

10th ICEEPSY 2019
International Conference on Education and Educational Psychology
EGO DOCUMENTS IN LITERATURE LESSONS AT PRIMARY
AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The use of ego documents in literature classes at primary and secondary schools via memoirs of women who experienced Holocaust when young. Their memories serve for parallel interpretation with original texts on the same theme. The inclusion of ego documents in literature lessons on secondary and tertiary educational levels. Literary lessons have undergone changes from the model of passing on information concerning literature in chronological order towards the concept focused on further understanding of the text and lessons built on interpretation of original texts. Ego documents manifest an effective tool to provide particular period or context of the author's life. The last decade has seen a great number of previously unpublished books on the topic of Holocaust in memoir literature. The texts include justification as to why the author wrote them. The topic of guilt rendered in many academic texts proves that it is an extraordinarily traumatic and complex issue, connected not only to the specificities of eyewitnesses, but rather provides a representation of period events. Individual memories are often seen and understood as collective ones, therefore collective memory influences the character of memories in retrospect.

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Keywords: Ego documents, literature lessons, Holocaust theme, memoir literature on Holocaust, original texts on Holocaust.



1. Introduction

In the last decades the research concerning cultural history, cultural anthropology, history of everydayness, or mentality history has manifested a frequent use of the notion called ego documents.

Ego documents include traditionally personal accounts and testimony of the writer; these include autobiographies, letters, chronicles, memoirs, reports, journals, but also official, legal and economic documents evidence, e.g. petitions, account books, testaments, witness accounts, etc. The research of ego documents develops microhistory and mental history as well as enables to understand modern human with their individual experience, cultural values, feelings and everyday behaviour. Unlike structural analysis, the research is predominantly focused on attitude, behaviour, perception and emotion. Such a type of research contributes to the period understanding and grasp, as well as representation of a subject on their natural surroundings (Kratochvil, 2016).

One of the fundamental questions while examining ego documents is the author's intention. This is derived from the fact whether the documents were aimed for the personal need (e.g. diaries as a therapeutical tool for understanding the author's entire life or a life period not intended for publication, but found in their legacy), for the family needs (e.g. recorded stories concerning deceased family members), or documents for the publication use, where the writer counts with a recipient (Halbwachs, Namer, & Jaisson, 2009). The very intention of the author then allows the ego documents to be tailored to suit period literary models, argumentation strategies, or particular literary genres. Ego documents include conscious as well as unconscious facts regarding the author, hidden, distorted or relativized vents, contradictions, comments, presentation and self-representations. All this information contributes to what is a meaningful whole – a story creating an image of emotional and inner life of writers.

2. Problem Statement

Primary and secondary school literature lessons have undergone significant changes in the last decades. The pervasive model used to consist of presenting namely factual information concerning literature, literary history and culture in chronological perspective. The year 2005 marks a change by introducing so-called Framework educational programme which focused on written text understanding and original texts interpretation. Ego documents of memoir or diary nature are located in between of fiction and non-fiction genres; their use in primary and secondary school lessons appears thus as an enriching tool to clarify period context or a particular milieu of their author (Zachová, 2013).

3. Research Questions

The use of ego documents in literature classes at primary and secondary schools via memoirs of women who experienced Holocaust when young. Their memories serve for parallel interpretation with original texts on the same theme.

4. Purpose of the Study

The inclusion of ego documents in literature lessons on secondary and tertiary educational levels. Literary lessons have undergone changes from the model of passing on information concerning literature in chronological order towards the concept focused on further understanding of the text and lessons built on interpretation of original texts. Ego documents manifest an effective tool to provide particular period or context of the author's life.¹

5. Research Methods

The basic method is to familiarize students with ego documents and to compare ego documents with original texts. The ego documents we work with include mostly memoirs, which emphasize chiefly attitudes, perception and emotions. From the plethora of sources thematising war experience and warfare strategies in memories, we have utilized memoirs written by women to describe World War II experience in the context of their family history.²

6. Findings

The issue of Holocaust presents one of the most recurring literary themes connected to World War II; at the same time, it has become a common reference point of European memory. War memories together with other memory types ensuring primarily the family memory reflecting upon war conflict and Holocaust can be successfully utilized during literary lessons, see e.g. Mitterauer (2009). From the plethora of sources thematising experience and strategies of war conflict, which thus preserve war events via memory, we have selected as a case study memoir female literature describing World War II experience in the connection of their family history.

The last fifteen years has seen a great number of publications in this field. They constitute a rich mixture of memoir literary genres. Although the texts originate as late as the turn of 20th and 21st century, they primarily consist of previously unpublished (or partially published) texts. These include original war diaries, or diaries complemented by commentaries written 50-60 years in retrospect, or new personal accounts written in order to warn the upcoming generations. It is the very rich mixture of original texts with additional comments which creates a specific type of memoirs, enriching the genre of a rather unusual variant.

The texts provide various answers to the question of why the testimonies were hidden from publishers, readers, or even from the family. An exemplary answer can be found in the response by Ruth Bondyová as to why she had her prisoner number removed from her arm two years after the war. Both in Prague and Israel, she could feel the question: "How come you have stayed alive?" What did you have to do to survive?" (Bondyová, 2003, p. 49) In some cases the family discovered diaries as late as in their mother's legacy. The feeling of guilt rendered in many academic texts suggests that it is an extraordinary traumatic issue. However, it is not connected only to specificity of particular eyewitnesses, but also provides

¹ For a similar research see Bauman (2010), Čuřín (2011).

² For further treatment of memoirs analyses, see: Filipowicz and Zachová (2009).

the understanding of period event representation and expectations. Individual memories are frequently perceived and evaluated as collective ones, therefore collective memory creates understanding of social memory and traditions in retrospective, thereby influencing the type and character of memories.

According to Assmannová (2013), newly formulated issue of personal memory as a cultural phenomenon becomes focal in the late 20th century when remembering becomes perceived as a reconstructive process. Exploration of cultural memory thus increases the interest of private sphere, notably their demand for period documents and memoirs.

All authors of the memoirs monitored in our study were born between 1920 – 1930. They experienced war events on the brink of maturity when their family structures and memories function as the only anchoring or arresting point. The family represents a framing device for authors to evaluate events they experience. Surprisingly, not even during the period take record these events (i.e. in period diaries), but also in retrospect via comments assessing the events in the prism of contemporary experience (i.e. via the experienced of already lived life). The fact that they all come from highly similar social background is not coincidental. Values and morals of inter-war middle-class must have created a solid basis for the future lives of the female writers analysed in our study. However, these values did not grant their survival. The question is, how in extreme situations any family strategy can be successful.

The texts provide us with customs of middle-class Jewish, mostly assimilated, families. In many cases the authors were the only children growing up in loving family surroundings. Families expected from their daughters solid school performance; all female authors when young learned to play a musical instrument, took private foreign language lessons, played tennis, went skiing, swimming or took up rhythmical gymnastics. Ruth Bondyová (2003) states that she was growing up in peace and quiet. There was no screaming, or beating in her home. She took up English, had a theatre season ticket, and read a lot. The listed family strategies safeguarded hope to achieve so-called good life, i.e. successful professional and social fulfilment, as well as the recipe for a satisfying family life.

Nevertheless, she argues that despite all the precautions, the majority of children died. Although middle-class family strategies promoting decent life and a solid family image could not protect their members in extreme conditions, their creative and moral potential remained an inseparable fundamental and constitutive quality of a human.

Family stories of memoir literature provide a priceless and inspiring source not only for generation having dealt with the experienced loss, but also for current generations. People growing up in the milieu depicted in listed memoirs are less manipulative; their personality structure mirrors further their inner value criteria, which does not prevent suffering, but brings order and strength to their lives.

It is of interest that fiction rendering of Holocaust in Czech literature is primarily male writers' domain. What is even more striking is that their most significant and artistically most powerful texts map stories of female characters.

7. Conclusion

If we compare samples of memoir literature with the characters of Jewish girls rendered by most distinguished Czech authors, such as Dita Sax by Arnošt Lustig (1962), or the stories of Jewish camp surviving girls by Josef Škvorecký – be it Lenka in *Lvíče* (Miss Silver's Past) (1969) or Rebeka in

Sedmiramenný svícen (The Menorah) (1964), we can interpret original texts as well as introduce naturally the complex period context recorded in memoir literature both to pupils and students.

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