
Documentary

Youth to Youth: The Freedom Mosaic

Youth to Youth: The Freedom Mosaic presents a mosaic of narratives of former student revolutionaries from 1989. The documentary captures their memories on the late 1980's in Czechoslovakia, the Velvet Revolution and on the decades after. It shows how the narrators reflected the 1990's – euphorically as well as critically –, the beginning of the new millennium and our present days. Oral history interviews are completed with a period footage and historical commentaries by our teachers [Miroslav Vaněk](#) and [Jana Wohlmuth Markupová](#) .

The documentary was created in cooperation of the Czech Television and the Institute of Contemporary History of the Czech Academy of Sciences in 2019. It was made using primarily oral history interviews, conducted as a part of a research project *University Students of 1989 in Longitudinal Perspective. Biographical Interviews Twenty Years Later* at the Institute of Contemporary History. The project was realized by researchers and authors of the book [One Hundred Student Evolutions \(Academia 2019\)](#) , following a successful book [One Hundred Student Revolutions \(Lidové noviny 1999 and Karolinum 2019\)](#) .

From the summary of the book *One Hundred Student Evolutions*:

The book *One Hundred Student Evolutions. University Students of 1989 in Longitudinal Perspective. Biographical Interviews After Twenty Years* focuses on student activists of 1989. It presents a continuation of the successful project *Students during the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia – biographical interviews (1997-1999)* and the publication *One Hundred Student Revolutions* (Nakladatelství Lidové Noviny, 1999 and Karolinum, 2019). Through the newly applied method of longitudinal oral history, the book has the ambition to capture the influence of the formative experience of the November 1989 revolution on the life stories of the narrators, former student activists of 1989, encompassing the personal, professional, as well as political level. Our work is informed by the concept of „symbolic centres“, i.e. a set of valences and values attached to crucial events of national history, in this case the revolution of 1989.

The same sample of original narrators was approached for the project; 12 narrators were replaced by new respondents, as some had passed away, could not be traced, or in three cases, refused to participate in the project. Altogether, between January 2017 and November 2018, we recorded interviews with one hundred narrators from nine regions of the Czech Republic, comprising more than 200 hours of audio recordings (in addition, video recordings were made with 65 narrators). In total, the transcripts of the interviews run to cca. 6,500 standard pages.

The longitudinal approach was applied for the first time in the context of Czech oral history. In the methodological part of the book, the authors compare this experience with colleagues from the fields of psychology and documentary filmmaking. They also introduce a new, previously undiscussed research dimension, termed „longitudinality within longitudinality“, where the gap between the first and follow-up interviews comprised about 8-12 months. In the meantime, parliamentary and presidential elections took place in the country, which provoked strong reactions from our narrators. Aside from the social dimension, the book also reflects on the changes that happened in the narrators' personal lives during the twenty years since the last project. All the covered episodic events convinced us that we develop during our lives and react to new stimuli, and demonstrate how memory develops.

The chapter *Generations* attempts to answer the question whether we can speak about a student generation and if so, to what extent was it a homogenous generational grouping. At the centre of our research interest stood the meanings attributed to this generation, but historical influences such as luck and chance were also taken into account. The chapter attempts to evaluate to what extent the connecting element of the narrators' shared historical experience was a common ideology of the former students or just opposition to the existing communist ideology. It also discusses the presumed and real influence of the Socialist Union of Youth on the former student activists, as well as their difference, as representatives of “organized youth”, from the “free youth” of the Underground. Our research focus also covered intergenerational understandings of November 1989 and the events that followed from the perspective of both the generation of the parents and children of our narrators.

Our research shows that while some former student activists use the term “generation”, they refer primarily to themselves, i.e. university students, rather than all young people in the country, all people of the same age, or even all universities or all students of their own university. At the centre of their life stories stands only the minority that actively took part in the student protests and strike. The former students can thus be described as the generation of the experience of November 1989, yet such an experience was shared by society as a whole. For the students, the added value in relation to this historical event is their own activity and participation in the student strike and Velvet Revolution of 1989.

The chapter *Variations of the Revolution* attempts to follow the ways in which the former students relate to their experience of the Velvet Revolution and asks whether and how this experience still influences their present lives. Three different approaches arose from a study of their life stories: A) the revolution as a “commitment”; B) the revolution as a “fulfilled obligation”; C) the revolution as a “prepared coincidence”. If for the first two groups interest in current events appears natural, the difference between them lying primarily in their understanding of their own public engagement, the view of the third group differs in the question of whether any kind of engagement has any real chance of success. In this context, a noteworthy finding is that regardless of the strategy used to relate to the revolution, a special place in the narrators’ stories is occupied by Václav Havel, not only as one of the key actors of the revolution, dissent, or Czech post-1989 politics, but also as a symbol of the revolution. Using Havel’s relationship towards civil society, we attempted to explain why our narrators, if they at all actively comment on current events, perhaps also as a result of their professions, tend towards civil society rather than “traditional” politics.

The final chapter *Golden Nineties?* focuses on a wholly new topic compared to the previous project: the 1990s and how the former students remember this period. While the original interviews were recorded during this time, the new interviews demonstrate that this decade is now clearly considered to be part of the past by the narrators, and moreover represents a formative time for them. The chapter examines the motif of positive, even nostalgic memories of the „wild nineties“ amongst our sample, which they confronted with the growing critical reception of the transformation years in the public sphere. The chapter thus considers the double-edged nature of the memories of the 1990s oscillating between euphoria and criticism, as well as individual and collective memory. It identifies two main narrative strategies the narrators employed: separating their personal experiences from wider political and social developments and self-criticism relating to the naivety with which they placed hopes in the new era. A further significant motif of the memory of this decade covered by the chapter is the ethos of individualism, which emerged strongly in the current interviews, but was absent in the original project. The current set of interviews thus presents a valuable source not only for investigating the events of November 1989, but also the period that followed.

Regardless of the various individual experience and life journeys of the one hundred narrators, their stories show that the experience of the Velvet Revolutions is inherently connected with them. If in 1999 the authors did not take a possible longitudinal continuation into account, today they are planning to finish the project in fifteen years’ time.