



**UNIVERSITY
OF PARDUBICE**

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**Family memory in the 19th century.
The functions and content of family memory
in the Czech middle class 1800–1914**

A Summary of Doctoral Thesis

Mgr. Barbora Kubátová

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The presented dissertation deals with family memory in the 19th century. The actual analysis of the memoir literature is preceded by an introduction to existing research and conceptual and methodological background. The introductory section is devoted to the current state of research, whereby I divided older and recent scholarly results concerning the family and memory in particular. Both historiographical approaches have their specific works that I believe should have been included in the thesis, even though they did not actually serve as a source. In the end, I concentrated on presenting existing research specifically in the field of family memory. All this was done to prepare the space for my analysis.

In essence, the concept of family memory is quite wide, and for relevant results, the heuristic part of the research and the methodological approach required certain boundaries, which were established based on research of sources and literature. The source base consists of individual family memories. At the very beginning of the selection of the source base, it was necessary to deal with the number of sources on the topic of family memory as well as the selected broad time period. After analysing possible conceptual backgrounds, it turned out to be appropriate and innovative to follow the family (and society-

wide) values proclaimed in the family memoirs. On account of the wide range of such conceptual approaches, it was clear that the sample under study had to meet specific comparable characteristics. The basic parameters of the selection were: non-noble memoirs dealing with the family, memoirs tracing at least part of the 19th century, Czech-written memoirs, and due to a large number of archival manuscripts, I limited the selection to published memoirs. After researching the topic, a selection was also made of other contemporary sources and literature that served for historical contextualization; these were mainly other memoirs, secondary scientific literature, or contemporary magazine articles.

The own chapter is devoted to the specifics and issues of working with memoir literature. Memoirs are classified as historical literary sources, sometimes also called narrative. In them, the author describes the lived (and also mediated) past and keeps the present and future reader in mind; he or she may ignore the boundaries of genre, and use a variety of expressive language and styles: thus, to a large extent, I am working with insite literature. In my research, I have taken into account: who wrote the memoir, when it was written, and at what time interval from the events or what the author's intention was. In

my earlier work, I have already explored the possibilities of examining self-representational strategies, specifically mystification, in personal documents. In particular, it turned out that this approach is not universally reliable and does not produce relevant outputs, but rather serves as a research supplement. Mystification and various means of concealment and aggrandizement always serve to benefit the family or a particular individual.¹

In the fifth, narrative part of the dissertation, individual families and the content of their family memoirs, memories, and chronicles are presented. This perspective provides an overview of the history of the families, their residence, their backgrounds, family relationships, and basic information about family life to make it easier to navigate through the analytical section.

The authors had time to record their memoirs as they aged. The average age at which the authors wrote the studied memoirs is just under 62 years, with the caveat that in some cases these

¹ KUBÁTOVÁ, Barbora. Mystifikace jako aspekt rodinné sebezprezentační strategie. In: JÍLKOVÁ, Marie, Marie MACKOVÁ a Eliška VALOVÁ, eds. *Jak se u nás podvádělo: za monarchie i za republiky*. Pardubice: Univerzita Pardubice, 2019, p. 145–157.

are estimates, however, it is not certain when precisely the memoirist started writing, and also the writing may have been spread over several (decades) years. Some authors even wrote their memoirs during their youth. The average age of the authors did not differ much even within the range of the centenary period under study. If we divide them into thirds, it turns out that the generation born between 1800–1850 decided to write their memoirs on average around the age of 55. The most represented generation, 1851–1875, wrote their memoirs around age 62. Finally, authors born between 1876–1925 were about 67 years old when they wrote their memoirs. These observations roughly correspond to life expectancy as presented in the publication *History of the Population of the Czech Lands*.²

The sixth, analytical part is divided into two main chapters, which trace the external elements of family memory and an internal perspective that takes into account the subjectivity of the narration, family traditions, and the inclusion of great historical moments in family memory. The intrinsic family values that were pursued are: *work, diligence, education,*

² FIALOVÁ, Ludmila et al. *Dějiny obyvatelstva českých zemí*. Praha: Mladá fronta, 1996, p. 190.

patriotism, and *modesty*. Surprisingly, *love* has also played a significant role since a certain period. These values were usually placed in various oppositions in family memory, i.e. against *laziness*, *snobbery*, or "*external glamour*". I conceptualized considerations of assiduity and diligence comprehensively from the perspective of men and women, even concerning its opposites laziness and idleness. Pointing out the different perceptions of time for work and leisure also proved essential. In terms of education, the memoirists did not only pursue the theme of institutionalized schooling but also the experience and wisdom of life passed on, presented especially in family chronicles, played an important role in family memory. Czech and rural origins were clearly considered the most representative in the memoirs studied. Nationalism, sometimes even strained, appeared at various stages in the Czech cultural, social, and political environment throughout the 19th century and is typical of Czech family memoirs of this period. In terms of modesty, I have most often observed references to frugality, self-sacrifice, and seclusion. Modesty is understood in memoirs as a positive characteristic of the environment and people. Self-praise and loud promotion of one's own qualities generated disapproval and suspicion in society that such promotion was

undeserved. Those who were truly good and talented did not need to spread the word; their own actions and behaviour spoke for them.

Based on the concept of local identity, the emerging phenomenon of 'home' was pursued. It is clear that from the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries onwards, memoirs (especially family ones) were increasingly oriented around a common central point, namely the home, and if these tendencies were somewhat shy at the beginning of the 19th century, by the end of it their orientation was evident. Based on research into family memoirs, it seems that the transformation of the conception of home, which no longer conceives of it merely as a material backdrop but as a place to which emotional experience is attached, takes place sometime after 1848, first in the memoirs of the Bohemian intelligentsia and later also in memoirs of rural provenance. I have already evaluated the use of this approach in my contribution to the possibilities of the concept of place identity. The aforementioned chapter traced the family's relationship to place as both the scene of stories

and their initiator.³

The telling and retelling of stories emerged as an important component of family memory, both as its content and catalyst, which are presented in the conclusion of the analytical section of the dissertation. Although embedded in a wide range of transmitted activities, family memory is highly selective and dependent on negotiation during family conversations. Our investigation confirmed that, for example, memories with an emotional colouration were particularly strongly held in family memory. The oral tradition of transmitting the family past is of course present in all the families studied and is also a necessary intentional component and unconscious basis of all written narratives. Family stories were newly communicated and fixed in memory during various occasions. Not only was the past explained among adults who already knew it, but also new information was transmitted to children. This was most often done in more leisurely moments. In the countryside, evening storytelling was associated with feather scrubbing, weaving, or knitting. In the case of the memoirs of families from the city,

³ KUBÁTOVÁ, Barbora. Prostory vzpomínání v memoárech české měšťanské inteligence druhé poloviny 19. století. In: KUDLÁČ, A. K. K., ed. *Cestami Mnemosyné. Paměť a identita v moderních českých dějinách*. Pardubice: Univerzita Pardubice, 2021, p. 37–58.

these are more likely to be occasions of 'black hour', dining or walking and strolling.

Capturing and preserving the memories of ancestors was very important to families, and in addition to verbally communicated family memory, there was also the writing down of memories, often at the instigation of the younger generation. There are also voices in the memoirs that the family past should have been searched and used more of the knowledge of previous generations. In their memoirs, they then urge the next generation not to forget and to have these types of conversations with their family.

There were several kinds of impulses to revive and write memoirs, and the memoirist's initiative usually played little role in this in the 19th century. Because of the contemporary aversion to self-glorification, memoirists usually approached the writing of their memoirs only based on impulses from their own family or outside friends, the public, or directly from publishers. Family memoirs are self-initiated only by the youngest authors. Until then, authors tend to downplay their part in the initiation, arguing that the writing of family memoirs did not come from their heads. In terms of the narrative mode, which in the case of individual memory recovery consists of a

time-unanchored subjective reflection on personal experiences, we see a clear shift from the position of the narrator who tends to underestimate himself to a self-conscious narrator.

The motivation for writing these memoirs, then, is not only the desire to capture great family history but also to preserve the memory of favorite national heroes. There was also a great demand for this kind of memoir, for stories both ordinary and extraordinary. The interest in the private lives of Bohemian greats was not only an entertaining read for the masses but the stories of courage, rebellion against the monarchy and the strength to stand up for one's beliefs promoted national togetherness and unity. The periods when such memoirs were published correspond to this. Overwhelmingly, these are editions that occurred during the periods – of the First Republic and the Second World War. In other words, during the euphoria of the establishment of the independent state, but also in moments of a certain sobering in the 1930s and pain during the world war conflict, when memoir literature became a kind of escape. It is clear that the publication of family memoirs depicting the 19th century enjoyed enormous interest from the 1920s to the 1940s, often repeatedly throughout the Second

World War. Society craved not only the stimulus of the life stories of the great personalities of the Czech nation, which gave moral strength, but equally for memories of *the old days* and *the good people* that comforted. After 1948 there was an apparent decline in the publication of this type of memoir. The family memoirs that were published at this time were aimed at the "proletariat" and the countryside. These editions emphasize that the Czech national specificity are the chronicles written by members of the plebeian layers. We can see a renewed interest in family memoirs from different strata after the revolution from the 1990s onwards.

The diversity of the chosen sources is created by the different social environments, time spans, and diverse range of goals and motives of the memoir authors. In some cases, the resulting observations could be generalized to form a kind of overview of the most common motives, functions, and referents of family memory, but it is desirable to point out the individuality and specificity of each source. In the first place, the traceability and clarity of references to family memory in the texts under study have become very evident. It has to be said that the memoirs examined do not show the same degree of possibility of use.

Some memoirs are rich in searchable references, others are somewhat flat in this matter – usually, those that stick only to factual events and for them, the family history consists of a simple pattern: birth – life/work – death. The diversity and uniqueness are quite significant, and attempts to generalise, to find points of contact, to find universally valid rules, might wipe away the group differences that make this collective what it is. Aware of this complex web of interconnected functions of family memory, its contents, and strategies, I was able to trace themes that emerged in all families (or at least in a large proportion of them) across the period under study. It proved crucial, useful, and methodologically feasible to trace the values that families valued and transmitted among their members within everyday life and across time. These observed themes were compared across space (rural and urban) and across time (1800–1914). The hypothesis was that the construction and representation of the observed family memory values would vary considerably, which was not ultimately confirmed. I believe that it turned out that family values transformed only very slowly during this centennial period, with more significant changes occurring only towards the end of the nineteenth century – and even then it was not so much the values that

transformed as the way in which they were inscribed, perceived, and mediated by the memorialists. Whereas at the beginning of the 'long' century, value standards were somehow given and unquestioned, the end of the century showed more reflection and questioning of what was being passed down in the family – the evaluative point of view of the author became more evident in the memoirs. Crucially, the source of these transformations appeared not to come from the core of the families or the memoirists' own beliefs, but the family narratives reflected external influences, so it was necessary to trace these processes comprehensively and contextualise them.

The hypothesis was that the cultural climate participated in the form of the written memoirs and that the form and content corresponded to contemporary ideas about the form and function of the genre. We have seen in the examples of family memoirs that they did indeed adopt external schemata, not only cultural, and literary but also political and social: the value patterns of an awakening nation. The society-wide notion of how literature should be written, what themes to present, and how to influence the reader was also impressed in the memoirs. The evaluation criteria gradually shifted from the aesthetic to

the moral – the authors' thinking about literature was conditioned by a strong national emphasis, ideologically based on the Biedermeier model connecting the role of family and nation.

The transformation of the content of memoirs was marked by the superpersonal value of human life in memoir writers born from the 1850s onwards, who remembered their parents, who had taught them superpersonal values and ideals from their youth. Public service meant not only daily concern for the existential well-being of others but also active participation in public cultural life. It was on these foundations – of universal progress and art for all – that, I believe, a launching platform for artists on the margins, i.e. also for memoir writers, could finally emerge.

The literary generation of the 1890s introduced the cult of the subject and subjectivity into Czech literature – self-expression and confession were newly highly valued, but the acceptance of these changes by wider society was not unquestioning. At the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries, cases of falsification trials were at their peak, when genealogists tried to prove their better origins (especially those of nobility) by writing family chronicles. It is therefore not surprising that the general public

did not warmly embrace genealogy, and even preferred to distance themselves from their family's past so as not to arouse suspicions that they were trying to improve anything about their family history. This aversion stemmed from a discourse that was based on modesty. The mentality of the time, pursuing and cherishing the expediency of the text, in particular, is clear: the author of a memoir must assume that he has made his life useful to his country or his family. The authors of much of the memoirs have an obvious need to defend why they wrote the texts, explain their motives, and refer to the fact that it was not their own choice but someone else's wish or even their duty.

If Pierre Nora argues that modern society does not look for justification in the past, in its history, but turns its attention to the future,⁴ in the family memoirs of the period under study we see only gradual changes in this process of transformation. Nineteenth-century society identified itself strongly with the nation and past almost all the time, so in the case of family memory, we can still speak of an alliance between memory and

⁴ NORA, Pierre. Mezi paměti a historií: problematika míst. In: MAYER, Françoise, Alban BENSA a Václav HUBINGER, eds. *N° 10, Antologie francouzských společenských věd: Město*. Praha: Cahiers du CEFRES, 1996, p. 43.

history, an alliance which, according to Nora⁵, is no longer functioning in the twentieth century. Memory was part of the public space for a long century and was far from being a private phenomenon – Czech society sought justification in the past and family memories were one of the ways that opened up this past.

In the last decades of the 19th century, another purpose of (family) memories emerged. There is a concern that the nation is losing the great personalities of Czech national life and their memorials, which opens up a space for recording memories of the greats of Czech history. The discovery of the memoir genre not only in the form of monographs but also in newspapers and magazines expanded the awareness of memoir literature and then it was only a step towards its full acceptance. Since the 1920s, the situation has been changing and the public has even demanded this type of literature.

It turns out that the authors of memoirs had better conditions for writing memoirs during the First Republic compared to earlier periods. The development of tabloid journalism not only provided a platform but also nurtured a wide readership that

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

demanded memoirs. The writings of the generation of authors who witnessed and remembered the peak of Czech national aspirations in the 19th century, the turning points of Czech history, were of fundamental value for the 20th century for several reasons – they recalled the indomitability of the Czech nation, its important leaders and representatives, but also the lives of *ordinary people* and *the good old days*, which seemed somehow simpler in the moment of the euphoria of the new republic and during the next world conflict.

Several social, cultural, and political demands came together to favour the memoir genre. Comparisons can also be drawn with another young democracy, after whose emergence the demand for authentic literature rose unprecedentedly. Pavel Janoušek seeks the reason for the increased interest in authenticity after 1989 in the shock of the sudden loss of an enemy, a subject, and a time when literature was part of a social context in which the boundaries of values were clearly defined: it was obvious who was "for" and who was "against", and a correctly spoken word had the force of a political act.⁶ The

⁶ JANOUŠEK, Pavel. Autenticita jako protipól literární tradice. In: *Autenticita a literatura*. Opava-Praha: Slezské zemské muzeum, 1999, p. 11–19.

transposition of his reflections back seventy years to the period of the First Republic corresponds well to the situation of the 1920s and 1930s when interest in memoir texts was on the rise: the monarchy had been defeated, literature had lost its political effect in which the boundaries of value were clearly defined. The importance of the memoirist's position on the right side of the barricade also emerges from research on family narratives of the communist period.⁷ The family memoirs of the nineteenth-century Czech intelligentsia had a common enemy against whom they defined themselves in life and memory. They had their heroes who, through the power of words, found themselves in prison or exile. Their family stories are subordinated to the collective memory of the formative period of the Czech nation, and the values they preferred correspond to those of the leading representatives of the Czech patriots or their role models from the Czech past. They also submitted to external pressures – they made a virtue out of the necessary frugality that was a feature of the middle class throughout Europe. These values also seem to have permeated the social

⁷ ŠVAŘÍČKOVÁ SLABÁKOVÁ, Radmila et al. *I rodina má svou paměť. Rodinná paměť v interdisciplinárním kontextu*. Praha: NLN, 2018.; ŠVAŘÍČKOVÁ SLABÁKOVÁ, Radmila a Irena SOBOTKOVÁ. *Rodina a její paměť v nás ve světle třígeneračních vyprávění*. Praha: Triton, 2018.

ladder among the lower strata of the population, but in their case, they were settled in family memory with less passion for the national cause. They had already been established in society for some time and family memories adapted them to their needs. From this point of view, these were themes that were introduced repeatedly, often with stereotyped renditions over decades.

Halbwachs believed that family thinking grasps at images and events from which their own representation can benefit significantly – *allowing itself to be illuminated by the success of its members*.⁸ These elements of mindset (political views, religion, culture, etc.), which are otherwise external to the family, may, according to Halbwachs, be transferred to family representations and retain their original form, but the preferences and interests of the household become their essence.⁹ Nineteenth-century family memory, however, was not subject (especially in the case of patriarchal families) to the needs of the family as much as to the needs of the nation, which was, moreover, entirely consistent with the obligation to

⁸ Loosely translated from: HALBWACHS, Maurice. La mémoire collective et le temps. *Cahiers Internationaux de Sociologie*. Presses Universitaires de France, 1996, 101, p. 53.

⁹ *Ibid.*

sacrifice one's own and one's family's welfare for the interests of the collective. The memoirs reflect values and opinions that correspond to the values inherent in the entire Czech society. They thus strictly follow the historical narrative of the time. A gradual change can be observed in memoirs written after the Second World War. Their authors abandoned the model template of higher ideals and their memoirs aim at an intimate and distinctive image of the family with its peculiarities – mutual relations, and common moments. Antonie Kavalírová, shortly after the middle of the 19th century, worries that she will write about trifles that are not worth writing about,¹⁰ 120 years later Eduard Grégr calmly tells how he and his friends fished during the First World War¹¹.

After evaluating the qualitative features of the memoirs studied, it is clear that although some features can be generalised and applied to all families, there are attributes that correspond only to a smaller group of families. The themes under study reflect the results of previous Czech scientific historical research and in many aspects are in agreement with

¹⁰ KAVALÍROVÁ, Antonie. *Paměti babičky Kavalírové*. Praha: Topič, 1938, p. 165.

¹¹ GRÉGR, Eduard ml. *Historie rodiny*. Praha: Eduard Grégr, 1996, p. 121.

them. In particular, it turns out that the identified family values have also been the subject of professional interest in recent decades, which testifies to their strong position in 19th-century discourse.

In the dissertation, I have traced the aforementioned values through the lens of family memory and placed them in the broader context of the referenced research. This reflects family memory's own adoption of value patterns from the outside. However, it is also subject to the interference and identification needs of the individual, who, despite possible attempts at objectivity, is unable (or unwilling) to suppress the subjectivity attached to the concept of family memory. In the case of writing a family memoir, this aspect is even more evident. Although my research did not aim for a gender-balanced authorial contribution to the source material,¹² for example, the women's question in the nineteenth century proved difficult to avoid, since some family memoirs fundamentally aimed precisely at reflecting this movement as well as less visible emancipatory manifestations. Conversely, the chosen concept of local identity

¹² The family memoirs studied were the work of thirteen women and seven men, not counting the problematic numbers in the case of the chronicles or the memoirs citing older works by family members.

proved useful, as it directed the analysis towards the tracking of identification with a space – the phenomenon of home – but its breadth did not allow for its full use.

If I were able to generalize the family values valid for all the memories studied: *assiduity, education, patriotism, modesty, love, and home*, these are attributes of family life that took on slightly different meanings in different settings. The presented results concern mainly the middle layers, i.e. about 20% of the population, so their validity is not universal, but it shows the tendency of Czech family memory to blend with official historical memory. If family memories of the Second World War are full of anti-Nazis, and of the socialist period full of anti-communists, we can also look for the origins of this phenomenon in the past, in the formative period of the Czech nation, when most family memories were defined against Austria, the Germans, and the monarchy.

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