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# S Educationalists in 1950s, 1960s Hungary: Identity and Profession through Retrospective Life (Hi)Stories

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**Abstract** This paper is based on the lost and found sources from the former Hungarian National Pedagogic Institute (OPI) and the National Educational Institute (OKI): due to the generosity of Professor Gábor Halász we can save valuable archives from disappearance. I found several life-story interviews in the corpus by different Hungarian educationalists, which were recorded in 1984 and 1985. These documents give a unique opportunity to describe typical career patterns, how a teacher could become a head of a department

in the Ministry or held other key positions on the highest level of educational administration in the post-war, communist Hungary. The semi-structured interviews focused on personal transitions and turns, connected with the historical time and political changes, including different socio-historical contexts and dimensions, like the recalled decades of 1950s and 1960, the interviewing period of the late socialism, and finally, the retrospection of the questioners. The biographic nature of the communist political system is a specific characteristic in my analysis: to get a position (like an editor in chief, a school inspector of different districts in Budapest, or a head of a department in the Cultural Ministry) it was required to constantly write and rewrite autobiographies; construct social and professional identities again and again, proved loyalty to the Party. The contemporary reader from 2023 can evaluate the sources as narrations: in the beginning crisis of the system in the 1980's, the interviewees told their lives with the intention to form the memory, create legitimation and meanings for their past activities and life-stories.

**Keywords** interview, life histories, narrative analysis, socialist pedagogy, educationalists

## Introduction

In the mid-1980s an unfinished and never analysed research took part in the National Pedagogic Institute (OPI) and Educational Institute in

Hungary (OKI) – the two organizations strongly entangled on a personal and administrative level. The previously mentioned research was initiated by young scholars like Mária Nagy, Péter Lukács, Gábor Halász and Géza Sáska, to map the history of the educational politics and its personal dimensions after the 2nd World War. They were the new generation of the discipline in that decade, the so-called educational researchers (in Hungarian: *oktatáskutatók*), differentiated themselves from the pedagogues, traditionally fashioned scholars in the education sciences. From this group, Professor Halász gave me many archival documents about this period, containing a dossier, entitled *Interviews in ed. politics (Oktapol interjúk)*. It is noteworthy here that in the Hungarian language, there is no difference between the terms of politics and policies, so I am going to use educational politics as referring both long-time strategies, planning and everyday practice. There were 7 interviews in this file, from various leaders of educational politics and administration, altogether 550 typewritten pages, telling stories about different educationalist careers in the state socialist/communist period, from the end of the war to the 1970s.

Differently from an average oral history process (Trower, 2011; Thompson & Bornat, 2017), I haven't participated in data collecting, facing only the products of a research: unreflect and forgot texts from the past, before the regime changed. In the first half of 1980's Hungary some historians and sociologists began to explore the grey zone, tabooed periods of the political history started in 1956 (and before), developed an Oral History Archive (Somlai, 2018), which has been now well known and established a tradition, but these stories from educationalists, who were leaders in 1950's, 1960's, have not been studied yet. It is very important to strictly separate three essential researchers' positions from the texts and the following interpretations:

1. Self-images of the educationalists, the development how they made memories and build their past – these are the life stories of the interviewees after 1945.
2. The new perceptions of the researchers in 1984-1985, creating a new tradition by trying to reveal the complex and conflictual quality of the history (stories became histories through the work of interviewers).

3. Analysis and reflections from a historian of education (the author of this paper) aimed to read and interpret the two directions together.

The main purpose of the study is to describe how the interviewees made their archive during the process – and archive in singular means “as representation of identity, or as the recorded memory production of some person or group or culture” here, established on the existing archives, the subsequent documents (Cook, 2011, pp. 600–601).

### **Methodological Challenges and the Historical Background**

The next interviews have got a special status between official and private archives (to the transitions of the two forms, see: Gilliland & Štefanac, 2018), as they haven't been registered and used until now, I do not know if there are duplums in state or institutional collections – I supposed these are the only ones, remained as raw research materials.<sup>1</sup> The secondary analysis of such archived oral histories raised crucial methodological issues, worth taking into consideration. “The effect of time passing, changed contexts for analysis and interpretation, the construction and therefore accessibility of the original data and new ethical considerations” (Bornat, 2008) are just some problems to deal with it. Re-using another researchers' data is a familiar practice in the historian's work, but the background of making the sources is significant in that case, so I tried to gather as much information about it as possible. This work helped me to clarify some points in the previously mentioned aspects too.

Three names put on the head of the typewritten pages as reporters: Gábor Halász, Soma Somoskői, and Géza Sáska. I reached all of them by phone conversations and mails in 2020, and summarize the

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1 It is crucial to mention here that one piece of the collection already published by Géza Sáska, a part of an interview with Pál Bakonyi (the former deputy director of OPI) about making curricula and forming subjects in the 1960s (Sáska, 1989). This is the only exception – as a public source –, but I haven't used it, because it turned out at the end of my research, due to Géza Sáska phone call on 29 April, 2023.



framework of the original investigation based on these information.<sup>2</sup> They had got influenced mostly by the new Western political scientists and sociologists in the mid-1980s (e. g. Margaret Archer), which draw their attention to the decision-making mechanisms in the educational politics and policies, the role of different interest groups in the former decades, without the obligatory ideological requirements. For example, Somoskői as a psychologist was interested particularly related to the individual mind-sets during the interviews, beginning with the questions: How the career in the educational administration and politics re-shaped and formed one's own cultural and personal values? Vice versa: How the family and schooling background impacted these life-stories? On the other hand, Halász and Sáska orientated the directions of the inquiry towards the public sphere, namely the political and professional dimension, including curricular changes, selection, educational reforms, and so on.

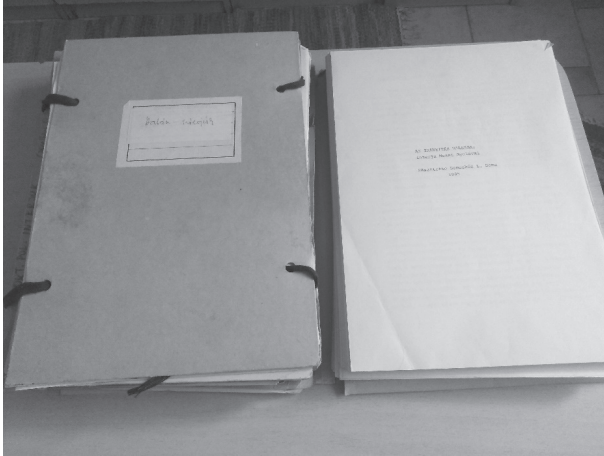


Image 1. Dossier of the interviews (picture made by the author).

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2 Phone conversation with Gábor Halász, 13 January, 2020; phone conversation with Soma Somoskői, 13 January, 2020; phone conversation and mailing with Géza Sáska, 26 October, 2020.

The 1st image shows the dossier, contained this new (at least in the contemporary socialist Hungary) researching approach, understanding educational policies and politics like an arena of different conflicts (to see, how this new method applied: Halász, 1986; Sáska, 1991). Ferenc Gazsó, an open-minded sociologist, the deputy cultural minister between 1983 and 1989 guaranteed the institutional support and background (the OPI and OKI) to this new challenge. The creation years of the interviews (1984 and 1985) meant a huge cornerstone in the Hungarian education: preparing and implementing the new Education Act, an overall reform of the administration, provided a bigger autonomy to schools (Halász, 1993). This legislation commonly interpreted in the Hungarian pedagogical discourses as the real beginning of the regime changes, four years before the radical political change, in the deepening crisis of the late socialism. We should view and explain the documents by taking this context in our mind.

The interviews involve whole life-stories and career patterns from a retrospect view, needed to re-contextualize (Tureby, 2013), as the current researcher (it is me now) re-use these sources, to answer his actual questions:

1. How characterized the participants their professionalization as educationalists?
2. What are the specifics of these career-(re)presentations?

By responding them, I am turning to the theory of human agency in the narrative history, which emphasises the ideographical character of our discipline, aimed to give voice to particular individuals of the past (Tamura, 2011). At the same time, beside the peculiarity of the stories, there are many common features in the life-narrations, especially in two fields: the strong accent of upward mobilization in their self-images, and highlighting/contrasting the hard beginning with the later career. These will be the focal points (starting the life and arriving in a high position) in the analysis of my protagonists' life-history interviews. But who were they?

## Actors of the Analysis

The interviewees constituted a special group, an intersection between academy, public education, administration and educational politics. Most of them had teaching period in their previous lives, associated to elementary and secondary education. Three historical dates played as landmarks in the life-stories: 1945, the end of the war; the 1956 revolution and afterwards repression; and the economic reform in 1968. Originally the conversations were audio recorded, but the tapes have not been appeared, only the type-written transcriptions are available.

Table 1. Data about the respondents (collected by the author)

| Interviewee    | Position   | Interviewer               | Date of the interview | Pages |
|----------------|--|---------------------------|-----------------------|-------|
| Mihály Balázs  | Head editor of Köznevelés (Public Education) between 1958 and 1976   | Soma Somoskői             | 24 October, 1985      | 86    |
| József Bencédy | Head of the Secondary Education Department at the Ministry (1958–1974)   | Gábor Halász & Géza Sáska | June, 1984            | 66    |
| Gyula Kálmán   | Head of the Cultural Policy/Local Administration Department at the Ministry from 1961  | No data                   | 13 December, 1985     | 42    |
| Gyula Mezei    | School director, head of the Cultural and Education Department of the capital city (1966–1988)   | Soma Somoskői             | 5 & 11 December, 1985 | 250   |
| József Szendrő | Director of the first agricultural technical high school (1960), member of the Party Committee responsible for economic reform (1967–1971) | Soma Somoskői             | September, 1984       | 52    |

|                |  |                           |                |    |
|----------------|--|---------------------------|----------------|----|
| Sándor Vendégh | Head of the Vocational Education Department at the Ministry (1959–1979)                              | Gábor Halász & Géza Sáska | 4 July, 1984   | 11 |
| Ottó Welker    | School director, head of the Department of the High Schools (Gymnasiums) at the Ministry (1967–1981) | Soma Somoskői             | November, 1985 | 43 |

All of the participants were male on Table 1, I just put the most important, representative positions after the names – they had got different roles in the academy, schooling or administration too. Four of them were leaders of different ministerial departments, and one managed the cultural and educational issues of Budapest: they were selected consciously to map the transitions between political decision-making and implementation, the middle levels of the educational politics. Gyula Mezei gave the longest interview (250 pages), this long-winded dialogue concluded later in a biography, with a sounding title *I did, what I did* (*Tettem, amit tettem*, see: Mezei, 1991).

The legitimation or verification of the life in a convincing narrative is a typical component in the interviews, as these careers started after WW2, in the period of the establishing communist dictatorship, or in the post-revolution Era (from 1957), when the power of the Party is restored and consolidated in a modified version. Viewing back from 1984-1985, they had to give reasons, justifying their activities in the past (which is natural in producing our narrative identity, see: Ricoeur, 1986), whilst the system was in a deep crisis, and the process of collapse started. The life-story theory in developmental psychology argue that the story about our life as an evolving narrative brings coherence and a meaningful sense for the individual, encompassing key events/scenes, turning points in the autobiography (McAdams, 2017). The family background, schooling and the first years of the career (entitled hard beginnings in my interpretation) is one of these important nuclear episodes in the interviews and the other is joining to the educational

administration/politics, the moment of getting a position. These two distinct periods were the most important ones in the narratives, defined everything subsequently.

### **Hard Beginnings in the Life-stories**

The interwar period, right-wing Horthy regime was the everyday experience of their childhood, and they began to work in the reconstruction after the war, in rough years, but with new hopes to create a better world. All story started with poor family background and life-conditions, hard-working parents, blue collar jobs in the early adulthood. These elements both reflected to the real socio-historical situations, as having worker-farmer origins and culture was a good point in a promotion someone during the 1950s (the new elite came from lower classes than before); and also presented a desirable self-image, because this was a requirement to enter higher levels, joining the Party and made a career. Writing and re-writing autobiographies meant permanent activities in Stalinism to prove loyalty, applying a job, school etc., and creating/ascribing a class, a social status was always the first step in it (Fitzpatrick, 2000). The context of the interviewing and the cited decade (1980s vs. 1950s) totally differed from each other, but the starting point might remain very similar through times. Let's see some first sentences!

“,...I had seven classes in a small village school. It was a very poor world, the teacher persuaded my father to go to the upper school (...) This is Békés county, and Viharsarok (in English: Storm Corner), the most stormy and underprivileged part of the region” (Mihály Balázs)

“So I was born in 1928, in Baranya county. My father was a Calvinist priest. We lived in, well, needy financial conditions, as the communities in Baranya and Ormánság were poor too...” (Gyula Kálmán)

“I came from a poor family (...) my father died, when I was nine, he did not have a permanent job, and we were altogether four as children. (...) from 1937, I was the wage-earner in the family...”  
(Gyula Mezei)<sup>3</sup>

„My father made a communist brochure in 1926, which caused one year arrestment (...) after that he couldn't get a job for 15 years in Horthy-Hungary, so I had to work from the age of ten...”  
(Ottó Welker)

Based on these descriptions, they were mainly first generation intellectuals, came from rural areas, small villages, with an agricultural background – only one or two respondent mentioned the preferred category of industrial proletariat as an upbringing environment. The surroundings of Ormánság and Viharsarok (birth places of Mihály Balázs and Gyula Mezei) have been traditionally the poorest parts of the country, home of the rebellion and revolutionary ideas, so it is emblematic to speak out and underline these roots. The role of local, elementary teachers seemed fundamental in the later career: these pedagogues influenced parents to put effort in further education of their children, supported going to a secondary school. In the McAdams model of life-stories this aspect belongs to the dimension of individual agency in story-telling, teachers explicitly provided the empowerment, the main driving force to build up their characters (McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield & Day, 1996, pp. 347–348). Reality and expectations inseparably intertwined in these openings, as the importance of class origins was unquestionable that time, which determined the whole life later – problems and struggle was actual and predicted a controversial world after 1945.

The end of WW2 was a zero hour in the narrations, as Mihály Balázs expressed:

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3 Mezei was ten years old in 1937.

“My biggest experience my life until then happened in the spring of 1945 (...) The teachers collected us to take our exams, in the big village of Mezőkovácsháza (...) I thought every student was rich there, because they had cows, I don’t know (...) Thus, my grandparents told us, they go to Arad, because here is the democracy...”

He was 15 years old in that year, when his family got a small field during the land reform – four years later, Mihály Balázs graduated in the secondary school (1949 was the date of the total communist takeover in Hungary), which was an entry to the elite. Gyula Mezei returned home from deportation in May 1945, for him, the Soviet Red Army brought the liberation – he started his life again, now he could enrol to the university, faculty of law (this was impossible before). WW2 interrupted and initiated life-processes:

“I passed my final exams (matura) in 1948. Due to family issues and wartimes, I didn’t take this as 18 year old-youngster, but when I was 20 years old.” (Gyula Kálmán)

In the second half of the 1940s a new world was established in Hungary, followed the communist dictatorship in the early 1950s, an explosion of the 1956 revolution (a cataclysm to faithful communists) and repression afterwards – this up and downs constituted the next chapter of the life-stories, beginning of the real careers.

### **Suddenly on the Top: the Gesture of Promotion**

The next turning point of the narratives is an unexpected and rapid change, when someone from the Party leadership chose the average intellectual or physical worker and gave an irrefutable offer, a high position. The call of the Party was inevitable, and altered the whole life – it is usually popped up as a *deus ex machine* in the interview. For instance, József Bencédy was a school director in the late 1950s (in a new gymnasium, called Bolyai in Budapest), in his institution the staff developed a new pedagogical program of the polytechnic education. The Party

Committee of the 13th District asked him to give a presentation about it, which was a great success, and

“...once upon a time the Cultural Ministry invited me to a meeting. The topic was the same: What is the future of the secondary school? What is the direction? (...) I made a comment there. I realized during my statement that the deputy minister, Pál Ilku and the head of the Education Department in the Party Centre, Jenő Lugossy intensively spoke to each other, whispered, looked at me and laughed. Later Ilku sent for me and proposed a job in the Ministry (...), the head of the Secondary Education Department (...) They chatted with Lugossy on that meeting, that ‘Bencédy speaks very well, but he do not know what is waiting for him in the Ministry’. So this was the offer. Everything began here.” (József Bencédy)

According to Zsolt Vendégh, the son of Sándor Vendégh (another respondent) Pál Ilku was a central figure in forming the educational politics those years. He was the strong man of the Ministry (formerly an army officer), with a practical-rational sense how to make policies, and allowed their subordinates to work alone, as he was not an expert in the field of education. Ilku’s saying to Sándor Vendégh is typical: “We are pushing the sauce, your task is the school”.<sup>4</sup> This proverb was said in the 1960s, but before that, Sándor Vendégh worked as a foreman in Tatabánya (a socialist industrial town) after graduation in a vocational school in the mid-1940s. He was “picked up” in the early 1950s, after completed his teacher training in Budapest: József Darvas, the educational minister requested Vendégh to give lectures in the Teacher Training Centre. In the summer of 1953 Erzsébet Andics and László Orbán

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4 Conversation with Zsolt Vendégh, 25 June, 2021. “Pushing the sauce” (nyomjuk a szószt) is a slang phrase in the Hungarian language to make a long speech, without any real content, to attract others. The meaning of the sentence might be that Ilku would stand behind Sándor Vendégh’s back and defend him from the possible attacks of the politicians.



(whose resort were the ideological affairs in the Party) announced, that he would teach in the Lenin Institute hereinafter, a privileged institution of the party elite. The Institute lost its autonomy and merged into the ELTE University in 1956, in the following two turbulent years he taught in a technical school, when the Ministry called him again. Valéria Benke, the cultural minister authorized him to organize a new Vocational Education Department in 1959 – Sándor Vendégh was only 32 years, when he got this task.

If we just overlook this brief CV, the quick replacements are well-marked and highly depended on the political changes. Our education-  
alists' career started in an unstable period of the 1940s and 1950s, so they could not make long plans or commitments in their lives. The Party might play the role of communion (another dimension of the McAdams model, beside agency, see: McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield & Day, 1996, pp. 348–351) for the participants, helped to achieve their individual goals, but it was an incalculable body. It is often occurred like a superior power dominated everyday people's destiny: Gyula Kálmán worked as a history, literature and grammar teacher in an elementary school until 1957, when he had to undertake an inspector position, then the head of the department in the local authority.

“A. I didn't like this position so much.

Q. Who offered this for you?

A. Actually, there was a situation in the local council, in which I had to understand these needs of the Party committee and the council, mostly articulated by the Party committee, so I took it.”

What is evident and said is as relevant, as quiet, words, which covered and hide the past: here, the questioner could not register the real factor of this turn, just a vague desire from the Party. Silence and sound always speak about the complex connections between power and freedom (Verstraete, 2016), in this case, the limitations of the right to speak were indefinite. If we continue this life-story, just after one year of leading the local department, Gyula Kálmán had to go to the Ministry to sit in a much higher position:

“Q. Why did they choose you?

A. I do not know that. Someone, somewhere offered me, probably.

Q. Have you never known this?

A. No. Anyway, I discussed with the minister there.

Q. Who was the minister?

A. Pál Ilku. Oh no, he was the deputy minister then.

So, the agreement was ready.”

(Gyula Kálmán)

Such obscurity is normal in the contemporary history, while most of the people, who involved, were still alive in the mid-1980s and the respondents had to take several personal interests into consideration as well. On the other hand, decision-making and selection processes were invisible in a state socialist system, the informal dimension played an important role in these promotions, although there haven't been any sources about this (to the post-communist heritage of informal politics, see: Klíma, 2020). Sometimes we may suppose that something is concealed behind these advancements:

“Q. How did you get this mandate to elaborate the curricula of the first agricultural technical school? What was your job before?

A. Before that I was a director in a state farm.

Q. It is strange, that someone is a director of a state farm, then he got a commission, related to the education.

A. I am interested in many directions: experiences in crop production, administration of the state farm, I was especially curious about education.

Q. Were there some precedents of this interest? Where did this come from?

A. No precedents, just developed in my mind, following the economic problems.”

(József, Szendrő)

Again, Ilku was the key character as later came to light: at the beginning, the first secretary of the Party Committee of Székesfehérvár, Lajos Cseterki (the first man in the local town) connected József Szendrő with the Ministry, where he had meeting with Sándor Vendég (head of the Vocational Education Department) and János Molnár, deputy minister of the higher education. The last link in the chain was Pál Ilku, who made the decision at the end to create a new school type, the agricultural technical school. Networking, connections meant many possibilities nowadays and then, and if these meets with expertise it was great, but loyalty or assumed reliability was much more important in selections. The case of Mihály Balázs after the graduation in 1953 shows us an example of a young adult, without any competence to control his future life in choosing a first job.

“Q. What happened to you after the university?

A. Well, they invited me from many directions: Party Centre, Budapest Party Committee, Army. They wanted me to go there.

Q. Had you got any friends, connections behind these invitations?

A. No. Retrospectively it turned out that from the graduating year of 1953, me, Pölöskey and Kornidesz were invited to everywhere. To the Foreign Ministry, Academy of Foreign Affairs, aspirantura in Soviet Union. Many other issues. Well, every people were cadres, they treated us as cadres. I refused everything. I had a bride, she had two more years at the university. Then I got married her and said: ‘I want a peaceful family and teach. Move back, where I was born, and being a teacher in the gymnasium’. (...) Nothing of these things realized, they called me to the Szabad Nép [Free People – newspaper of the Hungarian Labour Party], based on my thesis at the university. The title of the thesis was ‘Poor farmers of Ferenc Móra’ [Móra was a famous author of the underprivileged people], maybe the reason was not this, they only count on me as a trustworthy comrade. I didn’t say yes.”

Mihály Balázs could not avoid his fate: he had to go the army this summer, to fulfil the obligatory training, when he got a payment check from the Szabad Nép. “I knew from this, that I was ordered there” – as he commented it in the interview. Work there was his duty, told him one of the reporters working there, Miklós Gimes.<sup>5</sup> That was how Mihály Balázs became a journalist, and not a French-Hungarian teacher. Cadre and cadre policy was essential in the 1950s: the Party continuously tried to develop a new generation of cadres, rejuvenate the leading positions, replacing empty office posts with young, qualified and loyal people. It was an impossible mission as the new waves of purge repeatedly threatened these cadres (Rainer, 2002; Káli, 2018). Ottó Welker gave another lesson how a life-direction turned to another way and what might be the personal motives to accept this situation. Welker was a director of a Budapest based high school, Berzsenyi Dániel Gimnázium and he felt himself very good there. When the ministry was re-organized in 1967, a new department (high schools/gymnasiums) created and the officials started to sample Budapest high school directors to find a good candidate. József Fekete (a former director, but in these years already a high position commissioner in the Cultural Ministry) interviewed him, if Welker could acknowledge this fresh position:

“I accepted it following this logic: I was afraid, if I didn’t undertake, they would direct me to a place, where I had to do things, which I hate.”

Another element of his decision was to get more influence on schooling, rephrasing Welker’s sentences more simple: if I’m a school director I can manage my plans only in one institution, but if I’m a head of a national department, I can do this in 300 high schools. Making a career in every political system means parallel compromises and dilemmas, which warns us to exceed simplifying and dichotomist interpretations of our contemporary past.

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5 Five years later, in 1958, Gimes was executed due to his role in the 1956 revolution.

## Conclusions

The public life stories started here, after somehow our actors got their high positions. These narratives tell us many aspects about the self-images, and identification mechanisms of educational policy representatives from the communist/state-socialist period – I choose only two key points to analyse them, which affected and determinate the whole life-story later. Touching these issues resulted in my study to involve philosophical-psychological approaches, like life-story and narrative theories. A future research may target to characterise this professional group and its corporatist power (Depaepe, Herman, Surmont, Van Gorp & Simon, 2008) deeper, making a prosopography or collective biography, based on a widespread data collection.

Using ego-documents, interviews may refigure the historical scenes and make possible going beyond black and white (hi)stories about totalitarian regimes, showing the everyday life, individual possibilities and limitations in a communist system. It can be very interesting seeing deeper how the professional goals confronted and co-existed with ideological/Party intentions, how the apparatchiks and professors, teachers made complex interactions amongst themselves. Accents, jumps and silences in the life-stories remember us the complexity of the past, as the survivors of these stormy decades speak their lives in different contexts.

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