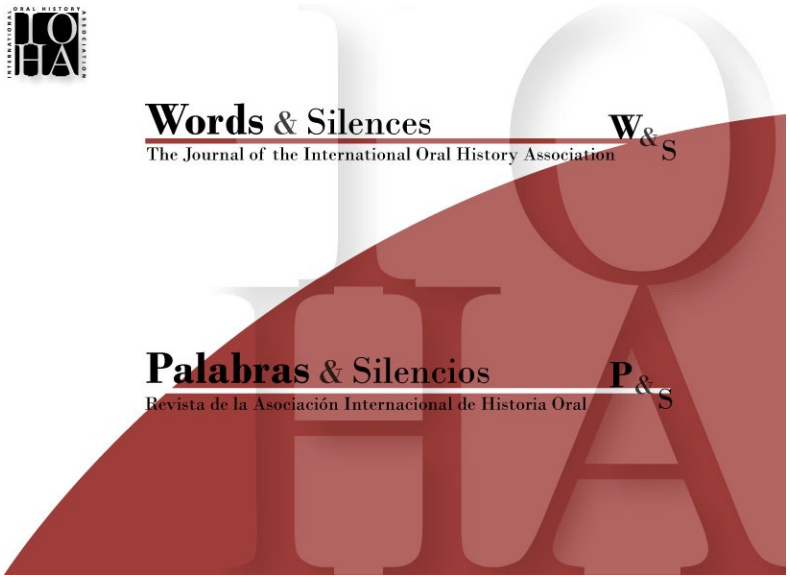

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Voices of the Persecuted and Slovak Collective Memory after 1989
Two Totalitarian Regimes in Biographical Reports

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Sovakia's modern history has been abundant in political transition and turbulence caused by two 20th century totalitarian regimes: the Fascist-Ludak regime (1939-1945) and the Communist regime (1948 – 1989). Indeed, they followed one after the other with only a few years of an illusionary return to democracy (1945 – 1948) in between. The aim of my paper is to briefly introduce and compare two research projects focusing on social groups that were persecuted during these regimes: Jews during the first totalitarian regime and small entrepreneurs during the second.

I first started researching small entrepreneurs shortly before the collapse of Communism (1987). The project started as a private collection of life stories from people in my home town.[1] I attempted to record their recollections of a life fully determined by business. The interviewees' narratives encompassed almost the entire 20th century, whereas their reflections emphasized especially inter-war Czechoslovakia and the independent Slovak State, which they considered a 'golden era' of entrepreneurship; and the decades of Communism, when they were forced out of the official Czechoslovak social structure.

Secondly, I conducted research (1995-1997) focused on the totalitarian regime that preceded Communism – the Ludak regime[2] that governed during the independent Slovak Republic (1939 – 1945). The focus group for this research were Jewish inhabitants of Slovakia – Holocaust survivors.

Material collected during both of these research projects constitutes a database of biographical narratives capturing almost the entire 20th century and its crises in Slovakia from the perspective of two distinct social groups. Officially it was possible to realize these research projects only after the fall of Communism. Until 1989, neither of the researched groups was incorporated in the official historical memory shaped by the regime. They represented taboos – a marginalized group (Jewish inhabitants of Slovakia) or a group (entrepreneurs), which was to be obliterated as 'class enemy'. Until 1989, personal and collective memories of these people were banished from Slovak collective memory.

Given the importance of the interviewer to any

1 The town of Trenčín, seat of the regional government located 120 km north-east from the capital city Bratislava.

2 *Ludaks* were members of the only permitted state-party in Slovakia (1939 – 1945): Hlinka's Slovak People's Party (HSĽS), which oscillated between adhering to Christian principles (proclaimed by the party) and nationalism mixed with strong sympathy towards Nazi ideology especially in relation to the so called Jewish question in Germany and Slovakia.

oral history project, it is time to introduce myself. I belong to a generation that grew up and matured under Communism. Having completed my university education in 1987, all through my student life I was educated in accordance with official Communist party ideology and, at the same time and like everyone else, I was formed by my family background. My family history was determined by non-Communist ancestors, including my grandfather – a former entrepreneur, and by denominational as well as ethnic heterogeneity. As with many other people in Communist Czechoslovakia, I lived a life that was on one hand demarcated by official values determined by ideology, and on the other by my own personal values. Life unfolded between these poles and constituted a constant search for balance between the extremes. This search for balance between public and private also takes place in democracies. Under Communism, however, imbalance can be subject to fatal sanctions.

Reconstruction of the World of Small Entrepreneurs

I had two motives for recording interviews with members of a social group that, at the time, did not exist officially. The first was private – to record my own grandfather's reflections on entrepreneurship and inter-war Czechoslovak democracy, which was otherwise available only as publicly narrated by official Communist propaganda. My second motive, which materialized during field research - was academic. While conducting research for my PhD dissertation, several of my interviewees referred me to a particular man – a former entrepreneur who was of key economic, social, and cultural importance for the region and its inhabitants. By the time I managed to gain his trust and he consented to talk to me, the Communist regime had collapsed, and I enthusiastically changed the topic of my dissertation to an examination of small entrepreneurs during the first half of the 20th century.

In their recollections, after decades of silence, former entrepreneurs reconstructed their life stories for themselves as well as for me, who they took as a grandchild of one of their own. After being silent for 40 – 50 years, they reconstructed an image of their town, its intertwined social relations, social and cultural life, and their own standing within this urban micro world. Via their reflections of workdays, holidays, leisure time and day-to-day communication between the locals, I gradually came to know a social group, its lifestyle and value system, all of which were obliterated by the Communist regime.[3] During the course of my research, small entrepreneurs of the past, by now considerably aged, finally had the opportunity to remember their difficult personal and professional life within a public reflection process. In interviews, they acted as representatives of an entire group providing its collective testimony. Following initial cautiousness, I recorded several conversations with every interviewee. Including intermissions, the research lasted 10 years. Besides the entrepreneurs, I also talked with their family members and contemporaries who engaged in non-entrepreneurial pursuits. In recalling a time when (usually) the father had a business, relatives revealed information about the entrepreneur's family life, which, in line with Communist ideology, had been meant to be forever forgotten. After decades they talked about the particularities of entrepreneur family relations, the status of women within that structure, the participation of all family members in running the company and the household, and their participation in local politics, associations and leisure activities.

> My father started from zero and worked hard, in America they would call him a self-made man. It was hard to get started in business, he had to take a loan. We were in the store from morning to night, but it kept a fellow happy. A tradesman lived for the work, and was proud to find meaning in his profession. (J.S. 1917, interviewed in 1989-1997)

When formulating their life story, former entrepreneurs' self-reflection was characterized by professional pride and awareness of one's signi-

3 These findings can be compared to research of the middle class conducted in Western European countries on the turning point of 19th and 20th century (Bertaux, Thompson 1997; Crossick, Haupt 1998; Bertaux, Bertaux-Wiame 1983).

ficance for the local community.

> Once a tradesman was a person for the public. Everyone looked to him. In the first place he had to be upstanding, it wasn't just about making money... (J.S. 1917, interviewed in 1989-1997)

> Tradesmen earned respect something like this: if they had a house, shop, store, sufficient supplies; priority was given to integrity, a good family life, behaving with integrity and keeping ones word. (Man born in 1912, interviewed 1988-1995)

I was interested in the way members of this group interpreted and commented on the regime transformations during the course of their entrepreneurship; starting with democratic Czechoslovakia (1918-1938) and moving through the Slovak Republic (1939-1945) to the era of their social liquidation by the Communist regime after 1948. The narratives I collected, talk of a 'golden age' of entrepreneurship, even during the Ludak wartime Slovak State.[4]

During the Ludak regime, Slovak entrepreneurs experienced a literal upswing due to the 'protective hand' of the Third Reich over Slovakia, the liquidation of Jewish competition, and enrichment via the legalized Aryanization of Jewish property.

> We did a lot of business abroad. From the Netherlands we got paint, from Germany typewriters, from Sweden counters. We gained contacts from the Slovak state, our dealings gained a name... (Man born in 1916, interviewed 1995-1997)

> When the Slovak started to take the Jews property – shops - many Slovaks came into free cash! That terrible greed, amazing how it changed people. (Woman, born in 1912, interviewed 1995-1997)

Reflecting on their Jewish colleagues' situation was not spontaneous for any of these interviewees. Similarly, even when evaluating the Communist era through the prism of their own persecution by the regime, no empathy or compassion with their Jewish colleagues was spontaneously expressed. It was only during structured interviews that I was able to record brief statements on the issue, often burdened by prejudice and stereotypes.[5]

> One family came to me. They were Jews. I hid 30 furs for them in my downstairs storage. I gave them some sort of confirmation of storage. They fled abroad... After the war when some of them returned, they swore at us for allowing their deportation. What could we have done to defend them, when all of Germany was swept along... in Hungary the same, also Austria, really everyone was afraid of those Germans... In fact, some of us did hide a few of them, or some of their things, but it was only a few. (Man born in 1912, interviewed in 1988-1995)

As the Communists assumed power, the forced transformation of the Slovak social structure continued, but on the basis of a new ideology. Again, propaganda played a key role in this process and a new phrase was born: 'enemy of the regime'. The main aim was to demonize social groups and individuals who were obstructing the regime's 'road to victory'. The term 'enemy of the regime' was a very abstract concept. With its flexible and variable meaning, it could be used to label anyone. Small entrepreneurs also became enemies, even though this was not apparent in the beginning. After all, they were not the 'typical exploiters of the proletariat' since most of them employed only themselves and their family members.

Gradually, however, they began to irritate the new regime because their way of life and work represented ideals Communist ideology rejected - private ownership and free entrepreneurship. For neighbours, they symbolized freedom of thought and conduct, which was unfriendly for

4 None of the interviewees was of Jewish origin. The absence of this perspective was overcome by the latter research project focusing on the Jewish community.

5 In the first phase of the research, I recorded non-structural biographies of individual interviewees. In the second phase I conducted structured interviews, which included additional questions. It was only during the second phase that interviewees provided recollections of Jewish entrepreneurs. This issue was absent from non-structural biographic narratives.

the regime. In the beginning of the 1950s, small entrepreneurs were nationalized and thus liquidated.[6] It is this period that is dominant in their reflections, providing a detailed picture of the Communist regime's relationship towards 'former people'.[7] The regime's methodology was diverse, as was the intensity and boldness of its actions taken against singled-out groups and individuals. In their memories, small entrepreneurs describe intimidation, blackmail - including threats to children's future prospects and other existential family issues, psychological and physical torture, and imprisonment. Such treatment was often based on fabricated accusations without a proper trial.

> During the nationalizations, trade concessions were suspended. They came without any warning and took it. At that time you had to have a „certificate of reliability" issued by the district office, and whoever didn't have it could only wait for the moment that he would be forcibly resettled. (Man born in 1912, interviewed in 1988-1995)

Testimonies of Holocaust Survivors

The collection of testimonies from Jewish Slovaks was the very first method-based oral history research of the Holocaust in Slovakia.[8] The process lasted for two years (1995 - 1997) and eventually resulted in 150 interviews with survivors. Interviews were sought with a much greater number of survivors, but out of caution many declined. Several factors influenced their behavior. The survivors were members of a marginalized, almost invisible, minority. We approached them 50 years and two totalitarian regimes after events, and asked them to recapture their life during the Holocaust. By 1996, the independent Slovak Republic had existed for three years and its regime, at times, reminded of the behavior and political rhetoric of the wartime Slovak State. Thus, potential interviewees feared their testimonies could be misused. With some, we managed to overcome mistrust by holding introductory meetings with the interviewees and opening direct channels of communication. The number willing to provide an interview grew proportionately with the number of interviews already conducted. Survivors exchanged experiences, and gradually an environment of trust was created between us and the survivors. Nevertheless, insufficient funding eventually limited the number of recorded interviews.

As in the case of small entrepreneurs, the respondents were asked to retell their life story, often for the first time, to someone outside of their family and circle of close friends, and in front of a camera.

Memories of Holocaust survivors[9] are a significant component of the Slovak Jewish Community's modern memory, and an integral part of the historical memory of the whole country. Despite that, the Holocaust as a topic is still absent from public discourse or, in other words, is still treated as a marginal component of the history of Slovakia.

We institutionalized a general structure for the interviews in order to encourage our respondents to divide their reflections into three main eras:

6 The Constitution of the Czechosloavk Republic from 9, May 1948 reads in part „the private property of small and medium businesses shall be respected" but in fact, from February 1948, the number of entrepreneurs fell. Trade licences were revoked for documented cases of blackmarket trading and speculation. In addition, judicial proceedings, could subject convicted entrepreneurs to so-called „Work Camps" in accordance with Government regulation 7/1948. A further basis for harrassing entrepreneurs was the law 199/1948 passed in July 1948 according to which Communal Businesses became the socialist representatives of entrepreneurs engaged in services. In 1951, entrepreneurs lost the right to hire employees, and by 1954 not one of them continued to face the administrative pressure and ploticial persecution.

7 This term was used by the ŠTB (Czechoslovak version of the KGB) until 1964 to label those who, based on their political, economic or social status, supported previous regimes (Veselská 2007:249-250).

8 The first interviews were conducted within an international project initiated by Yale University, USA and brought to Slovakia by the non-governmental Milan Šimečka Foundation (NMŠ), which assembled a team of Jewish and non-Jewish academics, journalists, and activists. (Vrzgulová 2005).

9 Recorded interviews are a part of the video archive of the NMŠ and are utilized for educational purposes.

preceding, during, and following the Holocaust. Thanks to this, we gained valuable insights into the life of the Jewish community during the interwar period, the complicated relations within a diversified community, as well as relations with the non-Jewish majority. These memories reveal prejudices and stereotypes which burdened Jewish-majority relations in Slovakia, the presence of latent anti-Semitism, and the penetration of intolerance into political discourse and interpersonal relations. This type of relations was codified and made obligatory by the totalitarian regime's anti-Jewish legislation, which legalized violence against the Jewish minority – its isolation, deprivation of civil rights, and eventually also of human rights.

Voices of the Persecuted and Slovak Collective Memory

The narratives collected from these research projects do not constitute a representative sample for either of the interviewed groups. The reasons for this are several. Firstly, for evident reasons – both projects were carried out too late and many potential respondents had simply passed away. In the case of the Jewish community especially, the Holocaust and post-Holocaust emigration (both legal and illegal) reduced the community's existence in Slovakia to practically zero. Following the year 1989 it was impossible to capture the interpretation of Orthodox Jews – most of whom had left the country after WWII or following 1968.

Time and emigration were also negative factors when it came to collecting stories of small entrepreneurs. In both cases, however, the willingness or unwillingness of respondents to cooperate was crucial. Nevertheless, despite the above mentioned fragmentation, the corpus of collected narratives represents two perspectives, which were virtually unknown from official sources until after 1989. These are 'subsystems' of Slovak citizens' collective memory, which have still not become an integral part of official memory. Comparing memories of both research corpuses allows us to point out some common as well as distinctive features.

I identified commonalities predominantly in the formal aspects of these narratives and in the aims of the narrators. Both groups constructed their life stories on comparisons between two or more periods of their life and society in Slovakia during the 20thcentury. Respondents drew comparisons between a period during which they were persecuted, and a preceding or succeeding era. These life stories convey individual, but also familial and collective memories of people with a similar faith, which had not been part of public discourse before 1989. For the first time, our research gave narrators the opportunity to formulate their stories for audiences of a different generation and historical experience. Their aim was to 'give testimony', not only about themselves and an era of persecution they survived, but also testimony in representation of an entire group.

Logically, the narratives differ in their content. Noted differences include the characters and the intensity of consequences of persecution; the influence of the experienced trauma on later lives; auto- and hetero-images of their own group as well as of the majority; the majority's stereotypical perception of both persecuted groups; recollecting and forgetting their collective historical experience as a result of public discourse and the official historical memory of the Slovak society.

During the Communist regime's entire existence, Slovak society's image of small entrepreneurs was largely stereotypical. This heterogeneous group was given the unifying label of 'class enemy'. As they represented private entrepreneurship and freedom of thought and conduct, the regime viewed them as a threat that, as a group, must cease to exist. The Communist regime successfully attained this objective: the group was de facto and de jure obliterated from society's structure. In most cases, however, its former members and their families remained in the society. Thus, on a local level, the official and unofficial memories of entrepreneurs coexisted. Fragments of memories, in which the entrepreneurs' presence in the town was recalled positively, were maintained within the local collective memory. During the time of terror and fright, however, they were not publicly communicated. Thus, when I began to pursue my re-

search, I was able to find these recollections as though locked in a 'time capsule'.

The image of Jews in Slovak society was burdened by prejudice and stereotypes throughout the 20thcentury and in a latent form resonates until today. (Krekovičová 1998). This attitude was significantly influenced by the social and political situation in Slovakia, and exploited by different regimes and their ideologies. Antagonism, prejudice, and anti-Semitism of Slovaks provided a breeding ground for the totalitarian political establishment of 1939-1945.

> The year 41 was already the end of studying for citizens of Jewish origin. That was the time when I started to think not just about my own fate, but that of us all. Because the store my father owned with my uncle was aryanized, we were expelled from our flat, from our own home and the persecution had begun in 38 or 39. I also felt it in school. We had Czech professors and also Czech classmates, but their time with us had already ended as they were caught up in the anti-Czech boycott that came with the Slovak state... By the time I moved from the gymnasium to the business academy, that was 40-41, I didn't have any Czech classmates. Strange times were beginning." (Man born in 1925, interviewed 1997)

Jews, labeled by propaganda as 'mortal enemies of the Slovak nation', ceased to be a part of Slovak society. First, anti-Jewish Ludak legislation 'gave blessing' to the mass pauperization of Jews by Aryanization (the process of transferring Jewish property to ethnic-Slovak owners). Second, the regime arranged deportations of this economically-dependent - and therefore unwanted - minority beyond Slovakia's borders. Inhabitants of Slovakia thus either became active accomplices or passive bystanders in the regime of their first independent state. The State's independence and national interests became absolute values, which determined the lives of all inhabitants of Slovakia and turned them into subject creatures. (Up to this day, however, many Slovaks have not been able, or do not want, to critically assess their own past).

> So much injustice I've survived in my life! I would like to live long enough to believe that this time people are trying for justice towards others. I want nothing else, and nothing else even interests me. But, for instance, when as a young soldier I talked about the horrors committed during fascism, how they murdered people and divided families, and about the killing of small children, one twelve year-old boy answered „I can't help that, but believe me I really hate Jews." So I smiled, he didn't know who I was, and I said, „OK my son, I accept what your saying here, but let's try to convince each other. You convince me of your words and I'll convince you of mine. Do you know any Jews?" And when he didn't, „then why do you hate Jews?" He said he'd heard about them, his grandparents had told him, and that's why he hated them." (Man born in 1924, interviewed in 1995)

> In 1948 I got into school in Dubnica. I wanted an education. I didn't want to be Jewish and neither did my brother. It was the reaction of a lot of people – an attempt to assimilate. (man born 1935, interviewed 2006).

The Slovak Holocaust represents a huge trauma for the entire society. It is a trauma which, even today, has not been discussed and critically judged and continues to burden Jewish-majority relations. After 1945, these crimes against citizens of the Slovak state were not looked at in such a way as to launch a public debate that could lead to healing. On the contrary, the trial and subsequent execution of the priest and President of the first Slovak state, J. Tiso, turned him into a martyr. A martyr who is still revered by a large part of the society, including some politicians and historians.

During the Communist era, 1948-1989, anti-Semitism was disguised by new ideological rhetoric warning of 'the Zionist threat'. The Jewish community lived a 'life under a mask' – trying to hide their identity or opting for full assimilation. For decades after 1945, the life of Jews was taboo within public discourse and, at the same time, subject to silence and deliberate forgetting

among survivors.

Contemporary Collective Memory in Slovakia and the Culture of Remembrance

Following 1989, historians and social scientists were free to start researching topics, which had been taboo. Thus, an opportunity was created to revive the collective memory of certain groups, and add these to the official recollection process and Slovakia's collective memory via free academic and public discourse. What is the situation after 20 years?

Research projects focusing on persecuted groups during the Ludak and Communist regimes have been carried out in Slovakia and a large number of academic studies have been published on the topic. There are ongoing discussions among historians and social scientists about the need to critically revise modern Slovak history and 'reconstruct' collective memory. These academic findings should influence future historian's knowledge, but also public opinion and the collective memory via relevant education, media, and political discourse.

Despite the fact that the fall of Communism took place 20 years ago, the process of accepting and incorporating the memory of heterogeneous groups into public discourse about Slovakia's Communist past is only beginning. Regardless of the boom in publishing academic works on particular aspects of the Communist regime - on the activities of the state security services, or on politically persecuted groups of Slovak inhabitants, these findings have not been adequately reflected in public discourse nor in education. There still exists only homogenised and simplified reflections of a half-century of the totalitarian Communist regime, and the current political discourse in Slovakia completely fails to reflect this era's horrors.

In Slovakia, recollections of the totalitarian Slovak State currently exist in just two antagonistic variants, Jewish and non-Jewish (Stern 2008). In addition, there are antagonistic historiographies and public discourses as well as diverse interpretations of these memories within the Slovak political spectrum. Officially, the non-Jewish majority does not accept that all the inhabitants of the wartime Slovak State were a part of the totalitarian regime and that many either actively or passively took part in its creation. On one end of the spectrum rests the formulation of a traumatic experience by Jewish survivors, which has a therapeutic affect on individuals, the community and should (but in reality does not) exercise such affect on the whole society. On the other end rests a romantic-nationalistic attitude towards the first independent Slovak State, which is promoted by the misleading efforts of some historians and politicians to separate the state from its governing regime (!), in order to present the former in a positive light.

Following 1989, Slovak society has been regularly exposed to official statements highlighting the need to critically reflect on the Holocaust, and Holocaust education is now included in the educational system (this is, in part, a result of international pressure and obligations). Experience suggests that educating young people by directing their focus to local and regional history could be an adequate method of increasing their knowledge of their town, region, and country's multicultural past. It is a method, which 'allows' multiple perspectives to enter public discourse and through that discourse society's collective memory. This is, however, a very slow and painful process.

In their rhetoric and programs, Slovak politicians emphasize national elements, which exclude diversified recollection reflecting common history. Reluctance to present critical reflections of experience from both totalitarian regimes is still dominant. Victims' voices have no political significance or social authority, which generates considerable disillusion. It is as if we were waiting for the uncomfortable witnesses of our past to gradually leave our society. Why is it so? I presume this situation was brought about by several factors:

1. Many current politicians (whether regional or national) have a Communist past or were at least active supporters of Communism during their youth, and are reluctant to draw attention to this part of their past.

2. After years spent living under an imposed ideological worldview and pursuing only one ultimate truth, it is unimaginable, uncomfortable, and for some even impossible to accept the fact, that societies are composed of diverse recollections and substantially different individual and group experiences.

3. Both totalitarian regimes turned their citizens into hostages and, at the same time, into cofounders, accomplices or, at least, into silent supporters of their legitimacy. As a result, public discourse is overshadowed by individual and collective feelings of accountability, which hinder attempts at self reflection and critical reflection on modern Slovak history.

4. Simultaneously, living under a totalitarian regime results in a fear of formulating dissenting opinions, which consequently leads to oversimplified explanations.

A great degree of stereotyping comes into play when recalling the Communist regime: negative Communist leaders, members of the party apparatus and executors of power vs. the homogeneous anonymous rest of society. Today the Ludak regime, whose actors now constitute the oldest age-group in our society, is even more distant and remains veiled by the mist of the first Slovak national state even more than before. Images of this particular period are monolithic and they do not admit to any level of collaboration with the regime, or to the use or misuse of opportunities the regime offered to the 'selected few' and to the 'silent majority'. The fear factor, symptomatic for Slovak society during both regimes, still exists and exercises its force. Today, however, it has been transformed into carelessness, aversion, disinterest or an inability to formulate a critical perspective on the past.

The part of the population, which calls for a critical reassessment of their own past and demands a Slovak collective memory based on multiple dimensions, has been labeled as unpatriotic and criticized for lacking national consciousness. The other part of society sees its indiscriminate nationalism, heavily based on myths, legends and half-truth, as a demonstration of national pride and patriotism. The third, yet most influential group, are politicians who intentionally (mis)use history to validate and justify their own social standing. The fourth, rather heterogeneous group, constitutes members of minorities living in Slovakia who have logically had a problem accepting and identifying with the majority-framed public discourse of our past. The fifth and largest part of Slovak society seems to have absolutely no interest in actively participating in a critical re-evaluation of modern Slovak history and collective memory as such. Only intensive debate about historical facts and their processing by various groups with distinct historical experiences, which constitute our society, can lead to mutual understanding and an increase in the tolerance and sensitivity which are requisite for our multicultural country (Siebert 2008). Slovakia has continuously witnessed a selective and intentional public manipulation of historical events and characters by politicians, and their deliberate emphasis on a monolithic Slovak community (Michela 2008:58). What is the influence of these phenomena on shaping our country's collective memory or its historical culture? (Le Goff 2007 : 149) For the time being, it seems that both of these processes remain subject to partisan guidelines, much the same as during the two totalitarian regimes of 20th-century Slovakia.

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