Czech Emigrants Before and After the Iron Curtain

Life stories in the context of changing cultural narratives

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Master's thesis in Sociology

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UNIVERSITY OF OSLO
November 2006

Summary

This research is based on life story interviews with 12 Czechs/Slovaks who emigrated during communism and returned to the Czech Republic after 1989. The aim of the study is to understand these biographies in the context of cultural discourses in the Czech Republic today, and in particular, to shed light on the tension that at times emerges among those who emigrated and those who stayed in communist Czechoslovakia. The basic theoretical premise of this research is that we depend on others to validate our life stories and to establish ourselves as moral, integral beings. The stories we tell about our lives are always interwoven with broader narratives about the community in which we live, and with other biographies (Gergen, 1999; Gran 2000). Historical change, such as the fall of communism, can alter the rules for biographical evaluation. The new narratives favour certain kinds of pasts and discredit others, thereby strengthening the positions of different communities of memory. The encounters between returning emigrants and the majority serve as an illustration of the struggle about which criteria that should be considered valid for the construction of a moral biography today. Divergent interpretations about the communist past and the individual's responsibility during the communist regime can lend support to or undermine the validity of life stories. Returning emigrants constitute a biographical mirror that challenges the life stories of some people in the post-communist space. At the same time, emigrants' biographies are also open to scrutiny. Upon return, they find that few people are able to understand their experiences from abroad, and their motivation for leaving is often questioned. Idealised images of the West and narratives about suffering at home overshadow significant parts of the emigrants' own biographies.

The main point of this study is to investigate the relationship between individual life stories and broader cultural and historical narratives. This may be a means to gain insight into important social processes, particularly in a society that is recovering from a historical epoch that is defined today as a national trauma. The tension between returning emigrants and the majority may be viewed as a symptom of the fact that the Czech Republic, as a post-socialist society, is still grappling with its own past and the ways in which the communist epoch is interconnected with present biographies.

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Contents

1. Introduction

1.1 The fall of communism and returning emigrants

The rise and fall of communism are two significant landmarks in recent European history. The first event resulted in the division of Europe into two separate enclaves, a situation that endured for more than forty years. During this time, thousands of people migrated from the Eastern side of the iron curtain to the West[1]. The fall of communism in 1989 opened up Europe to a migration wave in the opposite direction, as some of the émigrés in Western Europe sought to go back to their countries of origin. Having lived in some cases for several decades in a different country, returning emigrants bring with them experiences and perspectives that differ from those of the majority.

This study will focus on the life stories of Czech[2] emigrants[3] who left their country during communism, and who returned to the Czech Republic after 1989. The aim of the study is to understand these biographies in the context of changing cultural narratives in the Czech Republic and in particular, to shed light on the tension that at times emerges among those who emigrated and those who stayed in communist Czechoslovakia. In doing so, I will focus on the intersection between cultural narratives, life strategy, historical experience, and moral identity. More specifically, I will attempt to answer the following questions:

> *In what ways do dominant cultural narratives about the communist past, the West, and the act of emigration reduce or increase the validity of emigrants' life stories in the post-communist context? How do emigrants maintain their moral identity within their life stories by confirming or contesting such narratives? And what can the relationship between returning emigrants and the majority tell us about current challenges in Czech post-communist society?*

[1] The estimated numbers of emigrants during the communist period is a matter of some dispute. Some historians suggest that approximately 500 000 people left the Czech Republic during the communist epoch as a whole (Skjerven 2000: 38).

[2] The Czech Republic formed part of Czechoslovakia at the time when the people in this study emigrated. The sample of emigrants includes one person from present-day Slovakia, who re-emigrated to present-day Czech Republic. For the sake of simplicity, however, I will refer to these emigrants as "Czech" and not as Czechoslovak or Czech and Slovak emigrants.

[3] In the Czech context, the term "emigrant" often bears connotations of emigration related to economic as opposed to political motives. In the context of this thesis, it will be used as the neutral term for someone who, for whatever reason, left Czechoslovakia during the communist epoch.

The two first questions can be seen as springboards from which to answer the last question, which constitutes the core of this thesis. The more general purpose of this study is thus to investigate how individual life stories can provide us with deeper insight into a community's struggle to reach a satisfying agreement about a shared past, when this past recently has undergone radical revisions and is open to a variety of different interpretations.

Gergen (1999) suggests that community and history are intimately interconnected. The ability to agree upon an acceptable story about "what actually happened" is fundamental in the creation of social cohesion and for establishing the rules according to which individuals can achieve a coherent moral identity within the community. As such, it is not up to us as individuals to establish ourselves as moral, integral beings. The stories we tell about our lives are always interwoven with the narratives of the community in which we live and with the life stories of other people who play significant parts in the creation of our own storylines. We thus depend on our social surroundings to grant our life stories legitimacy or *narrative validity* (Gergen 1999: 10; Gran 2000: ii). A life story is therefore embedded within the greater cultural and historical context in which it is told. However, history and culture are not static entities: on the contrary, they are in constant flux. As dominant narratives change, so too do the criteria according to which an individual legitimately can portray his life story. Different rules for what constitutes good and bad may change with historical development, as the past is reinterpreted and infused with new meaning.

Within post-communist countries such as the Czech Republic, the dominant narrative of communism was replaced almost overnight by a capitalist one. Today, the communist period is being dealt with as a historical trauma from which the country is trying to recover. The challenge lays in coming to terms with a problematic past, when the life stories of a large proportion of the population developed according to the demands of the system responsible for that very trauma. Therefore, a historical trauma is not only about facing the pain and suffering experienced by the population; bridging the gap between official history and lived lives is equally demanding. This is likely to be a central problem for any country that is attempting to reconcile itself with a past under an authoritarian regime. One can imagine the difficulty of making sense of one's past life in the context of a new narrative that has replaced and relegated the communist adventure to an historical dustbin labelled "cruel" and "insufficient." Different life strategies obtain new values according to the post-communist narrative that rejects the old regime; the villains within the old regime become the heroes of the new era.

In the same way that Czech society as a whole is undergoing a process of reconciliation with a difficult historical epoch, so too are the re-emigrants attempting to reconnect with a significant and formative part of their personal pasts[4]. Lives lived abroad and lives lived at home have produced diverging historical experiences, and differences at the outset may have been reinforced during years of absence. When these lives finally converge again though the process of remigration, it is often difficult to understand the experience of the other.

This does not mean, however, that re-emigrants are free to convey their experiences in any way they like, to fill in the empty time slot of an unshared past. During years of absence, narratives have been formed about those who left and the lives they led. Or more importantly, these narratives are being developed in the present, as people deduce lives lived from whatever tangible evidence they can observe. Perceptions of re-emigrants are closely connected to narratives about the capitalist West. Thus, on the one hand, returning emigrants are seen to embody many of the things for which Czech people strive today, such as material and professional success. On the other hand, this very fact makes re-emigrants susceptible to suspicion and envy.

Re-emigrants are also being evaluated in the context discussed above, where Czech society is trying to grapple with its relationship to the communists past. Emigration was one of a few possible ways of positioning oneself vis-à-vis the regime. Choosing to emigrate seems to be open to a variety of interpretations, ranging from viewing emigrants as heroes or victims to a judging them to be cowards or opportunists. Re-emigrants thus have an ambivalent moral identity; it is not always clear what their motives for emigration were and why they now are returning to their roots. At the same time, the presence of returning emigrants compels those who stayed to reflect upon their own life strategy during communism. Because of their absence, emigrants are in a position to speak about topics that are usually veiled in silence, thereby opening up for questions that in some cases challenge prevailing interpretations.

Thus, the life stories of Czech re-emigrants and their newly formed relationship to a society in which they are familiar strangers can be seen as a series of symbolic encounters between different cultural narratives that allow for a different interpretations of the past and the individual's life path during the communist epoch.

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[4] There are no official estimates of the number of emigrants who have returned to the Czech Republic after 1989. Nešpor (2002: 800) makes an estimate based on general migration data. Between 1989 and 2000, there were 35000 emigrants from the West to the Czech Republic, and over 75% of these were from Austria, Canada, Germany, Switzerland and the US, the countries with the largest Czech emigrant communities. Even if we assume that all of these people were actually returning emigrants, they still make up only about 13-22 % of the people who left Czechoslovakia during the communist era

1.2 Emigrant-majority relations upon return

It is a well known social fact that the relationship between emigrants and the majority of Czechs has not always been cordial[5]. In a humorous book called "Czechs in a Nutshell", the author makes an alphabetical overview of things a foreigner should know about Czechs. Under the letter "E", there is a chapter on emigrants that illustrates some of the questions that make the relationship between emigrants and Czechs less than straightforward:

> [W]hat about the thousands of ordinary Czechs…who chose to leave the country instead of putting up with the Bolshevik regime? What were the real reasons for their decision to emigrate? Are the emigrants better than us, since they didn't collaborate with the communists? Do they now have any moral right to criticise developments after 1989? And, most importantly, are these people still Czech? (Englund 2004: 103)

We can see straightaway that the motivation for emigration is a question of some contention. Kabrhelová, a Czech émigré psychologist, brings up this topic as well, in addition to a number of other issues she faced upon return:

> Many people began to face us with lack of understanding, disinterest, rejection, envy. They didn't understand our motivation for emigration and return. We were often judged as people who went after prosperity and had a good time, while those at home suffered. As if the motivation for emigration was only economic. As if our departure and emigration were not a protest against the lack of freedom and the totalitarian regime, as if we did not have the right to decide about our own life!…Within [such opinions], one can feel the resonance of totalitarian ideology and also of unconscious feelings of guilt and shame due to people's own coexistence with a totalitarian regime that demanded adaptation…This black-and-white view that vulgarized and simplified the motivation to emigrate…was always supported by the totalitarian regime. The communist ideology grew deep roots, suited many and helped them to defend their own positions during totalitarianism (Kabrhelová 2004)[6].

The quote above captures many of the images that will be explored throughout this thesis. First of all, experiencing a negative welcome; secondly, the commonly held view that emigration was often motivated by selfish, economic reasons; third, the view of emigration as a protest against the regime; and fourth, the notion that some of the negative attitudes towards returning emigrants are related to unresolved issues among Czech people in terms of dealing with the past.

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[5] See for example Brouček et al. (2001); Čermak (1993); Englund (2004); Kabrhlová (2004); Nešpor (2002); Pecina (1999).

[6] Translated from Czech. See http://krajane.radio.cz/cs/artcle_detail/174

Nešpor, a Czech sociologist who has conducted a large-scale study on re-emigrants, comments that return is often difficult due to "the different historical experience of the re-emigrants and the majority of the population, and also to negative feelings felt by the majority towards re-emigrants" (Nešpor 2002: 802). He found that even though re-emigrants were generally successful economically and professionally, this success contrasted sharply to their social adaptation upon return.

However, the tension between the majority and emigrants is by no means a phenomenon that is unique to Czech society. There are, in fact, striking cross-cultural similarities in terms of the way emigrants and the majority evaluate each other. Huseby-Darvas' description of the relationship between Hungarian emigrants and the homeland bears many resemblances to the Czech context:

> The Hungarian-Americans resent that visitors from Hungary refuse to acknowledge their professional and economic accomplishments in the West and their alleged sacrifice for their homeland. Rather, they believe that the Hungarian natives, either openly or furtively, make them feel as traitors who left their homeland and the people there in the lurch after World War II or after the revolution of 1956. The question 'How could you?" is always implied, even when not articulated. For their part, the natives, either at home in Hungary or during visits from the homeland, resent what they perceive as the immigrants' condescension and what they often see as the immigrants' being out of touch with Hungarian reality, although they talk as if they know it all; moreover, many clearly state that they wish to interfere in and profit from Hungary's post-1989 polity and economy (Huseby-Darvas 2004: 87).

Many other studies in a variety of settings investigating the relationship between the majority and returning emigrants indicate that return is often much more difficult than anticipated due to complex social expectations, diverging experiences, cultural differences, socio-economic disparity, envy, and exaggerated images of the luxurious life abroad (see for example Long and Oxfeld 2004; Markoitz and Stefansson 2004). Clearly, there must be some similar mechanisms at play. Yet the tensions are anchored in specific cultural and social contexts that mediate the expression of the conflict and bear testimony to more general social processes within society as a whole. As Stefansson writes, literature about return migration "often hints at the importance of returnee-stayee social relations and collective cultural imaginations, but systematic, in-depth analysis of these issues have as yet been scant" (Stefansson 2004: 55) In this thesis, my aim is to take a closer look at these "collective cultural imaginations" to try to understand some of the possible reasons for the tensions between re-emigrants and those who stayed, and attempt to understand how this conflict may inform us about the way in which Czech society is relating to its own past.

1.3 Structure

Before I move on to more substantial matters, I will briefly outline the structure of the thesis. The next chapter concerns questions related to the method used. I will outline the research process so as to clarify the choices I have made, and the specific angle through which I have approached the material. Ethical questions are an important part of this discussion.

In chapter 3, I will outline important issues in the debate surrounding biographical research and the specific theories that provide the framework of the analysis. Chapter 4 offers further contextual material that is essential for understanding the empirical chapters. Here, I will first provide a brief outline of important historical events and the change within the historical narrative after 1989; secondly, I will discuss the significance of this change to individual biographies; and third, I will consider cultural narratives about the emigrant and two narratives about the past that differ in their view of the individual's position vis-à-vis the communist system. These contextual chapters have partly shaped the analysis, but they are also to some extent a result of the analysis: the two parts were formed in tandem and are therefore intimately interlinked.

Chapter 5, 6 and 7 are devoted to presenting empirical findings and discussions. Each chapter is introduced by a case study based on a life history interview with an interviewee. After each case, I bring in other empirical material and literature, and discuss different themes on which the cases have shed light[7]. Thus, the topics that are broached by the cases are based on the reading of the material as a whole, and not only on the individual case study, which serve more as a springboard for further discussion.

Chapter 5 focuses on the resistance some of the interviewees met in their professional field upon return, and how the change in historical narrative can shed some light on these experiences. Chapter 6 investigates emigration narratives within the life stories and how these may be compared to significant cultural narratives about the act of emigration within Czech society. Links between family history and emigration are also explored. Chapter 7 mainly examines the relationship between the interviewees' life stories, narratives about the individual's position within the communist system and notions of victimhood.

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[7] In sociological writing, there is often a division between the empirical sections and the sections where the researcher conducts an in-depth discussion and analysis. The rationale for this division appears to be that there should be a clear separation between the voice of the interviewees and the interpretations of the researcher. While acknowledging that this is important, I also consider the data to be a result of an interactive process between the interviewee and the researcher; moreover, the researcher's theoretical knowledge and his or her subjective interests and experiences shape the focus of the study and the selection of citations. Thus, there is no such thing as data that "speaks for itself." In this thesis, I have

In chapter 8, I summarise the findings and open up for a broader discussion about the ways in which this study may illuminate the challenges facing Czech post-communist society. I will also make some suggestions about the potential offered by life story research for the construction of a more inclusive and nuanced historical narrative.

therefore chosen to integrate analytic and theoretical discussions in the empirical chapters. I also think it is easier for the reader to follow the analysis/discussion when the empirical data is presented immediately prior to it.

2. A chronology of the research process

The main purpose of this chapter is to clarify the choices I have made over the course of the research process, and to identify factors that may have influenced my point of view. Thereby, I wish to make the basis of my interpretations as visible as possible. This is important for the evaluation of the credibility of a qualitative study (Thagaard 2003: 179).[8]

2.1 Point of departure

I first became acquainted with the Czech Republic nine years ago when I lived there for one year while going to school. It was the beginning of a lasting relationship; since that time, I have returned repeatedly and many of my best friends are Czechs. One of the friendships I made during my first stay was with Anna, who had moved to Prague from Germany to study and learn Czech. Her parents were Czech. They had emigrated to Germany during their honeymoon: her father had planned to leave and never come back, and only told her mother about it once they had crossed the border. Anna's mother was never able to say goodbye to her parents, and she never saw them again. At a later point, she told me about the first time she returned, after 1989, and how she had cried when she saw the dismal state of things; rubbish in the street, shabby houses, and people's indifference to it all.

This story emerged once more in my mind years later, when I was thinking about writing my thesis in sociology about migration. I was particularly interested in the topic of return. One reason for this was perhaps that I had lived several years abroad myself, and was always fascinated by how estranged I felt when I returned home after months of absence. But my absences had been relatively short – what about people who lived abroad for longer periods of time, even decades, perhaps without being *able* to return? It occurred to me that it would be interesting to do research into the life stories of Czech emigrants, as the topic combined my interest in Czech society, modern history, and the experience of return. I also sensed that there might be several sources of understanding about the act of emigration and the communist past, and that these potentially conflicting sources of understanding might be reflected in emigrant biographies. These expectations were based in part on Gran's (2000)

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[8] Thagaard (2003: 179-184) proposes three criteria for the evaluation of qualitative research: credibility, verifiability, and transferability. Other researchers (see e.g. Fangen 2005; Silverman 2001) propose related terms, and there have been many attempts within qualitative research to create means of evaluation that are appropriate for the method. Due to space limitations, I will not enter into this debate here.

study of Iranians in exile, and Gergen's (1999) article about historical narratives and moral identity. Thus, I moved to Prague in the summer of 2005 with a general interest in the topic and a set of theoretical ideas.

2.2 Recruitment and characteristics

Before I began contacting potential interviewees, I thought it important to know as much as possible about the historical backdrop of their life stories. I therefore spent the first couple of months at the Czech national library reading about Czech history and emigration. Throughout that period, I told (almost) everyone I met about my project and explained that I needed potential interviewees. The fact that I had lived in Prague before and had friends and acquaintances there was a great advantage. A substantial number of my contacts knew someone who had emigrated and returned. I therefore became acquainted with the interviewees either via people I knew, or via the university, where I met two interviewees by chance. To my knowledge, none of the interviewees knew each other, except for two interviewees whom I met at the same time. I usually called the potential interviewees to ask if they were willing to be interviewed, but in many cases they had already heard about me through our common acquaintance. All the approached emigrants, except for one[9], were willing to participate, and most of them seemed happy to share their experiences. I am convinced that it would have been more difficult to gain access to some of the participants if the initial contact had not taken place through a person they knew.

The disadvantage of this recruitment technique is that the approached individuals may have felt somewhat obliged to participate. I had the feeling this was the situation in a couple of cases, and I think this may have affected the quality of the interview. Moreover, if the relationship between the researcher and the participant becomes problematic for some reason, this may place the acquaintance in common in a difficult position. Common friends are also likely to increase the sense of loyalty that the researcher feels towards the participants in the study. At times, I found myself writing certain paragraphs aimed directly at the participants, and I have thought at length about how they might react to my interpretations. I found it very difficult to detach myself from parts of their stories that I found most interesting and descriptive of the interviewees, but which had little relevance to

[9] This man was one of the few participants I had met by accident, thus, we did not have any common acquaintances. He originally agreed to participate, but when I contacted him again he seemed reluctant. I underscored that he did not need to go through with his participation if he felt uncomfortable, at which point he decided to withdraw from the study. He did not tell me why he did not want to be interviewed, but I had the impression that his experiences with return were still quite fresh and painful to him.

the focus of this study. I do not think, however, that my sense of loyalty to the interviewees has affected the analysis as I have not avoided any particular topics.

Another aspect of the recruitment technique is that it had repercussions for the kind of people included in this study. Since I came into contact with the majority of the interviewees through contacts at the university, there is an exceptionally high level of education among the interviewees. Their professional fields included work within sociology, history, anthropology, theatre, art and filmmaking, entrepreneurial activities, business and administration, nutrition, linguistics, medicine, architecture, and engineering. Two of the participants had retired before they returned. The interviewees generally were well schooled in history and culture and had a high level of reflection on Czech society and their own role within it. Thus, the recruitment method clearly had significant consequences for the kind of stories I obtained[10].

The participants were between 49 and 70 years old, and had left at different times during the communist era. Six of the interviewees emigrated after the invasion in 1968; two had emigrated a few years before the invasion; two left in the 1970s; and two left in the 1980s[11]. They returned at different times during the 1990s or during the first years of the new millennium. The sample included six women and six men. Time spent abroad ranged from five years to more than three decades. The interviewees had spent their years in emigration in Australia, Switzerland, Norway, the US, England and Canada.

In addition to the interviews I conducted myself, I was fortunate to have access to some interviews with returned emigrants at the Centre for Oral History in Prague. Due to time limitations and certain restrictions, I did not conduct an in-depth analysis of these interviews, but I looked at some of the interviews and have at times included quotes from them. Wherever this is the case, I have marked the quote with "COH".

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[10] It is not clear how the sample relates to the group of emigrants as a whole. Nešpor (2002: 67-71) suggests that the a large number of the people who emigrated from the Czech Republic during the cold war were highly educated, in which case the interviewees in this study may be considered to be relatively representative of the group.

[11] Originally, I wanted to interview people who had left during the same time period, in the aftermath of the invasion. I soon realised that it would take too much time to find only people in this category, and I therefore included informants who had left at different times during the communist epoch. This means that the interviewees have quite different emigration experiences. In the analysis about emigration narratives, I explore some of the differences between the emigrants, but mainly, my focus is on their experiences upon return and the relationship between emigrants and people who stayed, and this topic is not tied to a specific departure time.

2.3 The interviews

Before I began interviewing, I made an interview guide with potential questions (see appendix). The process of making the guide was more important as a means to consider various topics and questions than as an actual tool during the interview. After the first couple of interviews, I rarely looked at the guide. I soon realised that its scope was too broad, and began to focus more closely on certain topics.

Similar to the interview approach outlined by life story researchers such as Rosenthal (2004), Danielsen (1993), and Vaněk (2004), I generally tried first to ask the interviewees to narrate their life story freely, and then ask more specific questions after they had finished. The purpose of this method is that it does not close off the interview thematically, but allows the interviewee to open up new fields of interest of which the researcher may have been unaware. The interviews were conducted either at the participant's home or in a café, and all the interviews were recorded and later transcribed[12][13]. Most of the interviews lasted between one or two hours. I wrote up a summary that included both a rough sketch of the life story and my own thoughts immediately after each meeting. The content and informative value of the interviews varied, as did the atmosphere during the interviews. Sometimes, both of us appeared to feel at ease and the interview floated naturally, at other times it seemed to be more awkward for both of us. Certainly, the outcome depended to some extent both on the chemistry between myself and the interviewee, and on the extent to which they were used to reflecting upon and articulating various aspects of their life stories.

In retrospect, I realise that it would have been better to do fewer interviews and instead talk to the same participants twice. It is challenging for someone to convey a complex and dense life story in the course of one interview (the interviews were generally between one and two hours in length), and a second interview round would have allowed both of us to reflect on our conversation and go into more depth on certain topics. In only one case did I speak to the interviewee more than once[14]; in fact, we met at least six times during my time in Prague. I

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[12] All of the interviews were conducted in English, except for one that was conducted in Czech. This was done mainly so that I would not have to translate the interviews into English. Before we started, however, I made sure that the participants felt comfortable speaking in English. Since most of them had lived in English-speaking countries, or were internationally oriented, this was not a problem.

[13] The material was stored according to the rules stipulated by the NSD, see http://www.nsd.uib.no/personvern/melding/pvo_veiledning_meldeskjema.cfm

[14] The frequent number of meetings was, first of all, due to the fact that this participant was very generous with his time and a very keen storyteller. Not only did he speak about himself and his life story, but frequently diverted into other topics and genres.

realised that many things would have escaped my attention had I spoken to this participant only once.

What was it like for the interviewees to speak about their experiences with someone from a different generation, and perhaps even more importantly, from a different cultural and historical background? Considering the fact that many participants had spent more than two decades in a different cultural context, this situation was hardly a novel experience. Moreover, many of them clearly expressed that they often felt it was difficult to convey certain aspects of their life stories to Czechs, and that they had at least as much, or more in common with people from other places. Thus, on the one hand, it is possible that the fact that I was a "foreigner" made it easier for them to talk freely, since they knew that I would be less likely to feel defensive about any criticism they mentioned about their experiences of Czech society. It is also possible that my foreignness encouraged them to explain some things more thoroughly. Danielsen (1993: 32) suggests that shared knowledge can sometimes lead to "white spots" when people narrate their life stories. This may be less likely to occur when the interviewee cannot assume that we share the same unarticulated knowledge. At the same time, I think that my age and my foreignness at times made the participants uncertain about whether I had sufficient knowledge to understand what they were talking about. Sometimes, they used phrases such as "as you might know", even about fairly obvious events, such as the communist take-over.

It is also possible that the participants felt *less* compelled to explain certain issues thoroughly *precisely* because I was a foreigner. The Western European narrative about communism is much more clear-cut and much less complex than the current social reality in Eastern and Central Europe. Having lived in the West, the participants were probably familiar with the historical narrative there. In a way, then, we did share the same historical background, since we were familiar with the Western view of communism and the events after 1989. I will return to the potential effects of this matter when I discuss motives for emigration in chapter 6.

2.4 Analysis and the construction of a research narrative

How did I go about organising and analysing the material, up until the present state that it is in? In the chapter on theory, I will discuss some of the important debates within the field of biographical research to clarify that I take a narrative, constructivist approach that also acknowledges the status of life stories as representations of actual events. More generally, there are numerous ways to conceptualise the different approaches and periods within

qualitative research, all of which are slightly artificial, since the various streams usually float into one another[15]. I will not attempt a discussion of the different directions and their differences here (see Fangen 2005; Thagaard 2003). Instead, I will point to the most important influences within this study. During the analysis, I felt constantly torn between the wish to represent the life stories of the interviewees from their perspective, in all their uniqueness and complexity, and my interest in placing the interviews within a narrative analysis. As I began working with the material, I moved between an approach that was based more on symbolic interactionism, with its focus on grasping reality from the point of view of the participants, and a more reflexive and hermeneutical approach that focuses on underlying mechanisms and narratives. In my material, I felt that the presentation of life stories preserved the perspective of the interviewees, while the broad, thematic analysis represented the narrative approach.

The process of working with the material illustrates the alternation between these two perspectives. First, I familiarised myself with the interviews through the process of transcription. More than 16 hours of speech had to be transformed into written text. Next, I wrote down what I termed a "descriptive analysis", i.e. I read through the interviews and wrote down all the topics and quotes within each interview that seemed interesting. The result was that the information was much easier to work with, and it helped me to identify and contrast reoccurring topics more quickly.

Secondly, I took an individualised approach to the interviews: I began writing up case studies based on the material, where I both recounted the life stories in my own words and used quotes[16]. Here, I tried to preserve the perspective of the interviewees as much as possible. I wrote seven case studies based on the interviews that I found to be the most informative. At this point, I realised that I would not have space to present both the individual case studies and provide a narrative analysis. This was a difficult realisation. In most cases, the interviewees had spent only about one to two hours speaking about their lives, thus, the stories I was left with were already a radical selection of an ocean of potential and different events that could have been recounted, a highly specific narrative produced within our interaction that cut the complexity of their life to the bone. Nevertheless, this

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[15] For example, most traditions have to some extent been influenced by post-modern ideas, such as constructivism.

[16] Although the quotes are kept as close to the original statements of the interviewees as possible, I have edited them somewhat. I have for example cut words like "you see, like, right" etc, and I have deleted repeated words. I have also taken out pauses and hesitations, as I do not think they are important for the overall analysis. These modifications were made in order to make the material easier to read, but most importantly, I did this upon the request of some of the interviewees, who felt like the oral form sounded awkward when translated into text and asked me to edit the language. When I have excluded whole sentences in a quote, this is marked by three dots: …

simplified version had to be simplified yet further in order to fit into the form of a sociological presentation.

Despite this, I set about writing a broad analysis based on reoccurring topics, using the interviews thematically and not as case studies. Having spent a few weeks away from the material due to the summer break, I went through this analysis again. I strongly felt that the result of this broad analysis was both dull and unrepresentative of the actual life stories. Finally, I decided to try to include both perspectives. I chose three of the cases, and presented a more general discussion, mainly from a narrative angle, after each case.

And yet, what, or whom, do the cases actually represent in their current shape? A biographical interview has an emergent quality: the information that is obtained is not only related to the actual experiences of the interviewee and his or her ability or willingness to convey these, it is just as much a product of the interaction, the method, and the research questions that the interviewer brings into the interview situation (Danielsen 1993: 16). Life stories are edited twice, first when they are told, and then when they are used in subsequent academic work (Skultans 1998: 14). While I was reading about the guidlines that underpin a "good" narrative (such as structure, plot, selection of events) I suddenly realised that I clearly had been guided by such rules when I created the case studies that formed the basis of my analysis. In addition, the main plots in "my" cases of course revolved around the topics under investigation, namely the emigration, return, and the relationship between emigrants and the majority[17]. Thus, ironically, I realised that the difference between the stories of the participants on the one hand, and a more general, narrative analysis was partly artificial: both versions had probably been influenced substantially by my own research plot and narrative voice. Nevertheless, one cannot deny that the interviewees' perspective is better represented by the actual case studies. I have tried to include as many quotes as possible in order for the narrators' voices to emerge through the text.

The inclusion of cases also represents an important methodological point. I have deliberately kept the cases fairly long and included topics in them that I will not be able to discuss afterwards due to space limitations. The reason for this is that I want the cases to illustrate how many different approaches I could have taken, and how much complexity that is lost in a general analysis that cuts the interviews into smaller pieces.

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[17] Berhar (1993) writes about this topic in her book "Translated women". Similarly to the people she interviews, she considers herself to be a storyteller, and she sees the life story version that she presents to be a "false document", a hybrid form that expresses both the voice of the "native speaker", and the voice of the researcher, who "translates" the narrative into a written story aimed at the scientific community (Behar 1993: 272).

On the other hand, while the cases personify the material I worked with and allude to the possibility of other types of analyses, they do not alone embody the topics that are being discussed later in the chapter. Much of the analysis is based on a general reading of all the interviews and can hardly be attributed to one life story. The other interviewees therefore continuously figure in the background and are in this sense equally important to the analysis as the three cases that are presented.

The various parts of this thesis are presented according to the usual guidelines in sociology, where background information and theoretical perspectives are presented before the empirical findings. My focus in the background chapters is, however, to some extent a result of the empirical analysis, and the various parts are intimately interlinked. As opposed to a grounded theory approach that emphasises an inductive process through which analysis and theory emerge first and foremost as a product of an interpretation of the empirical data, the analysis in this thesis can be best described as a result of *abduction*, "an alternation between (earlier) theory and empirical findings, where both successively are interpreted in light of each other" (Alvesson and Sköldberg 1994: 42)[18]. The analysis is thus a result of the reciprocal relationship between my theoretical knowledge and the tendencies in the data material (Thagaard 2003: 31).

The main purpose of this section has been to clarify that the present analysis is a product of my specific interests, knowledge, and various decisions along the way. On the basis of this, I have created a specific research narrative, sewing together different threads of literature, thoughts and life stories into a coherent whole. Thus, I am not trying to present an exhaustive explanatory model, I am proposing some potential explanations that in some cases might be right, in others not. From a hermeneutical perspective, understanding is a "situated event in terms of individuals and their situations – an inevitably prejudiced viewpoint" (Heywood and Stronach 2005: 15). All we can do within social science is to make plausible suggestions about our surrounding world, approaching it from a specific angle. Knowledge is produced by an act of interpretation that is always up for debate. The goal of qualitative research should be to make interpretations that are well anchored in data and other theoretical and contextual information. When this is the case, a study holds *epistemological validity* (Fangen 2005: 270-271). The extensive background information in this thesis is an attempt to increase the validity of the study.

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[18] Translated from Swedish

2.5 Ethical considerations

Life stories are often considered to be the locus of identity formation, where various experiences are worked through and incorporated to create a sense of coherency and integrity. If this is the case, we can expect people to be particularly sensitive about how researchers interpret and "use" their life stories. Throughout the process of collecting the material and writing about it, I have generally tried as closely as possible to follow the ethical guidelines proposed by the Norwegian Social Science Data Service (NSD)[19]. Here, I would like to draw attention to some specific issues that were particularly important in the current study.

The first important issue is related to anonymity (Alver and Øyen 1997: 119-126). Before I began the interviews, I explained to the participants that neither their names nor other details that would make them readily identifiable would appear in the thesis. This issue becomes particularly challenging in the context of life story research, since a detailed account of someone's life makes the individual more readily identifiable than a study where there is only a thematic presentation of different topics. Therefore, in addition to replacing names of people and places, I have also changed the occupation and in some cases also the host country of the participants[20].

Another significant issue that emerged over the course of this research was related to informed consent. This entails that the interviewees consent to participation based on information about the project which the researcher provides them with (Alver and Øyen 1997: 109-117). At the beginning of the interviews, I explained to the participants that I was interested in their life story as a whole, but particularly in their experiences with emigration and return. However, at that stage, I did not yet know the form my analysis would take. Above, I explained that my initial focus on the experiences of the interviewees gradually changed into how the participants' narratives might be related to broader cultural phenomena. I also use the participants' life stories as springboards to get to more general discussions, and draw certain connections between the life stories and sensitive issues within Czech society today.

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[19] This project has been submitted to and evaluated by NSD.

[20] These changes do not affect the analysis. While anonymisation solves one ethical problem, it did, however, occur to me that some participants who strongly identify with their occupations may feel like changing their occupation might provide a wrong image of who they are.

Throughout the writing process, this issue concerned me: what if the participants felt like I used (misused) their stories for purposes that they would not have agreed to if they had known what the final product would be? How could I redeem this problem?

There is no way to resolve this problem entirely. In addition to its importance to the issue of informed consent, it is also related to a more general dilemma in qualitative research. The analysis usually entails that interview material is put into a broader context, where earlier research and theoretical literature play an important role. The result is that the researcher's interpretations often differ from those of the participants, who may perceive these as "both alienating and provocative" (Thagaard 2003: 189). In this sense, research inevitably involves a certain degree of *objectification*. I believe a rather unpleasant awareness of this was one of the causes for my attachment to the case studies.

While the issue above clearly poses a moral dilemma, it may simultaneously be necessary to go beyond participants' self-understanding in order to produce fruitful analyses. For example, Bourdieu considers it to be crucial that social scientists develop knowledge and categories that differ from those that are used in every-day life. If researchers fail to do this, their work may end up reproducing existing prejudices and power relations in the field. The only way to redeem this objectification is, according to Bourdieu, to objectify the objectifier, i.e. to show how the characteristics of the researcher and his or her position and interests within the field may have affected the production of knowledge (Fangen 2005: 248-249). This is one of the aims in this chapter.

Another way to tackle the ethical dilemma above is to include the participants in the research process and allow them to comment on the analysis. Within the confines of this study, I have not been able to do this to the extent that I would have liked to. However, I considered it to be important to make sure that those participants whose life stories are presented as case studies were given the opportunity to read through my version and comment on it to make sure they did not feel I was misrepresenting them. I therefore e-mailed them the case study I had written on the basis of the life story interview[21], and asked if there was anything wanted to add or remove. Except for rectifying a few factual mistakes, the participants generally had few comments. Two of them did, however, request that I edit the language in the quotes to make its colloquial qualities less prominent.[22] Additionally, my hope is that I make clear throughout this thesis that the hypotheses I propose here are open to debate and that I do not intend to exclude alternative explanations or interpretations.

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[21] I also sent the transcribed interview to most of the participants.

I have a selective focus that mainly investigates the relationship between the interviewees and those who stayed behind, and particularly on the tensions between the two groups. By doing this, am I not creating an artificial division between "emigrants" and "the majority"? An important clarification is in place here. For the sake of simplicity I refer to the two groups as "emigrants" and "the majority". This does not mean, however, that I think they constitute homogenous groups, or that the issues under discussion can be attributed to the groups *as a whole.* This is a qualitative study that cannot make any claims to generalisations in a statistical sense. Instead, a qualitative study can provide certain insights into social processes or a phenomenon's characteristics, and potentially produce theoretical perspectives that may be meaningfully applied in a different context (Fangen 2005: 227). Over the course of this analysis, I am trying to identify some factors that – *in some cases* – affect the relationship between returning emigrants and members of the majority.

Finally, it is important to be sensitive to the fact that my own life story and historical experiences have been shaped in a very different context than those of the interviewees and people who lived under communism in Czechoslovakia. In this sense, I am an outsider, and I am looking at the past from a perspective that differs from those who lived it.[23] While this in one way gives me the advantages of distance, it can also be a reason to question my ability to understand. Andrews writes that in East Germany after the fall of the Berlin wall, there was "a real concern that their [East Germans'] stories cannot be understood by people who never experienced the conditions which characterised their lives; moreover, they argue, the past cannot be analysed though the spectacles of the present" (Andrews 2000: 188). I have understanding for these feelings. It is my sincere hope that my interpretations do not appear to be normative judgments of complex situations that clearly appear very different with hindsight than when they first unfolded.

In the next chapter, I will clarify my position within the field of biographical research and outline the theoretical perspectives that will be used in the analysis.

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[23] I think art, such as cinematography, is one of the best media to create understanding for what life during a different historical epoch. The German movie "The life of other people" (2006) gives an empathic account of the encounter between a Stasi agent and one of his object of surveillance, and clearly illustrates the complexity of the relationship between people and the regime.

3. Theoretical background

3.1 Fact or fiction?

The empirical material used in this research consists mainly of life stories. The field of biographical research is characterised by a diversity of approaches and opinions about how life stories should be analysed and what kind of knowledge we can expect to gain from such an analysis. I will briefly outline the most important perspectives, and mainly discuss the consequences of the post-modernist or narrative paradigms for the status of the empirical material in biographical research. The discussion will clarify my own position in terms of these questions.

In the field of sociology, the fundaments of biographical research can be traced back to the work of researchers within the Chicago school in the U.S. during the 1920s and 1930s. The most well-known biographical study emanating from this time is Thomas' and Znaniecki's (1996) "The Polish Peasant in Europe and America". Researchers within this tradition have been concerned with investigating how objective social factors influence biographies, but they have also stressed the importance of grasping the *subjective interpretations* of the subjects under study, in line with hermeneutical and interactionist approaches (Denzin 1989: 8).

In the following years, there was less concern with the biographical method and more focus on the development of survey methodology. The life story was not fully revived until the beginning of the1980s, when a group of researchers in France, among them Daniel Bertaux, began to study life stories as a means to understand the underlying social, economic and cultural structures that shape the life course. This approach was less concerned with subjective interpretation, and focused more on the *objective structural reality* of the participants (Danielsen 1994: 40).

A third way of analysing life story data emerged in the mid 1980s, when post-modernist ideas began to dominate the social science scene and prepared the ground for a wide range of *narrative approaches* to biographical research. In sociology, the turn towards postmodernism generally implied the abandoning of any concept of "objectivity", "generalization" or "truth", and a focus on local knowledge, narrative (or discourse) and language. From a postmodernist perspective, the scientific community's claim to say something about the world through their scientific production became problematic since

scientific work from this perspective could not be disentangled from locally based discourses and power relations.

The postmodern ideas entailed a radical questioning of the relationship between biographic stories and "reality". Since, according to postmodernism, there is no truth, there is "no 'true' way to connect the object world and the spoken or written wor(l)d" (Roos 2003:27). This obviously dealt a blow to a research area which, according to Roos, up to then had been characterised by a euphoric excitement about a type of material that could finally help researchers understand and explain "what really happened". Postmodernism removed this 'veil of innocence' – the biographic 'paradise' was lost forever to the merciless claim that "[t]here is no subject, no author, no reader, no reference" (Roos 2003:28).

Luckily, this is not the end of the story. By the end of the 1990s, the debate around postmodernism had cooled down significantly, and many of the postmodernist tenets settled down within the landscape of social science in a more modified form. As Roos points out, however, it was impossible to return to the paradise lost. Postmodernism had imprinted itself upon biographic thought through an increased awareness of narrativity, of identity as complex and multifaceted, and a generally increased reflexivity on the part of researchers (Roos 2003).

One of the consequences of the post-modernist paradigm can be seen in the general acceptance on part of most researchers that collecting and interpreting biographies involves a substantial amount of *construction*. This is an important point within the context of this thesis. There is no simple one-to-one relationship between life stories and lived life. Depending on the context, it may be appropriate for the individual to tell a number of different stories about herself (Danielsen 1993), and we shape our stories according to well-known cultural scripts. Events that took place in the past can be seen as building blocks in the life story. The act of construction takes place when events are selected, put together, and infused with interpretative meaning. This does not mean, however, as some advocates of the narrative approach profess, that biographical material has a more or less random relationship to the external world, or that all stories are fictions (see for example Denzin 1989: 77). It is in my view not only possible, but also necessary to see life stories as *both* constructions *and* as reflections of real, lived life[24]. If we do not acknowledge the latter we not only loose, as Ann Nilsen (1994) points out, the opportunity to learn about the complexity of lived

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[24] In the same line of thought, May (2001) suggests that it can be useful to adopt an approach that includes both a narrative analysis, and an analysis that focuses on the informative value of the content of life stories. See also Bertaux (2003) and Roos (2003) for perspectives that allow for the importance of social construction while simultaneously adhering to the fundamental idea that the production of scientific knowledge involves the description of an "external reality".

experience, but we also run the risk of underestimating the way in which the social and material context, including power relations, affect the production of knowledge .

Moreover, I think the acknowledgement of life stories as testimonies of real life processes is important not only from an epistemological, but also from an ethical standpoint. Looking at the life stories purely as self-contained narratives that serve the purpose of self-representation does not, in my view, do the narrators justice[25]. Roos (2003) draws attention to the fact that the interviewees themselves clearly talk about their lives under the assumption that they are referring to something outside the dialogue. From their point of view, their stories are real in a very concrete sense. This is also one of Nilsen's (1994) main points. She suggests that that a purely narrative focus tends to fragment the interviewees' experiences, leading to a greater sense of alienation and objectification. This kind of analysis easily turns into a purely intellectual endeavour that detaches the participants' experiences from real life and presents them as static fictional characters. As a consequence of these considerations, I sometimes analyse the life stories as narratives and investigate *how* the interviewees speak about certain issues, while at other times, I emphasise the contents of the life stories, and analyse *what* the interviewees say about events. My main focus is, however, on a narrative analysis.

The most important lesson is perhaps that it is important to be aware of the complexity of biographic data. Life stories consist both of "historical and social facts and the subjective representation of these" (Danielsen 1994:52). Moreover, a life story is also the product of a joint construction process that takes place in the space between the researcher, the interviewee, and the social reality that forms the context of the dialogue. In my view, what is interesting is precisely to investigate how individual narratives *relate* to the surrounding social reality. A life story bears testimony to much more than only the individual's self-representation and identity. Life stories can inform us about culturally based narratives, conflict lines in the surrounding society, and the individual's position vis-à-vis these. Having established the broader theoretical context, I will now move on to discuss more specific theoretical ideas.

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[25] Seeing stories as fictions whose criteria for authenticity lie in their ability to convince also has more serious implications. Denzin writes: "The point is, however, as Sartre notes, that if an author thinks something existed and believes in its existence, its effects are real" (1989: 25). There may be some truth to this, but we cannot make people's subjective beliefs the sole criterion for truth within society. In extreme cases, this would legitimise views such as the claim that the Holocaust did not take place.

3.2 The intersection between personal and cultural narratives

Although memories are in one sense the most personal of possessions, they also necessarily embody the ways in which people connect or fail to connect with society and history. (Skultans 1998: xi)

From a narrative perspective, life stories are much more than mere memories about the past. According to narrative theory, we speak about the past in specific ways, following particular rules that are fundamental for our stories to come across as believable and logical. Gergen (1999: 2) suggests that one of the most significant rules consists of the need to establish a valued end-point[26]. This end point can be either good or bad, but importantly, it needs to be saturated with value, informing us about the moral or the plot of the story. Thus, when we tell a story that holds a value-laden message and take on a certain role within it, we are making a point about who we are, or want to be. In Frønes' words:

> If I wish to describe myself as a victim, or as someone who is a self-made man, or as the one brave individual against the majority, then there is vocabulary available to do so. In biographies and self-presentations we also find the classic supporting roles, the good helpers and the evil opponents, the great obstacles that are overcome and happiness for the deserving one (Frønes 2001: 133)[27].

By placing ourselves within a narrative framework that conveys well-known moral tales, we establish ourselves as acceptable social beings and maintain a sense of *moral identity* (Gergen 1999: 9). Because of this, Gergen proposes that identity is a "discursive achievement" that we construct through self-narratives (Gergen 1999: 7). In this thesis, moral identity will be a key concept in the analysis of the life stories and the encounters between the interviewees and the majority.

The most significant point here is that the ability to maintain a moral identity is fundamentally a *social undertaking* (Gergen 1999: 8). Other people always play important supporting roles within our stories, and the meaning of our own actions is produced by contrasting and comparing ourselves to others. Because of this, we depend on others to confirm our stories by accepting the parts they are assigned. When they do this, they provide our story with *narrative validity*:

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[26] Gergen postulates several other rules that underpin the structure of a well-formed narrative, but these will not be discussed here, since my focus is not on the analysis of individual stories, but rather on specific parts of the stories and how these connect to broader narratives.

[27] Translated from Norwegian.

> Thus, as others' actions are used to makes oneself intelligible, so does one become reliant on others' accord. If others are not willing to accede to their assigned parts then one cannot rely on their actions within a narrative…Narrative validity, then, strongly depends on others' affirmation. This reliance on others places the actor in a position of precarious interdependence (Gergen 1999: 10)

In a broader sense, one can say that human beings have a fundamental need for acceptance and recognition from the social surroundings in order to maintain a positive identity. This awareness can be found in other fields of inquiry, such as in Honneth's (1995) theory about the role of recognition in modern society. He suggests that in many cases, social tensions are as much about a struggle for recognition as about material resources. Lack of social recognition curtails an individual's ability for positive self-development. When lack of recognition turns into a commonly shared awareness within a social group, this may be the beginning of inter-group tensions. Thus, mutual recognition is a crucial element for the workings of a pluralistic society, both at the individual and the group level. The narrative validity of a life story depends on other people's willingness to at the very least accept the story we present about ourselves.

I have now established the idea that we need others to recognise and validate our stories in order to achieve a sense of moral identity within a community. The second important point is that our ability to evoke other people's affirmation depends crucially on the ways in which our life story connects or fails to connect to dominating truths or broader cultural narratives. In Gran's words:

> The idea is that the *narrative validity* in a life story will be stronger as long as the individual's narrative coincides with and is confirmed by the dominating truths in the society where the individual lives. And vice versa, if the narrative does not coincide or is outright contradicted by official truths, then the narrative validity will be weak, and the individual will consequently experience uncertainty about his own biographical perspective (Gran 2000: ii)[28].

In the context of this thesis, the term "cultural narrative" will refer both to narratives about the past – i.e. accounts of Czech history – and prevalent cultural images that are relevant with regards to the view of emigrants, the West, and the new ideals within post-communist society. The key notion is that such cultural narratives are constructed intersubjectively and can affect people's life stories in significant ways. From this perspective, life stories are both personal and cultural testimonies:

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[28] Translated from Norwegian.

> The collection of narratives that we have constructed about ourselves is our personal mythology, which we use as much to construct ourselves for ourselves, as for presenting ourselves to others. Our personal mythology is on the one hand personal, on the other hand it is based on cultural narratives… (Frønes 2001: 109) [29].

During her research on life stories in post-communist Latvia, Skultans found that people's life stories were underpinned by dominant social representations and well-known literary images. In her view, a narrative does not necessarily mirror the structure of experience in the past, rather, its allegiance is "towards other narratives" (Skultans 1998: xii).When we tell our stories according to well-known patterns and accepted cultural narratives, we confirm our belonging and simultaneously make our stories more intelligible to the listener. Because of this, Skultans consider cultural narratives to be a valuable resource that we use to make sense of our life stories.

However, as I mentioned above, dominant cultural narratives can also pose a challenge to our self-presentation in cases when they do not fit in well with our personal narrative, or when our experiences cannot be reasonably expressed through shared narratives. Cultural narratives always reflect power relations within a society. This means that there are usually a variety of different narratives about the same topic that reflect the interests of different social actors:

> Different narratives also express different interests – position and power rests upon the dominance of specific narratives. When one's own biography is created at the intersection of several contradictory narratives, this soon becomes challenging. The hero in one narrative is perhaps the crook in the other narrative…Identity constructions become difficult. Biographies are not created as images of 'real' lives, they are created in the intersection between many different narratives and interests (Frønes 2001: 133)[30].

As I will point out in the next chapter, there are a variety of cultural narratives connected to the emigrant within Czech society; there also different narratives about the communist past that lend support to different types of life stories. I will now turn to investigating how a particular type of cultural narratives, namely historical narratives, is related to life stories.

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[29] Translated from Norwegian. Frønes makes a distinction between key narratives and dominant narratives, but I will not employ this two-fold concept here. Moreover, I use the word "narrative" for the Norwegian word "fortelling" in the translation of this quote, event though Frønes employs the word narrative differently than "fortelling" elsewhere. I think this translation is justified because the way I use narrative her is in fact closer to Frønes use of "fortelling" than his use of "narrative".

[30] Translated from Norwegian

3.3 Narratives about the past and moral identity

Whoever rules the past, rules the future, whoever rules the present, rules the past.
(George Orwell in "1984") [31]

Historical accounts constitute an important type of cultural narratives. Hayden White (1973) was one of the first scholars to point out that the process of history writing involved employing narrative structures and plots that had much in common with fiction and other non-scientific writing. Historical accounts are not, from this perspective, neutral narratives about a sequence of events. Instead, they emphasise certain epochs and brush over others as insignificant or trivial; they lift certain moments in time up into the light and leave others to dwell in the dark. In this sense, historical narratives have a lot in common with biographies in their selective emphasis on certain moments, people, and actions (Frønes 2001:134-135).

As society develops, so do the stories a community tells about itself. This is because historical narratives to a great extent are created according to present needs (Gran 2000; Maines et al. 1983). In his book on Czech national identity, Holy considers the connection between current identity and history writing:

> Just as any other history is constructed from the point of view of the present-day understanding of its subject, Czech history is a narrative of past events constructed from the present-day understanding of what it means to be a Czech. In other words, what is understood as Czech history is a construction which makes possible the understanding that 'we are what we are today because this or that happened in our past' (Holy 1996: 10).

Thus, narratives about the past are undergoing constant change, depending on the message we wish to bring from the past and into the present. As with self-narratives, the importance of historical accounts is that they underscore events and plots that allow for the creation of a group (national) identity. Because of this, "history and community are inextricably intertwined" (Gergen 1999:11) A collectively shared historical consciousness is the basis for a sense of belonging to a community: "[M]embers of the communities are tied together through a shared version of the past, from which their current identity can be derived. Group identity is obtained – at least partially – through the narrating and renarrating stories about the shared past" (Andrews 1999: 89)[32].

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[31] Quoted in Andrews (1999: 87),

[32] Translated from Czech

This means that historical truth is to a great extent community specific, and the cohesiveness of community relies on the ability to reach a satisfying narrative about the group's common past. Negotiation about a shared past means that members of a community have to decide what value to attribute to various events, and thus, "historical narration is inevitably linked to cultural values and morality" (Gergen 1999:11). When we understand and accept a historical account, we also accept the values it embodies; its gallery of heroes, victims and villains; and its moral about desirable or shameful situations in the past and how these should be promoted or avoided in the future. Irwin-Zarecka notes the connection between group identity, morality, and collective memory:

> First, collective memory is intricately related, though in variable ways, to the sense of collective identity individuals come to acquire. And second, it is imbued with moral imperatives – the obligations to one's kin, notions of justice, indeed, the lessons of right and wrong – that form the basic parts of the normative order (Irwin-Zarecka 1994: 9).

Life stories and history are intimately intertwined. The individual's life course is moulded by the interplay between the historical and social context and the individual's personal aspirations, opportunities and choices. The dynamics of historical change can thus in a sense be retraced to the shape of the individual's life course. Therefore, when we speak about our individual past, we also participate in the process of negotiating about the group's common history (Gran 2000: 41). The most significant point is, however, that our ability to maintain a moral identity crucially depends on our relationship to the historical narratives of our community:

> At the same time, because individual identity is configured or implicated in historical narratives, so is the achievement of moral being sustained (or impeded) by historical accounts. For good or ill, we each live within and are constructed by particular historical narratives – of our people, culture, nation, region, family, and so on. *These historical narratives serve as a foreground for achieving moral identity within relevant communities* (Gergen 1999:11)[33].

Milan Šimečka, a Czech intellectual who was a member of the Communist Party for 20 years before he became a dissident, illustrates the power of historical narrative for one's ability to play certain roles: "I had plenty of time later to ponder the motive of the drama *in which I was assigned the role of the villain*" (Šimečka 1984: 49). Šimečka suggests that it was not all that clear at the time what his role within the historical epoch would be. This became evident only later, when the communist era had been fully evaluated and defined.

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[33] My emphasis.

The above discussion suggests that historical narratives constitute a particularly important type of cultural narrative, as they are fundamental to the creation and maintenance of collective identities. A life story that is in accordance with significant narratives about the past may be seen as a type of cultural capital that endows the individual with a moral identity and allows the individual to belong and to participate in the creation future.

3.4 Communities of memory: multiple pasts

Above, I discussed the idea that the past is constructed from present-day needs. This means that the evaluation of historical events can change over time. However, the basic reason for the existence of different versions of the past is that our experiences always flow from our limited location and viewpoint at any given moment in history. Thus, even though people live through the same historical epoch, they may emerge from it with very different historical experiences. Members of the same society can belong to different "communities of memory" (Bellah et al. 1986; Irwin-Zarecka 1994). Communities of memories are created through common experiences, or through the remembrance of historical events that become particularly potent in the creation of group identity. Shared traumas are important in the creation of communities of memory, but such communities can also be founded upon other experiences that carry "formative force" (Irwin-Zarecka 1994: 52). In the context of communism, for example, we can imagine that dissidents, emigrants, and members of the Communist Party belong to different communities of memory[34]. These groups may evaluate the past differently in the present context, due to their different ways of positioning themselves vis-à-vis the system. Consequently, several conflicting narratives about the past often exist at the same time. The collective memory of certain people does not overlap with that of other significant social groups (Andrews 2000: 89). Moreover, other people's view of the past is not evaluated in a value-neutral fashion. In many cases, we try to establish ourselves as moral human beings by contrasting our own experience with that of others whose position and role differed from our own. This process is probably particularly significant when a society has undergone a historical trauma. In a society where there are unresolved issues of guilt and responsibility, there may be a tendency to devalue the experiences of others in the process of protecting our own moral identities. We need villains to appear as heroes, and we need an offender to appear as a victim. Thus, narrating one's life

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[34]Whether these groups hold a sense of group identity or group consciousness is of course a matter of empirical investigation. Emigrants have, for example, lived in different communities and often do not know each other. However, I think the term is useful as a means to point out differences in experiences and positioning.

story is not only about reconciling divergent narratives, the process may also be seen as a reflection of social struggles within a group about right or wrong (Gran 2000: 46).

The main points to bear in mind from this theoretical presentation are the following:

- We depend on others to recognise and accept our life stories to maintain a moral identity. This social affirmation relies importantly on the way in which our life stories are supported or contradicted by dominating cultural narratives.

- Historical accounts are a particularly important type of cultural narrative, due to their role in the creation of group identities and social cohesion.

- Historical accounts are malleable and may change according to present identity-needs. Different groups of people experience historical events differently, depending on their reactions and position. This constitutes the basis for the emergence of different communities of memory that hold divergent interpretations of the past.

In the analysis, I will mainly investigate how moral identities are defended or confirmed in the context of changing cultural narratives related to the past, the West, and the act of emigration. These narratives, and the need to explain one's own position, become particularly visible in the meeting points between returning emigrants and members of the majority. I will now move on to look at specific cultural and historical narratives that may influence the shape and content of life stories in the Czech post-communist context.

4. Historical change and biographies

In the above discussion I suggested that cultural narratives, including historical accounts, are community-specific and vary with time. Historical transformations, especially sudden ones, usually involve a change the balance of social power. This allows new narratives that previously have been suppressed or viewed as illegitimate to come to the fore. The dominating historical narrative during communism was, not surprisingly, very different from the current historical account of the communist epoch (Haukanes 1999). In this chapter, I will first provide a brief outline of the post-war historical situation in Czechoslovakia, including the shift from a communist to a post-communist historical narrative. This outline should help readers familiarize themselves with some elementary knowledge about the historical context of emigration and return. Secondly, I will investigate how this change in historical narrative may be dealt with at a biographical level, and finally, I will examine some cultural narratives about the emigrant and about the individual's position vis-à-vis the system in the past.

4.1 Historical account(s)

Czechoslovakia was born as a state in 1918, in the aftermath of the First World War. At the end of the Second World War, it was decided at the Yalta conference to include Czechoslovakia in the Soviet sphere of influence. The advent of communist rule was not, however, only a result of this historical agreement. The communists enjoyed significant support from the population in the first few years after the war (Holy 1996: 17). The Soviet Union had suffered huge losses, they had led the liberation of most of Eastern Europe, and local communists had been instrumental in the domestic resistance (Haukanes 1999: 94). These actions lent the communists a great deal of moral authority. In the 1946 elections, the communists emerged as the victorious party.

In 1948, after some political struggles, the communists took complete control of the state. If I were to write this overview within the genre of communist history writing, the following paragraphs would emphasize the progress of the working class and the communist take-over as a moment of liberation from the shackles of capitalism and class oppression. The communist era would be glorified and seen as the beginning of the historical epoch in which true human development would occur, resulting in the end of class struggles, and thus, the end of history. The previous "bourgeois" epochs of Czechoslovak history, in which the middle class defined the social and cultural development, would be discarded as a mere

stepping-stone to the true identity of the nation as a communist state. The Soviet Union would be promoted as an undisputed ideal to be followed at any price.

I will not follow this kind of outline here[35]. Instead, I will adhere to the post-communist historical narrative that emerged after 1989[36]. This narrative was, in part, created out of the need to create distance from the communist past: "The history of the state has been rewritten, and a new structure for periodising has been set out, in which the communist period is put in brackets and even demonised" (Haukanes 1999: 82). Within the post-communist, nationalistic narrative, it is held that the true Czech identity is embodied in the interwar years, when Czechoslovakia was one of the most culturally and economically developed countries in Europe. This was the era when the middle class (in communist jargon, the bourgeoisie) was blossoming in Czechoslovakia. The official historical narrative after 1989 emphasises the periods of war and communism as 'dark holes' in the national history that have to be overcome in order to resume the country's identity as a beacon of democracy and development. [37]In the new era, the West is seen as the undisputed ideal to be followed at any price.

Within post-communist history writing, the communist take-over, instead of being seen as a glorious and liberating moment, is seen as the beginning of a period of widespread terror and political purges. In a bid to consolidate power and transform Czechoslovakia into a Soviet style state, all opposition was expunged and traditional elites lost their economic and political footing. It was the most brutal period of political persecution ever during the communist regime. From 1948 to 1956, more than 100 000 people were imprisoned, 232 people were sentenced to death, and 8000 to 15 000 were beaten to death during interrogations or shot during escape attempts (Borneman 1997: 153). In the analysis, I will discuss the impact of the harsh regime on the family situation of the interviewees.

The communist coup and subsequent purges were the impulse for the first large post-war wave of emigration. Illegal emigration was considered an act of high treason and usually

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[35] Even though I in part consider historical narratives to be constructions, I do not think they have a completely random relationship to the external reality, and I cannot deny that I consider the post-communist narrative to give a more accurate picture of the communist epoch.

[36] When I speak dominating historical narratives, I do not imply that everyone agrees upon this narrative. As Holy writes, that "there is only one official historical narrative does not mean…that it is necessarily accepted as valid by everyone to whom it is addressed" (Holy 1996: 117).

[37] Holy (1996: 51) suggests that Czech nationalism is tied to this narrative: it construes communism as an externally imposed system that was alien to Czech national tradition, and the year 1989 (as opposed to 1948) as a moment of national liberation. From this perspective, the Czech nation is pure and it is the external 'Other' (in this case the Soviets) who is responsible for its historical predicaments.

meant that the individual would be sentenced in absentia to at least two years in prison and that his or her property was confiscated by the state[38].

In the following years, Czechoslovakia was run along strict Soviet lines. Privatization and Stalin's "iron & steel" concept, focusing almost exclusively on heavy industry, became the bedrock of the economy (Renner and Hurst-Buist 1989: 19-25). The state supervised and controlled all aspects of life. Particularly important was the development of the secret police, described by Havel as an omnipresent "spider's web". It was invisible, but every citizen knew it was there and watched his steps so as not to be caught (Havel 1990).

The advent of change came when the Slovak politician Alexandr Dubček, and the economist Ota Šik, began to take the mismatch between Soviet economic planning and the country's own needs seriously. They forwarded ideas about decentralization, a reduction in price controls, and the reintroduction of certain market economic principles. Despite opposition within the Communist Party, particularly from party leader Antonín Novotný, many politicians found these ideas appealing. In January1968, Dubček replaced Novotný as party secretary. His ascent to leadership marked the beginning of the Prague Spring, a period of economic and political liberalization. On April 5, Dubček and his supporters forwarded the Action Programme, which sketched out the framework for "communism with a human face", including the vision of a society with democratic values and increased civil liberties. Despite the reform politicians' pledged allegiances to the Warsaw pact and to communist ideology, the Soviet Union interpreted the development of events in Czechoslovakia as the beginning of a return to capitalism. On August 21st 1968, while the whole Western world watched in shock and awe, Soviet and Warsaw Pact troops invaded Czechoslovakia (Shepherd 2000: 25-30).

The majority of Czechoslovaks reacted to the invasion with a feeling of despair and disempowerment. In the first few months after the invasion, thousands of people emigrated to the West. Included in this group were many former party members and people who had become new 'enemies' of the regime after the invasion. The emigrants also included many young people whose disillusionment led them to seek out new lives abroad. Several of the interviewees in this study belong to the latter category. The invasion plays a significant role in their stories of emigration.

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[38] In the 1970s and 80s, many emigrants took advantage of the possibility to apply for a "presidential pardon". This meant that she had to give up her Czechoslovak citizenship or ask for status as a citizen living permanently abroad. The applicant had to pay a large amount of money for the education she received in Czechoslovakia (this could be up to 10 000 dollars US). If the application was accepted, it allowed the emigrant to go back home for visits. The measure was introduced due to a serious lack of foreign exchange in Czechoslovakia (Jeřábek 2005).

Gustav Husák replaced Dubček as the party secretary after the invasion. A period of so-called "normalisation" followed. One third of the party members were expelled, and everyone who held a significant position was screened to ensure political loyalty. The government waged a kind of "cold war against its own people" (Shepherd 2000:31). Those who wanted to keep a decent job had to sign petitions that expressed their gratefulness for the "fraternal" help of the Warsaw Pact troops.

The political processes after the communist take-over in the 1950s established a collective memory of fear that prepared the ground for more subtle means of subjugation. Šimečka (1984: 66) coined the new strategy "material suppression": it was clear that you had to be on good terms with the Communist Party if you wanted to enjoy a meaningful professional life, the ability to travel abroad, access to material benefits such as a cabin or a car, and the opportunity for your children to go to university. In the analysis, I will show that the idea of living relatively comfortably within the system and gaining access to professional positions in exchange for political obedience are topics that emerge in the encounter between returning emigrants and the majority.

The regime's survival thus rested upon its capacity to implement a complex system of punishments and rewards, offering its citizens a predicable, materially adequate life in return for political obedience. The system is referred to as "consumer socialism" (Otáhal 2002: 32), or in Havel's words, as an "historical encounter between dictatorship and consumer society" (Havel 1985: 38). It was no longer necessary to accept the game, as long as one played along with the rules and did not make one's disagreement publicly known. Thus, people increasingly withdrew to the private sphere where they were generally allowed to keep a decent apartment and a cabin in the countryside, while taking occasional trips to the beaches of Yugoslavia. In the public sphere, they tried to make as little effort and noise as possible, saving their strength for the authentic life behind the curtain and avoiding any action that might endanger the semblance of political obedience or jeopardise their peaceful lives.

It was precisely this combination of political oppression and people's general lack of interest in the surrounding society that spurred the creation of the dissident group Charta 77[39]. The Charta, headed by intellectuals such as Vaclav Havel and Jan Patočka, began challenging the power of the regime through their "apolitical politics", a set of ideas that simply urged people to live "in truth". According to the Chartists, the most serious consequence of the communist system was that it had led to a deep moral and existential crisis (Otáhal 2002: 44-

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[39] Together with the show case trial against the rock band "The plastic people of the Universe", the immediate impulse for the emergence of the dissident movement that was to be known as Charta 77, were calls for the Czechoslovak state to respect the Helsinki protocol that theoretically committed the countries in the Soviet sphere to respect human rights.

45). The key to change did not lie in political action, but in showing the individual a way out of his existential crisis, and in turn, change the whole society. Havel and his likeminded associates thus drew attention away from the system and back to the level of the individual, suggesting that everyone had a moral responsibility that went above and beyond personal needs. By refusing to accept the rules of the game, the whole authoritarian system could be exposed for what it was: a sham that very few people actually believed in. If the regime's foundations were made up of lies, then telling the truth was the most efficient weapon (Havel 1985: 40)[40]. Within this context, the act of emigration can be interpreted as an attempt to live in truth. I will return to this idea later on.

Despite their compelling message, the Charta members constituted only a small minority of the Czechoslovak population. Their message was not truly heard until international events lent support to their voices. In 1989, the time had come: the Berlin wall had been dismantled, communist regimes in several of the Warsaw pact countries had collapsed, and Gorbachev's promises of perestroika and glasnost had made a Russian invasion seem unlikely. The so-called "Velvet Revolution" began with a student demonstration that developed into a worker's general strike. The days of communist rule were history, and on December 29th, 1989, Havel became the first non-communist president of Czechoslovakia in 41 years (Shepherd 2000: 37). Despite some political and economic turbulence, the Czech Republic is today one of the most prosperous countries in the region. The Czech Republic's entry into the EU in 2004 was regarded by many as a final symbolic step away from its communist past and into the realm of the West.

4.2 Having the right past

As I suggested above, there has been a need to create distance to the communist epoch after 1989, and the new historical narrative emphasises the brutal and authoritarian aspects of the communist system. It is not enough, however, to update the historical narrative in the aftermath of sudden historical change. These changes also had to be incorporated at the individual level, in people's biographies (see for example Andrews 2000; Andrle 1999; Andrle 2001). Historical change create, as Krasnodebski writes, "moral losers and winners" (Krasnodebski 2000: 252). The fall of communism strengthened the moral identity of some communities of memory, while reducing it among others. Many people had longed for this

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[40] It is important to note that "normal" people probably had a hard time identifying with the dissidents. One of their aims was to pull people out of their isolation and find strength together; however, their circle was relatively small and may have seemed inaccessible to most people.

moment, but even so, the inescapable fact was that people had built their lives and identities around the very system that was unravelling in front of their eyes: "The fall of socialism…did not mean just the fall of the bearers of communist power. It was also the fall of ordinary people who had lived under this system and had, to a greater or lesser degree, adapted to it" (Šiklová 1991: 767) . How were people to make sense of their identity within the new framework, and what does the communist past mean today?

The criteria for a desirable past according to the post-communist narrative are the diametric opposite of those that were important during the regime. During the communist epoch, one can consider the standard for selecting people to work for the secret police as an illustration of the most desirable past. Ideally, members of the secret police were supposed to be from a communist family and be a party member or a potential member, they should not have relatives who emigrated, and they should preferably have a proletarian background (Žáček 2000). In the public sphere, people had to make sure their biographies appeared to have as many of those ingredients as possible, and their personal pasts were thus constructed according to public demands (Humphrey et al. 2003: 18)[41]

Today, on the other hand, having an intimate connection to the communist system is generally considered to be a negative aspect of an individual's past. Being recognised as someone who actively opposed and/or *suffered* because of communism, i.e. being granted the identity of a victim of communism is particularly potent for endowing someone with a moral identity today. Molly Andrews writes that in East Germany, "[t]he incentive to portray oneself as having been part of the opposition, and/or a victim of the system was very powerful: it was the most highly valued past in the new Germany" (Andrews 2000: 184).

Most people, however, lived their lives within the "grey zone" between the two categories of active cooperation and resistance (Šiklová 1991). Many of them may have resented the regime, but they complied with it and continued their lives as best they could within its confines. As in Germany, their identities could neither be clearly constructed as villains, nor as heroes (Andrews 2000: 185).

Because many people had problems relating their life story to the new cultural narratives, Andrews found that many people in East Germany were scrambling to find new identities by re-constructing their past. Others tried to live as if they had no past, since that aspect of their life only was a source of shame. The older generation, who invested "their youth, their

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[41] People were aware of these requirements from an early age. Skultans explains that in Latvia, children in school "were taught how to write an autobiography and advised on appropriate terminology for describing their family past and circumstances. All job and training applications required the writing of extensive autobiographies" (Skultans 1998: 69).

thoughts, their creativity into a life which is now nothing" were bitter and silent (Andrews 2000: 185).

It is important to emphasise, however, that people's perception of right and wrong pasts is not as clear-cut as the new narrative might suggest. There seems to be a widespread awareness of the fact that people complied with the system for a variety of reasons. In her research on the transition in the Czech countryside, Haukanes found that people did not seem particularly concerned about re-shaping their lives according to the new official truths, and having the "wrong" past did not affect social relations significantly. Former party affiliation did, for example, mattered much less in the local community than she expected. People knew that membership of the party did not necessarily mean "commitment to communism as an ideology, nor to the political system as it existed in the post-war Czechoslovakia" (Haukanes 1999: 136). Similarly, one of the interviewees in this study pointed out that certain people helped others through their position in the system:

> …the boss of this institute was a professor who of course is hated by many because he was a member of the communist party, but because of this position, he saved many people, like myself. Had he been an outsider, many people wouldn't have survived. And a whole generation of scholarship would have been destroyed.

What, then, does the individual's past mean today? The significance of the past seems to be context-dependent. Sometimes, the past does matter. For example, one of my interviewees obtained a position at the ministry of foreign affairs partly because he was one of the few candidates who had a "clean" past, and within the state system, there have been attempts to remove people who had prominent positions within the old regime (see section 4.4). Havel's status in the Czech Republic and abroad has undoubtedly been connected to the moral authority he embodies because of his past as a brave dissident.

Haukanes also discovered that although the past generally did not influence present social relations, it did have the potential to do so at moments of tension. Despite its flexible usage, the term 'communist' was far from neutral, and "its potential as a means to degrade someone or show them in a bad light was great" (Haukanes 1999: 140) Thus, the past appears to be a latent weapon that can be brought up in specific situations. Having a clean past can be a source of moral authority, and similarly, pointing to someone's "unclean" past can be a way to question an individual's integrity. The whole point here is to show the complexity of the relationship between the post-communist narrative and people's pasts. The relationships are not clear-cut, and people know it. There is an unwillingness to ask questions and bring up this topic for discussion because very few people have an unambiguous moral identity. In this sense, there is a gap between the official narrative and people's lived lives. Because of this, people appear to speak little about their past as a part of the communist system. Thus,

even more important than biographical *reworking* is perhaps the fact that the past is frequently veiled in biographical *silence*. [42]

The above discussion is important in understanding the atmosphere in the Czech Republic today with regards to the past. There is a set of silent, unanswered questions, and uncertainty in terms of how to evaluate oneself and others within the post-communist reality. Within this context, how do people view the option to emigrate? Next I will examine different views on the emigrants within Czech society.

4.3 Narratives about the emigrant: hero, traitor, victim or coward?

The discussion above showed that certain pasts were considered more desirable than others both during the communist period, and in today's post-communist society. Here, I will examine how the option to emigrate is evaluated today. Within Czech society, there are a variety of interpretations and cultural images connected to the emigrant that convey different messages about the decision to emigrate.

Historically, the Czech Republic has a long and rich tradition of emigration and exile, from the battle of The White Mountain in 1620, up the 20th century. Czech history is populated by a myriad of important national heroes who were in exile, such as Komenský, the famous pedagogue and theologian; Smetana, the renowned composer; and Masaryk, the founding father of the Czechoslovak state. During the communist era, many emigrants worked actively for the motherland from abroad[43].

One narrative about the Czech emigrant is connected to this tradition. Within this context, emigration is an act that entails high personal costs and is undertaken and endured on behalf of the collective. These ideas are much elaborated upon in the wide literature on exile that emphasises hardship, loneliness, and an incessant longing for the motherland. For example, Edward Said writes: "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience.

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[42] Pithart, a well-known dissident and the first Czechoslovak prime minister after the Velvet revolution, has attempted to open this debate in public. He believes people's lack of "memory" in terms of the past is caused by a fear of investigating their part in the maintenance of the system.

[43] Well-known examples are Pavel Tigrid, a prominent Czech intellectual who was the head of the Czechoslovak branch of Radio Free Europe, and Škvorecký, a renowned Czech writer who established 68 Publishers in Toronto together with his wife.

It is the unbearable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (Said 2000: 173).

This contrasts with another image of the emigrant, whose return after the fall of communism has been characterised like this: "A lot of people returned with a wide hat from Texas and with a lot of noise… their only interest was to make money" (Čermak 1993: 118). This narrative is about the selfish emigrant who left in order to ensure his or her own prosperity and live in the wealthy West. Here, emigration is seen as an individualistic act, with many benefits for the individual, and few, if any, positive benefits for the collective.

The two images correspond to the distinction between economic and political emigration, or between *emigrants* and *exiles*[44]. In this thesis, I use the word 'emigrant' for anyone who left communist Czechoslovakia, regardless of the motives. In Czech society, however, the word 'emigrant' often indicates someone who left for economic reasons, while 'exile' denotes someone who left for political reasons[45].

There seems to be a general belief that people who left may be divided into one of these two categories. At the very beginning of my stay in Prague, I told my landlord that I was writing about Czech emigrants. He immediately pointed out this distinction: "There are two groups of people who left, one of them because they wanted to lead better lives in the West, and the other one because they were politically persecuted. Unfortunately, it's impossible to know who belongs to which group today." He clearly implied that leaving due to political persecution was a legitimate reason, while leaving for economic reasons was not[46].

Narratives about the emigrant are also shaped by ideas about the West and the social reality surrounding emigration during the communist epoch. During communism, most people held an image of the West as place of material wealth and comfort, and many believed emigrants lived a life of luxury. This image was bolstered when emigrants began returning and some of

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[44] The distinction between the emigrant and the exile is, of course, not unique to Czech society. It is also a dominant theme within today's immigration discourse. An individual's success as an asylum seeker in the economically developed world depends on his ability to prove that his motive for leaving was not only the wish for a better future, but also that he has undergone the "right" kind of persecution at home.

[45] There is also a general conception that emigration motives differed according to which emigration wave one belonged to. Pavel Tigrid, a prominent Czech exile, was among the first to point this out. In general, those who left after 48 were considered to have largely political motives, while those who left after 68 often are perceived to have been motivated more by economic reasons (Nespor 2002: 798).

[46] These categories may also be of importance to emigrants' self-definition. In an interview with an emigrant, a student used the word "emigrated" about the interviewee's departure from Czechoslovakia. He answered promptly: "By the way, I don't consider myself an emigrant. I consider myself an exile. You know the difference between an emigrant and an exile? An exile goes more or less for political reasons, and an emigrant goes for economic reasons out of the country to make life easier for them or better" (COH).

them eagerly displayed the wealth they had accumulated abroad. Moreover, leaving frequently entailed negative consequences for the remaining family members (Pecina 1999)[47], adding to the impression that emigrants reaped the benefits of life in the West, leaving others to bear the brunt of their decision.

The idea of leaving as an "easy way out" is still noticeable. In an interview with the current president of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Klaus, he reveals that he considered staying abroad in 1969 to work as an academic in the US. He portrays his decision to return as the morally right thing to do, tacitly implying that staying abroad would have been a benefit to him, but not to his country:

> I had the feeling that the process had already started [referring to the Prague spring], that sooner or later it would end and that it was necessary to stand by it, and not observe it from the peace and comfort and the undoubtedly higher living standard of a professor at an American university. And looking back, I think I did the right thing (Navara August 22nd, 2005: 1).

Communist propaganda added to the image of the selfish emigrant: he was portrayed as an unscrupulous individual who betrayed his nation[48]. By changing the laws pertaining to illegal emigration and turning it into an act of high treason, the communist regime underscored the symbolic message of emigration as a highly immoral undertaking (Dubovický 1994: 82)[49].

In addition to the image of the emigrant as a traitor, he is also sometimes portrayed as a coward who, instead of holding the fort with his compatriots, fled to a safer place when the going got rough. In his research on refugee-stayee relations in Bosnia, Stefansson (2004) found a similar cultural imagery. For example, a commonly used term for refugee was a word that meant "those who ran away for no reason", meaning cowards. "The message here", Stefansson writes, "was that a decision to stay in besieged Sarajevo was courageous and patriotic, but a decision to flee was tantamount to succumbing to one's fears and

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[47]See http://www.ce-review.org/99/4/pecina4.html

[48] These images appear to linger on in the Czech population today, even in the younger generations. During a pub visit in Prague, I told a Czech man in the twenties about the topic for my thesis. He reacted with anger: not only did he consider the topic irrelevant, only interesting to a foreigner like me, he also used the word "traitor" when he spoke about the emigrants. "They have no right, simply no right," he exclaimed, "to come back here and tell us what to do!"

[49] Holy, a Czech emigrant anthropologist, suggests that this view of emigrants as traitors is not only related to the communist past. He proposes that the problematic view of emigrants is related to the nationalistic discourse in the Czech Republic that represents the nation as strongly collectivist, made up from homogenous individuals that are defined in reference to the larger, national whole (Holy 1996: 63). From this perspective, it is not acceptable to *choose* emigration, because this entails individual voluntarily giving up his place in the collective, demonstrating his individualistic inclination, and showing divided loyalties.

individual needs while shirking off the demands of solidarity with one's fellow Sarajevans" (Stefansson 2004: 59). The brutality of the conflict in Bosnia probably made the division between refugees and those who stayed more crucial; however, it is likely that similar mechanisms are at play.

In yet other situations, the emigrant is seen as a victim of the communist system in the same way as dissidents and others who were targeted by the regime. A monument to the victims of communism that was erected in Prague a few years ago illustrates this. By the monument, there is a plaque enumerating the victims of communism. The victims include those who were executed, arrested, and those who emigrated. Thus, in this context, emigrants in general are defined as victims of the system (as opposed to the vast majority of Czechoslovak citizens, who were not mentioned), which is one of the most desirable pasts in the post-communist context.

Furthermore, emigration may be portrayed as a form of protest regardless of whether someone left for economic, political, or altogether other reasons. Havel (1985) suggests that there were three ways of showing one's opposition within the communist regime: challenging the system from within, overt dissent, and opposition by refusing to live a lie. The latter is a broad definition, and includes "every attempt to live within the truth…everything in which the genuine aims of life go beyond the limits placed on them by the aims of the system" (Havel 1985: 54). According to this definition, all types of emigration may be seen as a protest against the system and an attempt to live in truth.

Clearly, then, there is no easy answer to the question of how emigration is perceived in today's society. Emigrants have an ambiguous moral identity, and there are a multitude of possible images of emigrants that endow their life stories with more or less narrative validity. This provides an important backdrop for examining the stories emigrants narrate about themselves. Before doing this, however, I will examine two prevalent narratives about the past that may be relevant to the life stories of the interviewees and members of the majority.

4.4 Narratives about the past: culpability or victimhood?

The dominating post-communist narrative regards the communist system as flawed and immoral. Beyond this consensus, however, there are different versions of the individual's position and responsibility vis-à-vis the communist system. As I will demonstrate in chapter 7, these narratives may lend tacit support to different types of life strategies. Two such

narratives can be illustrated by briefly examining the debate surrounding the lustration law in the Czech Republic.

The legitimacy of the post-communist regimes hinged to a great extent on their ability to dissociate themselves from the past and enact measures that dealt with previous injustices. One of the most important means to do this was the so-called lustration laws, which were enacted in large parts of Eastern and Central Europe to varying degrees[50]. The lustration processes entailed "the examination of certain groups of people, especially politicians, public officials, and judges, to determine whether they had been members or collaborators of the secret police, or held any other position in the repressive apparatus of the totalitarian regime" (David 2003: 1). If such involvement with the previous regime was revealed, the individual should not be allowed to hold important positions within the new state apparatus. [51] The point here is not, however, to go into a detailed discussion of the lustration laws and their consequences (see Appel 2005; Borneman 1997; David 2003). In this context, what is interesting is the debate surrounding the law and the way this debate reflects different narratives about the individual's role in the communist system.

Put simply, one can say that the debate reveals two main narratives about the past in the Czech Republic today[52]. The narratives agree on the undesirable nature of the communist system, while proposing different explanations for the individual's role within it.

The first narrative lends support to the lustration law by emphasising that certain groups in society can be singled out as responsible, and thus should take the consequences of their role within the former regime. These groups include former members of the secret police and members of the high echelons of the party. The lustration law can in this context be seen as an attempt to deal with some of the visible aspects of the communist regime by focusing on specific groups of people who personified the communist past. This wish did not stem purely from a need for revenge; there were also practical arguments, such as the concern that old elites might hamper the transition process, and there was a wish to open up the system to

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[50] The lustration law is related to similar processes in others societies that are dealing with the past, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa. Although dealing with some similar issues, there are, however, many important differences between the approaches, such as the fact that the TRC focuses both on victims and perpetrators.

[51] In the Czech Republic, the result of the lustration process was never published without the consent of the individual. The lustration act is secret, but if the lustration is positive, the individual has to leave her position without the public knowing the actual reason.

[52] These two narratives about the past can be related to Holy's (1996: 118-137) division between the nationalistic and non-nationalistic view of the past, where the first sees historical predicaments mostly as externally imposed and is concerned with "undoing" historical injustices, and the latter proposes drawing "a thick line under history" and come to terms with painful parts of the past by acknowledging that it is an inherent part of the nation, and not just forced upon it from the outside.

people who earlier had been barred from participating. By creating an official procedure for lustration, it would be possible to control the process and avoid the numerous rumours that plagued the political scene (David 2003).

The arguments on the other side of the debate may be connected to a view of the past where everyone holds responsibility for the perseverance of the communist regime. People's ability to adapt to the communist system is the cause of its continued existence, thus, communism was not only imposed from the outside; it also evolved from the inside. The most prominent advocate of this view was Vaclav Havel, who at the time was president of the Czech Republic. Despite being empathic about the population's need to redress past injustices, he opposed the lustration law for two main reasons. First, he considered it to be ethically and democratically wrong to judge groups of people on the grounds of group membership, without taking individual motivation and actions into account (Haukanes 1999: 40)[53]. Secondly, and more important for our discussion, Havel disagreed with the symbolic effect of singling out particular groups of people as guilty, since he believed everyone who adapted to the system and lived within its confines was accountable for its continued existence in some way or another. Havel clearly expressed this idea in his New Years address to the nation in 1990, soon after becoming president:

> We had all become used to the totalitarian system and accepted it as an unalterable fact of life, and thus we helped to perpetuate it. In other words, we were all – though naturally to differing extents – responsible for the operation of totalitarian machinery. None of us is just its victims: we are also its cocreators (Havel 1994: 4).

Similarly, Pithart, a well-known dissident and the first prime minister after 89, believes that people's urge to point out guilty groups stems in part from their unwillingness to examine their own role within the system. According to him, Czechs can only truly deal with the past once they are honest with themselves and realise that the system was not an external being, imposed upon them and disconnected from their individual actions. Because of this, he does not consider it possible for the state to provide the population with a longed-for catharsis:

> Either 'they' caused it all and thus 'they' must always be unambiguously identifiable and visible, or those who were involved with the old regime were so many and the ways of involvement so numerous, that such identification and visibility is impossible. The second case of course leaves us with no other option than that everyone comes to term with his own conscience, without the state morally absolving him by firmly deciding who's guilty (Pithart 1998: 256).

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[53] Havel also considered the material used to judge people, such as the archives of the secret police, to be an unreliable source.

Significantly, some of the arguments embedded in the pro-lustration debate allocate the majority of Czechs the role of the victim, whereas many of the arguments against lustration instead allocate them a share of responsibility and guilt. This is an important point, since the social value these roles embody is important for people's ability to maintain a moral identity within post-communist society. In chapter 7 I will return to some additional aspects of this debate, and show how the two narratives can lend support to different life stories.

In this chapter, I have presented an historical outline of the post-communist narrative and discussed the meaning of historical change at the level of the individual. I suggested that the new historical narrative has introduced novel criteria for the evaluation of people's pasts, where an intimate relationship to the regime is considered to be negative, and positions as dissident or victim of the regime are highly valued. Then I discussed the different interpretations of the act of emigration. The contradictory images illustrate the ambiguity of the moral identity of emigrants within Czech society. Finally, I investigated two different ways of seeing the individual's position vis-à-vis the communist system; one emphasising collective victimhood, and another stressing personal responsibility.

I will now turn to an analysis of the interview material in order to examine how the life stories of the interviewees may be related to the narratives and images I have outlined above. Each empirical chapter is introduced with a case study that is based on the life story of one interviewee. The case studies have been included to illustrate the material I have worked with and to exemplify selected topics in the context of the life stories. Note, however, that I do not consider any particular case to be illustrative of the topics and discussions that then ensue: these are based on the analysis of the material as a whole and on other literature. In the first chapter I will start by looking at Milan's case and the difficulties faced by some of the interviewees as they attempted to enter their professional fields upon return.

5. Milan: returning to closed gates

Milan was born in 1949. Both of his parents were from Prague and were studying at the university at the outbreak of the Second World War. They resumed their studies after the war, but their study progression was interrupted once again in 1948 by the communist take-over when Milan's parents turned down an offer to become members of the communist party, thereby closing the door to further educational advancement. As part of a social experiment aimed at involving intellectuals in manual labour, Milan's father was sent to work with horses in a village about 30 kilometres outside Prague. Milan spent the first years of his life there. The family returned to Prague when Milan was about 6 years old.

Milan began his studies in the field of film-making prior to the Prague Spring in 1968, at a time when the country was undergoing a wave of liberalisation and the regime paid scant attention to his politically incorrect family background. In 1972, the first election after the Warsaw pact invasion was about to take place. This event was to become the starting point of Milan's emigration story. Together with some friends who went to film school, he got involved in a documentary film project that focused on the elections. Since the regime was still trying to re-establish its firm hold over society, any attempt to document the workings of its machinery was perceived as a potential threat. In order to halt the project at its birth, Milan and his friends were surrounded by the police. The police opened a door to a building where a Soviet flag had been set on fire, and the students were subsequently accused of burning the flag and charged with anti-Soviet propagation

Milan was arrested and underwent a series of interrogations. The very same day as his arrest, he received a letter from the university informing him that he had been expelled because he had proven to be disloyal to the regime. Thus, any prospect of finishing his education was eliminated. After two months, Milan was released from jail, but was still awaiting the verdict from the legal proceedings against him. At that point, he had already begun planning his escape. Milan explains that the gravity of the situation made his decision to emigrate clear-cut: "I had the opportunity earlier on, I had been in London several times, several times in Paris, I had been to Stockholm, and I could have escaped, but this time it was so obvious, the reasons for emigration, it was nothing more to discuss".

His British schoolmate went to England and brought back with him two British girls who were both willing to help Milan by marrying him so he could apply for a visa to go to England. Milan picked one of the girls to be his bride, married her, and began applying for visas to go to England. As his trial was approaching Supreme Court and the regime continued to refuse his requests, his new British wife began pretending that she was mentally

ill and in need of her husband's presence. In the end, the Red Cross got involved to plead on their behalf and finally, the regime reluctantly granted Milan a four-day visa to visit his wife in England. Milan's departure took place in a rush: "I got permission to go for a four-day visit to see my seriously ill or almost dying wife. I went to the British embassy at 4 p.m., they gave me the visa, and at 5 p.m. I was already on my way!" Needless to say, Milan did not return when his visa expired. Three weeks after his departure, he received an unconditional sentence of 2.5 years in jail.

In England, Milan completed his education and embarked upon a successful career. He worked on a number of internationally celebrated film projects, and he was a significant figure within the British art world.

After the fall of communism in 1989, Milan began travelling to the Czech Republic and worked periodically there. Progressively, his parents and his brother passed away, leaving the family house in Prague empty. In 1997, having divorced his British wife[54], Milan resettled on a more permanent basis in the Czech Republic and moved into the house where he had lived with his parents and his grandparents during his childhood and teenage years.

Back in Prague, Milan began teaching at the university. Together with his second wife, who was also in the film business, he started a course that became very popular with the students. After some time, however, it became clear that people in the department were not too pleased by Milan's presence and the way he and Maria worked with the students. One of the reasons for this was, according to Milan, simply that they created higher expectations in students about what they could demand of their teachers: "[T]hen they had to work as much as we did, that's where the problem is, the standard was set too high, we ruined their norms…Because we were very good, very popular, and the other teachers would've had to be there on a regular basis as well.[55]"

At one point, one of Milan's colleagues even asked him why he put so much energy and effort into his teaching, proclaiming: "Don't you know that you are bringing up competition?"

After some time, the department called for applications from people who were interested in teaching on a regular basis. Milan explains that Initially, there were five positions, and five

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[54] Eight of the re-emigrants were divorced at the point of remigration, or got divorced during the process of returning. The interviews showed that remigration was often preceded by important changes or transitions between different life stages (change in job situation retirement, divorce). Many of the interviewees seemed to opt for remigration at transitional points in their lives, when return became a viable means through which to make life changes or adjust to such changes.

[55] The quotes from the interview with Milan are translated from Czech.

applicants, Milan and Maria being among them. To prevent them from getting the jobs, the administration removed two people from positions in another institute while encouraging them to apply for the positions held up to then by Milan and Maria. Thus, having two more applicants on their hands, and only five positions, the administration could push out Milan and Maria while maintaining an air of legitimacy.

Milan believes the aversion he has faced at university is to some extent is related to envy: "I think the envy here is enormous." Milan's experiences from life abroad have given him a different viewpoint on many things. He brings new impulses into the system, challenging ideas and methods that have been around for years. Milan thinks the legacy of communism is still strongly felt in the university environment. Not only have most of the employees been there since communist times, some of them also continue using the same methods as they did in the past in order to eliminate unwanted elements in their environment:

> [T]hose people who sit at that school, many of them are people who were there before the revolution, *old communists who don't have anything to give their students*, and this is of course inconvenient for them, suddenly the school should somehow turn in a different direction. I totally get it, psychologically, it's easy to explain. But it's strange that society tolerates it. And in the end, the students protests fiercely against it, and afterwards the teachers tell them "I remember you, you were the one who supported Milan back then" etc. And they actually literally threw out two of our students, they told them they did not pass an exam in maths, in the fourth year… for these people, it's like life or death, it's simply: "it's ours"!

At the time of the interview, Maria is a candidate to become the new faculty dean. However, because her name is so clearly associated with Milan's, she does not think she is likely to gain many votes. Maria explains that the dean is to be elected by a senate. During the last three months, one of the candidates has made sure five of the members of the senate got different academic positions, thereby buying their votes. Once again, Milan and Maria feel like witnesses of how methods that were common during the communist regime are still in use. Maria participates in the elections knowing that she cannot win: her only goal is to bring attention to the problems of the system.

Despite the fact that Milan is well known in the world of film-making, he feels like people often look at him with suspicion because he has been living abroad. At a university in a different city, Milan was elected dean by the academic senate twice, but the principal vetoed the decision on the grounds that Milan was unknown to him, having lived in England for so many years.

Milan's relationships with old friends and acquaintances have also undergone change after his return. He thinks people were more friendly and accepting when he still lived in England and came to visit occasionally[56]. When he lived abroad, people would be excited about the opportunity to go and visit him and take trips to his cabin or on his sailboat. After his return, things changed and Milan feels that his "price sank dramatically to almost nothing." At a safe distance, people at home seemed to enjoy his success – but at a close range, people were not as enthusiastic: "I am beginning to be a nuisance to them, back then I was someone they could go and visit…now I am someone who in addition to that teaches well, and does projects, who suddenly is on the cover of the local magazines. That's awfully dangerous, right?"

Perhaps as a consequence of this, many people at home have begun questioning his accomplishments abroad and believe the reason he returned was because he was unsuccessful. Despite all of this, Milan generally feels at home in the Czech Republic. From his point of view, he is Czech because he was born in the Czech Republic, but he does not feel the need to stay in his country of birth. Feeling at "home" is not exclusively connected to one place. When he lived in England, he felt at home there as well. At some point, he might choose to go somewhere altogether different: "[N]ow I exist here, and perhaps I will again exist somewhere else. So I am Czech, I was born here. But if someone told me that I will live for the rest of my life in Japan, then I will gladly be there."

5.1 Unwanted experiences

One would almost automatically assume that after the fall of Communism in 1989, the now free people would embrace their emigrants, taking advantage of their experience of living in democratic and prosperous parts of the world.

No such luck. (Pecina 1999)[57]

In his essay about the Homecomer, Schutz poetically writes that each individual who returns from abroad "has tasted the magic fruit of strangeness, be it sweet or bitter." After his return, the homecomer will feel the urge to "transplant into the old pattern something of the novel goals, of the newly discovered means to realize them, of the skills and experiences acquired

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[56] The feeling that friends and family were more interested in and warm towards the emigrants while they were still abroad was prevalent among several of the other interviewees as well, and has been described in other studies on return migration, see e.g. Gmelch (2004).

[57] Available at http://www.ce-review.org/99/4/pecina4.html

abroad" (Schutz 1945: 375). Similarly, many of the interviewees mentioned that they wanted to contribute to their country of origin upon return. Hana, whose case is presented below, is one of the clearest examples of this. By virtue of her resettlement in the Czech Republic, she wanted to bring something back to the local community. She considers her return to be embedded in the old, central European tradition of migration, and in the moral of fairytales that embodies the circular movement of leaving home, learning and bringing it back again:

> Coming back here, I thought I'd like to try and see what I can bring back. I have the feeling that I have learned something, it's like the old story of my great great grandfather. He learned his trade somewhere else, and then he brought it home. It's the old story of central Europe. There are lots of fairytales about that. You get your upbringing in a family, you go and meet the world, to learn your trade, and you come back, enriched. And you can contribute something greater than what you would have been able to if you remained.

However, as Milan's case above shows, it is not always unproblematic to return home and apply oneself professionally. In fact, the most striking aspects of Milan's narrative are his difficulties in being accepted in his field and finding work at home, despite international recognition[58]. His narrative is remarkably similar to that of another interviewee, Vladimir. Vladimir is a renowned professor whose scholarly pursuits have gained him international recognition. Before his return to the Czech Republic, Vladimir had been living abroad for more than 30 years, in different locations in Sweden, the U.S. and Australia. When he came back, he was determined to contribute to his field within the Czech Republic by teaching at the university.

As in Milan's case, however, Vladimir's return to the academic environment in the Czech Republic was no soft landing. He realised after a while that the resistance to him at the university was very strong. The negative reception had in part been spurred by an article that Vladimir had written abroad before the velvet revolution. The article took a critical stance towards some of the people involved in Vladimir's research field in Prague. Without Vladimir's knowledge, the article later on appeared in a Czech underground, samizdat journal. Since publication in such journals was explicitly against the regime, Vladimir's article had firmly placed those whom he criticized in his article within the communist camp, labelling them as "collaborators" with the regime – a situation they were less than pleased with after the revolution:"[S]o that was of course very painful, because that meant that those guys who wanted to run the department here appeared on the other side of the fence, I was anti-communist, and they appeared on the communist side."

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[58] This is also the case after he lost his job at the university: he started a firm, but barely gets by because of lack of commissions.

According to Vladimir, many of his colleagues at the university appeared to feel threatened by his presence. They seemed to think that he had returned to "destroy their scholarship and ridicule all of them, and they felt like their scholarly field is their property and nobody should interfere." Vladimir believes their reaction stems from a fear of being revealed as incompetent. He had experiences that they did not have, and he was not afraid to voice his opinion if he disagreed with something. In his own words, he pointed out that the "emperor has no clothes". Everybody had for years been taught to accept the state of things and keep quiet about any criticism. Vladimir broke the pact of silence by pointing out weaknesses in the system and how these could be improved. In this sense, Vladimir suggests that he threatened the power positions of certain people:

> They do not want experts who are better than they are because then they would not be experts anymore. Even when they know that the field is in need of experts they would rather see that the field is bad or perhaps even totally closed down, only so that they will not seem stupid, that's a well-known principle, to be a one-eyed king amongst the blind…One eye is enough when nobody can see, but when someone with two eyes comes along, it would mean the end of the king, and we don't want that…

Vladimir explains that these feelings ultimately prevented him from establishing his position at the university – the senate simply turned down his application. But Vladimir did not despair. Soon after his application had been turned down, he was hired by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and left to work abroad for a few years. After his return to the Czech Republic, Vladimir has slowly been able to establish himself within Czech academia again.

Milan and Vladimir's cases are the clearest examples of stories that bear testimony to resistance in the professional field. However, several of the other interviewees also mentioned that they felt like it was difficult to share their experience and advise with those at home. Jan (COH), for example, felt that returning emigrants were accepted up to a point, but their advice was not well taken if it challenged the usual way of doing things:

> ….so it was quite clear that, you were accepted but in a certain sense you were not really asked for your advice. That's a pity… So, were we accepted? Yes, I mean we were accepted but there was always the limit. It seems to me that if you had a very substantial issue with something that was against some of the mantras, then that was not particularly appreciated.

Anna says that she thinks the lack of openness towards her and her experiences is one of the reasons why she does not feel more at home in the Czech Republic:

> ….it has a lot to do with the reception I got from some of the segments of Czech society, that 'this is how you do it in America, but this is how we do it here, and we really are *not interested in your recommendations or in your experiences.*

Disinterest in experience from abroad is followed by a wish to do things the "Czech way", without interference from those who lived elsewhere. During the interview with Cyril, which took place in a café, the current president of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Klaus, walked past our table. Afterwards, Cyril exclaimed: "…when he [president Klaus] walks, it's like Mr. God himself. He's one of those guys who are actually telling people who emigrated: what do they want? We know, we do it our way, better." Cyril is suggesting that there is resistance to the advice of emigrants even exists among high-ranking politicians.

Petr, an economist educated in Canada, proposes that one of the reasons people in high position were not interested in the advice and involvement of emigrants, was that they wanted to hide their own agendas. According to Petr, the Velvet Revolution was not a real revolution: "…at that time, if the revolution was real, they would have needed the advice or cooperation of people from the West." Petr thinks such advice was rejected because it would have interfered with the process of handing down power from one group of people to another. In addition, involvement from abroad could have revealed that those in charge did not have the necessary skills to deal with the transition.

Thus, several of the interviewees felt their wish to contribute seemed to have been misapprehended by others, who displayed suspicion and a lack of interest in the skills emigrants can offer. Nešpor found similar results in his study: "Whereas many re-emigrants came to the Czech Republic with the conviction that they intended to help the country, they have not only met with a lack of interest, but also with the clearly negative reaction of the majority" (Nešpor 2002: 803)[59].

Why do the experiences and advice of emigrants seem so out of place? Why are some of them met with resistance to such an extent that they have a hard time getting by as professionals in the Czech Republic today, despite their credentials? I will examine some potential answers to these questions in the next section.

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[59] In his study on re-emigrants to Barbados, Gmelch also found that people were reluctant to take advice from returnees. One interviewee said that he had to be very careful about not making his ideas seem like products of something he had learned abroad. In fact, locals take advice from a total stranger more easily than from a returnee: "The difference is that people will listen to what the foreigner has to say, but not to their own kind. They'll say, 'Who the hell is he to tell us what to do. He's only a Barbadian like us'" (Gmelch 2004: 220).

5.2 The struggle for positions and legitimacy

In his study of refugees returning to Bosnia, Stefansson (2004) found that the tensions between returnees and stayees were often the most difficult part of the homecoming experience. The conflict was at times related to the need to legitimise choices in the past, but an equally important source of tension was competition for material resources. Similarly, it seems likely that the resistance some of the emigrants in this sample met in their professional field was in part due to the fact that their colleagues perceived them as competitors. This may explain why at the beginning, at a safe distance, interviewees felt accepted, but when they returned on a more permanent basis, the social relationships with those at home deteriorated.

Emigrants may, in fact, be perceived as particularly threatening because they embody many of the ideals upheld by the post-communist narrative as significant ingredients in the future development of Czech society. In the struggle about who should have a say in the future, the past may be seen as a potential weapon with which to increase or reduce the legitimacy of certain claims.

One essential point to make about Milan and Vladimir's stories is that they entered institutions that have been, and continue to be run by the state, and thus have not undergone processes of privatization or radical structural changes since the Velvet Revolution. Those among the interviewees who entered the private market did not seem to have experienced as much resistance, and naturally, those who returned upon retirement have met fewer problems, as they did not have to become part of the work market[60].

Many people within the university system that Vladimir and Milan entered had obtained their current positions during communism. Despite its officially propounded narrative of egalitarianism, the communist system was in fact highly hierarchical, and the ability to obtain a position and advance professionally depended to a great extent on one's relationship to the system. In her article about the underlying causes of the rise in nationalism in post-communist countries, Šiklová mentions this factor as a source of shame in today's society:

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[60] In his study on return migration to Barbados, Gmelch (2004) also found that it was easier for returnees to apply their experience from abroad in the private rather than in the public sector: "Its bureaucrats, say many Barbadians, are primarily interested in defending their own position. Unlike the business community, where the pressure of competition forces people to be at least minimally open to new ideas, there is no such thing in the civil service." Similar to Vladimir, one of Gmelch's interviewee points to the fact that colleagues may feel threatened by the returnees' presence: "Because you've been away and maybe know more about something, they feel threatened" (Gmelch 2004: 220).

> They [people who lived under the communist regime] realize that all the marks of their acquired social status were and remained tied to some form of collaboration with the fallen political regime. Each of us who lived in Central and Eastern Europe knows that anyone who rose to any professional or scientific prominence, owned any real estate, got to travel abroad, must have at the very least been obedient to the communists in power (Šiklová 1991: 768).

Obedience and loyalty to the system were thus equally or more important factors for professional advancement than actual merit. This is in contrasts to the Western ideal of meritocracy, where the individual's professional life is supposed to be based on his or her abilities and experience[61]. An awareness of this may have cause those who built their careers under communism to be particularly sensitive to criticism from people who have advanced professionally in the West, as these people can claim to have risen to prominence thanks to their own hard work and talents (features that, as we will see, are important ingredients in the life stories of some interviewees). Milan, for example, spoke of some of the employees at the university as "people who were there before the revolution, old communists who don't have anything to give to their students," clearly questioning their competence and suggesting that their position today is largely a result of their relationship to the regime in the past. Similarly, Petr is outspoken in his criticism of his colleagues at the university: "I said 'you are such old, communist idiots', they are still there, there are 600 teachers, and only fifty of them can teach in English, fifteen years after 89, it's a joke. Sixteen years. Eight percent…what did they do for those years?" Thus, when emigrants enter the system, they may appear as an obvious threat to those whose positions were obtained before the fall of communism.

Even more importantly, however, is the fact that many emigrants have precisely the skills that are in demand according to the post-communist narrative. Radical social change can be compared to changing conditions in nature: certain features that used to be adaptive, are suddenly problematic, and other features are suddenly in demand. A parallel can be drawn between Bourdieu's "habitus" and the way an individual's predispositions and worldview is adaptive or maladaptive in the context of rapid social change. Dispositions that used to be advantageous suddenly become a burden, and instead, new skills and outlooks are required (Humphrey et al. 2003). For these reasons, Piotr Sztompka suggests that the social transformation in Eastern Europe after the fall of communism was highly traumatic for many people, despite the pervasive longing for change. The new epoch initiated a clash between the cultural rules of communism, and the emerging demands of the capitalist system. Many

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[61] Note that this is an ideal that, of course, is not always followed in practice. However, the *idea* as such is strongly present in Western-based culture and ideology.

people who had lived their lives under the old system felt disoriented in the new social reality, since the "clash of those two incompatible cultures meant for most people that their internalized, trained ways of life lost effectiveness and even became counterproductive or negatively sanctioned in the new system, while the new cultural rules appeared to them as alien, imposed, or even coercive" (Sztompka 2004: 172).

Here we reach the heart of the issue: who, according to the new narratives and the new demands, would be better equipped to do the job of setting the correct course for the future than highly educated emigrants, having spent most of their adult life abroad, learning the ways of the system that was seen as a role model for the post-communist societies? Many emigrants belonged to the elite in Czechoslovakia even before their emigration. When they returned, their cultural capital had increased even further, as they possessed, in the words of one of the interviewees, "some work experience and life experience that was simply very valuable because it didn't exist here." Who better to hold the key to the future than them?

Those who stayed, however, emphasise that having lived in Czechoslovakia is equally or more relevant than the returnees' "foreign" knowledge to understand today's situation. Paradoxically, the two groups often use the same argument, but in different ways: those who left argue that they are more capable of understanding and improving things because they *were not there* during the years of communism, and those who stayed argue that their point of view is more relevant precisely because they *were there*. Their charge is that émigrés cannot truly understand Czech society today because of their absence.

It is easy to understand the feelings of those who stayed. Many of them did their best to be allowed to lead meaningful professional lives within the limits of a regime that, particularly after the invasion in 1968, appeared to be there for good. The strict emphasis during communism on certain aspects of the past as a means through which to gain privileged access to the system led to a situation where many people maintained two parallel narratives about their own lives: one version for official consumption, and another strictly private, uncensored version that often contained very different elements. In their private biographies, many people construed their identity as anti-communist and secretly ridiculed and resented the system. Thus, even people whose pasts appear to be inexorably linked to the system may in some cases feel this part of their biography does not reflect their true identity. In this sense, their biography is not at odds with the post-communist narrative; on the contrary, they may feel like they can finally let their "true" selves emerge into public again. Because of this, it is also conceivable that some people who held relatively high positions during communism today feel like victims of the system who simply swallowed their convictions

and did what they had to do. Therefore, they may not feel like "old communists", and they are perhaps particularly sensitive to people who are in a position to apply this label.

In the discussion above, I noted that the meaning of individual pasts appears to be context-dependent. In this situation, when emigrants and their colleagues at home struggle for positions and influence, the past is a potential weapon that can be used to question the integrity of the opponent. Not only do many of the returnees embody the new cultural rules and desired know-how, according to the narrative that construes emigration as a protest against totalitarianism, they also possess a "clean past"[62]. Simultaneously, they are capable of revealing possible deficiencies in their colleagues' professional knowledge, and they have the power of potentially branding them 'old communists', which can be an efficient way of striking at someone's moral identity within the communist context. Emigrants may be prone to break the pact of silence and point out continuities with the past - both at a biographical and a system level - that people generally keep quiet about.

But it is not only the emigrants who bring up the past in the meeting point with those at home. As I have pointed out earlier, there are plenty of less flattering narratives about the emigrant that can be a made use of in this situation. This may be a means of questioning the appropriateness of emigrants' claims for positions and influence: certainly, they are skilful, but are they trustworthy? Doesn't their past show that they are opportunists, ready to embrace any chance to better their own position?

People who stayed never had the opportunity to develop the kinds of skills that people who emigrated acquired abroad. Thus, they cannot compete with the emigrants in that field. On the other hand, colleagues at home sometimes use their social network and knowledge of the system to counter the qualifications of returning emigrants. Milan and Vladimir both came back with skills that are highly valued according to the post-communist narrative, but they are (at least initially) stopped at the gates, they are not given the opportunity to get a foothold that would allow them to fully use their skills. The situation may be read as a good example of the fact that the ideals upheld by the post-communist narrative are countered in practice because the new demands and the politically correct ideals cannot be as swiftly realised within the existing social reality. Next, I will discuss how the new historical narrative plays a significant role in determining who should be allowed to hold the key to the future.

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[62] This is of course only the case with emigrants who did not have an intimate connection to the regime prior to emigration.

5.3 Damaged by the system: the new historical narrative and the key to the future

> We were passing the bus station, and there was the local dean who turned down my application, in a very humble position, in a worn out coat, looking very poor, and I was passing by, and he did see me…So you can call it revenge, but I didn't plan it, it just happened. Symbolically, he was standing there, poor guy, in his winter coat, actually it was not winter, but anyway, he was a sad looking, disappointed, tired man, and we were travelling past him … (Vladimir)

This anecdote is about Vladimir's departure after his application to the university had been turned down. The quote encapsulates some of the issues I am about to discuss: the image of the emigrants *and* the Czech nation on their way to a promising future, leaving the worn-out communist past behind them. The problem is, of course, that this past is made up of human beings – like the dean in the worn-out coat at the bus station.

In addition to the post-communist narrative that holds up the West as an ideal and privileges (at least theoretically) those who can aid the Czech Republic on its way, there is also a strong historical narrative that lends legitimacy to the pasts held by many returnees. Above, I mentioned that the dominating historical narrative during communism was replaced almost over-night by a new historical account that presented the communist period as a "dark hole" in Czech national history, a trauma that had to be overcome before re-entering the country's true path towards democracy and prosperity.

The problem is, however, that the epoch cannot be weeded out of people's life the way it is being done in the construction of Czech national identity and history writing. In fact, it is widely held that the years of communism have left a deep imprint on people's mentality. Many of the interviewees spoke passionately about the dismal state of morality in the Czech Republic today, from poor work ethics and unwillingness to get involved in civil society, to the high levels of corruption[63]. Even though the system has changed, the same mentality prevails in certain areas of social life. It appears to be a common view, both among emigrants, academics, and Czechs in general, that it will take a generation or two before Czech society will be able to overcome the mental burden of communism. For example, Sztompka writes that the trauma caused by the conflict between the demands of the old

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[63] See also Neĕpor: "All of them [re-emigrants] complained of poor work attitudes, non-observance of informal agreements, poor risk-taking abilities, and little real team work, and of deep individualism in the material sense, dysfunctional social net-working, corruption, and distrust in practically all areas. Some respondents who work in international or foreign firms believe things are improving, while those who have to collaborate with the state administration disagree. In their view, the situation is a result of the persistent influence of the communist regime on ethics" (Nešpor 2002: 803).

system and the requirements for the capitalist future will be resolved mainly by the passage of time: "Only if this legacy fades away or disappears may we expect lasting healing of the postcommunist trauma. And here the most significant effect is exerted by the universal and inevitable process of generational turnover" (Sztompka 2004: 193).

Several of the interviewees mentioned this as well. One interviewee (COH) related the problems of transition with the slowness and difficulty of changing people's mentality:

> Many people imagined that once the communists are gone everything would be "smooth sailing" and just be "happily ever after". And I knew quite well that it wouldn't be so because of certain habits and the way that people behave. After all, two generations lived under communism…It's easy to build a new store, it's easy to repaint buildings, and this can be done very quickly, but just to change the attitude and behaviour of people takes another generation.

Similarly, Helena believes positive change will come only when those who were "marked" by communism are replaced by a new generation: "I feel negative about it, because it's how people were brought up. It leaves a mark, doesn't it? I think your generation might do something about it. But that's not in my lifetime. It's going to take a long, long time before the thinking gets changed."

When speaking of Czech society, Vladimir underscored that he felt very hopeful about the potential of future generations, who are "free of the ill-fated past." The disrespect and ethically questionable behaviour that sometimes can be felt within the public sphere is not, according to Vladimir, an expression of the real Czech mentality, rather, it is a consequence of the tragic and crippled lives created by communism. If anything, Vladimir feels he represents the "real" Czech, since he has been given a chance to fulfil his potential, free of the restrictive environment created by communism:

> I am rather the typical Czech, these other ones were damaged by communism, if everyone had had the same chance, if we took away that experience of communism, then everyone would have had the same chance and everyone would have been ok, so if you want a typical Czech, then that's rather me than them.

Vladimir is here explaining that he understands that it is the political situation that is responsible for people's misfortune, and he is suggesting that most people would be good and decent people had their life conditions been different. However, the quote holds another message as well. Vladimir suggests that he, as an émigré, is a carrier of 'true' Czechness. He embodies the valuable Czech tradition that was lost during years of communism, the black hole in Czech national history. Those whose mentality was affected by communism, on the other hand, are not true representatives of the national spirit. In her research on intra-ethnic differences between Latvians, Mortensen found that Latvian emigrants expressed a similar

notion. They tended to see culture at home as "contaminated through contact with the Soviet culture" (Mortensen 1996: 6), while the emigrants had been able to preserve a purer version of Latvian culture.

The inescapable message in the above quotes is that many people were *damaged* by communism. Thus, according to the post-communist historical narrative, the generation who lived most of their lives under the communist system are, together with the epoch of communism, discarded as detrimental to the development of the country, with nothing to contribute to the future and no role to play within the new system. If people in this category in fact are receptive to this message, this must be rather painful to them. No wonder that some people, as Andrews wrote, turn bitter and silent. They are identified with a system that is considered inefficient, immoral, and unwanted. Their past is considered irrelevant, even detrimental to the future. They belong to a "community of memory" that has no right to speak anymore, because their memories and life experiences are inevitably tied to an epoch that needs to be overcome. True development will occur only once new generations, unspoilt by communism, take over.

Many emigrants, on the other hand, spent most of their lives outside the communist regime and have experiences from the West. Like the new generations, they may be seen as a segment of the Czech population that is undamaged by the past and a resource for the future[64]. I am not suggesting that emigrants necessarily think of themselves this way. It seems plausible, however, that this message about the past and the superiority of some groups over others in terms of managing the "right" future is a potential cause of tension in Czech society today. Some people's pasts are considered irrelevant, even detrimental to the desired future within the post-communist narrative, whereas other's people's pasts are considered to contain what is needed for the construction of this future.

Milan's case illustrates some of the most problematic aspects of the encounters between emigrants and the majority when emigrants enter the professional scene at home. The post-communist narrative that holds the West as an ideal and considers the communist epoch to be a black hole in history favors emigrants as holders of the key to the future. Once more it is evident, however, that there is a lag between the social reality and the post-communist narrative. The new narrative discards the communist epoch and proposes the need for Western knowledge, but this does not mean that such knowledge necessarily is accepted, or

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[64] Again, this depends of course on their experiences and relationship to the regime before they emigrated. Many emigrants in 1968 left due to political purges and thus had worked within the system for a long time prior to emigration. The interviewees in this sample were, however, all relatively young at the time of emigration and had not been involved in party politics.

that people who lived most of their lives within the communist system do not have a say or hold significant positions within today's society. Here, I am simply pointing out certain cultural narratives about the past and the future that favor certain groups over others, and thus may be significant at the meeting points between emigrants and members of the majority.

Next, I will turn to investigating how the interviewees spoke about their decision to emigrate and their family history. As an introduction to the chapter, I will present a case study of the life story interview with Hana, who considers herself to be an "accidental emigrant".

6.   Hana: an accidental emigrant

Hana was born in a small town on the western border of Czechoslovakia, into an upper middle class family. Her family tree is a product of migration and the mixture of different cultures: her great grandfather was from northern Italy, and he married a Silician-Polish woman in Germany and settled in Moravia (now the Czech Republic). Hana points this out at the beginning of her narrative: "So yes, the first point is that I come from a family that migrated."

Hana's parents got married in 1939 to prevent her father, as a single man, from being deported to Germany for forced labour. Following the inter-war years, which were dominated by optimism and prosperity in the newly founded Czechoslovakian state, her parents' life was first marked by the ravages of the second world war, and then, in 1948, by the communist take-over. The events made a great impression on Hana's mother, whose reaction was sorrow and despair. As a result of the disappointment and fear the political developments instilled in her, she withdrew from the outside world into the family sphere. From that time on, Hana's family led what she terms the life of a "declasse social group". Her mother would carry on with the same traditions and habits that she had been taught within the framework of her original social class; making sure the food was served correctly on nice china, always wearing a hat and gloves if she left the house. But the actual content was gone, only the contours were left.

Hana grew up during the 1950s when some of the most severe political persecution processes took place in Czechoslovakia. Her family's reality was altered radically when her own father became a victim of such a trial. He enjoyed a relatively high position in the local community due to his work as a lawyer. One of his colleagues reported false information about him to the local authorities in an attempt to get a job they both were applying for. The result was devastating:

> It was local chiefs who put my father on trial, who intimidated everybody who knew him and wanted to support him, he was stripped of his job, outright, with no support from anybody, and he was isolated and put into manual labour. And my father really suffered badly…He aged very quickly, and he had a series of heart attacks, became a very old man over night, he suffered badly, psychologically.

It was difficult for Hana to understand the political realities that so much affected her parents. At home, these issues were veiled with silence. Hana had to try to make sense of the unspoken and reconcile the relationship between the home and the public, sensing more than understanding the conflict. Therefore, the conflict manifested itself in indirect ways. Hana

was, for example, eager to participate in the Pioneers, the communist youth organisation. Her mother did not want her to be in the organisation, but she did not want to tell Hana directly. The result was a hide and seek ritual which took place in the mornings when Hana wanted to put on her red pioneer scarf:

> We had battles, because the pioneers had to wear these red scarves, it was a uniform of a sort. I would love to wear it. And she would hide it, every morning, and I couldn't find it (laughing), I said: Where is my scarf, and she would pretend she didn't know.

In 1966, Hana finished high school and went to Prague to study. She was lucky: her eight year older sister had not been able to go to university because of their father's downfall within the community. At the time of Hana's graduation from high school, the political climate was softening and the teachers who had earlier been instrumental in damaging her sister's future were trying to compensate for past deeds by helping Hana along. In Prague, the atmosphere was thrilling; change was in the air. Topics that had earlier been strictly excluded from public discussion were now being eagerly debated; art, literature and theatre were flowering. A sense of openness and freedom prevailed.

Two years later, Hana went to do volunteer work in England during the summer holiday. The Warsaw Pact invasion caught her by surprise while she was abroad. Hana originally had no intention to stay in England, and even when the invasion occurred, her heart was set on returning home and continuing her life there: "I was thrown into the situation, totally not knowing what would happen. I didn't have an inclination to stay abroad. I wanted to finish my studies, I wanted to be part of what I had become part of, the buzzing, intellectual world in Prague."

As events unfolded, however, it became clear that returning would be rather difficult. Due to her overstay abroad while she was trying to make sense of the situation, she was evicted from university back home and sentenced to a year and a half in jail for "illegal" emigration. This was the turning point:

> So I said: come back and sit in prison, I don't particularly want to do that. So I closed the doors, and said: I am not going back…Nobody knew what would happen thereafter. And I think the uncertainty of whether you will ever go back, whether you will ever see your parents, I think that was the hardest psychological thing.

Because she never made a conscious decision to emigrate, Hana has never fully seen herself as an émigré. Hana's migration story is, like many other events in her life, a result of what she calls an "accidental decision". She became an emigrant due to external circumstances that changed the course of her life, not because she had made a conscious decision to leave her home country.

Putting her old world behind her, Hana began to build her life in England, and successfully so: she completed her education, obtained a good job within academia, got married and had a daughter.

November 1989: The communist system in Czechoslovakia is unravelling. Hana is in England, glued to the television. She keeps telling her daughter to come and have a look. In the end, her daughter sighs and says: Mom, that's your history, not mine!

Unknowingly, Hana's daughter had pointed out something significant: she finally had access to her own past again, a past which was intrinsically linked to the history of the country which she had left more than 20 years ago. She describes the developments of 1989 as a "complete life event." Her immediate reaction was not, however, that she could return home for good. More importantly, the fall of communism allowed her to open a door to her own past:

> It was the fact that when you're an exile, and you don't know when you are going to make contact with your own homeland again, it's quite a traumatising thing. You have to emotionally close off from your past. You have to make a break, you have to say: I am now somebody else…So all that I experienced way back as a student, as a child, as a family, I put aside completely. That was a past life. And now that was beginning to open itself again. To be reviewed, to be incorporated, to be integrated. So I think from that point of view, that was very important, in 89 I completed a circle. *And it was possible to reintegrate my past into my present.* So that was the important bit."

Now, thirty years after her emigration, Hana is back in the Czech republic. She is divorced, her daughter is grown up and lives in England. Hana has left the world of academia and opened a beautifully renovated guesthouse in a small village. The decision to come back was a result of a long process that gradually opened Hana up to the idea of living in the Czech Republic. Hana's mother was getting older and had health complaints, and Hana wanted to spend more time with her. At the same time, her life situation changed in a way so that she was free from commitments in England. She travelled back and forth for more than ten years, before she eventually made her final decision to settle in the Czech Republic in 2002[65]. It was not an easy decision – it entailed, once again, her having to distance herself from a significant part of her past.

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[65] Several of the interviewees mentioned that they traveled back and forth between the Czech Republic and their host country for long periods of time before they eventually settled in the Czech Republic. They seemed to be careful not to make abrupt decisions about remigration and cut their ties to the host country too quickly.

The main reason for Hana's return to the Czech Republic is not one that can be described in rational terms. It was a decision based on emotions, on a feeling of belonging. Her remigration was connected to a wish to live once again in a place to which she is inherently connected by the formative years of her life:

> It's significant that we are coming back because we have been brought up here, we are emotionally attached to this country. I have to say, it wasn't a rational decision, it was an emotional feeling. The moment I stepped out of the airplane, I knew I belonged here. I didn't have to ask myself that question, I knew in my heart I belonged here. It can't be explained, and it may be totally irrational, but I follow that voice.

Hana wants to contribute to the local community. Her hope is that by opening a guesthouse, she will bring more activity to the village, give the local businesses a boost, and help create an interesting environment for people in the village. However, local people have a hard time understanding where she is coming from and what she really wants. Various stories circulate about Hana in the village. What are her real motives? She speaks the language fluently and understands the local mentality, yet everyone knows she has lived in the West for most of her adult life, and her guesthouse is certainly something quite extraordinary in a traditional Czech village. Since making money is not her main goal, she does not behave like a regular entrepreneur either. Hana seems familiar, yet she is a stranger. People's image of the West as a place where the streets are paved with gold also becomes a framework for the interpretation of those around her:

> Never ever was I given any inclination, or any hint, that I was a stranger [in England]. Whereas here, people look at me: who is this woman? Where is she coming from? Why is she so rich? How did she become so rich? Again, it's translated into money, there is envy, there is an unwillingness to accept that I've come back because I want to give something back. I have to have some other motives. But it's ok, I don't mind, I think it's part of re-emigrating and one has to accept that it's not always going to be easy. And I have to readjust myself.

Her family's attitude towards her has changed over time. When Hana came as a visitor, they were very friendly and welcoming, but when she began to come more frequently, the mood changed gradually and feelings of envy became more pronounced. Again, the pervasive feeling is that she must have been very privileged because she lived in the West. Hana finds that it is very difficult to explain to people that at times, life as an émigré was very challenging:

> I had to earn my living just like anybody else, I was a single parent, I never had any support from any of the grandparents to bring up my daughter, it was tough. It was absolutely tough, and nobody knew. They all had images that living in the west for 20 years, I made lots of money and I was very comfortably off…To be a single

> parent without support, it wasn't easy. I had to make ends meet, and it certainly
> wasn't an easy life. So I couldn't talk about that, they were not receptive to that.

Most friends, however, appreciate the fact that Hana has returned and that she is ready to "invest something back into this society, not just money wise, but generally, one gives something of oneself, and the courage one had to come back."

Having lived for more than 30 years in the buzzing metropolis that is London, Hana now once again lives in a small village in the Czech Republic. One feeling has remained constant throughout her life, even after her return, and even despite the feeling of belonging which struck her as she got off the plane in her home country - the feeling of being an outsider, a stranger to the others: "They look at me like I'm a bit of a stranger. I am a bit of a stranger, because my way of looking of the world is different. So that's what I mean, a permanent outsider, even with remigration, I still look in from the outside."

6.1 Emigration narratives within the life stories

In this chapter, I will focus on some specific topics that were broached in Hana's story, namely the way in which the interviewees spoke about their emigrating and their family background[66]. Earlier I have explored some of the cultural images associated with the term 'emigrant' in Czech society. One of the most pervasive images is related to the idea that emigrants can be divided into those who left for political reasons, and those who were largely motivated by economic prosperity. Was this distinction reflected in the life stories of the interviewees? How did they explain their decision to emigrate? And what role does their family background play in their emigration stories?

Since the moral identity of returning emigrants often appears to be evaluated according to their emigration motives, I expected the interviewees to be eager to connect their story to the image of the exile. Except for Milan, however, none of the interviewees were persecuted prior to emigration. For this reason in particular, I imagined that the interviewees would speak a lot about their decision to emigrate, because I thought they might feel the need to

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[66] The presentation of Hana's story above illustrates a number of different topics, and I will not be able to discuss all of them here. As I have mentioned before, I chose to keep the cases relatively long in order to demonstrate their richness and the variety of the stories and simultaneously show my selective focus.

defend their decision or at least provide reasons that disconnected their departure from the economic reasons that often are attached to the image of the emigrant[67].

Before I start this analysis, I would like to reiterate a point I made previously. I mainly analyse these stories as narratives, which means that I look at the ways in which the stories connect to different images through the interviewees' emphasis and language use. The danger with this kind of analysis is, as I have pointed out above, that it may seem to reduce the stories to fictional accounts. I would once more like to emphasise that I do not mean to question the actual events and experiences, but I want to explore the differences between the interviewees and try to identify how these reflect not only divergent life experiences, but also different contextual factors that may influence how the stories are narrated.

6.1.1 Emigration as an accidental or spontaneous result of the invasion

The interviewees who left in the immediate aftermath of the invasion in 1968 spoke little about their decision to emigrate, and in particular, made few references to their own role as an active decision-maker. They generally portrayed their emigration as an inevitable result of a chain of events that occurred more or less out of their control. Many of the interviewees emphasised external factors when speaking about the decisive moment of their emigration. Hana's story above illustrates this point: she was waiting in England after the invasion, not sure whether to return home or not. The turning point came when she was sentenced in absentia to several months in prison, and she was expelled from university for illegal emigration. Hana had, partly due to chance, become an exile. She even mentions that this is important for her self-perception:

> But I never considered myself and émigré, proper… Because of not having made that conscious decision. I was a student, I was waiting how things will develop, and I took the opportunity of being able to study in England, and then other things happened subsequently that were a progression from that. So really consciously I don't think I've seen myself as an émigré, although, having come back, I am an émigré, I have spent 30 years somewhere else. So it's a strange mixture.

Helena, another emigrant in my sample, was in a similar situation. She was working in England as an au pair when the invasion took place. When asked about her decision to stay,

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[67] This expectation was not only founded on the fact that the motivation for emigration appears to be an important factor for legitimacy in present-day Czech society. One can also assume that an event that departs from the individual's expected life trajectory will require intensified attention because it need to be explained, worked out, and interpreted within the context of the life story (Danielsen 1993: 21).

she emphasised two factors: first of all, her mother's advice (encouraging her to stay in England), and secondly, a letter she received from Czech television informing her that she had lost her job due to her stay abroad (rendering her professional future in Czechoslovakia very bleak). The interesting point here is that, more than anything, Helena underscores her mother's role in encouraging her to stay, making few references to herself as an active decision-maker.

Four of the other interviewees explain their emigration as being a spontaneous reaction to the invasion in 1968 (see, for example, Daniela's case below). Hardly any of them speak about the process of making the decision to leave. Daniela is one of the few interviewees who elaborate on the dilemmas of leaving, but she also points out that there was little time to think: "I did not think about the future. If I had thought about the future, about what awaited me outside, most likely I would not have done it". Like Helena, Daniela emphasises that her mother's encouragement was decisive for her emigrating.[68]

There may be several explanations for this pattern. First of all, it is not unlikely that the interviewees felt that historical and political forces were more important in determining their life course than their own, free decisions. Most interviewees did *make* a decision to leave, but their departure was not altogether voluntary; it was also a consequence of large-scale developments that they found to be unacceptable.

From a narrative perspective, the lack of emphasis on decision-making may be related to the fact that such a story makes the narrator more readily identifiable as a refugee or, within the Czech context, an exile[69]. In her thesis about Eastern European immigrants in the Czech Republic, Šedová suggests that the absence of the decision-making process is an essential ingredient in a convincing refugee story:

> The creation of a strong and convincing story that the emigrant can identify with entails speaking about emigration as a life necessity…If, in fact, the respondents had included the phase when they were preparing and considering emigration, they would inevitably be pointing to their active role and the role of additional factors during the

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[68] It is perhaps not accidental that several of the interviewees mention their parents' role as important factors in their decision to emigrate. Since emigration could have negative effects on remaining family members, it may be important for some interviewees to underscore the fact that the decision was not made individually, without involving the closest family. Moreover, most interviewees underscored that their emigrating generally did not have an adverse affect on their family – in many cases, they explained that their family was already "black-listed" by the communists, so that their emigration could hardly do more harm.

[69] I would like to stress that I do not think that emigrants consciously manipulated their stories to make themselves appear in a more favourable light. It is possible, however, that implicit knowledge of the social context and the rules that guide the evaluation of legitimacy might have influenced the way emigrants narrated their emigration stories, in the sense that certain features were emphasised more than others.

decision making that do not belong to the image of a refugee. According to this image, the refugee is a person without a choice who escapes because he does not have other acceptable alternatives. There is not space for decision-making. Thus, in the narrative of refugees, emigration is a logical reaction to pressure that is caused by external circumstances (Šedová 1997: 19)[70].

Šedová suggests that emigrants to some extent cement those parts of their emigration narratives that portray them as authentic refugees when they relay their stories to the authorities in the host countries. The emigrants in my sample generally did not speak much about the process of legalizing their stay abroad. Even so, it is not unlikely that the portrayal of emigration as an externally produced event with little time for preparation made their decision more acceptable both to themselves, and to those surrounding them[71]. In his article about Iranian exile, Shahidian writes that exiles can only overcome their feelings of guilt vis-à-vis the loved ones they left behind by "realizing – and repeatedly reminding themselves – that their fate is not a choice" (Shahidian 2000: 85).

Moreover, many of the interviewees in this group probably considered the invasion to be a sufficient explanation for their emigration, thus making further explanations about their decision to leave unnecessary. The interviewees left at a moment in time that was, and continue to be, defined as a historical and political trauma. Due to the urgency of the situation surrounding the invasion in 1968, emigration at this time was almost inevitably associated with political motives. Moreover, it was not only the Czechoslovak population who considered the invasion a trauma; the Western powers undoubtedly regarded the event as a shocking display of authoritarian power abuse. Within the context of the cold war, the Western authorities were eager to maintain an image of the communist system as both failed and inhumane. What better proof than live victims of the system? Thus, the cold war narrative lent further support to emigrants' identity as exiles, particularly after the invasion.

In fact, the Western historical narrative may have influenced the interviewees when they spoke to me. The interviewees might have assumed that we shared the same historical version of communism and the invasion. From a Western perspective, the question of *why* people emigrated is perhaps less difficult to understand than why *more* people didn't emigrate, particularly after the invasion. Perhaps the interviewees would have felt the need to explain their reasons for emigration more in-depth if they had spoken to someone from

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[70] Translated from Czech

[71] From a psychological point of view, it might be easier to accept the decision to leave if it is seen as forced upon the individual instead of chosen. The hardship of life in emigration, in addition to potential feelings guilt vis-à-vis loved ones who were left behind might be easier to deal with if one simply 'did what one had to do'.

Czechoslovakia, whose historical knowledge and experience would have been different from mine.

6.1.2 Emigration as a life project

There is a significant change in this pattern in the interviews with emigrants who planned their departure well ahead. Their emigration took place either a few years before 1968, or in the late 70s and the 80s, and could not be read as a spontaneous reaction to the invasion. There is a general tendency within Czech society to regard this later emigration wave as motivated more by economic reasons[72]. This was even mentioned by one of the interviewees who left in 1968. He warned me that even though people who left later might claim that they did so for political reasons, in reality, their motives were often economic: "They [those who left later] have a very different point of view. Very different. They were more economically oriented, [looking for] opportunities that were not here. Of course, they would say that it's for political reasons. But it's very different." Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that the interviewees who left later spent considerably more time discussing their emigration motives and their decision to emigrate than the other interviewees, whose reference to the invasion sufficiently explained their actions.

When speaking about their decision to emigrate, the interviewees in this category tended to underscore the general problems related to the communist regime and the difficult living conditions within such a society. One interviewee used the word "garbage" eight times in the first few minutes of the interview when speaking about his pre-emigration life. Other words he employed to illustrate the dismal situation were: totally useless, total communist joke, bad atmosphere, listen to total idiots, total disaster, Animal Farm, 1984[73], Big Brother watching you, no adventure, no freedom, no future. While he did not claim to have emigrated due to persecution, he explained his decision by referring to the lack of common democratic values and by expressing that he did not find his activities within the communist regime meaningful: "I was not persecuted. There was just no future, not freedom. And I had no esteem for what I did." Jan's decision to emigrate was not sudden, it was an option he contemplated for years which was based on a general feeling of discontent with the situation:

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[72] Interestingly, the emigrants of the 1948-generation accused emigrants of the 1968-generation of the very same thing. Thus, each emigration wave appears to consider later emigrants to be more economically and less politically motivated, thereby endowing them with less legitimacy. Perhaps this is related to the fact that the identity of an exile is, in a sense, a "scarce resource". If too many people would claim this identity, it would no longer be efficient as a means to for example obtain refugee status.

[73] Here, the interviewee refers to Geroge Orwell's famous novels "Animal Farm" and "1984" that poignantly describe the ways of an authoritarian state.

"I was thinking about it for years, because I hated this environment, everybody's scared, no future." Another emigrant, Petr, also underscores the political system as the cause of his emigration: "[I]t was a communist dictatorship which was about the same as a fascist dictatorship. So, that was our prevailing concern. I wanted to escape the communist dictatorship." Here, Petr strongly emphasises the authoritarian nature of the regime, and stresses that his emigration was spurred by a desire to escape. Through their choice of words, Petr and Jan both connect to the strong Western narrative of democracy and freedom, and contrast this narrative to the situation in Czechoslovakia. Their narratives also speak of emigration as a way of protesting against a regime that made life unbearable, thus connecting their stories to the broad definition of opposition discussed earlier, where any act that entails straying from the rules of the communist game is seen as a voice of dissent.

Some of the interviewees in this group also stressed that they planned to emigrate for years before they went through with it, suggesting that the emigration project was their main life strategy. In some cases, the thought of emigrating was present from a very early age. Petr's interest in the West was sparked when he was listening to Western radio stations as a child. He began to sense that there "was a lot to be desired", and that the means to fulfil his dreams lay somewhere else, beyond the borders: "I had some kind of an inkling or intuition of other things beyond the borders. I was thinking of that, inquiring, trying to get some information as young as thirteen or fourteen. Maybe fifteen."

Julia spends a significant amount of time explaining her preparation to leave, and she also stresses the fact that the idea was present in her from an early age: "I think since I was sixteen, I wanted to get out, it was in the back of my mind, I did not know how, I did not know if it was possible, but I just felt that I would eventually leave." Julia first attempted to leave when she was in her early twenties, but failed. As a result, Julia's boyfriend had to serve time in prison, and Julia's passport was taken away for five years.

When Julia met her future husband, she still wanted to leave the country. The following quote illustrates how strongly present the thought of emigration was in Julia: "I think maybe it was in the back of my mind when I was choosing my life partner: would he be able to go, to get out?" Julia stresses the risks involved in the emigration project. It was not possible to discuss this topic openly. If such information got into the wrong hands, it would not only stop any attempt to emigrate, it could also have serious repercussions for Julia and her family. Julia was even afraid to bring up the topic with her husband. The turning point was a postcard that they received from their neighbours, a young couple who had gone on holiday to Yugoslavia and never came home. In the postcard, their young friends wrote that they had emigrated to the West. From that day on, Julia and her husband began, secretly, to prepare their departure. Not even their parents knew about their plans. In order to seem like a normal

family whose only wish was to build a normal life, Julia accepted a promotion at work. They bought new furniture and a new car. Then they packed their suitcases with summer clothing to go on a holiday with their four-year old son to Yugoslavia, leaving all their things behind. In her story, Julia emphasises that she and her husband sacrificed good professional positions and the material security they had, and left empty-handed into the unknown. They never returned, but did as their neighbours: once they were safely on the Western side of the iron curtain, they sent letters to their friends and family, informing them about their decision.

To summarise, people who left later appeared to feel the need to justify their emigration to a greater extent than those who left in the aftermath of the invasion. By explaining how life in Czechoslovakia was gloomy and restrictive, in striking contrast to Western values of freedom and democracy, they communicate the idea that leaving was a form of protest against the regime. The fact that economic motives were not mentioned once as reasons for emigrating may suggest that there is an awareness of the fact that such motives are considered illegitimate. However, it may also suggest that, even though economic motives may have been important to some emigrants, they were by no means the main motivational factor. In fact, Juila's narrative suggests that it was necessary to *sacrifice* economic and material security on the path to emigration. The highly detailed account of the way emigration was planned and how the thought of emigration ripened from an early age provides an image of emigration as a deep-rooted wish that has little in common with superficial desires. On the contrary, emigration is seen as a major goal that the individual works hard to achieve, making many sacrifices on the way[74].

6.2 Family history and emigration

Hana's life story sheds light on some interesting topics related to the interviewees' family background. Looking at the interviews as a whole, it occurred to me that the interviewees' destiny as emigrants might have been influenced by events in their childhood, or even by events that took place prior to their own birth. Thus, even if external events may have set

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[74] During my fieldwork, I spoke to a sociologist who had conducted interviews with "ordinary" people who had lived under the communist regime. She said that most of them made some kind of reference to emigration, suggesting that it was an alternative that many people had contemplated at some point in their lives. Even though emigration was not seriously considered or perhaps even outright rejected, it seems to have been an option that existed in the back of people's mind, *as an alternative*, whichever stance the individual took towards it. When, such as in Petr and Julia's case, emigration was present as an idea from their mid-teens, it almost seems to have represented an alternative life trajectory, "something to do when one grows up". While some teenagers might have seen their future lives within a certain occupation or position in Czechoslovak society, others envisioned emigration as their life path – a path that would take them outside the confines of the system.

their emigration in motion, it was perhaps not altogether accidental that these particular people ended up as emigrants.

First of all, as in Hana's case, the interviewees' parents were often internationally oriented with significant language skills, and a strikingly high level of education[75]. These factors are likely to be a result of the way in which the interviewees were recruited, but it also seems plausible that this kind of family background made the likelihood of emigration greater. The first thing Hana points out is that migration is a part of her family history, and that her family has a multicultural base. Daniela's story, presented below, provides a similar example: Daniela's mother had lived abroad, she had extensive knowledge of languages, and she stressed the importance of passing this knowledge on to her children. Similarly, Anna's mother was a language teacher at high school, and her father was a professor with many contacts abroad. They often had foreign visitors staying with them. Even as a child, Anna was fascinated with the world they represented: "I was always interested in them, I would not leave the room, but I would be sitting there interested in the conversation, I remember that, never wanting to go to sleep." Considering this type of family background, it was probably not accidental that some of the interviewees found themselves abroad at the moment of the invasion: they came from families where learning languages and travelling were valued activities, and many of them were resourceful enough to travel abroad when the opportunity presented itself. It is likely that international orientation and language skills made emigration as an alternative seem more appealing and less risky.

Hana's story (as well as Milan's) illustrates another interesting commonality in the interviewees' family history, namely the fact that the communist regime in many instances had had a negative impact on their family situation. In fact, in 8 out of 12 cases, the interviewees mentioned the communist regime having had a negative effect on the family situation[76]. One of the reasons for this may have been the exceptionally high educational level of the interviewees' parents, as highly educated people were more frequently targeted than people with working class background. Negative experiences with the regime were, however, widespread in the Czechoslovak population as a whole. One estimate suggests that

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[75] Among them were two lawyers, three doctors, one mathematician, and four university professors.

[76] Juila's father was prevented from studying medicine because of his bourgeois background. Daniel describes the constant fear that his father would be arrested as a formative part of his childhood. Helena's parents (a doctor and a lawyer) were also prevented from practicing their professions after the communist take-over in 48, because their previous stay in England had exposed to "capitalist mentality" and thus made them potential enemies of the new regime. Similarly, Cyril's parents both lost their jobs in 1948 and were relegated to work in factories, and Jan's father lost his business in 1948 during nationalisation. Zdena explains that she was taught to resent the regime from an early age due to the negative effect the communist take-over had on her family situation. Among other things, her grandfather lost his business during the nationalisation process.

only about 10 % of the population did *not* experience direct persecution or the persecution of close family members (Kaplan 1993). Thus, it is not necessarily the case that such occurrences were more common among emigrants than among other groups within the population. From a narrative perspective, however, it is possible that this part of the life story is important in order to make better sense of the emigration experience. When it is clear that the regime has continued to negatively affect an individual and his loved ones during an extensive time period, this certainly makes the decision to emigrate more compelling. Note, however, that many of the interviewees were asked directly about the effects of the regime on their family, thus, it was not always the case that they volunteered this information as a part of their emigration stories.

Some of the interviewees did, however, make explicit links between their family history and their own emigration experiences. In Daniela's narrative about her childhood (see below), she stresses that her family had the opportunity to leave the country soon after 1948, but declined the offer and decided to stay. Her father felt too committed to his work at home, and he believed the political situation in Czechoslovakia was only temporary. Having told this story, Daniela suggests that this decision was significant later on, in her own life: "So I think that's an important part of my story and I will tell you why then later." She returns to this part of her family history when speaking about the moment she was about to make the decision to emigrate. Her mother reminded her that in 1948, they had been mistaken to think that the situation would change soon for the better, and she advised her daughter to leave. Thus, at the point when Daniela made the decision to become an emigrant, her parents' own life story and their memory of historical events proved to be an important factor.

Anna's story is strikingly similar to Daniela's. In 1968, immediately after the invasion, Anna left with her family for England where her father had been given a post as a visiting professor. Despite the invasion and the ensuing restrictive atmosphere back home, the family decided to return at the end of their legal stay in England. Like Daniela, Anna emphasises that she considers this decision a mistake, and important in her later life:

> Unfortunately…the family decided to come home, return back to Czechoslovakia. And I think unfortunately, that will be obvious from what followed afterwards. My dad could have gone on to the United States to work in more applied sciences, I think he had an offer from General Motors, and I think he would have done quite well in the U.S., but we returned.

The year abroad made Anna realise that there was another world beyond the borders, an attractive world that she and her family unfortunately left behind. This experience, and her parents' failure to take the chance to emigrate, seem to have been important factors in her later decision to emigrate.

When telling her life story, Helena refers to events in her parents' lives that took place before she was born. Both her parents were highly educated – her mother a doctor, her father a lawyer – and they met in England during the war. Helena's father was half British, half Czech. Her mother had lived in England for 19 years and was reluctant to go to Czechoslovakia after the war, but because "love is crucial" and her husband insisted, she followed him back. In retrospect, Helena's mother always seemed to regret this decision. After the communist take-over in 48, Helena's parents were not allowed to continue in their professions, because their time abroad had exposed them to the "capitalist mentality" and thus made them potential enemies of the new regime. They toiled in factories for the rest of their working lives. In 1968, prior to the invasion, the political climate softened considerably and it became possible for many people to go abroad for the first time in years. Helena's mother immediately took the opportunity to send Helena to England as an au pair: "She loved England. That's why she made me go and see what sort of life she lived," explained Helena. When the invasion took place, Helena's mother advised her to stay where she was, and not to make the mistake she had made by returning. Even after 1989, when Helena decided to return to the Czech Republic mainly because of her husband's strong wish (echoing the experience of her parents) her mother referred to her own life experience and insisted on her staying in England: "She said: you are ruining your life. You won't be happy here. You are ruining your life. You are happy there. Don't do it."

The above discussion suggests that family memories sometimes appear to have been significant in the interviewees' own lives at moments when they were making crucial decisions. These memories are made up both from the family's own experiences and decisions, and the historical context in which they occurred. It is interesting to look at the family background of the interviewees because it brings a new dimension to the image of the emigrant and the division between economically and politically motivated emigration. Instead of seeing emigration as clearly delimited event that took place at a specific time due to a simple set of motivational factors, emigration is perhaps better seen as a process that is embedded in the life history as a whole.

However, by looking at events in childhood as "emigration precursors", these events potentially assume a causal role in the interviewees' decision to emigrate. As mentioned earlier, it is also possible that the emigrants searched out and emphasized such aspects of their own background retrospectively. Remembering and including parts of their life stories that can later on be linked to their emigration experiences may be a way of finding continuity between their past in Czechoslovakia, and their later identities as emigrants. Moreover, by seeing events in their childhoods as meaningful to important life choices later on, these choices may appear more logical and acceptable. In reality, I think it is not possible to determine whether family history played a causal role in the later decision to

emigrate, or whether this an association that has become more significant retrospectively in the life stories. This is a good example of a more general problem within narrative analysis: it is often impossible to know whether the connections that are made between events are a product of the current outlook and the concrete interview situation, or whether the events were interlinked in that way at the time they occurred.

In this chapter, I have suggested that the interviewees' emphasis on the decision-making process prior to emigration differed depending on when the emigration took place. Those who emigrated as a result of the events in 1968 spoke very little about making the decision, whereas those who left later spent much more time explaining their decision to leave. In first case, the *absence* of the decision-making process increases the narrative validity of the story, whereas in the latter case, the *presence* of sequences that explains the decision-making increases the narrative validity of the story. Finally, factors in the interviewees' childhood and family background may have contributed to making emigration a particularly likely alternative; or potentially are a sign of the creation of continuity in the life stories. The next chapter will be introduced by a case study of the life story interview with Daniela, whose emigration and successful life in the U.S. bears strong resemblances to the narrative about the American dream.

7.   Daniela: fulfilling the American dream

Daniela grew up with her two sisters in a distinguished family in Prague. Her father was a renowned professor and medical clinician, "a very gifted man, and well known", her mother had studied medicine as well, but she never practiced after the children were born. Daniela's mother had a culturally diverse background: she was born in Austria to a Czech-German family, she later lived in Belgium, and she had considerable knowledge of foreign languages. She insisted on her daughters taking lessons in English and French.

In the 1950s, Daniela's father had to close his private practice as a result of nationalisation, but he retained his professorship and never became a direct target of persecution. A lost opportunity to emigrate is an important part of Daniela's narrative. Soon after the communist take-over in 1948 Daniela's father was in France at a conference. He was offered a professorship there and his colleagues and friends advised him not to return to Czechoslovakia and stay abroad with his family. Daniela's father turned down the offer and returned home. He was convinced that communist rule in Czechoslovakia was temporary, and he felt committed to his work back home. The failure to understand the gravity of the situation and leave while there was still time sealed the family's fate in Czechoslovakia and became an essential factor in Daniela's decision to leave 20 years later: "So they came back, and I think it was the last trip to a foreign country, after that their passports were taken away, the borders were closed and we could not travel anywhere. I think that's an important part of my story and I will tell you why then later."

After high school, Daniela began studying science. She was about to complete her studies when the invasion occurred in 1968. As for many others, the Prague spring had inspired Daniela with hope that the political situation would change. The ensuing invasion not only disappointed her, it also scared her. Daniela witnessed aggressive exchanges between Russian soldiers and dismayed Czechoslovaks. It was a frightening situation: "I found out that I am not really a brave person, it was very disturbing to me." Emigration was a well-known alternative for Daniela, not least because her younger sister had emigrated two years earlier and was living in the US at the time. But her sister had a different mentality, being much more adventurous and out-going. Daniela describes herself at the time as an "almost pathologically shy" person. The thought of actually leaving was foreign to her: [F]rom time to time you heard about someone who did not come back from vacation, who succeeded to escape. I was always saying: how and why do people do it? How can they live without the family, without Prague, without the shelter of the family life?" At this point in her life,

however, Daniela's fear was stronger than those considerations. Her need to leave was spontaneous and left her with few thoughts about what life in emigration would bring:

> It was a really big trauma, the Russian invasion, and at the time, I did not think, I just wanted to get out of the situation. I did not think about the future. If I had thought about the future, about what awaited me outside, most likely I would not have done it…

The decision was further promoted by Daniela's mother, who pleaded with her to leave the country while there was still time. She did not want her daughter to make the same mistake they had made 20 years ago, when they thought the turn of political events was only temporary:

> And my mother told me - that's why in the beginning I told you about the decision my father made - she said: don't make the same mistake we made in 1948, now the borders are still open, and you can go out, it will not take too long, and the borders will close… Because they both felt that of course if they had stayed it would have been much more easy, much better for my father's career, for our lives.

Despite these incentives, the decision was not easy. Daniela's father was very ill, and so was her grandmother. In the end, however, Daniela took her mother's advice and left. Her father and grandmother both died within a year. Soon after she left, she was sentenced in absentia to two years in prison due to illegal emigration.

After staying in Western Europe for a few months, Daniela left for the US in order to be closer to her sister. Here, she began her efforts to complete her education. Her first meeting with a professor in New York served as a turning point in her story, a moment when she had to get rid of her shy humbleness and was introduced to the American way of thinking:

> I have to say up to today, I remember I was telling him: I can do whatever, I just want some job, I had no money, because I left and I had one luggage and I had, I don't know, 15 dollars in my pocket…So I said I would be willing to do whatever, and he said: no, no, that's not how you work and how your act in the States, you have to have your mind clear on what you want to do, and go after it.

After a considerable amount of hard work, Daniela finally learned the language and passed the exams that would allow her to continue her education in the US. In the ensuing years, she built a successful career as a researcher. Daniela married another Czech émigré, and they had a daughter.

The immediate cause of Daniela's remigration was that her daughter had decided to settle in the Czech Republic. On retiring, Daniela was divorced and no longer had any professional or personal obligations in the US. She decided to return to be closer to her daughter.

Looking back, Daniela thinks her migration experiences have changed her. She was forced to get rid of her shyness and to take responsibility for her own life and her own decisions.

In a way, Daniela thinks her experiences have made her tougher on other people. She is less compassionate towards those who complain about not succeeding in life. If she made it, why cannot they? To Daniela, it is a simple matter of determination and will: "You know, once you jump into the water, you swim. And you do whatever you need to succeed…" She once had a heated discussion with an American Indian who complained about being disadvantaged because he belonged to a group that experiences discrimination. Daniela did not accept this explanation for his lack of success in life:

> I was telling him: it's really up to you, I don't think what you are saying is true, I think you are only lazy…especially nowadays, maybe if you said it 20, 25 years ago, you were disadvantaged…don't tell me this nonsense, because I know that if you really would like to apply yourself, you will make it. So maybe I've lost some compassion towards people, which I think is perhaps a negative part of going through emigration.

Daniela had a successful and interesting professional life and she managed to build up a secure economic base. Being an emigrant meant that she was cut off from the resources she had access to by being a member of a well-known family. At the same time, she finds that one of the most rewarding aspects of her emigration and her success in a new society stems precisely from the feeling that she did it all on her own.

Daniela has mixed experiences in terms of reconnecting with old friends and Czech society in general. With some people, she felt as if they never parted, but with others it has been more difficult:

> I found that the 30 years, and me being in America, and having the American experience, apparently was negative, and somehow threatening to them, or whatever, I cannot explain the reason. And I was surprised that it was not so close or solid as I was hoping it would be.

Daniel sometimes find it very difficult to explain to those who stayed what it was like to be an emigrant. The majority of people evaluate Daniela's life only in terms of the material, tangible end result of what was a long and difficult process, and do not seem to understand that life in emigration was sometimes hard:

> There are two groups of people: the smaller group are the people who say: I admire you, because I know it was perhaps not easy to do what you did, and what you accomplished. So that's one group. And the other group, which is much bigger, doesn't realise what kind of hardship, emotional and physical, you had to go through, they only see the results of it. And they say: oh, you are so well off, look at your apartment, we could never do this here. You were lucky because you were able to

travel, you were able to be free, you were able to drive a car, we had to go through hardship to get a car.

Daniela has come to terms with the fact that most people do not understand. She has given up trying to explain it to them, and she does not hold their inability to grasp what her life was like against them – their experiences are simply too different and some things are impossible to understand unless you live them yourself. The situation was similar when she came to the US and people asked her about her life in Czechoslovakia:

> It was the same when I came to the States, and the people around me were asking: tell us how it really is to live under the communist regime! And I tried to explain to them, and I knew that I am not getting through to them, that I am telling them something which they just cannot comprehend.

Daniela feels fortunate to have a sister – the oldest of the three, who did not emigrate – who can assist her in the process of reconnecting with the society she left so many years ago. But years of living in separate environments sometimes comes between the two of them, like the time when the two émigré sisters criticized their older sister for not taking proper care of their family house:

> She was saying: it's easy for you to say, you were not here, you had your life there, it was much easier for us [in the US], it was hardship [back home]. So she was one of the people whom I never tried to explain that it was not so easy. And we still sometimes have friendly, but heated discussion about how life was.

Daniela feels like she has two homes: one in the US and one in the Czech Republic. At the same time, she was to some extent an outsider in the US being an immigrant – and now, she is in some ways an outsider in the Czech Republic, having spent a large portion of her life abroad. Being, in a sense, an outsider, Daniela feels she is able to see things more clearly than if she had spent all her life within the regime: "I think that can see it more sharply, perhaps, than people who are living here, because I guess that they somehow lost the ability to recognise it as evil, because they grew with it."

7.1 The brave and adventurous

In the discussion of cultural images of the emigrant, I discussed some of the negative features that sometimes are attributed to emigrants, such as cowardice. In his research on returned refugees to Bosnia, Stefansson found that his interviewees counter similar images by describing the "act of fleeing as an expression of courage and initiative rather than cowardice" (Stefansson 2004: 60). Similarly, the interviewees often portrayed emigration as a decision that required bravery and an adventurous mind.

In Daniela's story above, she describes emigration as something that originally did not appeal to her, contrasting her own personality with that of her émigré sister, whom she considers to be much more out-going and adventurous. Many interviewees portrayed those who decided to leave Czechoslovakia in a similar way. For example, Julia attributes her sister's decision to stay and not to emigrate to differences in personality and lack of courage: "I don't think she's the type. I am the crazy one. I don't think she is the type who would have the courage to do this."

In Miroslav´s view, emigration was a risky enterprise because it meant leaving a secure space and starting all over:

> It was very risky. To leave something where you know people, where you have a certain background, you have your home, you have your friends around you, to go somewhere where you just don't know anybody and now you're starting totally from scratch.

Several of the emigrants suggest that emigration was an alternative most people knew about, and somehow had to take into account. According to Miroslav, many of those who did not emigrate harboured a wish to do so, but they were either not able to do it, or they did not go through with it simply because they were not adventurous enough:

> I think the population was divided into those who knew they wanted to leave, those who wanted to leave and they could not for objective reasons, like old parents or somebody who was here and who was incapable of leaving, for whatever reason…And those who genuinely did not want to leave. And a fourth group was probably the people who were afraid to leave. Who really would like to, but they did not speak any languages, who were not adventurous enough, who were not willing to take the risks.

Milan's view is strikingly similar:

> Everyone probably, not everyone, but many people considered it as an option…And a lot of people probably didn't even have the courage to do it. And a lot of people probably had good reasons for not emigrating, because maybe they had old parents whom they had to take care of, or something like that.

When addressing this question, Jan too mentions that he thinks "every normal person should have thought about it, but it's difficult, not everybody can get out, and not everybody can make it or can really take it abroad." The emigrants themselves, then, stress the fact that emigration was a clear option during communism, and also a strategy that people had to consider. As Julia says, "at that time you had to make a decision, you either go or you stay."

Here, Julia is suggesting that staying was as much a decision as leaving. This is an important point that will be discussed in the next section.

7.2 Taking life in one's own hands or surviving within a hostile system

The view of emigration as an act that requires initiative and courage is related to another key point in the narratives of the interviewees. Their life stories generally forwarded the message that it is important to take responsibility for one's own life, to take initiative, and to make independent decisions. Daniela's case illustrates this message. Her story resonates with the narrative of the American dream: several aspects of her emigration can be seen as obstacles in her path to professional success that were subsequently overcome due to hard work and persistence. Through this experience, Daniela has come to believe that anyone can make it if she really wants to. It's up to the individual to make what she wants out of her own life.

To Julia, the idea that people are responsible for their own life extends to the decisions people made during communism. She thinks that people need to acknowledge that staying was as much a decision as leaving. Julia believes many Czech people are envious of re-emigrants because they never had the courage to leave themselves. She describes how her initial sympathy with Czech people gradually diminished after she begun returning. In the beginning, she felt sorry for people who had stayed, but then she realised that "people make choices, and if they didn't want to leave at the time, they stayed, and that was their price." If people are unhappy about their situation today, they have to admit that it in part is their own doing: "And they decided, oh, their little cottage is very important to them, so they stayed here. And then they cannot complain that they have only 5000 crowns in pension, and we have maybe twice as much. But we worked for it, nobody gave us anything for free." Interestingly, Julia here also maintains that people may have decided to stay for materialistic and selfish reasons, which are the very same reasons that are often attributed to the emigrants' motivation for leaving. She is suggesting that life in Czechoslovakia was comfortable enough. This is in line with the idea discussed in the section on Czech history, where I mentioned that the regime after 1968 focused on granting people material security in exchange for political obedience.

In Stefansson's research on post-war Bosnia, a similar topic can be identified. One of his interviewees also perceives staying as a decision that people have to assume responsibility for today: "To be honest, I'm also tired of their war stories. It was their own choice to stay here. I went away and thank God for that!" (Stefansson 2004: 64). One of his interviewees also pointed to the idea that staying was less about patriotism, and more about protecting oneself: "I get really mad at those people who say that they stayed here in order to defend the country. Everybody says that they wanted to defend the country, but I think that the only thing they defended was their own existence" (Stefansson 2004: 59).

Thus, the interviewees emphasise the importance of taking life in one's own hands, and regard people's decisions in the past as something they have to take responsibility for. Here, I would like to remind the reader about the previous discussion of the debate surrounding the lustration law, and the two narratives about the past that this debate illustrated. The narratives equally regard the communist system as an evil, but they tell different stories about the individual's position within the system. The interviewees' life stories resonate with the first narrative that emphasises that everyone has their share of responsibility for the communist past. This narrative lends validity to a life story where the individual makes independent decisions and is an active agent in his own life. He is responsible for 'living in truth' under all circumstances, which according to the post-communist narrative meant taking a stance against the communist regime. Emigration can be regarded as such an act. When emigrants stress the importance of taking responsibility for one's own life, this can perhaps be perceived as an implicit criticism of people who stayed, hinting at the fact that they remained passively within the communist system and accepted its conditions.

Some of the interviewees contrasted the ability to take responsibility and make independent decisions with the mentality of people at home. Eva (COH) suggests that many of the major challenges during the transition are related to this topic:

> So for instance the fact that people are not used to taking personal responsibilities for their own lives. Everything was kind of arranged for them. You had your doctors assigned to you, and you had been offered a job more or less assigned to you. You didn't have very many choices because the state was the only employer. Just to learn this basic thing that Americans take for granted, don't even think about, that you have to make a lot of personal decisions, what to do with your life, from very early on. And this was what the whole... it's almost as if the country what we had to undergo as immigrants, the whole country, people from the age of... I mean from babies to old people, they had to undergo something similar to just get used to their new work. And obviously many people never managed to do that. It's not an easy matter.

Daniela similarly contrasts her ability to make independent decisions with that of her sister who stayed:

> I think that I learned to make decisions much easier, I think I am able to handle situations with more ease, than my sister is, for example, who stayed here, who herself admits that because they lived so many years in a state where they actually did not make any decisions, the decisions were always made for them. So nowadays, it's difficult for her to decide, and to make decisions. Which is to her I think, I don't want to say a detriment, but a disadvantage.

These differences in terms of the ability to make decisions and take responsibility can of course be attributed to the divergent life experiences of the interviewees and their counterparts at home. It is, however, interesting to note that holding a passive role in one's life story – i.e. not making independent decisions and adapting to external expectations – can

easily be supported by the second narrative about the past that suggests that most people were victims of the communist regime. This narrative lends validity to the life story of people who cooperated with the regime, while at the same time harbouring negative emotions against it. In the context of this narrative, people simply did their best and maintained a passive role in their life stories and within the social context. Faced with an overwhelmingly strong system, they had no choice but to submit to its demand and subdue individual inclinations, decisions, and responsibility. Remaining passive may in fact have been regarded precisely as a means of taking responsibility, since keeping a low profile was usually the best way of protecting oneself and one's family from harm. In this context, passivity is seen as an important means for individuals' ability to survive life within a hostile system.

Thus, both ways of regarding the individual's position vis-à-vis his own life and the surrounding society are crucial ingredients of different life strategies within the communist system. Being an active agent in one's own life and making it on one's own are leitmotifs within emigrant stories, whereas being a passive agent in one's life and simply adapting to external demands is likely to be an important aspect in the life stories of people who stayed[77]. According to the material in the interviews, emigrants and people who stayed seen to emphasise these different life strategies (actively taking responsibility versus passively adapting to external demands) when they meet. When they do this, they are also providing an explanation for their own life stories, thus protecting their moral identity within the post-communist context.

7.3 Image of the West and rejected suffering narratives

The human psychology is strange: people love a person, but then they ask why he hasn't suffered with them (Interviewee in Stefansson 2004: 65).

When emigrants return to their home country, they are usually surrounded by few people who can understand and confirm their past abroad, and they often find that people show little interest in finding out about this part of their life. Returning emigrants are, in a sense, *invisible strangers*. On the one hand, they have intimate knowledge of the culture and the language; on the other hand, a substantial part of their life story and identity is rooted somewhere else. There are, however, no external markers that make them readily identifiable

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[77] One obvious weakness of this interpretation is that I have not conducted interviews with people who did not emigrate, thus, these ideas are only based on what the interviewees said about the way people who stayed speak about their life.

as strangers. Therefore, when they return, people often treat them as if they never left the country, and they may not be interested in their experience from abroad because they do not fully realise that the years spent abroad may be as fundamental to the emigrants' current identity as the time they shared with those at home[78]. In this sense, one could say that they find themselves in a narrative *vacuum.*

At the same time, people's views of emigrants' life abroad appear to be strongly coloured by narratives about life in the West. In Hana's case presented above, she mentions that people had an exaggerated view of how comfortable and easy life in the West was, and that they simply were not receptive to her attempts to explain that it was not all that easy. This was something Hana "couldn't explain to them, they were not really accepting that." This topic is also brought up in Daniela's story. She feels like people tend to evaluate her life according to her material success, without realising all the hardship, emotional and physical, that she had to go through to accomplish the things she did. In his book about the psychological challenges of emigration, Diamant (himself an emigrant) explains in the forward that the book is mainly aimed at those who stayed, in order to show them "that life in emigration was very demanding and difficult for many people" (Diamant 1995: 3)[79].

Clearly, many emigrants sense that people at home are not receptive to the hardships of emigration, while they simultaneously feel that this is a significant part of their life stories. This experience is not unique to the Czech Republic. In his research on returning refugees to Bosnia-Herzegovina, Stefansson found that the suffering of life as a refugee was seen as subordinate to the hardships back home. One returnee complained that those who stayed appeared to like they had a "monopoly of suffering" that made them "morally superior" (Stefansson 2004: 179). People at home seemed disinterested in hearing about the experience of being a refugee:

> While stayees complained endlessly of the hardships of life in Bosnia, Radana thought that they seemed unable to understand and uninterested in hearing about the legal, social, and psychological difficulties of the refugee life in the West, clearly perceiving conditions in those countries as a 'bed of roses" (Stefansson 2004: 55).

The significance of cultural imagery for the reception of the returnee is also described in Schutz' essay, "The Homecomer". Schutz writes about the difficulties of the returning

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[78] Kundera brings this topic up in his book "Ignorance" that describes the return of two emigrants to the Czech Republic. He writes about Oddyseus, who returned to his beloved Ithaca after years abroad: "A stranger gets asked 'Who are you? Where do you come from? Tell us! And he had told... But in Ithaca he was not a stranger, he was one of their own, so it never occurred to anyone to say, 'Tell us!'" (Kundera 2002: 35).

[79] Translated from Czech.

soldier, whose stories from the war are largely ignored due to people's 'pseudo-typification' of his experiences. Instead of listening to his story, those at home apply a ready-made image of the soldier the way it has been created through reports in the newspapers, the radio, and in war propaganda. Thus, a strong cultural narrative overpowers the soldier's ability to convey what life at the front was really like. According to Schutz, this situation is one of the "biggest obstacles to mutual establishment of the disrupted we-relations" (Schutz 1945: 374)

In the same way, prevalent cultural narrative about the West as a place where the streets are paved with gold appears to make it difficult for emigrants to convey aspects of their life story that depart from this image. In a sense, both the interviewees and those who stayed seem to maintain narratives about life in emigration that are coloured by the image of the American dream, but they impute different content to the story. While the interviewees focus on their own hard work and the obstacles they had to overcome in their path to a good life, those who stayed focus on the opportunities and material benefits that appear automatically to follow life in the West.

By ignoring the emigrants' stories of hardship abroad and upholding an idealised image of life in the West, those who stayed are also creating a sharper contrast to the difficulties endured back home. Anna relays this type of experience: "I've been told that many times: while you were in the west, *we were suffering* under the communist system, so you *cannot really understand* what was going on here. It was *easy* for you to live there."

Interestingly, however, it is not only those at home who appear to be unwilling to recognise the hardship of the other party. Some of the emigrants also seem to be reluctant to accept the pervasive image of suffering under communism. For example, when speaking about some of the people at the university who held the same positions after the revolution, Vladimir comments that they "even pretended they suffered from communism." Above, we have seen that Julia suggested that people may have decided to stay in Czechoslovakia because they were comfortable there and wanted to maintain their material and social standing. Similarly, Milan feels like people propagate a one-sided image of life in emigration as comfortable and easy while emphasising that those who stayed at home had to endure suffering and hardship under the communist regime. As the following quote demonstrate, Milan perceives this as a simplified image, particularly since, in his view, many of the people who stayed in fact collaborated with the very regime they today claim is responsible for their suffering:

> Here we have to admit that about 80 % of the people collaborated with the system in one way or another. And of course now they have the feeling, even if they know that this was not exactly the case, that we who were emigrants, we had a very good time, while they suffered terribly here. Right? At the same time, I came there, and I had three marks. And simply, most of those people had to work really hard in order to

even…. but no, 'they [emigrants] were doing so well, lived in capitalism while we, poor us, we had to suffer'.

Thus, both the emigrants and those who stayed appear to fail to acknowledge those parts of each other's narratives that speak of hardship. Kundera's (2006) book Ignorance, which is about two emigrants who return to the Czech Republic for the first time after 1989, picks up this theme. Stefansson writes: "Kundera shows that both exiles and stayees are so obsessed with having their hardship recognised *by* the 'Other' that they fail to attend to the suffering *of* the other" (Huseby-Darvas 2004: 58). Why is it so important to have the other party recognise one's suffering, and why do both sides display such reluctance to do so? Some possible answers to these questions will be discussed next.

7.4 The role of the victim: moral and material consequences

In order to answer the previous questions, it is necessary to investigate which functions narratives of suffering serve within communist society[80]. Frønes writes that there is "tough competition over the role of the victim in many modern contexts" (Frønes 2001: 114). In general, the recognition of unwarranted suffering endows the individual with moral authority. This is particularly significant within post-communist society, because socially recognised suffering in this context transforms the individual's position within the regime from being a co-creator of the regime to being a victim, thereby endowing the individual with moral identity.

I have suggested earlier that two major narratives exist about the individual's role within the communist system; one that regards the system as an evil that was imposed upon a majority of victims, and another that allocates everyone who accepted life under the system a share of responsibility and guilt. Some very interesting parallels to the issues concerning victimhood and guilt in the Czech Republic can be found when looking at Germany's attempt to deal with its Nazi – and later communist – past (Giesen 2004). According to Giesen, the German population initially dealt with the past through avoidance and a "tacitly assumed coalition of silence". In this atmosphere, "everyone assumed that the others, too, had supported the Nazi regime and would therefore agree to be silent about their common shame" (Giesen 2004:

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[80] I would like to stress that by investigating the functions of suffering narratives, I am not in any way questioning the actual suffering inflicted upon the Czechoslovak population during the communist regime. I am, however, trying to understand how tales of suffering can influence present social relations.

116). However, similarly to Pithart's and Havel's attempt to bring up the topic of responsibility in the Czech public discussed above, some intellectuals "raised their voices and posed inconvenient questions" (Giesen 2004: 119). Faced with these voices and "outside observers", such as schoolchildren, foreigners, and Germans who had never supported the regime, there was a need for a new exculpatory narrative. The new narrative created a sharp distinction between the oppressors and the people, allowing the average German to assume the role of the victim (Giesen 2004: 120)[81]. Giesen suggests that similar processes took place after the fall of communism in East Germany half a century later:

> Again the issue was to demarcate the line between the perpetrators and the majority of decent Germans who had suffered from repressive rule, but this time it was even more difficult to turn the filthy grayish web of collaboration into a clear-cut black-and-white picture of guilt and innocence: almost a third of the entire population had been involved in *Stasi* activities, and the system of surveillance and control had expanded during the four decades to reach a perfection the Gestapo never achieved (Giesen 2004: 124).

Here, we can see a parallel to the narrative in the Czech Republic discussed earlier that emphasises the guilt of specific groups of people, while absolving the majority. In the Czech Republic too, there appears to be a pact of silence about the past that keeps the majority's role out of view. Everyone knows that life under communism was complicated, and that it is difficult to discern people's real motivations and roles within the system. The majority is united in their guilt *and* victimhood.

Similar ideas can be found in Šiklová's (1991) essay "The Solidarity of the Culpable". She suggests that although most people rejoiced at the fall of communism, they soon found out that their past lives within the regime were a source of guilt. The guilt stemmed both from the fact that many people had acted in ways that would normally be against their principles to ensure their material and professional survival, and from an awareness that they to a greater or lesser extent had contributed to upholding the regime. Thus, after the fall of communism, Šiklová suggests that "[a]lmost all of them now have a sense of being in danger, which stems at least in part from their own less-than-clear consciences" (Šiklová 1991: 767). The common awareness of guilt led, according to Šiklová, to a sense of "solidarity among the culpable". Šiklová suggests that this sense of guilt created a need to point the finger at someone on the outside (similar to the need for an exculpatory narrative in

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[81] This exculpatory narrative was, again, challenged as new generations who had not lived through the Nazi epoch grew up in Germany. In this process, the past was brought out of the sphere of silence and into the midst of the public. The public debates on the issue of guilt "replaced the narratives that had presented the Germans as the victims of the Nazi tyranny with a charge of tacit and overt collaboration" (Giesen 2004: 128). Now, the trauma of the Nazi past was being turned into a stigma of the whole nation.

Germany), and thus has become an important source for the violent nationalistic tendencies in Eastern and Central Europe today. But it also leads to a widespread "hostility toward anyone different – e.g. former dissidents, those who emigrated abroad, anyone who chose a different path and demonstrated different survival techniques" (Šiklová 1991: 770).

Šiklová is implying that people's unresolved feelings of guilt may be a significant factor in the encounters between groups who are outsiders and therefore do not share the "solidarity of the culpable". Emigrants constitute one such group. In one sense, they are outsiders, and similarly to the situation in Germany, they may challenge the narrative that creates clear divisions between perpetrators and victims. These boundaries are, as I have suggested several times, already fluid within Czech society. For example, Haukanes found that the term "communist" had different usage depending on the social situation. Former party members sometimes included themselves in this category, but at other times, they complained about "the communists", in this case speaking about those at "the top", while placing themselves in the same camp as ordinary people (Haukanes 1999: 137).When emigrants with a "clean" past enter the social landscape, *everyone* who lived though communism, and who did not stand up against the regime, can potentially be pinpointed as a perpetrator. This is not to suggest that emigrants frequently do this, but as I have pointed out earlier, such accusations may be a powerful weapon in Czech society at moments of tension.

Thus, when Czechs face returning emigrants, the importance of suffering narratives, as a means to distance one's role from that of the perpetrator, probably becomes more acute than usual. As Havel points out, most people were *simultaneously* victims and co-creators of the system. Normally, however, the role of the perpetrator and the role of the victim are mutually exclusive. Thus, when people emphasize suffering and powerlessness in the face of an "outsider", they are making their potential role in the regime less visible, thus defending their life stories the way they unfolded within the communist regime. Such tales may, in other words, grow in significance when people are confronted with others who chose a different life path during communism.[82]

In a similar way, emigrants' narratives of suffering may function as protection against those who challenge their moral identity. By emphasising the hardships of life in emigration, emigrants are contesting the narrative that portrays emigration as a selfish enterprise that

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[82] This does not mean that narratives of suffering are necessarily important in every-day life. For example, in her field study of the Czech countryside, Haukanes was surprised that she did not encounter more "tales of suffering" when people spoke about the past (Haukanes 1999: 103). Moreover, Haukanes counters Šiklová's hypothesis about the solidarity of the culpable and suggests that their shared past did not "give them a basis for solidarity of any kind" (Haukanes 1999: 226). Tales of suffering may, however, become important when people are confronted with others who chose a different life path during communism.

was an easy way out, and instead pointing to a position as victims of the communist regime. Their suffering also belongs to the image of the exile. Earlier, I suggested that one narrative about the emigrant is connected to the suffering of the political exile whose life outside the borders of the motherland is painful and demanding. Said even speaks of exile as "death, but without death's ultimate mercy" (2000: 174). In this context, suffering is proof of love of the homeland, and of the fact that life abroad was not chosen for its apparent comforts and luxury. Thus, the interviewees' narratives of hardship can be seen as a claim for recognition as exiles, for belonging, and for their right to have a say in the future of their home society.

The above discussion suggests that socially recognised suffering may be a source of narrative validity that strengthens the individual's moral identity within the post-communist context. However, socially recognised suffering can also have very *tangible* consequences. Conversely, unacknowledged suffering can sometimes prevent groups from making claims in the present. This seems to be the case with emigrants in the Czech Republic. One of the major sources of conflict between Czechs abroad and their homeland is related to questions of citizenship and restitution. I will not get into the details of Czech citizenship and restitution legislature here; suffice it to say that the Czech state generally has not been very accommodating towards emigrants in this matter (Barkan 2000: ch. 6; Nešpor 2002: 59; Pecina 1999). In particular, the Czech state has been reluctant to allow former citizens to reclaim their Czech citizenship while retaining the citizenship of another state. Illegal emigration during communism entailed both the retraction of Czechoslovak citizenship and the confiscation of any property that the emigrants left behind. Since holding a Czech citizenship has been a prerequisite for the ability to make restitution claims, the matter has more than mere symbolic consequences. The issue has at times created tensions that some have compared to an "undeclared war" between Czech emigrant communities and the Czech Republic, amounting to absurd situations, such as when the Czech Republic's attempt to join NATO and "Czech emigrants living in the States vociferously sided against the Czech Republic's entry" (Pecina 1999)[83]. Even though the citizenship law gradually has been amended to make it more inclusive, these changes usually do not open up for emigrants' restitution claims (Barkan 2000: 129). The interesting point here is that the justification for refusing the emigrants' claims to citizenship and restitution sometimes appears to be related to the idea of valid suffering. In Barkan's words:

> The moral justification for the exclusion of "foreigners" [emigrants] reasoned that restitution should be based not solely on actual loss of property but also on *having remained and suffered under communist affliction*. The "in-group" included only

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[83] See http://www.ce-review.org/99/4/pecina4.html

those who had withstood the Communist regime for more than forty years, and therefore ought to benefit from restitution, but not those who had escaped it. This opposition to "foreigners" was directed against individuals who had been part of the nation and, as such, had suffered losses that would have entitled them to present restitution had they not left (Barkan 2000: 128).

Thus, failing to recognise the hardships of emigration does not only reduce the narrative validity of the emigrants' life stories, it is also a political matter. It is also important to keep in mind that a law can be read as a symbolic gesture that conveys a normative message: from this perspective, the restitution law can also be read as a signal that staying during the communist regime was a morally superior act that should be rewarded today. Or at the very least, it signals that the suffering of those who stayed was greater than that of the people who chose emigration, and lived in the prosperous West.

In this chapter, I have discussed how the two different narratives about the past, one that emphasizes collective victimhood, and another that stresses individual responsibility, can lend support to different life stories. I have also suggested that emigrants challenge the image of life in the West as easy and comfortable and life at home as difficult and challenging. Instead, emigrants speak of emigration as an option that entailed courage and considerable hardship. Suffering narratives are important for the construction of moral identities both for emigrants and for those who stayed, and the importance of such narratives may increase during encounters between the two groups.

The final chapter is devoted to a summary of the research findings and a discussion of the broader implications of this thesis.

8. Final discussion

8.1 Summary of findings and interpretations

In this thesis, I have investigated the interaction between cultural narratives and individual life stories. My interest has been in exploring how life stories relate the common history of a society, particularly when the official historical account has recently undergone significant revisions as a result of changes in the political and social power balance. The life stories of Czech emigrants are specifically interesting in a post-communist context because they differ from those of the majority who lived under the communist regime. For whatever reason, those who emigrated responded to the historical situation in a different way than those who stayed, and there are therefore varying degrees of overlap in the historical experience of the two groups. Using Bellah et al.'s term (1986), one can say that the emigrants belong to a different community of memory, whose view of Czech society and the past often differs from other significant social groups. The time of remigration is a moment when the lives of emigrants and people who stayed reconnect, making such disparities particularly visible. The life stories of emigrants and their relationship to those at home thus provide a unique opportunity to gain insight into the complex social reality that is hidden behind the official narrative about the communist past.

First of all, I investigated how cultural narratives supported or challenged the narrative validity in the interviewees' life stories. I suggested that the post-communist narrative that holds up the West as an ideal strongly favors emigrants' pasts due their accumulated work experience and know-how from the West. Additionally, the new historical narrative that portrays the communist era as a black hole in history lends support to the commonly held view that people who lived through the epoch are "damaged" by the system. Emigrants with a clean past can in this context be viewed as a segment of the population which is free of damage and therefore should have a significant say in the construction of the future. This makes returning emigrants particularly potent competitors when they enter their professional fields in the Czech Republic. Moreover, their colleagues at home may feel defensive vis-à-vis emigrants because they hold the potential of pointing out professional inadequacy (compared to Western standards) and the fact that people's current positions may in part be related to their relationship to the communist system. Their colleagues at home may, in turn, question the integrity of returning emigrants and use their contacts to hinder their success.

These could be some be some of the possible reasons why returning emigrants at times have difficulties getting a professional foothold.

The above discussion lends support to the fairly obvious idea that there is often a discrepancy between the new ideals and the actual social reality in the aftermath of social change. While the new narrative promotes Western ideals, people may not always accept them, particularly when they are channeled through "outsiders", such as returning emigrants. While many returning emigrants initially are eager to contribute with their knowledge, they probably quickly realise that the receiving party is not as enthusiastic, and they sense the gap between ideals and implementation. In the face of this, returning emigrants may not hesitate to voice this problem and point out that there is more continuity, both on a system level and on a biographical level, than most people would like to admit. Emigrants are, in this sense, breaking the pact of silence around certain topics concerning the past and its continued influence in the present.

This leads to the another important point. In the midst of a more philosophical discussion about the meaning of historical change, it is important to keep in mind the past can be used as a means with which to exert power at moments of tension or competition. One of the aims in this thesis has been to show the complexity and ambiguity of people's relationship to the past. In this context, where a variety of interpretations and views are available, the past is a particularly flexible resource that can be constructed according to various needs and viewpoints. Disagreement about the past may therefore not be as much the cause of conflict as a *weapon* in a conflict where much more tangible resources are at stake. I am not suggesting that people necessarily manipulate the past in a conscious manner, but its flexible nature makes it amenable for the defence of a variety of positions. Thus, returning emigrants and their colleagues at home may lean upon different narratives about emigration and the past in order to consolidate their moral identity and influence in the present.

Secondly, I investigated how the interviewees maintained a moral identity within their life stories by confirming or contesting cultural images. A number of different images of the emigrants exists that endows him or her with more or less legitimacy in the post-communist context. In their own narratives, the interviewees stressed that emigration was a decision that required initiative and courage, thus countering the image of emigration as an "easy way out". They also countered the image of emigration as an individualistic, opportunistic act. Depending on the time of departure, emigration was described either as an externally produced event with little time for decision-making, or as a conscious strategy that required considerable planning and sacrifice. The political situation was in all cases stressed as the impetus for emigration. Many of the interviewees came from families that had been harmed considerably by the regime, and some of them also made connections between their parents'

lost opportunities to escape or stay abroad and their later decision to emigrate. These aspects of the interviewees' family history may have made them particularly prone to emigrate; or from a narrative perspective, they are a means to explain and validate the decision to leave.

The interviewees appeared to emphasise the fact that the individual has to take responsibility for his own life and make independent decisions. In addition to being an expression of divergent experiences, the difference between the interviewees and their counterparts at home in terms of agency may be a means to explain one's own life strategy during communism. A life story that stresses responsibility and initiative is supported by the narrative about the past that considers the continued existence of the system to be everyone's responsibility. Emigration is, in this context, a means to take a clear stance against the system and live in truth. On the other hand, a life story that stresses passivity is supported by the narrative about the past that portrays the majority as powerless victims of the system. The main message here is that passivity was an important strategy to ensure the individual's survival within this hostile system.

While the emigrants' intimate knowledge of the West may be seen as a resource, it also appeared to be an obstacle because the collectively held images about life in the West often overshadow the actual experiences of returning emigrants. Several of the interviewees expressed frustration about the fact that people considered their life abroad to be a "dance on roses" in contrast to the hardships of life in Czechoslovakia under communism. The interviewees countered this idea by communicating how difficult it was to start from scratch somewhere else and by suggesting that staying was a choice as much as leaving. For both sides, the emphasis on hardship may be a means to defend life stories and moral identities. Moreover, socially recognised suffering is not only a matter of legitimacy, it can also important for the ability to make claims to certain resources.

From a methodological perspective, the main insight from this research is that life stories can be valuable vehicles to understand broader social processes and the ways in which these affect individual and collective identities. The final discussion is devoted to the question concerning what the relationship between returning emigrants and the majority can tell us about current challenges in Czech post-communist society.

8.2 Biographical mirrors, communities of memory, and the need for recognition

With the fall of communism, people who earlier had been considered criminals by the regime literally became the new rulers. Those who in the past had a close relationship to the regime were robbed of their (historical) moral identity, while others finally were granted one. Historical change is accompanied by changes in the power relations in society, and the post-communist narrative reflects such changes. A new version of the past has been given supreme voice and dominates over the others. Some people, such as active dissidents and high-ranking communist members, have a more or less clearly defined identity according to the post-communist narrative. [84] However, the majority has an ambivalent moral identity from the present-day viewpoint. The variety of images connected to the emigrant may be seen as an illustration of the ambiguous connection between people's life stories, relationships to the past, and moral identities. This uncertainty surrounding identities in the post-communist context might intensify the need to find support for one's own life story.

The life stories of emigrants and people who stayed are implicitly supported by broader narratives about the past that place different weight on people's personal responsibility and victimhood during the regime. These matters are clearly important in the Czech Republic today, and topics that embody them seem to strike a sensitive nerve within the Czech population[85]. The story about the Mašín brothers is one such topic. The debate surrounding them has divided the Czech nation in two: half of the population views the brothers as brutal murderers, while the other half sees them as national heroes. I will briefly recount the story and the debate as it aptly summarises some of the main issues in this thesis.

The Mašín brothers were sons of a celebrated officer who was part of the most well known resistance group during the Nazi occupation. After the communist take-over, the young brothers established a military resistance group with some friends. In 1953, after a few small-scale sabotage actions on Czechoslovak ground, the brothers decided to escape to the other side of the iron curtain in order to receive training in partisan warfare techniques from

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[84] Note, however, that several of the Charta members were former communists. This is considered to be one of the reasons why the Charta, at least initially, was met with a certain degree of suspicion by people (Day 1999).

[85] There also seems to be a general sentiment among Czech people that they have not offered enough resistance at crucial moments in history. A quote from a newspaper illustrates this: "With us reigns the tradition of giving up: the years 1938, 1939, 1948, 1968 we have always given up everything without a fight; Schweik became the role model for the people" (Mladý svět, 1990, no. 4:20, quoted in Holy (1996: 127)). In particular, Czech people often compare themselves to Poles or Hungarians, who appear to have displayed fiercer resistance throughout history. This image seems to imply a view of Czech national identity as docile and passive, and topics that confirm or counter this image seem to spark debate.

the Americans. During their sabotage missions and their notorious escape through East Germany, the brothers and their friends killed six policemen and other people in the civil service (Alda 2005)[86]. Several family members and friends at home were sentenced to prison due to their relationship to the runaways, and the brothers and their associates were portrayed as brutal murderers and looters by the communist regime[87].

On the one hand, the brothers' actions are today interpreted as a selfish attempt to save themselves at the cost of sacrificing the lives of innocent people. [88] The brothers ended up living in the prosperous West while their emigration led to much hardship and suffering for their loved ones in Czechoslovakia. On the other hand, the brothers' actions are interpreted as instances of longed-for heroism. The brothers are considered to belong to the rare group of straight-backed individuals who had the guts to put up a fight instead of simply adapting to the authoritarian system. The debate is intense: what was the morally right thing to do under the communist regime? Is opposition against a seemingly overwhelmingly stronger system worth the cost, particularly if it harms a third party? Is it not better simply to adapt and make the best out of the situation, while protecting family and close ones? But then again, what about the idea of living "in truth"? (see discussion on Reflex online 2006).

I believe the reason for the heated debate is precisely that the story compels people to think about their own position in the past. As the following quote from a web discussion about the brothers suggests, some people appear to identify with those who fell victims to the brothers' actions: "The Mašín brothers killed three innocent people[89] who served the regime in the same way that I, even if I was not a communist, served the regime in the past because I worked for the regime. Maybe you didn't, in that case you'd have to be either in emigration or in jail" (Reflex online 2006).[90] This is a good example of the complexity of coming to terms with the communist past. How do you identify with a set of heroes, when people just like yourself play their opponents in the story?[91]

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[86] http://www.praguepost.com/P03/2005/Art/1027/print_template.php

[87] Only three members of the group, among them the Mašín brothers and Milan Paumer, made it to the other side. They all joined the US Army Special Forces. The two other members of the group were captured and were given death sentences in Czechoslovakia.

[88] One poll suggests that 55 % of the Czech population considers the group to be killers (Willoughby 2005).

[89] Here, the debater is probably referring to the three people who were killed who were not policemen.

[90] Translated from Czech.

[91] The issue of whether the Mašín brothers and Paumer should be given an honorary reward has been raised and rejected twice in parliament. The last time, the current president Vaclav Klaus vetoed the proposition. While Czechs appear to be divided over the issue, it is probably telling that emigrants generally seem to have taken a clearer stance. The Czech and

The whole point of this anecdote is to illustrate that questions of guilt, responsibility, and victimhood are very much present in Czech society, and that the life stories of people who positioned themselves differently vis-à-vis the regime appear to be particularly potent in evoking such questions. The debate surrounding the Mašín brothers is much larger than it seems at first sight, because it touches significant issues in people's own lives. Similarly, returning emigrants constitute biographical mirrors that remind people of their own pasts. Thus, the tensions between returning emigrants and the majority may, in some instances, be seen as an expression of the fact that people feel uncertain about their own life stories in the context of the post-communist narrative.

This uncertainty is an issue that needs to be taken seriously. If life stories and history are as intimately intertwined as I have suggested, then the shift in narrative after 1989 may be very challenging to deal with for a significant part of the Czech population. A Czech friend of mine explained that his grandparents watched the news on TV in 1989 with disbelief and surprise: suddenly, the whole basis of their social reality as they knew it was disintegrating, and the system they had been working for all of their lives was considered to be immoral and wrong. How are people to come to terms with such a situation? Andrew's (2000: 185) research on former East Germany showed that people tended to keep silent about their past, or scramble to recreate a new and acceptable version. A third option is that people react by rejecting the new order and its accompanying narrative in order to protect themselves.

The fact that the Czech communist party is the third largest in the country today is an indication of the latter alternative, and a strong signal that there is not unanimous agreement about whether communism should be described as a failure or a success. The people who lived through the communist epoch will of course gradually disappear and new generations will certainly have different perspectives on the past. But collective memories tend to outlive the short span of a human life. How will the past speak to the future generation? The increasing support for the extreme right among young people in Germany is perhaps a testimony of the fact that the past does not fade away with the old generations[92].

Showing understanding for this situation does not mean that we should abandon all values and consider historical events from a relativist position. For example, I do unquestionably prefer a democratic society to a totalitarian one. The challenge rests in the ability to take a stance against an authoritarian regime and certain unacceptable practices, while

Slovak Association in Canada gave the Mašín brothers and Milan Paumer the Thomas Masaryk Award to in 2005 (IHNed.cz 2005)

[92] It has been estimated that 21 % of men under the age of 30 in Germany today support the Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands (NPD), a political party on the extreme right of the political spectrum (Kluge 2006: 20-27).

simultaneously not robbing people of the fundamental need to anchor their current identities within the past. By saying this, I am not suggesting that we should absolve the individual from any responsibility; it is certainly true that some people have participated in actions in the past that simply are intolerable. It is, however, important that we do not pass judgements according to a black-and-white version of the past, but allow those who lived through an epoch to tell their individual stories[93]. Pithart, the first prime minister after the revolution and a member of Charta 77, represents such a perspective:

> Is really every communist an immoral human being, and is each member of the Civic Forum[94] an impeccable idealist?…Who has the right to judge only because he was not a Party member? Who has the right to judge on the basis of the principle of collective guilt? (Pithart 1998: 291).

A one-sided view of reality that denies entire social groups recognition can become costly in the long run. Honneth (1995) considers lack of recognition between different social groups to be an important source of conflict[95]. This idea can be applied equally to the recognition of different communities of memory who related to the past in various ways. I mentioned earlier that Šiklová (1991) suggests one of the causes of the wave of nationalism and xenophobia in post-Soviet states is that the past has become a source of shame for many people. Because people cannot express who they are through the past, they instead turn to nationalistic and ethnic identity markers. Similarly, Pithart (1998: 289) proposes that it was of crucial importance to tame the urge of the victorious side of the Velvet Revolution in 1989 from being too categorical and harsh towards their opponents. In his view, such an approach would have been likely to spur a counter-reaction that in the long run could threaten the democratic victory. Lack of recognition might force people into the trenches, which in the next round can create extremist positions and an escalation in inter-group conflict. Germany's need to reassert their national identity after the harsh defeat in the First World War may be an extreme example of such a process. Recently, the Czech minister of interior banned the Czech Communist Youth Union. If one considers the arguments above, such measures may in fact be counterproductive and in turn serve to create more radical views.

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[93] This idea promotes institutions such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, where both victims *and* perpetrators are invited to speak about the past.

[94] The Civic Forum was a broad alliance of people instrumental in the Velvet Revolution, and formed the basis for the new government in 1989.

[95] This idea is also fundamental in the debate on multiculturalism. See Charles Taylor's (1992) "Multiculturalism and the politics of recognition".

One obvious challenge inherent in the ideas proposed above is to allow for multiple perspectives and identities while making clear that certain values have to remain intact. This challenge constitutes the core of many debates in democratic societies today, such as the one surrounding multiculturalism. Another challenge is tied to the fact that historical narratives cannot be disentangled from the power and domination of certain groups over others. It is perhaps illusory to think that everyone will be given an equal voice in collective history making. It is, however, important to strive towards this ideal. Historians have a particularly important role here, because they are in a position to construct historical accounts. It is important that they resist the request for a simplified historical narrative based on present needs to create sharp divisions between us and them, guilty and not guilty. Instead, it is crucial that historians take into account the perspectives of several communities of memory and provide a nuanced version that does not estrange people from their historical identities.

Finally, I would like to suggest some potentially fruitful fields of future research. First of all, it is important to collect the life stories of different communities of memory in order to better understand the past and its influence upon present-day society. Important research is already being conducted in this field in the Czech Republic. Vaněk and his colleagues have, for example, collected the life stories of people who belong to two widely different communities of memory, namely communists and dissidents who were prominent during the normalisation epoch (Vaněk 2006; Vaněk and Urbášek 2005).

It would also be very interesting to investigate the way in which the new generations view the past. The number of young communists appears to be on the rise in the Czech Republic. How do these young people view the communist regime and the events after 1989? Is there a relationship between their current views and their family history? And how do other young people today regard the communist era? Which narratives about the past survive and prevail into the future?

The importance of this type of research is of course not restricted to post-communist countries. It is equally interesting in our own context. Some people are beginning to suggest that the Norwegian historical narrative about the Second World War and its aftermath is a fairytale story that draws a far too flattering picture of the Norwegian nation. These ideas were proposed in a recent documentary about Blindheim, one of Norway's most decorated war heroes. Blindheim has publicly criticised the history writing about the war, and suggests that many sides of the conflict are being overlooked in a bid to create a more acceptable story about ourselves. The documentary makers refer to the one-sided image as a product of a "culture of silence", where few people have been able or willing to give voice to different versions of the past (Hagen and Jerstad June 3rd, 2006). By focusing more on different communities of memory within Norway, we could reach a more truthful narrative about

ourselves. The life story approach will be particularly fruitful in the production of further knowledge about the interconnections between family history, historical experience, communities of memory, and cultural narratives.

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All the sources that have been used in this thesis have been listed.

Word count: 39565

APPENDIX: INTERVIEW GUIDE

CHILDHOOD and FAMILY BACKGROUND

- Could you tell me a bit about your childhood?

- Where did you grow up?

- Siblings?

- Where were your mother and father from?

- What did they do?

- How would you describe your parents?

- How would you describe the economic situation in your family?

- What was the most important event in your life before age 12?

- How was your family affected by the communist take-over?

EDUCATION/OCCUPATION

- When did you move away from home?

- What were your aspirations? How did you imagine your future?

- Education? If yes:

- Why did you choose this area of study?

- How would you describe your time at the university?

- Friends, basic relationships – are any of the people or contacts from this time still important in your life?

- In what way did your studies/choice of study affect your later life?

- Did the political environment affect your opportunities for work?

- What were your work experiences before migration?

LIFE PRE-EMIGRATION:

- How did you experience the year 1968 and the onset of normalization?

- How did the political events affect your life?

- How would you describe the general atmosphere at the time before you migrated?

- How did you feel about the future?

- Did you have specific goals/ambitions in your life? How did you think you could achieve them?

- What was your family situation like?

- What was your social situation like?

- How did people around you deal with the political situation?

- How did you feel about the political situation?

- Were you active politically in any way?

EMIGRATION/DECISION TO EMIGRATE:

- Did you know anyone who had emigrated?

- What were the attitudes in your social environment towards emigration?

- Did you hear any stories about emigrants? How were they perceived/portrayed?

- Can you tell me about how you made the decision to emigrate?

- Which factors were the most influential in your decision?

- How did you feel when you had made the decision?

- Can you tell me about how your friends and family reacted to your decision? (if they were informed)

- Do you think there were any important differences between those who stayed and those who emigrated?

- When you left Czechoslovakia, did you think you were leaving for good or did you imagine that you would return one day?

- What were the legal aspects involved in emigration? Was your migration considered legal or illegal by the authorities?

- What was your preferred destination?

- How did you leave the country?

- What were your expectations about emigration?

- Did your migration have any consequences for your family in Czechoslovakia?

HOST COUNTRY:

Relations to host society

- What are your first memories from the host country?

- How did you feel the first few months after you emigrated?

- What were your initial encounters with members of the host country like?

- What was your living/work situation like?

- What was your legal status in the host country?

- How do you think members of the host country perceived emigrants from the east?

- How much did members of the host country know about the situation in Czechoslovakia?

- Did you talk about your past in Czechoslovakia to other people?

- How did you explain your migration story to people you met in the host country?

- What were the similarities and the differences between your old and new life?

- Were you able to use your education/previous job experiences in the host country?

Czechoslovaks in host country

- Were there many Czechoslovak emigrants in your host country?

- Were there any émigré organisations in your host country?

- How would you describe your relationship to other emigrants? Were you frequently in touch with them?

- How would you describe the relationship between emigrants?

Feelings about home country

- How did you feel about Czechoslovakia after you had left?

- To what extent/with whom did you communicate back home?

- Did you ever go back to Czechoslovakia before 1989? What were your experiences like?

1989 – EVENTS:

- What was your general life situation like at the time?

- What were your initial feelings and reactions to the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia?

- How did people around you react to the events? (other Czechoslovaks, people in host country)

- In what ways did the fall of communism affect your life?

- Did the fall of communism change your position in your host country in any way?

DECISION TO RE-MIGRATE:

- How did you feel about the possibility to go home permanently?

- Tell me about how you made the decision to re-emigrate. What were the most important factors?

- How did the people around you react to your decision to re-emigrate?

REMIGRATION

- How did you experience the initial time after your return to the Czech Republic?

- What was your job situation like after your return?

- What was your family situation like after your return?

- Who were the most important people for you in Czechoslovakia before migration?

- Which people are the most important for you today?

- How do you think Czech people perceive re-emigrants?

- How do you explain people about your migration and your experiences abroad? Do you feel like people understand you?

- In which way do you feel like re-emigrants contribute to the Czech Republic today?

- How do you feel in the Czech Republic today?

- How do you feel about your host country?

- Did your return to the Czech Republic live up to your expectations?

- Do you think of yourself as "Czech"?

- Where do you feel the most at home?

- Do you know other re-emigrants?

- Did you ever consider going back to your host country permanently?

- What do you think your life would have been like today if you had not emigrated?

- Have you ever regretted either emigrating or re-emigrating?

CLOSURE, FUTURE OUTLOOKS

- Looking back at your life, what do you consider the most important event in your life?

- If you were to divide your life into different chapters, what would they be?

- In what period of your life do you in retrospect consider yourself to have been the most content?

- What period of your life do you consider to have been the most difficult?

- What are you plans for the future?

- Do you think many emigrants and re-emigrants share your experiences and views? If not, what other stories do you think they tell?

- How do you feel about having participated in this interview, has it been difficult in any way?