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Looking for the Personal and Professional-pedagogical Identification of Middle School Teachers during the Communist Period (1949–1989) in Hungary



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Abstract The aim of this thesis is to show how identity and professional-pedagogical identification in pedagogy were transformed in the second half of the 20th century under the totalitarian communist dictatorship in Hungary. He gives examples and wants to demonstrate that memory (remembering) not only makes the present but also reveals the experience of the past and transfers it in its personal character into the present. Memory (the practical past) makes possible what is lost through the repeated experience of life. Furthermore, she uses the personal life histories

of secondary school teachers to demonstrate that remembering has a significant impact on the production of (new) historical knowledge at both individual and group levels (Gyáni, 2020, p. 354).

Keywords Teacher Education, Professionalisation, Communist Education Policy, Identity

Introduction: Identity and History

The author's aim is to show, based on the recollections of secondary school teachers, how they experienced their personal and professional identities during the period of the Hungarian communist dictatorship. A brief clarification of the relationship between identity, history and memory is necessary to develop the topic.

According to Erikson (1968), identity can be defined as follows: It is the knowledge and experience of both the cognitive and emotional elements of the question ‘Who am I?’, the knowledge and experience of our inner reality – “the feeling of being at home in our own bodies, of knowing where we are going and of being internally certain of the recognition of those who matter to us” (Révész, 2007, pp. 224–225). Self-definition is becoming increasingly important in structuring the individual life world, which is closely linked to the process of individualisation. In the context of social (group) identity, as MacIntyre points out, the ‘history of our lives’ is always embedded in the history of the communities from which I derive my identity (MacIntyre, 1985, pp. 220–221).

The historical process is built on the individual life stories of members of alternating generations. They constitute the ‘raw material’ of history. Erikson points out that “...the history of mankind is a vast exchange of individual life cycles” (Erikson, 2002, p. 19). But he also suggests that no single individual life cycle can contain the totality of the historical process. The encounter between history and life history can only ever be partial, more or less occasional, and accidental. Thus, the totality of the historical process can never be traced back to individual life histories, nor can it be separated from individual life cycles. The identity is based on different components. There are anthropological, positional (or role identity) components, identity elements produced through social classification operations and speech acts, ideological identity components and emblem-like identity components.

Patterns of the subjective experience of a historical event or period, thanks to modern techniques of recording and transmission, are, with due criticism, becoming increasingly important in contemporary historiography. Signs of this can be clearly seen in the history of regime change. It is always the ‘historical moment’ that offers the individual the valid patterns of identity, self-definition, and self-defining categories available to him. Each period offers individuals a specific, valid identity repertoire. Identity is not the same as the knowledge (sense) of categorical belonging, even to the exclusion of alternative possibilities.

Experienced identity leads to a knowledge that always induces emotions, motives, behavioural drives and modes of different intensity and quality (Pataki, 2004, pp. 223–232).

The psychological aspects of autobiographical memory, self-knowledge and autobiography have been the subject of varying interest since the beginning of the last century (W. Dilthey, Ch. Bühler, G. Allport). Inspired by systematic self-reflection, autobiographies (reminiscences) can be seen as individual reactions to the era of modernism (Baumeister, 1987, pp. 187–176); they can be seen as both a document of chronicle-like nature and a literary work (autobiographical novel). According to Pataki, sources based on personal memory have certain ‘sensitive periods’ (mid-life crisis, mid-life review). Recent research in the field of autobiographical memoir encourages the analysis of the biographical factors of the personality, and the ‘identity as life story’ approach even speaks of narrative expansion and ‘affective revolution’. In Pataki’s view, the ‘psychological universe’ of the life story offers a way to study self-reflection, autobiographical memory, self-awareness, and self-presentation in a specific way. Systematic studies can pay particular attention to the motivational patterns of self-disclosure in writing. The main components of this are the transcendence of limited personal existence, the assertion of individuality, the legitimation of the real self and self-esteem (Pataki, 2001, pp. 11–35; 2006, pp. 97–151).

Halbwachs, however, argues that remembers are more interested in the chronological order of events, and thus do not pay attention to stability. History, on the other hand, compresses...for a few moments, it condenses the development of the whole period. According to Halbwachs, history begins where tradition ends. Collective memory is a particular consciousness, the framework of which brings together and associates our memories. For him, history as a concept refers to the nation. Halbwachs, therefore, divides collective and historical memory (2005, p. 189).

For P. Nora, memory and history are two different entities. Memory is life itself, constantly changing, while history is a problematic and imperfect reconstruction of what already exists. For today’s historians, the search for lost cultural worlds and with them new (‘foreign’)

perspectives have become important. Postmodern trends are increasingly invalidating the duality of memory and history as it was in the past. Micro-history, the lives of everyday people, i.e., the exploration of the experiential world of the past, has come to the fore (1984/1999).

J. Assman (1999) uses the term communicative memory to refer to memories of the past. While cultural memory, he says, is focused on fixed points of the past. And there is a transition between the two. According to A. Assmann (2004), the difference between individual and collective memory is that collective memory is the result of learning. If we feel that the boundaries of memory and history have now come very close together, let us recall Ricoeur. According to him, the historian reveals the truth of the past, and memory ensures our fidelity to the past (Gyáni, 2020, p. 369).

To overcome the limitations of oral history, from the 1970s onwards, life history research interpreted and analysed interviews in a new framework, seeking to find the link between the personal and the social. Breaking away from historical and memory studies, biographical research became theoretically linked to a renewed narratology in philosophy and literary theory. Biographical research has become particularly popular in post-regime Eastern Europe in the fields of political and social transition, life-history reconstruction of the recent past, and identity politics. According to this method, life history, memory, and identity (self-representation) are presented as closely intertwined terms (Kovács, 2007, Oevermann, 1979, 1983; Rosenthal, 1986, 1989; Schütze, 1983).

Research Design

The research is based on interviews with middle school teachers over 70 and 80 years of age, most of whom taught in a traditional secondary grammar school in the countryside for their entire lives (more than 40–50 years). With the help of retrospective memories, it will be possible to answer the question of which different strategies the educators used to find their identity.

The author shared the viewpoint, that the live history research is a renewed form of interpretative, qualitative research method, in which

the interview, as a quasi-biographical narrative, allows the narrator to construct and interpret the social reality he or she recalls. The reminiscences also give us a picture of the individual representation of teachers (in this case, rural secondary school teachers in the lowlands), their personal and group identities. The narrator is allowed to construct and interpret the recollected “social reality”. It is the task of the interviewer to ensure that the resulting text, the biographical reconstruction, is not random and authoritarian. It should be underlined that the hermeneutic interpretation of the text (its inherent structure and meanings) is made from the perspective of the present, through a new reality (Mason, 2005; Schütze, 1983).

Individual reminiscences stimulate the research on social memory. The recollections of a small number of reminiscences help to highlight motifs that add new information to existing research on the history of education. A comparative analysis of the motifs makes it possible to identify differences between the ‘ideal’ and reality, to note local specificities, highlight differences and national peculiarities between the educational systems of the communist countries, and identify deviations from the model Soviet model. Teachers are key players in the educational process, part of the elite, but also the trainers of the elite at any given time. Their life path is a resource whose analysis through narrative means is an important and essential area of educational research. However, it is particularly important to deconcentrate narratives by eliminating earlier romanticization, nostalgic approaches, idealizing or simplistic political settings, and critical confrontational positions (Golnhofer, 2001, pp. 84–113; Kovács, 2007, pp. 1–18; Mason, 2005, pp. 15–25; Punch, 2002, pp. 45–56).

The research involved thirteen semi-structured interviews with retired teachers from a rural high school, 11 of which were full interviews, lasting approximately 1.5–2 hours. The interviewees were born between 1930 and 1940. The exception is a head of the institution who led the school for more than thirty years as deputy headmaster and then headmaster. The interviewees were loyal in their recollections and their reflections were essentially positive. The teachers were asked preliminary questions to tell their life stories, and they told their life

stories in a coherent way: How did you become a teacher? Who was your role model? Did you have a teacher in your family? Where did you continue your education? What was teacher training like? How did you get a job? What kind of work did you do? What are you most proud of? What did you like best about your job?

The analysis was based on the life story arc and breakpoints categories: childhood (parental home), youth (studies, role models), adulthood (family, work: job, job responsibilities, successes) (Schütze, 1983, pp. 283–294).

The interviewees spoke at great length about their childhood, their role models, their higher education, their careers, and their successes. Most avoided political or ideological questions. My preliminary assumption was that this older generation, which had lived through three political regime changes, would reflect strongly on the transitions in values. I thought that they would make strong indications of how their lives and careers had been influenced by politics, the communist era, and political systems. But the older teachers wisely and consciously avoided sensitive topics. If they did talk about political, religious, or ideological issues, or about the disadvantages of their background, they did so only after the interviews, as a kind of addition.

In previous analyses, I have tried to present the different life histories of a community of teachers (Vincze, 2021); this analysis focuses on the personal and group identities of teachers. I examined the narratives (or more narrowly the content assigned to the categories) in the interpretation phase according to the following supporting criteria: a) event-centredness, experience-centredness, b) external frames of reference, c) awareness of reflection, d) focus on achievement, success, e) prejudices, stereotypes, strong external determination, f) marginalisation, g) naive, idyllic fairy-tale writing, h) reference to fate (Pataki, 2001). The following research questions are placed in the centre: How have their own learning experiences and role models supported their profession choice (identity)? What professional institutions could have contributed to the professionalisation of teachers during the communist period? To what extent could teachers identify with their role

as teachers in schools (in local communities)? How do teachers evaluate their own life paths?

Professionalisation and Past

In the context of the teaching profession (as personal mission) and identity, it is not possible to avoid linking the two concepts. The concept of professionalisation is concerned with the interpretation and development of the professional activity system, on the one hand, and the processes and context of becoming a professional, on the other. By professionalisation we mean a field (profession, vocation) with its own theory and practice, specific knowledge, and ethics, which is carried out for the benefit of society. If the profession is understood as a professional mission having skills, it also emphasises a committed identity. Professionalism implies specific language, rationality, knowledge/competence categories, commitment, and ethics.

Professionalisation involves highly qualified experts or knowledge elite (secondary grammar school/gymnasium teachers, education administration/education policy experts) at the university the construction or institutionalisation processes of knowledge that can be acquired at university. In the context of professionalisation, it is usually examined whether how the different intellectual professions are organised professionally (training institutions), how they control the acquisition of the professional qualifications necessary for the professional performance of a given task, and how the representatives of the profession can create the institutions for the independent professional representation of their interests (Németh, 2014, pp. 22–23; Garai & Németh, 2018, pp. 219–232).

The professionalisation of the Hungarian secondary school teaching profession has basically followed the trends of scientific development in the European region. According to the Humboldtian University model, the training condition for a specific new type of Central European intellectuals was initiated, whose task was to prepare the state bureaucracy or elite (Tenorth, 1999, pp. 429–461). Many similarities can also be observed in the development of different teaching professions and the institutionalisation of different types of schools in the

19th and 20th centuries. The domestic model basically followed the German model. It is characterised by centralised, state-controlled education, the separation of the organisational framework of elite schooling and mass education (Németh, 2014, pp. 21–43).

The socialist era in Hungary consisted of three sub-periods: a transitional period between 1944 and 1949, the establishment of the communist dictatorship between 1949 and 1956, the third period, the Kádár era between 1956 and 1989. As early as 1946, various political and policy initiatives were launched to abolish the traditional institutional framework and scientific content of education. Its final abolition took place in 1948. After the nationalisation of schools, the communist model of education was implemented, following the Soviet model. The uniform (communist) school, education and youth movement put the entire domestic school system at the service of building socialism-communism. In the monolithic party-state that was being built up, professional autonomy, critical spirit, and the right to freedom of thought disappeared (Romsics, 2010, pp. 100–108).

János Kádár, the General Secretary of the Hungarian Socialist Party, started a new policy in the 1960s, which brought a specific Hungarian model to life. The peculiarity of the system was that it created conditions for a better standard of living, hence it was called goulash communism. Most of the population had the opportunity to own a comfortable flat, a family house or even a summer cottage with a garden, a motorbike, or a car. The party provided limited support for small individual businesses, private land, and small gardens for workers to supplement their earnings. Under the soft dictatorship, Hungary began to develop its educational reflection based on its earlier cultural heritage and adapted Western initiatives. Freedom in cultural life was limited. The educational policy leadership defined three forms of culture, according to which there were subsidised, prohibited, and forbidden cultural products. Many people (especially intellectuals) were exposed to forbidden culture (handwritten works of their own making and translations of mainly Western journals and books). Culture was a medium of protest, criticism, enlightenment, and education (including cabaret, alternative theatres, dance movement). Teachers

had a great responsibility because they were able to shape the new generation for a new beginning. Behind the closed doors of the classroom, they had the opportunity to teach values without ideology (Bihari, 1996; Romsics, 1999, pp. 494–510; 2016).

As the historian Romsics (2008, pp. 267–274) has pointed out, in societies that face significant shocks, whether external or internal, identity crises are inevitable. Hungarian society is one of those nations whose history has been marked by great fractures. The history of Hungarian society in the 20th century has at least three major fracture points: Trianon in 1920, the Soviet occupation in 1945 and the regime change in 1989. But the post-World War II period also saw several turning points: the communist takeover in 1948, the 1956 revolution and the new economic mechanism (and its downfall) of 1968.

The school reforms from 1956 to 1990 were fundamentally determined by the Education Act of 1961 (Act III)¹, the Education Policy Resolution of the MSZMP Central Committee of 1972², and the Education Act of 1985 (Act I)³. The educational changes implemented after 1945 were corrected and attempts were made to adapt to the modernisation processes that had taken place in the meantime.

Teaching as Profession and Everyday Life

The new ideology, the obligatory communist worldview, made it difficult to integrate into the new order. Young people from traditional, conservative Christian families found it particularly difficult to find their place. Nevertheless, for many, the hope and opportunity of a new life and a clean start after the war provided opportunities for higher education. The communist regime encouraged further education for

1 Education Act of 1961 (Act III). Available at: https://jogkodex.hu/jsz/1961_3_torveny_7310759.

2 Education Policy Resolution of the MSZMP Central Committee of 1972 J. Kardos József, M. Kornidesz. *Dokumentumok a magyar oktatáspolitikai történetéből*, 1990. Budapest.

3 Education Act of 1985 (Act I). Available at: <https://mkogy.jogtar.hu/jogszabaly?docid=99000023.TV>.

those from poor peasant and working-class families. The state needed a new elite (Karády, 2012). Becoming a teacher took several paths. There were eight-form grammar schools and, after 1948, four-form grammar schools (including pedagogical grammar schools where students also studied pedagogical subjects). After graduation, there were opportunities to enter college or university. In Hungary, teacher training colleges were established in 1948–1949, initially three-year colleges, later four-year colleges providing primary education. The secondary school teacher diploma was awarded by universities. Many people took additional courses to obtain a university degree while working and raising a family. A few personal examples highlight the motives and role models that determine the choice of teaching as a profession, most of which are event-driven and fable-like.

I wanted to be a doctor, but medical school was a six-year course and teacher training was only four years. As my parents retired, I preferred the shorter course. (Barna)

I was interested in mathematics and physics, but there was no place, so I went to the Lenin Institute, where we studied Marxism-Leninism, and then I became a teacher of Russian.... I can honestly say that I did not like teaching, the real job for me was when I became a school librarian. (Ida)

Sport was my greatest love, I was good at basketball, but I wanted to get away from home, so I applied to a teacher training college where there was a good basketball team. (Tibor)

I became a teacher because that's what my mother decided when I was three. But in teacher training high school, I knew I wanted to teach high school students. (Ágnes)

My father was a teacher. When I was three, I didn't play with dolls, I sat in the classroom, and I was sure I was going to be a teacher. (Judit)

I started my studies in a Jesuit grammar school, which was nationalised in 1948, and this changed the education significantly. I wanted to be a missionary, ...later an interpreter, I didn't want to teach, ... and I ended up studying Russian. (Sándor)

I liked the couple of teachers who lived in the rented room in our house, I copied them. (István)

Teachers from poor families highlighted the importance of state support as external frames of reference:

We lived in the dormitory in a nice environment...the canteen provided full catering, I lived well on my stipend, went to the cinema, on excursions. We got a half-price ticket for the travel. (Sanyi)
I came from a poor family, I was half orphaned, ... the scholarship was my only source of livelihood. I had to work during the schoolyear and in the summer ... to provide for my clothing. ...I learned to manage money. (Sándor)

In describing their professional work, the interviewees highlighted the diversity of teaching tasks and the difficulties they entailed:

I started to work in primary school; it was not easy. I found that I could use the language skills of the Slovak children in the village in Russian In 1956-57, Russian teaching was interrupted due to the revolution. Then I became a pioneer leader, which I was afraid of, but as I was a scout, I soon got used to it. (Sándor)
I got a job in a small village near my hometown, with a staff's flat in the primary school, which had semi-shared teaching. The lower classes were taught together in one room and the upper classes in another. The only television in the school was the one in the neighbourhood. A year later, I received a favourable offer from the secondary grammar school, which also supported my university studies... I became head of class, then head of the youth movement, then deputy headmaster at the age of 26, and director 20 years later. (György)

The compulsory ideological pressure, the compulsory learning of Russian, the glorification of Soviet holidays and heroes party influence (Szabó, 2000) are partly reflected in the recall of daily tasks:

I found it difficult to bear the arrogance of power, the tasks that went with various humiliating social work: the agitation of farmers to join a farmers' cooperative, the compulsory agricultural work on Communist Saturdays. (Kálmán)

I think it was important that in the seventies I included in the literary programmes subjects that were not necessarily part of the compulsory curriculum of the textbooks (biblical themes, Transylvanian literature). But I knew how much was possible, where the limits were. (Ágnes)

Looking back on their careers, what did teachers feel successful in? Their success in their subjects was mainly reflected in the results of their school-leaving examinations and the number of students admitted to university. Results in competitions, including national subject competitions, were another big success factor. Several of them highlighted class teacher work, talent management and inclusion as the most important areas of educational activity. There are examples about successes:

I considered it a real challenge to prepare weaker students successfully for the maths exam. (Erzsi) I am proud to have had nationally ranked candidates in geography (Gyuri)... history (Sanyi). I have regularly taken my students to performances of Entomology Society. (Barna) My students have achieved the best results in athletics. (Tibor) I have introduced the ETO index in the school library. (Ida) I have prepared more than 150 successful French language exams. (Kálmán)

But there were others who experienced professional success in other ways, for example as a politician (vice mayor/István), choir director (Judit) or student theatre teacher (Ágnes).

Fortunately, there were professional associations for teachers, most of which were reorganised after 1945. Many teachers were involved in professional organisations, which played a significant role in their professional development (achievement) and fulfilment. The most important associations were: Hungarian Historical Society (Sanyi), Hungarian Geographical Society (György), János Bolyai Mathematical

Society (Erzsi), Mathematical and Physical Society (István), Eötvös Loránd Mathematical and Physical Society, (today: Eötvös Loránd Physics Society) (István), Hungarian Society of Entomology (Barna), Hungarian Kodály Society (Judit) in cooperation with the Association of Hungarian Choirs, Orchestras and Folk Music Ensembles. Externally, the Kodály Society was of great importance and popularity, with an association that promoted Zoltán Kodály's music pedagogy not only at home but also internationally.

The associations organised regular professional meetings and established of a journal for the improvement of the sciences to present the latest scientific findings to university and secondary school teachers. They focused on scientific problems and tasks or presented of their solutions. They published book reviews and gave information about the Society's events. They regularly organised competitions for students. The active members produce test sheets and preparations for competitions. They played a significant role in science popularisation to steady scientific training and the quality of scientific education. Cultural events among them conferences, concerts, commemorations, prizes, studies have been of great importance in this work. The annual meetings, the volumes and the involvement of foreign partners enabled them to establish a significant network of contacts not only domestically but also internationally (Glatz, 1967, 1990; Ember, 1967).

Why did teachers join professional associations? The teachers could have personal motivations, for example influenced by parental, family, or academic role models. Several of them had professional motivations or sometimes pressure. In the secondary grammar schools, the most recognised achievement was national competition results. The results of the competition were the most appreciated by school leaders and the profession. The professional recognition was expressed with medals and cash prizes. But for example, the teachers who organised the competitions usually received the best classes. Personal and professional connections was supported by activities in the societies. Networking gave teachers access to beneficial and useful information, and they were able to join the national competition organisers and their juries. Despite their professional achievements, it cannot be said

that professional associations have managed to stay outside political influence. Mathematics and physics, for example, were in an easier position than the social sciences. O. Szabolcs, as historian and editor of the *Journal History Teaching*, commented as follows: “*It would be nice to claim that Journal [of History Teaching] (1955–1989) was resistant to the system. It was not, but simply trying to play its role with integrity, to represent the profession; to represent the interests of history teaching. It was resistant only insofar as professionalism itself conflicted with politics.*” (cit. Závodczky & Borsodi, 2010). Nevertheless, the societies tried to transmit the traditional professional values and support the educators and scientists. They were a bridge between the science and society.

This is echoed by the head of the school (György), who says that a good school only works if it has teachers with individual personalities.

Conclusion

Interviews with teachers show that they find joy in their work. Although their career choices were influenced by their role models, they were certainly influenced by the new education system that emerged after 1945 and its specificities. In their recollections, they considered that they had the opportunity to develop their professional skills according to their own interests and competences. Most of them started out in primary school, but in time all of them got jobs in secondary schools. The politics of the time influenced their careers, which some emphasised: “*History (or fate) shaped our parents’ and our lives*” (Barna, Sándor). They emphasised the multifaceted nature of the teachers’ professional work, which included ideological and social tasks. Most of them felt that they were professionally valued and respected teachers in the local community, and that this recognition was mainly seen in their achievements in their subjects. They were proud of the fact that they had shaped and influenced the local elite and had helped many students to obtain their school-leaving exams and university degrees and to enter the professions.

The teachers in this community, a rural secondary school, did not point out that their work, unlike other professions, is not prestigious. This confirms and confirms that the culturally specific, historically

grounded, competing perspectives of teacher identity are grouped into schemas that are coherent and shared by certain communities of teachers (Welmond, 2002, p. 60).

The analysis of narratives shows that professional identity formation is a dynamic process, that different identities are integrated and that both the individual and the context are important factors in this process. In the present case, the communist dictatorship disrupted the identity process. The example of older but sufficiently wise teachers, who mostly avoided political issues, shows that they could actively shape their destiny. Although the external circumstances, events (dictatorship) basically limited people's life paths, the professional activity of teachers proves that individuals were not passive sufferers but active participants in the formation of their professional identity. In most cases, they possessed two important meta-competencies for professional identity formation: self-reflection and adaptation (Beijaard et al., 2004; Schepens et al., 2009).

In Hungary, the transition from the 1960s onwards changed the living conditions of teachers, who became increasingly differentiated and more likely to belong to the lower middle class. Their low salaries led to a loss of prestige (Nagy, 2001, pp. 82–86). Secondary school teachers living in small towns looked back on their careers with satisfaction. None of them mentioned that they were dissatisfied with their salary and marginalised, although they pointed out that they had worked long hours, working overtime to buy a house, a flat, or a car.

The changes that occurred in totalitarian or semi-totalitarian states in the 20th century generally resulted in a 'deprofessionalisation' (Jarusch, 1983, pp. 9–36; Freidson, 2001). Although the process of teacher professionalisation was interrupted by the socialist turn after 1945, the profession of secondary school teacher continued to offer the possibility of social advancement (Fónai & Dusa, 2014).

Teachers' recollections revealed that their self-image was based on the traditional teacher image, and that they saw themselves primarily as knowledge brokers and child-centred facilitators. They had an adequate self-awareness and adapted well to the challenges of the era

they lived through, with survival strategies (and a harmonious family life) to thank for their longevity.

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