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or
CARRYING
A SECRET
IN MY HEART

CARRYING A SECRET IN MY HEART

THE CHILDREN
OF THE VICTIMS OF REPRISALS
AFTER THE 1956
HUNGARIAN REVOLUTION

AN ORAL HISTORY

CARRYING A SECRET IN MY HEART ...

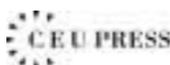
Children of the Victims of the Reprisals
after the Hungarian Revolution in 1956
An oral history

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Children of the Victims of the Reprisal after
the Hungarian Revolution in 1956
An oral history

by
Zsuzsanna Kőrösi and Adrienne Molnár



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INTRODUCTION

In this volume we present the results of oral history research carried out under the title *The Second Generation of 1956ers*. In the course of our investigations we were looking for answers to the following questions: How were the fates of the children of those executed or imprisoned after the crushing of the 1956 Hungarian revolution affected? And how did the members of a generation that was punished for the revolutionary roles played by their parents grow up with the burden of their heritage? Through our exploration of their personal fates and their experiences in the public and private spheres we also gained valuable information about the micro-history and mentality of Hungarian society as a whole.

Documents found in archives that have been opened up since the change of political system in 1989 prove beyond doubt that the crushing of the revolution was followed by a campaign of political retaliation that surpassed anything that had happened in modern Hungarian history. János Kádár and his government, who were appointed by the Soviets in November 1956, had 229 people executed for their activities in 1956, including prime minister Imre Nagy, the leaders of several revolutionary organisations and workers' councils, armed fighters, and several participants in the intellectual resistance. About twenty-two thousand people were sentenced, thirteen thousand were interned, and tens of thousands more were dismissed from their workplaces and put under police supervision. Following the general amnesty in 1963, the majority of those who had been imprisoned were released, but in many cases discrimination lasted for decades. The revenge, which, besides retaliation against the participants was intended to intimidate society, included the families of the convicts. Children grew up stigmatised and their whole lives were affected by the fact that, because their parents were regarded as enemies by the authorities, they too were being punished. This took place in an atmosphere in which, in order to legitimise the system, the central authorities aimed to control remembrance, forcing people to forget and to remain silent. Their goal was to force members of society to remember things in a particular way. They falsified facts and reinterpreted correlations in keeping with their own goals. They stigmatised the revolution as a counterrevolution and its participants as enemies of the people, murderers and criminals. They rewrote history, and as a result, personal history lost its validity at an official level. They wanted to erase memories that were unwelcome from

the point of view of the system and in order to do so they removed unwanted details, and even people, from film footage, for example. The reinterpretation and falsification of events can also be found in the concepts and language used in the trials that followed the revolution, and in the demagoguery of the so-called *White Books*, brochures and films, which, especially in the first years of the Kádár regime, portrayed the revolution as a counterrevolution. In 1957, for example, as part of the propaganda campaign, a touring exhibition was organised that tried to prove through documentation the horrors of the “counterrevolution”. The machinery of falsification worked on several levels, starting with the manipulation of the past in school education, the entire rewriting of official history, as well as the new memories, memorial sites and monuments imposed on society and the demolition of former ones. They attempted to undo the revolution and to make its participants non-existent, in such a way that the mere mention of their names would evoke fear. During the consolidation that followed the direct retribution, however, they tried to relegate to oblivion the events of autumn 1956—both the defeat of the revolution and the retribution that followed. Virtually the only exception to this was a series of campaigns on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the revolution, when the radio, television and press flooded the country with lies that promoted the official evaluation of the revolution.

According to psychologist Ferenc Mérei, himself a 1956 convict, the crushing of the revolution was followed by “nation-wide repression”. In the atmosphere of dual communication that was forced on society by the authorities, the majority of people apparently accepted the rules and erased from their minds former memories, feelings and opinions: they were silenced and silent. What had happened in 1956 and the retribution that had followed remained taboo, not only in official communication but also in private life, almost until the change of political system in 1989. One reason for this was that the authorities made certain allowances. The open terror of the previous system disappeared, restrictions were eased, and the majority of people had a growing sense of freedom. As a result of significant changes in the economy the standard of living rose. The methods for transforming memories were not, of course, completely effective. There were areas of personal recollection that could not be reached by the authorities: the institutionalised world cannot erase everything from the memory. Nor should we forget about those who did not give in to manipulation, who did not believe the authorities, and who resisted consciously. They held to the ideals of the revolution until the end and some of them even tried to voice their opinions.

The background to the research was provided by the Oral History Archive (OHA) of the 1956 Institute. The OHA, which began its work in 1981/1982—at a time when it was still illegal—with round-table conversations with participants in the revolution, contains the classified recollections of more than one thousand witnesses of twentieth-century Hungarian history. The aim of this series of conversations was to enable participants, by questioning and extending one another’s memories, to piece together their stories of the revolution as

they had known and experienced it, in contrast to the official and falsified historiographical view in which the truth had been reinterpreted. From 1985 the financial support of the Soros Foundation made it possible for the OHA to continue its activities within an organised framework. Since, during the Kádár era, between 1987 and 1989, researchers had no access to written historical documents that were kept in closed archives, research into private and micro-history—in other words, oral history—proved the only possible means by which real events could be explored. As part of the project, which was called *In the Second Line of History*, interviews were made with people who had participated in, shaped or witnessed important events. They included the leaders of the democratic period that followed the Second World War, the economic, political and cultural elite of the Communist system, and participants in the revolution. We talked equally to the representatives of power, those responsible for the retribution, those who had suffered persecution, those who had been imprisoned, and those evicted from their homes and marginalised. Émigrés, predominantly those who had fled abroad following the revolution in order to escape the retribution, formed a separate group. A large group of the interviewees comprised outstanding scientists, artists, writers, architects, religious figures, doctors, newspaper editors and university teachers, who had had a significant influence in their own field or on the history of Hungary as a whole. In an unexpected turn of history several of our interviewees, despite their advanced age, began to be politically active once again and their interrupted public careers, which they had believed to be over, were relaunched after 1990 and the fall of the Communist system. Since we conducted sociologically based interviews that explored motives, background information and complete biographies, besides being an exploration of the falsified Hungarian history of the twentieth century, the collection represents a huge resource for the interpretation of the processes at work in particular social groups and for the examination of life strategies, changes in culture and values, as well as the ways in which values were preserved.

From the middle of the 1990s the OHA further increased the scope of its research. On the one hand, by analysing the interviews contained in the collection certain specific social phenomena can be studied and classified. On the other hand, further interviews were made among members of various social groups. Thus, for example, as part of a project launched in 1999, we are classifying interviews made with 1956 convicts from Miskolc and Budapest using the so-called network method. Using the selected recollections we are reconstructing the interviewees' individual systems of relations and the resulting overall network. The OHA interviews provide a similarly rich resource for a research project begun in 2001, exploring the way in which those imprisoned in relation to the events of 1956 found their way back into society. By making and analysing further oral history-type interviews research on repatriation examines the fates of a particular group of people who left Hungary after 1945, who spent a significant part of their lives abroad, and who returned home following the change of political system.

The tape-recorded conversations are entered word by word into a computer, after which both the interviewer and the interviewee make any corrections they deem necessary on the printed text. The interviewee decides on the level of publicity to which the interview should be exposed. The interview can be closed, which means that the permission of both interviewee and interviewer is required for either research purposes or citation; it can be available for research, which means that the interview can be used freely for research purposes but that the permission of both interviewee and interviewer is required for citation; or it can be public, which means that it can be used freely for the purposes of research and citation, as long as the source is acknowledged. A disc and one bound copy of the transcript, including a front page giving the most important data about the interview, the contract regarding availability for research, an index of the interview, and in some cases attachments, are added to the collection. In order to make it easier to find important information, we make short synopses of the interviews that are transferred to a computer database. The collection is available to researchers. In recent years several hundred people—historians, sociologists, anthropologists, journalists, filmmakers and university and secondary-school students—have visited our research facilities to find information and help in their work.

The most important parts of the OHA are the approximately five hundred interviews made with those who participated at various stages of the revolution. Thus even before our research on *The Second Generation of 1956ers* we had information about how participants and their families had experienced the retribution and about the kind of individual and family strategies they employed in order to handle a situation that was brought about by external forces and accepted by a considerable part of society. Until recently, however, we knew little about the daily experiences of members of the convicts' families, and about what it meant to be the child of a 1956 convict during the Kádár era.

In the course of our investigations, we were looking for answers to the following key questions: What kind of memories do the children of the convicts preserve of the autumn of 1956, of the role of their parents, of the crushing of the revolution and of the retribution that followed? How did all of these affect the lives of the convicts' families? What were their lives like under the changed circumstances, and how did they come to terms with the trauma that had befallen them? What kind of discrimination did the children experience? What formal and informal reactions to the children's difference could be detected on the part of the immediate and wider social environment (micro-community, school, workplace, army)? And how did the children themselves respond? How did their situation influence their emerging identities? How did they evaluate their fathers' activities in 1956? What image did they have of the revolution? How did this image change during the Kádár era? And how was it modified as a result of the change of political system in 1989? What is their attitude to politics and political involvement? What of their experiences have they passed on to the next generation?

We approached the subject of our research from a historio-sociological, socio-psychological and psychological perspective. The interviews focused on the fate of the individual in its social and historical framework and on the inner conflicts experienced by the individual. Thus we became acquainted not only with individual histories but with the characteristics of a unique social group. We thus obtained further information about the mechanism of the Kádár system since we were examining a unique group, the members of which were neither participants in the revolution nor directly involved in the retribution. In this respect they stood closer to the majority of society than to the participants in the revolution. At the same time, however, because they were indirectly involved they acted as indicators of the relationship of society to the political system and to the authorities, since by their mere existence they forced those around them to take sides and make statements. Their experiences also reveal how for forty years Hungarian society related to 1956 as a historical and political event, and to those who had participated in it.

We do not have precise data about the social composition of the participants of the revolution—nor, because of the nature of the event, would this in fact be possible. However, it is obvious that among them we can find representatives of every social stratum. The majority were ordinary people and many of them had lived through the political changes that followed 1946 as adults, experiencing the tensions within society on a daily basis. They were not “conspirators”. Life had been made almost impossible for them and they merely wanted to live. Certain groups, such as intellectuals who were members of the Communist Party, the so-called revisionists who had been disappointed by the party’s policies, demanded reforms and called for an improvement in the lives and working conditions of the workers and for workers’ autonomy. The majority of participants in the revolution, however, were carried into events by the storm of history. They went out into the streets and demonstrated, went on strike, voiced demands and joined armed groups. Some were elected to positions of leadership by the people around them.

We selected our interviewees in several stages. Since we had little preliminary information about potential interviewees, we used the two databases of the 1956 Institute as a starting point: we used documents from the trials of those executed or sentenced to imprisonment in the course of the retribution that followed the revolution as well as the classified interviews of the OHA that related to 1956. We chose our interviewees bearing in mind the social position of their parents. Thus our analysis is not based on quantitative research using a representative sample. Our aim was rather to interview a few individuals from each social stratum in order to explore the fates of people from various backgrounds and society’s judgement of them. This would enable us to describe and analyse similarities and differences and to characterise differences according to social position. We also tried to take into consideration differences related to place of residence. When selecting our interviewees we even tried to reflect differences arising from the father’s role in the revolution and the age of the child.

We conducted forty-two interviews with forty-three persons. In one case two sisters were interviewed together. Twenty-one of the fathers had been executed and twenty-one imprisoned. In 1956 twenty-one of the families were living in the capital city, thirteen in towns, and eight in smaller villages. Fourteen of the fathers were intellectuals, three were intellectual workers with medium-level qualifications, sixteen were skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled industrial workers, five were agricultural workers, one was a leading party functionary, and three were army officers. Among the mothers five were intellectuals, ten were intellectual workers with medium-level qualifications, ten were skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled industrial workers, three were agricultural workers, one was a party worker, twelve were housewives, and one, who had been an agricultural worker, died in the summer of 1956. During the revolution three of the fathers were higher-level political leaders, ten were leaders of regional revolutionary organisations, ten were armed fighters, two were members of the army, six were leaders of factory or institution workers' councils, eight took part in the political resistance, while three were sentenced on unsubstantiated charges of murder. In 1956 fifteen of the interviewees were below four years of age, eight were between four and six years of age, sixteen were between seven and ten years old, and four were above ten years old. In terms of gender, twenty-five were women and eighteen were men. We did not originally differentiate according to the gender of the convicted parent. We tried to interview people whose mothers had been convicted, but we found scarcely anyone in this category. On the basis of facts explored so far, we can see two important reasons for this. On the one hand, it was largely men who participated in the revolution, while the women who took part were usually young and childless. On the other hand, the direct retribution affected women to a lesser degree than men. Of the 229 people who were executed 6 were women and none of those 6 had children. There were larger numbers of women among the imprisoned or interned, but the overwhelming majority were either very young or middle-aged and therefore did not have young children. When selecting our interviewees we took additional factors into consideration. First, we contacted only those who were minors and dependents at the time of their fathers' arrests, and who therefore had no way of escaping the consequences of their convictions. It can also be said that the experience of being stigmatised was an inherent part of their socialisation at the beginning of their lives as individuals. Secondly, we excluded those who had left the country after the crushing of the revolution. Thus we interviewed only those who had grown up in Hungary and who were socialised during the Kádár era, since we wanted to obtain information regarding a phenomenon that was embedded in Hungarian society. This does not mean that the fates of those living abroad are not of interest. However, they had to cope with problems of a different kind.

There were great difficulties involved in contacting the interviewees and encouraging them to talk. Even initial encounters gave away something—sometimes a great deal—about them and their relationship to the revolution and the

retribution, and the effects of their personal trauma and long silence. Almost one-seventh of those contacted refused to share their memories. This refusal was motivated, in all cases, by anxiety and fear. They were afraid of facing the trauma. They were unwilling to reopen the old wounds and claimed that an interview would seriously disturb them emotionally. In their cases several decades of pressure to forget proved to be so strong that even during the mid-1990s they were unwilling to talk about what had happened to them. Others were afraid of further revenge, believing that many of those who had master-minded, or passively supported the retribution were still in positions of power that made them potentially dangerous. It was at this stage that we obtained our first personal impression that these people had been completely taken over by their fears.

However, the majority of those contacted did agree to be interviewed. For them the pain and shock of recalling the past was mixed with relief that they could finally talk to someone who was interested. They trusted that by recording their life stories they could pay tribute to their fathers who had been victims of the retribution. None of this, however, contradicts what we have said about fear and anxiety. It simply represents a different way of coming to terms with it. There were some who confronted for the first time during the interview experiences that had been repressed for decades, thus we needed particular empathy in order to help them through the difficulty of recalling the past and breaking their silence. Since we intended to explore the socio-historical correlations of personal experiences, as well as the silenced history of the Kádár era, our subjects could basically be explored by means of interviews. However, in order to represent the context with greater accuracy we also carried out archive research. In making the interviews, we followed the methods of oral history, of the sociological life story-type of interview, and of the deep psychological interview. We recorded entire life stories and attempted to reconstruct the life stories not only of the parents but also of the grandparents in order to become familiar with their everyday lives, their experiences, and their social heritage, while devoting most of our attention to the key aspects of our research.

The design of the interview, which was drawn up as part of the research plan, contained the major question areas and the most important subjects, highlighting the information that we had to obtain from each person in order to end up with comparable answers. The interview design was not, however, a standardised questionnaire but rather a guideline from which we could, and had to, depart depending on the life and the cultural and social background of the interviewee. One cannot prepare for another person's life story. One can, and must, adapt with flexibility, in keeping with the goals of the research, to actual situations. In the course of our conversations we also tried to find answers to questions that the interviewees had relegated to their subconscious selves. On such occasions one cannot ask direct questions or expect immediate and direct answers. If the interviewer acts as a helpful partner and allows the interviewee to talk freely, even hidden correlations can come to the surface. We did not inter-

rupt the interviewees but let them interpret their own stories in their own way. Thus we obtained answers to questions we had not even asked, and with sufficient empathy we were also able to ask some painful questions. Finally, we were aware of our responsibility to help the interviewees to channel the tensions caused by the conversation and by their confessions.

The tape-recorded interviews, the shortest of which was one and a half hours long and the longest ten hours, lasted on average five hours. We usually met on one occasion, but sometimes three or even four times. The transcripts of the recordings are between thirty and two hundred pages long. The interviewees authorised the transcripts and signed a written declaration as to who is permitted to use their recollections for the purposes of research, and under what conditions. Synopses of the interviews were also made, in which we recorded sociological facts, answers to certain questions important to our research, and significant correlations within the life story.

Before starting our analysis it is worth saying a few words about memories and recollections in general and in particular about the authenticity and usefulness of the information provided in our interviews. According to some, recollection is a very doubtful resource from the historiographer's point of view, because, due to the imperfection of recollection, the past cannot be reconstructed from an interview. Indeed, the past cannot be recalled perfectly. The individual experiences of participants, however, are as much a part of any historical event as the facts themselves—which are, after all, often difficult to verify. A memory is never an exact replica of events or of past mental processes. We preserve certain aspects of what happened, forget others immediately, while others fade with the passing of time. Remembrance is not repetitive but constructive. When recalling their life stories those remembering not only describe events but represent them in a particular way and always recreate them from the perspective of the present. Thus memory in itself is not authentic. Memory, when compared to the original event, distorts, simplifies and embellishes. Those remembering preserve and highlight seemingly insignificant elements, while not mentioning others. They are always selective. In recollections myth and reality, fact and fantasy, past and present are permanently confused. The interview setting makes conscious the act of remembering. The interviewee becomes a "professional" rememberer and often instinctively tries to meet, as far as possible, imagined or real individual and social expectations personified by the interviewer. The way in which the life story is constructed, the way in which the interviewee remembers—and what is remembered—are greatly influenced by their distance from the past, the importance of the events described in terms of the person's later fate, as well as the actual situation, the current interests and the verbal abilities of the person remembering. In the process of remembering we build on our knowledge, experiences and emotions. The content and emotional intensity of the recollections reflected the deep personal involvement of the interviewees, who were making confessions about their families and about their innermost feelings and describing their fates, and in some cases their personal tragedies.

Our aim is not to explore historical reality, nor do we intend to reconstruct it in our book. Our intention was to find out about the kind of memories that characterise one particular social group, about their knowledge of the past, about the extent to which they are capable of understanding and incorporating into their identities the significant events of the recent past—the revolution and its consequences—which had an immediate influence on all Hungarians. These interviews were made decades after the events. Prompted by our questions, those remembering systematise what they can recall of their past from the social, moral, mental and intellectual viewpoint valid for them at the time of the interview. Thus no matter how they try to speak of their past experience, it always appears as knowledge with hindsight. Their memories are often mixed with later experiences and tale-like mythological elements. Sometimes they appear to talk “nonsense”, or what they say is influenced by actual political and personal factors. We reconstruct what happened to them on the basis of this. When drawing our conclusions we rely on what was said, and we present what the interviewee brought to the surface during our conversations. We do not examine the factuality and truth—that is, the authenticity—of what we hear. We have no right, nor is it our task, to correct them. We have to accept everything, since we have nothing with which to compare the recalled individual stories and emotions. These are relative stories that exist simultaneously. There is no single, valid story.

The current book is structured following a chronological order. We illustrate our observations highlighting the common features of the individual fates by the words of the interviewees showing how, according to their recollections, they experienced these years.

The name of the interviewee follows each edited interview fragment. Three of the interviewees were not willing to allow us to publish their names. They are referred to by the (fictitious) abbreviated surname “Z”. Short biographies of the interviewees and members of their families are also included on page 153. The illustrations were selected from the personal documents of the interviewees.

In the course of our research, psychologist Gertrud Hoffmann worked alongside us. Sadly, she did not live to see the publication of this book.

She was born on 28 March 1928 in Újpest, near Budapest. In May 1944 her family was forced to move into a ghetto. Her parents and elder sister were deported, and she was conscripted into a non-combatant labour corps, from which she managed to escape. First, she hid in a boathouse in Újpest, then she was hidden by friends and acquaintances. Her mother and sister died in Auschwitz. Only her father returned. In 1946 she was admitted to the University of Budapest and in 1951 she graduated in Psychology and Biology and became a secondary-school teacher. From November 1956, she participated in the production and dissemination of illegal publications, then in organising aid for the families of the convicts. She was arrested in 1958, and in 1959 was sentenced to four and a half years in prison. News of the illness and death of

her father, her only remaining close relative, reached her in prison. She was released in 1961.

She taught in a children's home and an elementary school, then from 1963 in a secondary school. She was an excellent teacher and her students remember her with great fondness. Even so, she never gave up her profession as a psychologist and continued to pursue her own studies while she was working. From 1967 until her retirement in 1989 she worked as a leading educational psychologist. She actively participated in organising a network of educational counselling services and in shaping their professional profile. She managed to help many teenagers through their problems. She also participated in training young psychologists at Loránd Eötvös University, Budapest and at the Psychology Centre of the Municipal Pedagogical Institute. She regularly published articles in professional journals.

She assisted us in our work from the very beginning with her professional and personal experience. In a note written in May 1999 she described what this research meant to her: "I was delighted to be asked to take part in this project. I am personally involved in the subject on two levels. During my twenty years in outpatient child psychology I was particularly interested in cases in which children had been exposed to severe family trauma, such as death, serious illness, loss of freedom or bitter divorce. (I myself was traumatised as a child—because of Nazism.) The other level is the 1956 revolution itself, for which I personally tried to do something. I served almost three years of a four-and-a-half-year prison sentence. I am deeply interested and emotionally dedicated to the survival of the spirit and ideals of the revolution. I recorded these interviews with a passionate interest imbued with personal involvement. I listened to them and reread them several times, and never for one minute was I bored by them."

As a result of illness that left her in great pain she decided to bring an end to her life. She died on 31 July 1999.

This book is also dedicated to her memory.

A két kakas

Volt egyszer két kiskakas. Egyszer az egyik kakas talált egy ^{arany} ~~penzt~~ ^{penzt}. Elment a boltba, hogy felváltsa Mikor hozamint adott a testvéreinek. Mikor a testvére ment ki a szemetdombra két ~~penzt~~ ^{arany} talált, de nem adott belőle a bátyjának. Erre ösz zeverekedtek. Végül el kellett menni a cica bírósághoz, hogy igazságot tegyen. Azt mondta a bírő, adják oda az ^{arany} ~~penzt~~ ^{penzt}. A kakas oda adta az ^{arany} ~~penzt~~ ^{penzt} a cicának, a cica csak ezt várta. Mikélyt adadta elker-

gette őket. A két kakas hamar-
osan ment el és megfogadták,
hogy többet nem vesznek össze.
rte.

Tekete Zolt

II. é. 2

M. Japolca 1956. II. 7.



Esze János

meis-meis

Kunok vitéze

1703-1711.

For description of illustrations see p. 181.

II.

THE REVOLUTION

People's memories of the revolution depend largely on how old they were when it took place and on the nature of the events they experienced, but also on how their families interpreted those events, both at the time and later. While the memories of those who lived in the capital, or in places where there were mass demonstrations or armed fighting, are based on first-hand experience, others heard news of the revolution only indirectly. Those whose families discussed the events as they took place during the revolution itself have recollections that differ from those who were surrounded by silence. Some memories have faded or altered over the years, but some are still very much alive. Environmental factors, as well as the publication of memoirs, analyses and political interpretations, have significantly affected people's ability to recollect what actually happened.

“UNCERTAINTY WAS PART OF OUR EVERYDAY LIFE”

Those who were very young (i.e. less than four years old) in the autumn of 1956 cannot be expected to remember the days of the revolution, and even some who were older at the time are only able to recall fragments of memories. Others, however, have a clear recollection of events and their relevance. Their memories are distinguished by emotions and moods that had previously been unknown in their families. Some recall excitement, perplexity, tension, anticipation and fear; others recall feelings of relief and euphoria.

“I remember that when I was six I ran home one day screaming and screaming that the ‘revulsion’ had broken out. I was proud of bringing such an important piece of news, something I was able to judge, to some extent, as being bad for *them* and good for us. I must have had a very childish perception of what was happening. And it was then that my parents switched on the radio. I can recall the picture clearly.” (GYÖRGY ORBÁN)¹

¹ The name of the interviewee follows the edited excerpt from our conversation. Three of the interviewees did not want their names to appear—they are referred to by the (fictitious) initial Z. in this volume. See the short biographies of the interviewees and their families on pages 153–183.