, anything. And we used to go for common brigades, earn money and buy things together or go for trips. You wouldn't believe, (note: as voluntary firefighters) we purchased a radio for cultural centre… The village buzzed, not like now, you walk around and see nobody out*."

[6] The traditional work ethics happens to overlap with socialist ideals – a very common issue that the state used to benefit from and sustain.

The quote is from Jana and Ondrej, a middle-aged couple living on a small hill in the village, for whom the memory of socialist sociability clearly overlaps with memories of their happy youth. In all similar accounts, informants described how they would spend all their time socializing this way, never questioning or doubting their participation. Since all free time activities were encouraged by the state, in certain respect, locals' stories support an old observation of Walter Benjamin, who famously remarked that the Soviets have abolished private life, making an everyday life a public matter (Benjamin 2005, 30).

Schevchenko and Nadkarni observed how their Russian informants never took this into account and always presented everyday life in an apolitical way, discussing their free time activities, private and material concerns as if they were secluded from the state (Schevchenko, Nadkarni 2015, 83). This was no different in memories of my informants, which raises an issue of an inherent success of socialist governments in persuading the citizens that their 'free time' activities are really predominantly their private matter. Whenever I asked about the ideological aspect of the leisure and tried to problematize their radiant accounts of socializing, informants waved it down saying that the party left them alone as long as they were good workers and occasionally performed some obligatory rituals such as demonstrating with the flags during political holidays. They grinned when talking about the creative ways they were inventing in order to minimize their presence at such events or just remarked that they did not really care, as the official ceremonies also meant having a rest of the day off or simply a good opportunity for subsequent get-togethers for drinks and meals.

Figure 7 Soviet star at the balcony of house of culture

The issue of resistance within the symbolic landscape of the happy socialist times thus curiously does not function as a disruption of the narrative – on the contrary, it strengthens the notions of the sociability and importance of tight social relations that people miss so much in today's Starov. Yurchak (2006, 115) has written extensively on how during socialism, new meanings have been creatively produced through unanchoring the content of the fixed forms that had to be kept intact. This process was especially important when taking place within the community, so that the newly created symbols were shared by the participants. In their accounts, the state thus might have permeated the everyday life, but it could have never gained full control of their lives. In the informants' narratives, the calmness of the late authoritarianism in Czechoslovakia was further enhanced by emphasis on the positioning of the village outside the centres of power, as it granted a certain level of seclusion and homeliness even in the relationship with the bureaucracy.

In addition to that, it should be noted that by the seventies and eighties, the communist party stopped trying whatsoever to claim the souls of the citizens and demanded only occasional performances of allegiance while keeping the status quo. Top communist leader Husak summarized the post 1968' policy of the party: "*Normal person wants to live quietly… this party wants to safeguard a quiet life*" (quoted in Sayer 2013, 30). Such an approach let to a paradoxical situation endorsed by the state that did everything it took to keep its inhabitants pacified – to use Verdery's term, etatization of time has not ceased, it has just transformed itself. The primary goal of self-improvement thus gave way to the task of keeping the citizens quiet and occupied – whether in a collective or individual way. Even though it is nearly impossible to disentangle the temporal frames of my informants' remembering of socialism, I can only speculate that their happy memories of village sociability in clubs predominantly come from this late era. It was the time, when more negotiation as described by Yurchak was possible and the state seemed to have succeeded in persuading its citizens that their lives acquired a genuinely private dimension.

We all stood in the line

Another salient feature of the images of social harmony in Starov is their strong egalitarian aspect, with people socializing as equals – a feature that was allegedly broken down by increased social stratification after the fall of socialism. If before, everyone earned more or less the same, shared the working hours and the economic problems, positions of inhabitants vary these days. The strength of the shared sociality and equality symbols in the past can be demonstrated on Jana's description of the queue, an often-ridiculed institution ushered in by the socialist economy of scarcity.

> "*I queued for 3-4 hours to buy a Christmas gift. You'd queue for oranges, for everything. I waited for three hours to get Lego for kids. But it was not a problem, since we all stood in the line!*"

There is no doubt that the queue served as an important sociability forum. Through queues, barter and favours, a strong notion of a village solidarity and shared values were often demonstrated and strengthened (Crowley 2002, 15) (Creed 2002, 63). However, in Jana's memory, the meaning of the queue is not primarily linked to establishing social capital – instead, it is a radically democratic symbol of the past days. She described how everyone queued, without exceptions. In addition to this, barter and favour system that arose due to shortages was recounted as if it only strengthened cooperation and sharing among the villagers. It is true that in small communities, the obligation to share, almost up to the point that evens out social differences, is a part of the egalitarian morality that was often present in informants' accounts. Jana and Peter proudly talked about '*not having much, but living well'* in the past, linking the ethical dimension of their lives to succeeding in getting by in the times when goods and services were often scarce. Needless to stress, '*living well*' in these accounts also translates as living in close connection with other members of the community.

Similar case was described by Herzfeld (1991, 161), who showed how villagers in his case juxtaposed the feeling of moral superiority stemming from the shared poverty in the past to what they perceive as present unsatisfactory social engagement from the wealthier members of the community. According to the persistent morality in the village, if someone accumulates wealth, it is her obligation to contribute more for the common good. If this rule is broken, the social differentiation automatically loses a part of its legitimacy. In Starov, this is an inherent part of the exclamations that '*everybody only cares about themselves now'* that I kept hearing over and over again, signaling the pervasive feeling of abandonment

of the past sharing practices amid increasing individualism. People lament about the fall of sociability among the villagers and discuss the ruined present in the village through stories about a decline of solidarity and omnipresent gossips and envy within the community ("*They are even envious of someone's job*!") that replaced the past egalitarianism and commonality.

What Jana and Peter do not talk about when remembering the queues and barter during socialism is that in reality, life was far from being egalitarian. Everybody might have stood in the queue, but at the end, people with stronger and more extensive connections got better or harder-to-reach goods. In fact, elaborate clientelist structures that citizens had to navigate around are one of the defining features of socialism (see e.g. Berdahl 1999, Watson 1994). Such structures were almost always presented as personal connections and favours, just like in aforementioned cases of shared work that neighbours did 'for free'. In an economy of shortage, the personal connections were often much more valuable type of capital than the money itself and they were competed for accordingly.[7] The democratic images that my informants painted when recalling socialism are thus again clearly idealized memories of the regime.

Post-November economies

As I mentioned before, in all the interviews the Velvet Revolution was always cited as a specific moment in time when the luminous days abruptly ended. Interestingly, when informants spoke about the regime change, they usually interlinked it with economic and political transformation, not the social one. This could be explained by the rapid changes introduced to the economy right after 1989 and the subsequent market shock that the industry in the valley never recovered from, while it took a bit longer to change the patterns of social

[7] In Ilf and Petrov's novel The Little Golden Calf (1931), the main character gets rich, but soon realizes that he cannot lead a lavish lifestyle, as there is little to buy in the Soviet Union. Living in socialist Czechoslovakia without connections would likely look the same.

conduct. Robert, a factory worker, offered his take on the revolutionary days in Czechoslovakia:

> "*I was so happy I almost jumped out of the window... But now after the years, gosh how disappointed I am. By this era and everything that's happening here. In the village, with the politicians, MPs, who rule it all. I imagined it differently. Corruption, nepotism… Now everybody will tell you it was better then. There was work for everyone, even if you didn't want it*."

Elderly Jitka, also a former factory worker described her skeptical comments about the upcoming years amid the general happiness of the revolution in 1989:

> "*This is not gonna be democracy; it will be capitalism. Capitalism, that's all we'll have."*

Jitka continued her speech by long descriptions of the harsh conditions the workers have to sustain today. She spoke about a friend, who is not allowed to leave for the bathroom during the shift and about the minimum wage payments, which do not even amount to the social dole levels, once the workers count in the transportation costs to and from the factory.

> "*It wasn't like this before. Full buses of people used to leave for the factories from the village. Sometimes you couldn't even get in… I say it is much worse than it used to be. Democracy is for the cities, for big shots. Not for tiny villages like ours*."

During my stay in the village, I heard Robert and Jitka's narratives of great dissatisfaction with the present times alongside the talk about the revolution and the past innumerable times. The memory of the revolutionary days gets immediately linked to the economic downturn and erosion of life and work standards for the working classes - always in direct comparison to the way it used to be. Dismantling of the working class positions in post-socialist countries

has been widely discussed in literature, with authors commenting on workers' loss of voice in the society and the precarity that they have to face (Kideckel 2002, 115). The case of Starov, lying in a valley that many referred to as a 'hunger valley' is no different. In 2013, the unemployment rate in Starov reached almost 24 per cent, a number that would be even higher if I included the so-called hidden unemployment of the citizens, who were excluded from the national database, as the bureaucracy did not see them as pro-active enough in their job search. By losing jobs in the factories, the villagers have lost much more than just economic security – they have lost access to wider social connections that they used to foster and therefore to networks outside the village, a condition theorized by Creed (2002, 63). If before, the state guaranteed jobs and therefore forced everyone to leave the village and mingle with people from the surroundings, the unemployed today face not only economic problems, but also severe social marginalization and a lack of mobility caused by Starov's relatively outlying location.

Such a situation starkly contrasts with the times of full employment policy that was strictly enforced during socialism. In connection to that, at the end of Robert's quote, another feature of the imageries of the radiant past in Starov gets uncovered – approval of the fact that the state enforced a certain level of order. Everybody had to work, "*even if they didn't want it*". Everybody participated in events. Boys used to be obliged to do military service time, where "*they learnt what discipline is*", as Robert remarked. Discipline and order that ensured predictability and certainties of one's life indeed are some of the themes that were presented to me in positive light.

Paxson writes about how people in a Russian village she studied also included order in their accounts of the idealized past. She understood it as a memory of a framework for the societal goals (Paxson 2005, 102). If the values of equality, sociability and solidarity that the informants deem important in their narratives somehow used to persist, there were framed

and enforced by tighter discipline. People in Starov show similar positioning by drawing a line between disciplined 'before' when things worked and today, when the frameworks were lifted, ushering in chaos, uncertainty and ruin. With the radiant socialist days gone, all that is left is a reality of a village, where the values of the old times seem to be falling apart and the inhabitants take on a role of commentators of a situation that once again, found the village without them feeling in control.

Disentangling the socialist bliss

In order to understand my informants' vivid imageries about the better 'before', it might be fruitful to look at theory on nostalgia. The term nostalgia was coined already in the 17th century and used as a medical term for homesickness (Boyer 2006, 362). Longing after home, longing after a familiar land that is left behind us carries a poetic link to the topic of this chapter - longing after a familiar memory land(scape) that seems long lost and ever so bright. Svetlana Boym writes about reflective nostalgia that appears when the familiar has been changed too fast, forcing the people to narrate, recollect and draw relationships between past experience, present and their future lives, or as in case of Starov, pushing people to over-impose the socialist memory terrain on their present and future (Boym 2008, 16). She also remarked that nostalgia seems to be connected to places, but "*it is actually a yearning for a different time*" (Boym 2007, 8). Such time does not need to be specified in linear terms. It is closer to an atemporal imagery filled with meanings and metaphors, providing more maneuvering space for the selective dimension of an actualized history narratives (Giordano, Kostova 2002, 77).

In Starov, memory landscape of socialist past was precisely such an endless plain, with very little temporal structuring. As my informants remembered, very few of them drew distinctions between the various stages of the regime development. There is no need

to emphasize that Stalinist regime in the 1950s has little in common with the thaw in the 1960s, replaced by 'normalization' years after the Soviet army occupation started. Nevertheless, both younger and older inhabitants use only blank 'during socialism' phrase whenever they are about to contribute their story about the past – managing the memory of the regime as an immense flat storage of diverging symbols that can be activated when needed.

The fluidity of such a memory storage combined with the shared conventional narratives makes it an ideal anchor for the village society in unstable times of transformation. It is through looking back that the community renarrates its ideals about a good life and a good society over and over again and discursively locks the values in the socialist past. Vis-à-vis present, marked by unstable and fast-paced changes, an unclear future and omnipresent signs of downfall, inhabitants highlight the backbone of their morality through the stories about the radiant socialism. Shared, hard labour, commonality, tight social networks, equality and certainty of one's tomorrow are all put on a pedestal, as the features that the present desperately misses. In this manner, the landscape of the socialist past is produced to serve as a role model that can be always referred to in order to subvert or strengthen the meaning of everyday occurrences in the life of the community. As Paxson wrote, the radiant symbolic terrain of the socialist past is like a "*template, through which all social states can be judged*" (Paxson 2005, 119) – and in case of Starov, the present is judged mercilessly.

In connection to that, such template of a radiant past also serves as a program for the future of the village. Based on his research on Sakhalin Island, Grant (1995, 162) notes that for the first time in the 20th century, the societal changes in the 1990s did not attempt to erase the remembering of the past by overshadowing it with a proposition of a new and better future. Indeed, in case of Starov, the promise of the market economy prosperity has been shattered soon after the revolution. With factories in the area going bankrupt and precarious

working conditions, inhabitants feel that they have been left out of Slovakia's potential future – as Jitka said, the reaps of democracy are for cities and big shots, certainly not for their village. With no believable plan of a new radiant future and an everyday reality that seems less than encouraging, people choose to turn to "*ruins of the old order*" for frameworks, rather than denouncing them (Grant 1995, 163). The themes contained in nostalgic remembering serve as a program here; they are an answer to widespread depression from the lack of future and very little control over the development of the village community. In other words, radiant past memories have the power to act as a symbolic substitute for the agency that the villagers lack as well as be as source of pride in their lives, grounded in the past achievements.

It is clear from my findings that however problematic some of the features of socialist ideology in everyday lives might have seemed to the villagers, many of the party-propelled ideals do reflect informants' views of what a good society looks like. Chris Hann similarly notes that at the level of everyday practices of the inhabitants, who took the social system that they lived in for decades for granted, the moral ethos of socialism has not been truly abandoned (Hann 2002, 10-11). The idealized ethics of socialist everyday life in my informants' accounts are indeed often juxtaposed to the "moral wasteland" of their contemporary experience. Hann highlights a paradox here – while the anti-communist mainstream discourse propelled by the dissidents and the media emphasizes the moral emptiness and the prevalence of grey zone during socialism[8], the villagers' memories claim the exact opposite (ibid). In case of small communities like Starov, the morals of equality, sharing and hard work can probably even be traced back to the ethics of the village life from

[8] See for example Vaclav Havel's essay Power of the Powerless (1991). Wilson, Paul trans, ed. *"The Power of the Powerless" (in) Open Letters: Selected Writings: 1965—1990*.

pre-socialist era (see Kandert 2004) – yet in today's Starov, they are tightly connected to the memory terrain covering decades of communist rule.

The disjuncture between the official public discourse and remembering in Starov opens up a new level of understanding of the nostalgic narratives. If in case of the WWII tragedy, inhabitants are oblivious to the outsiders' interpretations, when remembering socialism, their nostalgia is an open counter-stance towards the official take on the communist rule. Amid grim everyday reality, the community thus uses invocation of a continuity that overarches the revolutionary 1989 rupture to reassert itself, resisting both the ruling political representation and its memory project. As I mentioned earlier in the text, Starov always occupied a marginal position. However, socialist governments at least in theory included such small communities and their inhabitants in the project of better future, regardless of the reality on the ground. That is not the case now, as the village has no hopeful future to cling to. By replacing it with the blissful images from the idealized past, the citizens turn to a production of a protest space that is exclusively theirs and under their full control. Inhabitants thus create a differential memory, where the uncertainties of the present do not need to concern them. Such memory is a space, where the inhabitants do not need to worry about their everyday struggles and where the politicians, who have failed their trust (and who do not even show enough respect to come on time on the commemoration day), have no power over their lives.

Conclusion

In one of her texts, Olga Schevcenko points out that since nostalgia does not relate to past as it was, but to individuals' remembering of their own sacrifices and hopes, the stakes grow higher – the memory practices suddenly not only concern "*one's former innocence or grandeur, but the imagined futures these fantasies projected*" (Schevchenko 2015, 69).

In this chapter, I have shown how nostalgic remembering in Starov has an immense impact on such imagined futures as well as present in the village. The recurring themes of sociability, solidarity, egalitarianism and certainty found in the images of the past thus can be understood as basic values that the villagers wish to sustain as ideals in their increasingly uncertain lives. They are the core morals that make up the archetype of the Starov community - community that might not exist any more in the village, but while the myth of its past lives on, so does the hope of its reestablishment in the future. Additionally, the nostalgia-infused memory terrain of the socialism also serves as an important forum for articulating discontent with the current socio-economic-political situation in the village and the country. As such, the remembering of the inhabitants takes on a form of an important space for reassertion of both what the community and its members wish to be like and on the contrary, what they stand in opposition to.

Past in the service of community

The aim of the thesis has been to demonstrate how Starov inhabitants use two distinct memory landmarks to foster the group solidarity. The patterned remembering narratives have revealed an array of modes in which the identity of the group, its boundaries and relations to the outsiders as well as about the morals and ideals that the community adheres to vis-à-vis the transforming and uncertain present are forged. It has been shown how past, present and future in Starov influence each other, as the three temporal planes never stand quite separately in the conceptual world of the community.

The memory landmarks in the two chapters are handled in separate and unique ways, yet collective memory practices linked to them always function as forces directed towards reinforcement of the community. In the chapter on the commemorations of the WWII tragedy, the remembering was oriented at making the past relevant for the present-day community, acting as a cornerstone of its identity and sense of belonging. On the other hand, the post-socialist nostalgia narratives aimed towards signifying the present through the images of the past, as well as delineating the program of the future. In the WWII chapter, it is the tacit acknowledgment of ambivalence against the overwhelming official narratives that opens up the remembering practice and allows inhabitants to claim their sense belonging in the community through participating in commemorations. Contrarily, in the segment dealing with post-socialism, villagers are the ones taking on the monumental narratives of a radiant socialism, creating an ethically unambiguous and stable safe haven amid uncertain present.

Such a list could go on and on, supporting the claim that people and communities manage the past to accommodate their current needs. I am convinced that the two landmarks presented

here are the most important remembering centres to which and through which meanings are attached in Starov. However, it must be noted that the description of the remembering landscape as defined through the two is inherently partial, lacking the taste of the complexity of social life in the village. As an outline for a future research, it would be useful to include many other landmarks and conceptual memory bundles to the analysis. Trying to disentangle meanings attached to other village rituals such as May-pole construction, Mardi Gras and more contemporary ones like an annual football cup and a goulash party or to accounts of the village life in a pre-war period – a time that has already entered the land of a mythical past, would possibly lead me towards a more nuanced picture of what the worlds of Starov inhabitants are like.

While I was still working on the draft of the thesis, one of the comments I received was that my argument is too straightforward. Looking back at my writing, I can see the point. If in the introduction, I promised to tell a story of how remembering is mobilized to sustain the community amid the post-socialist crisis, I organized my findings to in order to do so – to the extent that commemorative practices almost seem like an omnipresent spell that has the capacity to keep the village from ruin. I would therefore like to briefly conclude by disrupting the image that I myself built up and re-setting the conclusions into the realm of everyday Starov, as seen by local teenagers.

No way to stay

"Me: Do you want to stay here?

Tereza: No way.

Me: Why?

Tereza: There's nothing to do here. You can see it yourself. Nothing."

When talking to teenage Tereza and her friends, it does not take long to find out that their future plans do not count on staying in their home village. Compared to life in towns, there really is not much action going on in Starov. In addition to that, meagre job opportunities, long commute times and lack of infrastructure in the village make life difficult for those who decide to stay.

In the text, I have attempted to show how the narratives circled around the two major fields in the remembering field of the Starov inhabitants are used to bolster the community. However, when confronted with reality on the ground, it is clear that the community as imagined and performed through remembering that I outlined is likely to slowly disappear. Almost all young people move out and the elderly slowly pass away, leaving the village space to the holidaymakers – and as everyone in Starov suspects, community can only be performed for as long, as there are actual people, who are able to do so. Reaffirming the group through remembering and nostalgia does indeed play an important role at the moment, but its powers do not seem to have a capacity to overweight the flow of the slow decline.

It is not the place of an anthropologist to speculate about the future. However, especially among the young, who already know that their inevitable departure is approaching, I sensed signs that the present in the village – so demonized by the older inhabitants, will become their radiant past. I can picture the teenage girls I talked to in 15 years time in their town apartments, remembering the happy youthful years spent in Starov, surrounded by the mountains and life that appears to run in slow-motion. The village itself does not seem to be on its way to disappear, it is just that it will serve predominantly as a weekend refuge. And the village community as it stands (and remembers) today will only exist as a nostalgic dream of the past for the ones that chose to leave.

Epilogue: To tell the truth

On one of my last days in Starov I discussed my future return to the village with Lucka and Adam, one of the few young couples, over a cup of coffee in their living room. Adam joked that they will only see whether I am welcome or not depending on what I write about the community. I mentioned Nancy Scheper-Hughes' description of a cold reception she got by her informants after she published her work Saints, Scholars and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland (1979). The added epilogue of the book is a narrative of how difficult it can be for the community to cope with what might be perceived as an overtly critical account of their lives. In Scheper-Hughes' case, the bitterness and the feeling of betrayal and misrepresentation among the villagers resulted in her forced departure, as nobody in the community could have offered her a lodging without facing ostracization for helping her out.

Upon hearing the story, Adam asked: "*But did she tell the truth*?"

Me: "*I guess you could say so*."

Adam: "*I see, but an ugly truth*."

Obligation not to refrain from narrating such 'ugly truths' could be one of the hardest things about being an anthropologist. Even despite my adherence to all the possible ethical considerations, I am always petrified by the upcoming reactions of the informants. Hopefully, the locals will at the very least deem the image of Starov and its memory topography presented in this work honest and I will not have to face the near lynch-like situation that Scheper-Hughes went through – after all, I already miss the community and the people, whose stories made the whole thesis possible.

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