

Modern Scholarly Biography in the Humanities: its Teaching Potential and Possible Pitfalls in Post-totalitarian Czech Society

Naděžda Morávková / email: moravkov@khi.zcu.cz

Faculty of Education, University of West Bohemia, Czech Republic

Morávková N. (2019). Modern Scholarly Biography in the Humanities: its Teaching Potential and Possible Pitfalls in Post-totalitarian Czech Society. *Czech-Polish Historical and Pedagogical Journal*, 11/1, 81–90.

<https://doi.org/10.5817/cphpj-2019-010>

This paper describes the changing role of biography in the context of historiographical methodology and the historian's approach to research. The primary focus is on biographies by history scholars, though the same developmental tendency may be observed in contemporary biographies of prominent literary historians, historians of the creative arts and music, ethnographers, archaeologists, pedagogues and so on. There is a description of certain methodological problems, the potential and the pitfalls of research in the field of modern historiography and other social sciences which have arisen as a result of changes in academic discourse during the 20th century, including specific restrictions in the availability or usability of sources, or the classical limits of ego-history as such.

Key words: family; scholarly biography; developments in historiography; didactics of history and historiography; life history; oral history

It is now 30 years since the Velvet Revolution took place in Czechoslovakia, marking the end of government by one political party. Society, and with it education and research, have undergone – and continue to undergo – a complicated journey of transformation. Before attempting here to review the current situation regarding scholarly biographical works in Czech in the humanities, particularly in historiography, as well as in the teaching of these disciplines, it is necessary first to compare its level with that of world standards and examine specific ways in which the Czech situation is different. The extent to which it is possible to name and quantify these specific features is open to discussion; the current paper will focus primarily on those features of Czech scholarly biography which are shared with biographies of similar type in other post-totalitarian states. For comparative purposes, examples of changes in the academic discourse need not be limited to countries in the former Soviet bloc: equally pivotal changes have occurred relatively recently, for example, in South African historiography following the fall of apartheid, or a significant section of German or Italian historiography in the first half of the twentieth century.

A potential pitfall of biographical works may be the resistance of modern research and interpretational methods and approaches which go against the classical norms and to a significant extent even suppress them.¹ Such methods are often inspired by anthropology, sociology or psychology, plus elements from the literary or publicist sphere. The question thus arises as to whether or not this phenomenon is of benefit. This topic will be discussed in more detail below.

The current narrative of historiography as presented to the Czech academic community, and to an ever increasing extent particularly to students of history when the focus is on science, education and art, places emphasis on life stories. If these stories are absent, the scholarly biography begins to fossilise into a most undesirable form, consisting of dry, stereotypical details taken from textbooks or encyclopaedias and information in the form of reviews of published works by the person being studied. The style of narrative biography referred to as “life history”² – a specialist term which is usually left untranslated in non-English texts – should, however, really be “live.” Such works are even occasionally referred to as “live life history,”³ with particular emphasis on the word “live”, if the development of historiography and other branches of the humanities are to be understood in context and to their full extent. This applies not only to the teaching of historiography at universities but also to primary research. It might have seemed that on the threshold of the 21st century, long after the so-called narrative turn in the social sciences, a discussion on the possibilities and limitations of oral interviews or the use of qualitative research would be passé. In fact, the opposite is true: the polemics of seeking and finding a discourse in this direction, including attacks and apologies, are still very much a topical issue,⁴ especially as regards scholarly biographies.⁵ Within the academic community of post-totalitarian societies, the sensitive observer will perceive a certain cautious conservatism and wariness towards non-standard methodologies. The most common argument against “too” innovative approaches are then mostly a product of the classically paradigmatic, logical scientific approach, which insists the most important

¹ See Caine B. (2010). *Biography and history*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

² Goodson I. F. – Sikes P. J. (2001). *Life history research in educational settings: learning from lives*. Buckingham: Open University Press; Goodson I. F. (2013). *Developing narrative theory: life histories and personal representation*. London: Routledge.

³ Atkinson R. (1998). *The Life Story Interview*. Sage University Papers Series on Qualitative Research Methods. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

⁴ Chamberlayne P. – Bornat J. – Wengraf T. (eds.) (2000). *The turn to biographical methods in social science: comparative issues and examples*. London: Routledge; Klein Ch. (ed.) (2009). *Handbuch Biographie: Methoden, Traditionen, Theorien*. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler.

⁵ Renders H. – De Haan B. (eds.) (2013). *Theoretical discussions of biography: approaches from history, microhistory, and life writing*. Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press. From this volume mainly: Levi, G. The Uses of Biography, pp. 61–75; then Loriga S. The Role of Individual in History: Biographical and Historical Writing in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century, pp. 75–94.

consideration is facts, and academic style should ignore anything that is not strictly factual. The biases or emotional insights of readers or listeners are not a priority – indeed, quite the contrary: the idea that an innovative approach could jeopardise one's objective view of reality is still very much alive.

There exists an identical perception concerning supposedly uncorrelated and superfluous facts, such as details from an individual's personal life, which at first sight have no relevance for a characterisation of that person's professional life, artistic creativity or output. This is all the more so in the case of facts which overlap into someone's private life or even the intimate details thereof, whose publication by the researcher might become a matter of ethical correctness. The question is whether or not such details belong in a scholarly biography. If, however, they do not, then how else may the reader acquire an understanding of the motives and inspiration in the life and work of the subject? Even socio-political views, which in a totalitarian academic environment were an important factor in providing a complete portrait of a biographical subject, are unimaginable without a certain insight into the intimate family sphere. Such personal views could not be proclaimed publicly or appear in academic works if they were not in accordance with the valid ideological discourse of the day. Uncovering true opinions and comparing what might have been a necessary concession to the ideology of the times and what was genuine personal conviction, is impossible without entering into the private sphere of the subject. One proven method of great value here is oral history, given the availability of relevant contemporaries, or other types of personal sources, such as correspondence or diaries. Sometimes, paradoxically, even sources created by the political party or social bureaucracy of the era can also be of use: these sources would include various character references, so-called comprehensive evaluations, proclamations of committees or political and social organisations, and so on. There is more to be obtained from these sources than mere facts: the researcher can also use them as a means of gaining an insight into the atmosphere of the times as part of an attempt to understand the motivation behind the actions of the subject. Understandably, the extent of the biographer's voluntarism in applying such an approach becomes an issue in terms of objectivity. At the same time it might be said that a certain permissible level of subjectivity is a specific feature of live life history.

A further dilemma may occur with those biographical facts which fall into the category of not easily verified or even unverifiable. Such facts may come heuristically from oral histories and statements from witnesses, as well as via qualitative research, and also from traditional written memoirs, diaries, correspondence, and so forth. The question then arises of how to deal with information that cannot be definitively confirmed by further sources but at the same time is of fundamental significance for the life story. For the researcher such items are often of a greater value that transcends the boundaries of what is purely informative. Nonetheless, it is impossible to conceal the subjective character of such information; hence it is only to be expected that critics of its use will again

point out the pitfalls of voluntarism when interpreting reality. Oral history, similar to other methods of qualitative research within modern biography, attempts to challenge any devaluation of the validity of these sources by calling upon triangulation.⁶ Just as the establishment of a geographical location must be conducted from three different points, so in verifying the truth of historical information the researcher should endeavour to use more sources. At the same time, it should be stressed that even if such verification is impossible, this does not mean the quest for information through qualitative research should be abandoned. It has considerable potential beyond the area of facts, enabling the biographer to see inside the person being analysed, understand the motives and mental barriers influencing their behaviour, possibly even how they interpreted certain information retrospectively or would wish it to be interpreted. These are most valuable elements in a biography.

It is at this point we come to the main arguments of those who defend the narrative approach in biographical heuristics and the life history approach. The initial consideration must be that any personality is a complex whole – an entity consisting at various moments of many different components. When examining the life and legacy of an individual, empirical facts need not always be the most important aspect. Contemporary biography works with these factors as a matter of course, and methods used in sociology, psychology or anthropology are by no means exceptional. There is a consensus of opinion at the theoretical level that if the image of someone in scholarly literature is to be complete, these approaches should not be ignored. Few would defend a policy of ignoring certain aspects of a life solely because their relevance to the work or professional legacy of the person concerned is not evident at first sight. Experience has shown, however, that in practice things are far less clear-cut. Meanwhile, there is an ever-present danger that the selection of facts on the basis of their capacity to be verified can result in a somewhat banal and impoverished description of the person, or even a completely distorted picture.

Nonetheless the question still remains of how to establish that thin borderline between facts which are necessary for illustrating a biography and facts which fall into an area which has limited or even zero value in heuristics or any subsequently published synthesis. Similarly the question of what belongs in the two above-mentioned categories is also a matter of debate: what is relevant, albeit only for the researcher, and what it is possible – or even necessary – to publish. The researcher definitely needs to establish such facts that the insight into the subject of the research will be as complete as possible; any dilemma as to what aspects of the findings might be published is a matter for reflection and academic debate. The fact that the heuristics must be as comprehensive as possible, and their subsequent

⁶ Flick U. (2004). Triangulation in Qualitative Research. In Flick U. (ed.), *A Companion to Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, pp. 178–183.

interpretation may be limited by other factors, is a generally established approach. What, however, tends to be less accepted are cases where the narration and so-called “soft” facts intrude in the final scholarly text. This is especially the case if these facts are not accompanied with the expected verification commentary or not placed in illustrative appendices.

The narrative turn in the humanities, which took place in the 20th century – even if its essence, to a greater or lesser extent, was suppressed, has been present in human instinct since time immemorial; it has rehabilitated certain methods of research, including rhetoric and stylistic constructions for a subsequent synthesis. In the age of enlightenment and positivism, such elements were undeniably beyond the scope and aims of a scholarly biography; however, it is important to appreciate the necessity of a dividing line between a biography written in the form of belles-lettres or journalistic style and one which is intended to be a scholarly text. That said, the defining characteristics of the last-mentioned cannot consist solely in the formal features of academic writing.

Change in the historiographical discourse at the end of the 20th century brought amongst other things a tendency towards methods of microhistory and a fondness for re-established forms of ego-history. Their usage, however, has given rise to a number of methodological dilemmas and a variety of responses from the academic public.⁷

Ego-history has experienced changes in terms of its importance. In the past the personality of the historian stood aside in the interests of history itself, with emphasis being placed on the subject’s work and professional opinions. Nowadays it is becoming increasingly common for scholarly biographies to include topics from the family, emotional, inner or even intimate sphere of the subject. In terms of relevance and especially space within the text as a whole, such content represents an attack on the erstwhile dominance of purely factual and so-called relevant biographical details.⁸ Whether examples are cited from the by now classical text of George Iggers,⁹ or from a speaker at the recent 11th conference of Czech historians, Lynn Hunt,¹⁰ a comparison of this undeniable tendency as perceived by modern historiography on the one hand with, on the other hand, biographical reality and examples of fundamental biographical syntheses, it is evident that the current trend is one of much greater variety and a willingness to delve deeper and experiment more. This applies especially to world history.

⁷ Čermák I. (2002). Myslět narativně: kvalitativní výzkum „on the road“. In Čermák I., Miovský M. (eds.), *Kvalitativní výzkum ve vědách o člověku na prahu třetího tisíciletí*. Tišnov: SCAN, pp. 11–25.

⁸ Denzin N. *Interpretative Biography*. (1989). Newbury Park – London – New Delhi: Sage.

⁹ Iggers G. G. (1996). *Geschichtswissenschaft im 20. Jahrhundert: Ein kritischer Überblick im internationalen Zusammenhang*. 2. durchgesehene Aufl. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

¹⁰ Appleby J.– Hunt L. – Jacob M. C. (1994). *Telling the truth about history*. New York: Norton.

Written history then has considerable problems in how to reflect events and place them in context. One major difficulty is the fashionable tendency to forego the unambiguous nature of the genre described above; another is the fashionable methodological and thematic multidisciplinaryity. As regards history, for more than a century now, biographical writing in particular has willingly adopted methods and forms of research which were associated with the social sciences, anthropology, psychology sociology; more recently, however, it has also assumed forms which have more in common with belles-lettres and journalism.

One of the most useful methods within the development of historiography is qualitative research and oral history. For years such methods remained in the shadows of traditional approaches to the historian's work and, even though world historiography has long been accustomed to eye-witness accounts as a source and form of synthesis,¹¹ there are still occasional instances where Czech historians treat oral historical sources with a greater or lesser degree of underlying mistrust. Memoirs and diaries of course feature prominently in Czech historiography; however, the perception of their validity by the community of historians is a different matter. Nevertheless, qualitative research is necessary particularly in the case of most recent history. It is not uncommon for the researcher to encounter a kind of heuristic vacuum in which the subject of research and their life story is lost due to a lack of preserved classical sources somewhere in the recent past. If the given person's family does not archive their papers, if the researcher encounters an insensitive or deliberate premature shredding of archive materials or misses the time-restricted possibility of speaking to contemporaries of a deceased person, the writing of any provisionally planned biography might prove an extremely difficult task. This problem occurs especially at the level of local history, which aims to seek and often raise from the depths of recent oblivion such personalities who may not have made any great impact on a national scale, but from a regional perspective their lives and work are interesting. A typical example of instances where sources might be seriously lacking is that of teachers and their life story. The importance of teachers has always been traditionally undervalued, even if there have often been experts of outstanding quality and influence in the place where they lived and worked. Qualitative research can greatly enrich a work if it is properly conducted.¹² Nor need it be purely fact-based: a far more valuable contribution might consist in capturing personal reflections of the past or a text based on, say, *The past through the eyes of XY*. Immediately here the question arises of whether this, one of several forms of modern biography, may be considered an academic

¹¹ It is worth mentioning outstanding ego-histories which at the same time form part of important academic works dealing with the history of historiography, e.g. Eliade M. (1990). *Autobiography. 1907–1986*. Translated from the Romanian Mac Linscott Ricketts. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹² Silverman D. (2005). *Ako robíť kvalitatívny výskum*. Bratislava: Ikar.

text. Together with Lévi in this context, one may remain optimistic.¹³ Nonetheless, it is crucial that the historian be competent in using such an approach. One must also acknowledge scholarly work in the form of memoirs, which at the present time serve as a substitute for non-existent biographical syntheses, often recording facts and information which the historical record would otherwise be denied.¹⁴

In the field of qualitative research, especially concerning modern and most recent history, if forced to adopt a standpoint towards the legacy of the subject and their role in the history of the scholarly paradigm or even academic establishment, the researcher will frequently encounter complications connected with political or professional correctness. Such matters require a certain temporal distance which, however, the contemporary researcher does not have at her disposal. In historiographical terms, personalities who, for a variety of reasons, are perceived as controversial do not rank among the most popular or sought after subjects of scholarly biographies. Nevertheless, this is something with which, sooner or later, the discipline will need to come to terms. One interesting example of how to approach the task is Albert Hurtago's work on the historian Herbert Eugene Bolton;¹⁵ other examples would include lives of historians associated with regimes which have either been supplanted or defeated, such as Nazism in Germany or apartheid in South Africa. A good example in a Czech context would be the life story of Zdeněk Nejedlý, which has already been analysed from a variety of points of view.¹⁶ The biographies of such people may still influence the ideas or even emotions of researcher, reader or critic; thus the methodological demands increase especially when using the narrative method and qualitative research, a factor which must be taken into account. Analysis and reflection of the legacy of such personalities or a reflection of their work within professional institutions, plus relations with their academic contemporaries, may lead to the researcher necessarily skating on somewhat thin ice. As regards modern Czech historiography, the highly professional approach of the České Budějovice school is worthy of praise, in particular that of Bohumil Jiroušek who, it is true, does not

¹³ Lévi G. (1989). Los usos de la biografía. *Tomado de Annales ESC*, núm. 6, noviembre de 1989, pp. 1325–1336. Also available at: [www: https://es.scribd.com/doc/174281669/Giovanni-Levi-Los-usos-de-la-biografia](https://es.scribd.com/doc/174281669/Giovanni-Levi-Los-usos-de-la-biografia).

¹⁴ One example for all is Polišínský J. (2001). *Historik v měnícím se světě*. Praha: Univerzita Karlova; Šmahel F. (2009). *Nalézání, setkávání a míjení v životě jednoho medievisty*. Praha: Argo; Hlaváček I. (2011). *O mých předchůdcích i současnících: soubor studií k dějinám archivnictví, historiografie a pomocných věd historických*. Praha: Národní archiv; Spunar P. (2010). *Vlny vzpomínek: rodina – studia – akademie*. Praha: Academia.

¹⁵ Hurtago A. L. (2012). *Herbert Eugene Bolton: Historian of the American Borderlands*. Berkeley – Los Angeles: University of California Press.

¹⁶ Teichman J. (1938). *Zdeněk Nejedlý*. Praha: Girgal; Červinka F. (1969). *Zdeněk Nejedlý*. Praha: Melantrich; Král V. (1986). *Zdeněk Nejedlý a Gollova škola*. Praha: Univerzita Karlova; Křestán J. (2012). *Zdeněk Nejedlý: politik a vědec v osamění*. Praha: Paseka.

usually conduct qualitative research but ego-sources of archival provenience are a specific feature of his work. It is important to add that he treats these sources with the utmost caution and, in the case of personalities whose legacy is controversial, with commendable academic correctness. He definitely does not shirk from subject matter of this nature.¹⁷ At the same time he endeavours sensitively to locate these topics within the overall context of national historiography, which in such instances is the most demanding task of all.

The form of Czech biography has clearly undergone development in recent years, albeit somewhat in the wake of world developments in this sphere.¹⁸ Its major handicaps are certain difficulties which are specific to biography as a literary form, namely descriptiveness and a certain expected schematic structure. Nonetheless, there are signs of efforts to break out of this bind. Certainly one way to do this is narration. One very interesting item is a recent work by young historian Milan Ducháček on Václav Chaloupecký.¹⁹ Ducháček undoubtedly possesses literary talent, including stylistic creativity, and does not hesitate to employ this in an academic text. In combination with academic honesty and heuristic endeavour, his technique works well. This innovative biography is certainly one of the most interesting examples of the genre in a contemporary Czech context. In this case, oral history research has created one of the most significant factual sources, as well as sources for constructing the author's "understanding" of his subject.

The school classroom is also an area in which a modern and attractively presented life story of a scientist or other well-known personality can be used in a number of ways. Evidently its most important role is in the sphere of motivation: despite its scholarly nature, biography can have an emotional effect, arouse feelings associated with pity, admiration, inspiration, patriotic pride, condemnation etc. Biography can add a human touch to classroom history, making it more attractive for pupils, more "lively" and "personal", referring to parallels between past and present. That said, much depends on the type of text and from a didactic point of view the appropriateness according to the age group of the pupils. Different facts from the life of, say, František Palacký, will be used with pupils at primary school than with students in a history seminar at secondary school. At the same time, the motivational aims might remain the same, namely to present Palacký as a real person with a human fate, shortcomings and weaknesses, implanted into the

¹⁷ See e.g. Jiroušek B. (2011). *Historik Jaroslav Charvát v systému vědy a moci*. Praha: ARSCI; týž (2004). *Josef Macek: mezi historií a politikou*. Praha: Výzkumné centrum pro dějiny vědy; týž (2014). *Karel Stloukal: profesor obecných dějin*. České Budějovice: Halama.

¹⁸ Ambrosius L. E. (ed.) (2004). *Writing Biography: Historians and Their Craft*. Lincoln – London: University of Nebraska Press. Also available at: [www: https:// www.questia.com/read/110189610/writing-biography-historians-their-craft](http://www.questia.com/read/110189610/writing-biography-historians-their-craft).

¹⁹ Ducháček M. (2014). *Václav Chaloupecký: hledání československých dějin*. Praha: Karolinum.

society of his day – not, on the contrary, as a textbook icon suspended in a historical vacuum. Unfortunately, many personalities, as presented in current Czech textbooks, suffer from this demotivating statue-like image; the result is that pupils find texts about them demotivating. And yet a brief extract from a diary or personal correspondence, reminiscences by a descendant or close acquaintance, an amusing minor episode from the person's life, or even, for example, a caricature, providing it is within the bounds of acceptability – all these items can “light up” a standard biographical entry in a textbook. If, however, the authors of textbooks are to utilise this possibility, there needs to be a sufficient number of modern and well researched academic biographies available which may be drawn upon when creating texts for school study.

Since time immemorial biography has been a most useful genre for both historiography and didactics.²⁰ Contemporary biography, however, is complicated by issues which are encountered generally in modern historiography. In particular the use of methods which classical historiography regards with suspicion, such as qualitative research, the use of sources of a personal nature, capturing personal reflections, methods specific to anthropology or the social sciences, sometimes renders problematic the acceptance of biography as an academic or study text. However, this article suggests that heading away from conservative standpoints to greater variety in the genre is a demonstrable tendency of contemporary historiography and it is entirely possible to respect the basic principles of academic style in biography without being forced to renounce the methods described. The criterion for using personal materials as a factual source should be triangulation; for illustrative purposes regarding the subject's opinions and standpoints, a qualified commentary putting the relevant passages into context will suffice. The issue of subjectivity and objectivity in historiography is one of considerable relevance and frequent discussion. Hitherto no general consensus has ever been achieved and biography is a genre more likely to provoke rather than silence debate. At any event, for contemporary historiography, which often encounters a dearth of sources on a particular topic, to reject the use of personal materials as a source would represent an enormous loss. Every year sees a reduction in the number of witnesses to past events, together with their authentic view of the past and often unique memories.

A major issue concerning contemporary biography is the ethical aspect of research and, within that framework, also encyclopaedic biographical details within the context of developments and changes in academic discourse. The twentieth century in particular typifies this trend but still there is no need to cloud the issues or by-pass them altogether in a scholarly biography.

²⁰ One excellent example is Plutarch's *Lives*, available in a high quality Czech translation by Jiřina Popelová – Plútarchos (1940). *Plutarchovy životopisy: Perikles Fabius Veliký Dion Brutus*. Praha: Melantrich.

A personal story is something inspirational in both a positive and negative sense, and as such it has great didactic potential. An experienced teacher who knows how to work correctly with such material in the classroom thus acquires a resource which can often have an unexpected impact. However, working with real-life stories requires preparation and professional competence, which should be provided first and foremost at faculties preparing future teachers. There also need to be appropriate thumbnail biographies available for teachers either within study texts themselves or in supplementary teaching materials. There is great didactic potential for the use of biography especially at primary schools in the Czech Republic, where local and national history is taught as a separate subject. Likewise family stories and histories as a didactic means or inspiration for a project have already proven very successful. Once again, however, it is necessary to emphasise the importance of the didactic erudition of the teacher since, as described above, the potential pitfalls are equally as great as the benefits this method undoubtedly brings.

Biography is, and will continue to be an important genre within the framework of the specialised text and subject didactics. It does have its specific features but a qualified expert, author and reader will know how to respect this factor and make use of it. It is a genre which definitely has a promising future and for the purposes of research there is no reason to shy away from it.