

What are your thoughts? II

Carolyn: We met a lot of time witnesses, already. They seemed to have very interesting stories and opinions, but I have to say, sometimes I was bored despite of that. Some of the time witnesses just talk very longwinded and are somehow hard to understand. In those situations, I am always a little uncertain: Shouldn't they prepare themselves to talk to an audience in an interesting way? Could or should such time witnesses receive some kind of training on rhetoric or on how to present a story? On the other side, they are talking about their personal experiences and maybe, by training them, the authenticity of their stories would get lost.

Ronald: But what means "authentic"? I don't think the time witnesses should be trained. But you can recognize which people tell their story just for them, even when we are present. However, the time witnesses we met in Slovakia had interest in us and actively tried to engage in a conversation with us.

If people talk about their lives, there are two possible effects: The first being that you try to present yourself in a good light. Even mistakes have a good side, in the end. The second being that history becomes stringent and smooth. It's notable that most of the time witnesses did not talk about their doubts, about conflicts inside the movements or about the Post-Revolution-Era. In our group, there was a focus on the struggle for freedom as such. But the shaping of the new possibilities and the adaption to a free life were rarely mentioned. Do you think the longwindedness is caused by the fact, that we are hearing the same story again and again? Or does it emerge because people are enjoying to reminisce those times, which changed their worlds? What do you think, Caro?

Carolyn: I do not think this longwindedness is there, because we are hearing the same story, since the personal experiences differ to a great degree. But I think that other thought of yours was interesting, that we seemingly prefer to talk about the struggle for freedom and the revolutions instead of the time after those events. I guess, that might be because the Post-Revolution-Era was really complex and because certain, phenomena, like the remaining of old elites in power, might not be visible at first sight and hard to describe in an entertaining way. If you are talking about the Revolution itself it might be easier to reduce the complexity of the story. And, as you hinted at, maybe that is the kind of story we like to hear.

Ronald: It is dangerous to talk about „the kind of story we like to hear“. We are part of an anniversary-event. Sure, freedom is a precious and existential good. But we have to be cautious not to assume, that in those times, all people wanted to join the long, hard struggle of the freedom-fighters. That way, we are missing other aspects: the military, the communists or the people who wanted a betterment of their lives in a rather diffuse way.

You are clouding the time you are talking about by describing it as „confusing“ and „complex“. Transformations include powerful dynamics, leading to unknown consequences. Maybe we have a hard time recapitulating them. I, personally, regard the 90s as the most teachable time period: The societies had to invent themselves from scratch and it's those processes, which help us to get to know other cultures in-depth. You were asking yourself, if the time witnesses should be trained. But it's also up to the listener to prepare himself before hearing about their experiences. Time witnesses are rarely able to talk in a simplified way, because for them it's the details which matter and they want to share their detailed knowledge with us, enabling us to walk through their past with them, step for step. When we will be celebrating another anniversary in some decades, there will also be experts talking about freedom and they might add complexity to the issue and render the stories of the past more exciting.

Carolyn: I did not say or at least mean, that the time after '89 was especially complex. What I wanted to say was, that the complexity of some events can be reduced easier than that of others; revolution can easily be presented in an entertaining and exciting manner. I agree with you, we – as participants of this study trip- have the responsibility to prepare ourselves before meeting a time witness. But time witnesses also talk to other people, which might not be prepared. Maybe, in some people, you need to spark a first interests and that- in my opinion- is not possible by telling stories in a longwinded way.

There is another point concerning which I share your opinion: we should not only listen to people who were active participants of the Revolutions but also to experts and to other voices, which might show, that not everyone was a freedom-fighter back then. There was also another way of living and a certain kind of normalcy.

Written by Ronald Wendorf and Carolyn Bohn

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