
The conference “Urban Memory. The City and Its Inhabitants in the 20th century”.

Alexandra Bitušíková

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6th-7th November 2008, Brno, Czech Republic.

The team of researchers from the Institute of Ethnology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic based in Brno together with their colleagues from the Moravian Museum, Archives of the City of Brno and the Institute of History of the Faculty of Arts at the Masaryk University in Brno organized a conference "Urban Memory: The City and Its Inhabitants in the 20th century." The event took place on the 6th-7th of November 2008 in the heart of Moravia, Brno, in the wonderful Dietrichstein Palace, one of the seats of the Moravian Museum.

The aim of the conference was to bring together scholars from different disciplines who study the phenomenon of urban memory and issues related to it such as identity forming, collective memory, urban spaces; and urban images and symbols. More than eighty participants, mainly ethnologists, social anthropologists, historians, sociologists and other social scientists from Czech Republic and Slovakia contributed to the success of the conference with their presentations or remarks and comments.

Twenty six papers and intense discussions in just two days made everyone "awake" and active. All session chairs were very strict in keeping the time available for each speaker. This approach is not very much appreciated by the presenters themselves, but it is crucial if the space for the discussion is to be protected.

The organizers divided the program thematically in several sessions. The first two sessions were devoted to "The transformations of the city in the 20th century." Katarina Popelková and Juraj Zajonc of the Institute of Ethnology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava presented two case studies from the Slovak city of Nitra in the inter-war period. In addition to the empirically-based research material, they challenged the methodology of exploring identity and memory of the city in the historic period that can only be seen and studied as a reconstruction. Elena Kurincová of the Slovak National Museum in Bratislava presented a fascinating life story of a "Bratislavan" born at the beginning of the 20th century and his multiple naturalization processes in one city and several political and state regimes. Ivana Kotrbatá of the Department of Ethnology of the Faculty of Arts at Charles University in Prague took us to the post-1948 and post-1989 city of Tachov and its dramatic re-emigration history. Daniel Luther of the Institute of Ethnology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava introduced the development of diversification and transformation of urban spaces in Bratislava in relation to urban memory of its inhabitants. Pavel Skopal and Petr Szczepanik of the Department of Film Studies and Audiovisual Culture of the Masaryk University in Brno presented an innovative project on the film and cinema culture in Brno before 1945.

The third session was focused on "Looking for identity and urban memory". Daniel Drápala of the Institute of European Ethnology of the Faculty of Arts at the Masaryk University in Brno; Alexandra Bitušíková of the Research Institute of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia; Petra Košílková of the Department of Historic and Anthropological Sciences of the Faculty of Arts at the West Bohemian University in Plzeň; and Ladislav Lenovský of the Faculty of Arts at the Constantin Philosopher University in Nitra introduced different perspectives of the memory and identity forming in Czech and Slovak cities of Rožnov, Banská Bystrica, Plzeň and Piešťany.

"Collective memory and the city" was the theme of the fourth and last session of the first working day. Monika Vrzgulová of the Institute of Ethnology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava started the session with a new and interesting topic on the memory of the generation of the "sweet sixties" in the city of Trenčín. Peter Salner of the same institute analyzed and challenged the concept of social engineering using the example of (not only) the Jewish community. Katarína Košťalová of the Research Institute of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica devoted her contribution to the impact of the socio-professional group of railway workers in Zvolen on city identity and memory forming. Helena Bočková of the Institute of Slavic Studies of the Faculty of Arts at the Masaryk University in Brno analyzed the role and place of folk traditions in the Czech national identity building in Brno.

The busy first day culminated with a pleasant and friendly networking social dinner, filled with relaxed atmosphere and nice Moravian food and wine, and accompanied by lovely music presented by the music band Bezobratři.

The second working day continued with two sessions on "Urban spaces and memory." Michaela Ferencová of the Institute of Ethnology of the Slovak Academy of Sciences in Bratislava presented a paper on memorials as a means of legitimization of regimes on the example of the city of Nové Zámky. Jolana Darulová of the Research Institute of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica talked about identity and memory reconstruction in two former mining cities of Central Slovakia - Banská Bystrica and Banská Štiavnica. Jarmila Čermáková of the Archives of the City of Brno presented celebrations of the 28th of October in Brno in the course of history, and Martin Pelc of the Institute of History at the Salesian University in Opava showed and analyzed the images of the city of Opava and its parks. Martin Juřica of the Archives of the City of Ostrava presented the changes of one street in Ostrava. Slavomíra Ferenčuhová of the Faculty of Social Sciences of Masaryk University in Brno brought a sociological perspective on the place of memory in urban planning in Brno in the context of the European development. Jana Vítvarová of Department of Historic and Anthropological Sciences of the Faculty of Arts at West Bohemian University in Plzeň devoted her paper to the topic of "danger" in urban memory in Plzeň.

Ondřej Daniel of the Multicultural Centre in Prague opened the last session with his introduction of the web portal European city. Andrea Zobačová of the Institute of Ethnology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic based in Brno continued with the contribution dedicated to the memory of the researcher Karel Fojtík and his studies of working class dwellings in Brno. Stanislav Brouček of the Institute of Ethnology of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic in Prague brought us to the world of the Czech diaspora living in an urban environment abroad. Jakub Machek of the Institute of Economic and Social History of the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague introduced the historic memory reflected in the Prague newspaper from the turn of the 20th century.

The conference opened an interdisciplinary dialogue and revealed a number of theoretical perspectives on the study of urban memory. All presenters have been encouraged to publish their contributions in several publications. We can only hope that we will have an opportunity to read the majority of them soon.

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