

“In Karlov, we were like a Family”: Communal memory space as lived mnemonic device



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Abstract

This paper attempts to answer the questions of how present perception and conceptualizations of everyday life in the city recreate representations of the past and the image of a long demolished neighbourhood of a workers' colony, and how this image is used as a “mnemonic device” when narrators seek to respond to the perceived socio-spatial problems. We deal with what we call “oppressed memory” of a neighbourhood that does not exist in its “memory form” anymore, but is, though, lived as a communal memory space and used as a memory device to respond to the perceived current social and spatial problems of the city of Pilsen and beyond.

Keywords

collective memory, community of remembering, Pilsen, workers, narrative identity

INTRODUCTION¹

This paper deals with the narrative identity of former industrial workers within the post-industrial city. The text is not to present a theoretical discussion on the memory concept, which might have been overstretched within anthropology and social science in general. Rather, the memory concept is treated here as a part of the general study of cultural reproduction. This paper concentrates on questions of how present perception and conceptualizations of everyday life in the city recreate representations of the past and the image of a long demolished neighbourhood of a workers' colony, and how this image is used as a mnemonic device when narrators seek to respond to the perceived socio-spatial problems. The workers' colony, demolished in the late 1980's, is approached both as a product of neighbourhood group failure and a device to tackle it.

For ethnographers, any research of neighbourhoods that do not physically exist, obviously constitutes a problem. Although some archival documents are available, the site is not there anymore, and participant observation of everyday life is impossible, one cannot share the experience of what it means to live there, with those people, under those structural forces. Such difficulties led us, as well as many others, to study the neighbourhood community as it is represented, narrated, contested and recreated by those who remember people who used to live there and who continue to

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draw upon the former local experience of social relations and spatial organization of the site itself and the city as a whole. It is clear that, as in plenty of cases documented by research (e.g. Olick and Robbins 1998, DuBois 2014), the narratives about the past produced by these former inhabitants are embedded in the present perception, experience and material conditions, they reflect present needs, projects and dreams. They also underpin or undermine, reproduce or challenge — respond to the dominant and official memory of the post-industrial city with its proper means to channel and shape class identities.



OBR. 1 Karlov. Informants' archives.

This paper focuses on former industrial workers, most of whom were employed in the Škoda Works before they retired and inhabited a colony built for workers and located near the Škoda factories in Pilsen serving its housing function until the late 1980's when it was demolished, leaving behind only minor spatial traces: a building originally serving a local gymnastics organization Sokol (now a pub and music club), a building originally serving as a place for social gatherings "People's House" ("Lidový dům", now vacant), some toponyms ("Karlov", some names of streets), and trees which formerly stood in front of the houses. The informants have formed a group of remembering, meeting annually at least twice, many of them keeping close relationship with each other. We have interviewed them, paid friendly visits and participated at their events since 2013, first as a group of researchers, then, since 2016, the authors have continued studying the group.

SOME METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS

In line with findings elaborated upon within theoretical memory studies, it must be noted that the goal of this paper is not to reconstruct any exact past events, memory is rather treated as a collective socially enacted enterprise which is selective and, so to say, interpretative, and embodied, as mentioned above, in present frameworks (Szaló and Hamar 2006 write about communities and events of remembering; see also Rose-Redwood et al. 2008). We are primarily focusing on “narrative truth” (cf. Smith 2000: 328) and narratives about Karlov, which are formed, contested, negotiated and distributed within the context of a group of remembering. The story of Karlov shared as the official narrative of the group organizes the shared representation (cf. Wertsch 2008) of the demolished neighbourhood and is reproduced at groups gatherings which are taking place since the late 1980’s. These events constitute the social framework for remembering, enable repertoires of stories to be told, and one can come across different mnemonic items (cf. Olick and Robbins 1998; Olick et al. 2011), such as photographs, a map of Karlov, some archival documents, articles from press, or our own book (Lupták Burzová et al. 2013). There are typically approximately 80 former inhabitants present, and they usually sit next to their peers or neighbours, sometimes newcomers show up:

“True, I do not know some of them by name, only by sight, but you know you met them everyday for years. So, I know that these or those lived in the Seventh Street, but I do not recall their names. One knows everybody and can speak to them, but one usually chooses his peers, sort of his group, and people sit in such bunches in the hall.”

The atmosphere is typically very friendly, people talk for several hours, exchange little stories and photographs. Dozens of informants confess that they consider the gatherings very important, they forget about their daily problems and return to their childhood, the group confirms and updates their memories and shared experience. Many of them testify that, as mentioned above, these shared recollections indeed have palliative effect on them, they fulfil their individual identity needs. Sometimes, especially when one’s peers pass away, people stop visiting the gatherings as they do not know anybody else who would help them “remember who they are”:

“The man [she used to meet at the gatherings] always said ‘Karlov lives as long as we live.’”

However, many of our informants perceive that their memories potentially conflict with the dominant post-communist memory, which makes their remembering insecure, sometimes painful. Their remembering conflicts with the dominant Czech collective memory based on recalling traumatic events of world wars and the Communist regime (cf. Eyal 2004). Their collective remembering also reflects specific beliefs about the world (cf. Herman and Vervaeck 2001: 1) and Karlov serves as a mnemonic device to the critical assessment of the present socio-spatial order.





And we can say that their remembering is to a certain degree “oppressed” by the present official narrative devaluating both working-class memory and the site of Karlov itself, due to the current presence of “inadaptable” foreign workers there (cf. Sennett and Cobb 1972; see e.g. Kalb’s discussion of symbolic dispossessions 2009). Interviews, both those recorded and informal, have been constrained by this perceived inadequateness of some narratives, sometimes leading to the informant referring to archival sources or to those individuals he or she believed might have much more transferrable mnemonic capital. These individuals were those with perceived valuable memories as they were not members of the Communist party, were engaged in the anti-regime Sokol gymnastics movement, or managed to get university degree. In our interview situations often happened that some informants either reduced their narrative to a limited number of stories shared in the group narrative and embedded in material objects of memory (such as photographs) or said they had nothing to say, that they do not remember anything worth recording anymore. Let us recall Bozon and Thiesse (1986: 247) here:

“The memory of the oppressed, it is first and foremost an oppressed memory: the presence at the interview of a third party of higher social and cultural rank (an intermediary who had put us in touch with the informant), often led to the interviewee’s breaking off from what he was saying. He expected the more learned and higher-ranking member of the community to talk more knowledgeably than himself about the village’s past. Theirs is therefore an isolated memory, which mulls over and over the same themes in the course of rambling conversations down at the Old Age Pensioners’ Club, or in the local bar.”

In fact, this collective memory is no more than a palliative to assuage unbearable individual recollections. By reconstructing the past as a time stood still, doomed to the constant repetition of its own Sameness, people can at least verbalize memories of days gone by, when the group had a social existence.

We dealt with a very similar situation when interviewing some of the informants for the first time and sometimes gathered only a small number of almost the same micro stories, and they even drew some of them from the texts we had published, referring most often to our book “You can read it there, there is everything!”. Still others, who have not participated in the collective events and group remembering, and cannot base their narratives in shared representations, can offer, in their own view, even less. They stress that Karlov represents a community of distant past, it does not exist anymore, and they live “completely different reality”.

THE NARRATIVE “WE”

The interviews show that our informants stress an emergence of a collective identity — an identity of those who lived in Karlov and spent much time together. This narrated collective identity was, in the perspective of our informants, enabled by the relative isolation of the colony as well as by class and professional homogeneity. We



OBR.2 Children in Karlov. Informants' archives.

can assume that they valued most of all family, neighbour and peer bonds, and the activities they had in common with others, such as sports:

“Thanks to the fact that my grandpa was employed in Škoda, and my dad was also working there, I myself ended there as well. This led to us getting an apartment in the colony, in Karlov, because Škoda workers got apartments there, they were probably preferred. So my childhood began there, and it was marvellous, because... I cannot even imagine any different childhood than I had there, and this was probably due to the many children living there. There were like ten, fifteen children, so we could from very young age — there were not too many cars at that period passing the colony — play football in the morning right in the streets, maybe one car drove there during a whole day, or sometimes none. So we lived in the streets, in a group. There was a slide in one street, so we went sledging a lot, we played football, among other things. But! The crucial role in my life was played by the gymnastics hall of Sokol, I started to do sports there with everybody — I don't know when, maybe even before school.”

All the stories we managed to collect point to the significance of a group, or even community, in the process of remembering the life in the neighbourhood. One's place in the narrative is in the group, he or she is an integral part of social bonds, which define him or her, not the other way around. We refer to this as “narrative identity”. This concept is used and elaborated upon mainly in psychological and philosophical works and it designates various ways, strategies and techniques individuals employ to construct and reconstruct through narratives a coherent and meaningful representation of their lives and themselves as social beings (cf. e.g. Raffard et al. 2009; Singer 2004). Narrative is a means for reinterpreting experience, both individuals and groups use it as a tool by which meaning is produced:



OBR. 3 Gatherings. Informants' archives.

“Their personal narratives, their “narrative identity” situates them meaningfully in their culture, providing unity to their past, present, and anticipated future. Each addition to the ongoing life narrative offers another opportunity for individuals to understand where they belong in the world and to determine what takes them closer or further away from the goals to which they aspire.” (Singer 2004: 445–446)

This paper focuses on shared narratives of the former inhabitants of the workers' colony Karlov, stories told and distributed in the context of a “community of remembering”. We can discern a specific perspective and specific knowledge behind the reproduction of their group identity. Majority of narrators characterize the group of former inhabitants as a sociable and solidary community; good and warm relations and collective activities constitute the core of all narratives we managed to record. The emphasis put on communality is one of the mnemonic tools used to counterbalance what informants perceive as fragmented social relations of today's society:

[Researcher] “Why do you think that all those people keep remembering Karlov in this way?”

[Informant] “So, people were very sociable there, they visited each other, they took chairs in front of the houses, sat together and spoke together. Today, you do not talk to your neighbours, right?”



OBR.4 Karlov before the demolition. Informants' archives.

Although many informants experienced degrading physical state of the colony's buildings, they usually prefer to talk about good social relations. Many of them eventually left Karlov and sought better housing, they tend to relativize or even avoid the fact. The progressive decay and even the demolition are not in many cases narrated as traumatic or narrated at all:

[Researcher] "And we have here a strange paradox, because many people moving in the 1970s were happy to find new comfortable living, but, at the same time, they say they did not want to leave."

[Informant] "You need to distinguish two associations. As a community, we were very friendly towards each other, but the quality of housing... Here, in this new house, people so not virtually know each other. They random say "Hello". It was not like that back then. Should you need anything, you knew where to go and that people would help you, they would keep an eye on your children. Things were different there. So that is the point. Those Karlov inhabitants lived and held together."

When informants describe the physical condition of the colony, they emphasize those aspects that supported lively community exchanges: not too many cars, enough room to play with peers, spaces for sports, the self-sufficiency and spatial isolation of the colony, rural atmosphere and the surrounding nature. "Even though some may think



that we were low class, that Karlov was a dirty ghetto, we are proud”, one informant said.

“Look, people did not want to leave the neighbourhood. The fact that we still meet, and that those people still attend those events does probably prove that they liked it there. If they were not interested, if they did not take to it, they would not participate at those events, they would not rejoice at the presence of their former neighbour. So I think, they all liked it there and that, even though they had only a small apartment for four, one room and a kitchen, and cold water, and if they wanted to have a bath, they would take water in their hands and pour it into the tub, right. And that they had to use washboards to wash their clothes... The truth is, those people liked it there, which can be seen, as I say, in the fact that we meet twice a year... It happened that more than one hundred, hundred and twenty people showed up.”

The narrative “we”, the story of the community of the inhabitants of Karlov, is very significant. They emphasize the bond as a family bond, especially when remembering childhood experience:

“We were just one big family. All the time together, right? We were all the time, our part of the street, together. We went to one garden and played all sorts of games... We organized matches...”

The constitutive other of the “narrative identity” is both the past “newcomers”, people who moved to Karlov for a certain limited period of time in the last decades before the demolition, and people living in their neighbourhood today. The former were not, according to those who perceive themselves as the “natives”, attached to the community, they lacked any point of anchorage, they did not participate in peer groups’ activities and cannot — or do not want to — identify with the communal narrative. The shared representation entails that “who lived there, remembers with affection” and those who did only spent their nights there “cannot understand the memory”. Narrative identity, to put it in other words, derives from participation in social relations, in “togetherness”:

“Our children were scolded for pouring water at their playground so that they could ice skate. I do not know whether somebody complained... Maybe they were not even our people, maybe they were those newcomers. The people of Karlov always held together.”

Who is the true member of the Karlov community, then? They do not necessarily need to be born there, but they have to engage in communal activities, either in the past or in the present group remembering at the gatherings. In this sense, a true community member can be even an individual who did not actually live in Karlov, but who did participate in the street life, knows the local terminology and engaged in close relationships with others.



We have already mentioned that such idealized memory of life under socialism and in a place, which is now negatively stigmatized, can be seen as “oppressed” memory. The shared representation of Karlov as a cohesive community as such challenges the official national traumatic memory organized in the axis of “bad Germans”, “bad communists” and “good capitalists”. Our informants as narrators sometimes resist the dominant strategies of representations organized into homogeneous antagonistic groups and periods. We will see below that narrative identity, the narrative “we” of our informants often crosses political or class or even national borders:

[Researcher] “So, when you think about Karlov, as you perceived it when you were a child, let us say, in the 1950s?”

[Informant] “We had a beautiful apartment and all the inhabitants were friendly and sociable, nobody would harm anyone. We were a family. The only difference was that People’s house was occupied by social democrats and that the building of Sokol was populated by national socialists. These were something better off, of a somewhat higher status. Workers and office workers. Or something like that. But nobody harmed anybody else. There were also some German families there, we also had friends among them... normal children like us, although they did not speak Czech that well.”

Work is part of the shared narrative, our informants as workers proudly remember their non-alienated jobs as well as the fact that they were socially rewarded for it. A specific perspective can be identified, which includes beliefs about ideal relation between the employer and the employees. Especially the founders of the Škoda Works are routinely appreciated:

“Housing for workers was great for that period, one would say. We had a sewerage system, we had water, electricity, right? ... The gardens in front of the houses... I think Emil Škoda did a great job for workers.”

“It can be said that workers were quite well off, because Škoda, although a capitalist, made good housing for those people. At that time, it was great. Karlov, nice people together, the apartments were not bad, maybe some changes could have been made, maybe it could have been reconstructed... That was Karlov, life was good there, and almost everybody worked in Škoda.”

As we have mentioned above, all remembering entails interpretation of today’s experience and reflects the present, it is always the product of today’s social needs. The narrative identity discussed in this text contains a specific perspective that often helps narrators understand and respond to their present everyday experience, social and spatial order and to cope with it. The communal representation of Karlov, the lived memory space of the colony based on intensive relations with others, is a tool that can be employed to challenge the perceived deterioration of social relations in the present.



IN PLACE OF KARLOV

There is another important issue we wish to sketch, already indicated by Maurice Halbwachs: collective memory is not only social, but also entails time and space, always alludes to the shared lived space. Although maintained that the shared representation of Karlov is anchored in Karlov narrated as an organism of intense social ties, we have to add that the material aspects of the past and present Karlov as well as the exchange of artefacts, such as photographs, are also important:

“There was everything, a grocery store, pubs, space for sports... Everything was there. Our ma always said: “In Karlov, even bricks blossom” and yes, the yards were covered with bricks and there were forget-me-nots growing in between. So that is why my ma told me: “I am not leaving Karlov, even the bricks blossom here.””

In this way, narrators fill the gap left after the demolition of the colony and enter into a memory space, which serves to anchor the collective remembering. Thus, even though informants refuse to relate to the present site, to the remains of Karlov and the residual objects, and even though they say that “Karlov does not exist anymore”, they do anchor their remembering in the memory space of Karlov, which they carefully look after and examine every time they meet. If they would refer to the present site of Karlov, they would risk that the worth of their remembering would be challenged — the shared memory space, on the contrary, cannot be seen, experienced, nor occupied by anybody from the outside. Karlov is an imagined place, a meaningful social space (cf. Cresswell 2004; Harvey 1996), which serves as a mnemonic device and as such supports both the collective identity and combination and links between the past and the present.

CONCLUSION

This paper sought to discuss the questions of how present perception and conceptualizations of everyday life in the city recreate representations of the past and the image of a long demolished neighbourhood of a workers’ colony, and how this image is used as a mnemonic device when narrators seek to respond to the perceived socio-spatial problems. We dealt with what we call “oppressed memory” of a neighbourhood that does not exist in its memory form anymore, but is, though, lived as a communal memory space and used as a memory device to respond to the perceived current social and spatial problems of the city of Pilsen and beyond.

Urban scholars claim that society and space are mutually determined. (Social) space is produced socially, and every society shapes it according to its own needs (Harvey 1973: 273). The memory space of Karlov can be seen as a continuously negotiated product of beliefs and spatial meanings (cf. Pospěch 2010) of how should social and spatial order work, how should the relations between space and society be organized. The memory space discussed in this paper allows the reproduction of a “narrative community” which can be thus secured as stable and unchanging. The

lived memory space is a place where work still holds its human dimensions, where people can self-realize, the inhabitants can creatively produce and reproduce their everyday lives in the friendly company of others (cf. Mollona 2009: xii).



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