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## Writing the Lives of Foremothers, the History and Future of a Feminist Teaching Tool

Andrea Pető & Berteke Waaldijk

### Background

*The assignment has a long history of this type of producing, recognizing knowledge in women's movement and feminism. The idea that women have a genealogy that differs from the history that has been written by men about their ancestors has a long tradition in feminism and it has dominated the field of women's history in its developing phases as an academic specialism. Jane Austen's complaint, voiced by one of the women in Northanger Abbey, that history was boring and uninspiring because it was all about '(t)he quarrels of popes and kings, with wars and pestilences, in every page; the men all so good for nothing, and hardly any woman at all', is only a prelude of two centuries of writers who argued that history as it had been written by men was incomplete.<sup>1</sup>*

The work of women's historians avant-la-lettre at the end of the nineteenth century (Mary Beard,<sup>2</sup> Johanna Naber<sup>3</sup>) describes histories of women who had been neglected by male historians, and addressed topics that did not make it into academic history written by men. The attempts to remember her-stories however were not limited to the genre of academic writing. Women have used a great variety of genres to keep alive the memories of a female past : from telling and re-telling stories, singing songs, making quilts to writing novels, family memoirs and academic dissertations.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Austen, Jane, *Northanger Abbey*. Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1985 [first published 1815] p. 123.

<sup>2</sup> Smith, Bonnie 'Seeing Mary Beard', in : *Feminist Studies* 10.3, Fall 1984, pp. 399-416.

<sup>3</sup> Grever, Maria, *Strijd tegen de Stilte. Johanna Naber (1859-1941) en de vrouwenstem in de geschiedenis*, Verloren, Hilversum, 1994 and Grever, Maria, 'The Pantheon of Feminist Culture : Women's Movements and the Organization of Memory', in : *Gender and History* Vol. 9, No. 2, pp. 364-374.

<sup>4</sup> Carby, Hazel, *Reconstructing womanhood*, U.P., New York, Oxford, 1987; Levine, Lawrence, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 1977; Pomata, Gianna, 'Partikulargeschichte und Universalgeschichte - Bemerkungen zu einigen Handbüchern der Frauengeschichte', in : *L'homme Z.F.G.* 2, 1990, pp. 5-44 [also published as : Gianna Pomata, 'History, Particular and Universal : Some Recent Women's History Textbooks', in : *Feminist Studies* 19. 1, Spring 1993, pp. 7-50]; Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Gender and Genre : Women as Historical Writers, 1400-1820', in : P.H. Labalme, (ed.), *Beyond Their Sex. Learned Women of the European Past*, U.P., New York, 1980, pp. 153-182.

With the resurgence of a women's movement in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, these traditions re surfaced and helped the beginning of women's studies as an academic field. Remembering and re-telling the history of you mother and grandmother was one of the elements in the feminist consciousness-raising groups that flowered in US and Western Europe<sup>5</sup> and the idea that the history of women could be told and documented through private memories and stories contributed to a rethinking of the distinction and the hierarchy between private and public.

In the former Soviet Block during the period of communism the past was distorted to legitimise communist rule, and history was narrowed down to an enforced forgetting so women remembering to their life in print followed the canonised hagiographic version of party history.<sup>6</sup> In the past twelve years in Eastern Europe we are witnessing a boom of publishing memories in books, journals, but very few of them were written by women. After the fall of the communism in Eastern Europe 'private' knowledge and 'private' histories were used to challenge official representations and to recover 'the real history' without the state/party orchestrated distortion. In East European Countries different oral history collections were set up collecting 'private' source opposing the 'public'/official sources assuming all 'public' sources were all 'wrong'. It is crucial to understand the 'metaphoric mapping' of these private memories in order to break out from the 'true/false' framework of remembering very much prevailing today. The post 1989 period was expected to redefine through the democratisation process gender relations as well. During communism the stereotypical women's characteristics were intimacy, sensitivity, family centerdness as a resistance to 'states feminism', because these characteristics were revitalized by the 'states feminism'.<sup>7</sup>

The private resistance to communism was based on restoring the so-called 'female virtues' in family, based on the three expected roles of women as daughters, wives and mothers. This attempt with religious ideological support aimed to preserve the family values in private life against the pseudo-gender equality of state socialism.<sup>8</sup> After 1989 the restoration of 'female virtues' happened which did not modify the ways in which gender hierarchies are performed and institutionalised, nor the way in which women are placed or are rather missing from the national narratives.

<sup>5</sup> Morgan, Robin, *Sisterhood is powerful: an anthology of writings from the women's liberation movement*, Random House, New York, 1973.

<sup>6</sup> Pető, Andrea, 'Women's Life Stories. Feminist Genealogies in Hungary' in: Slobodan Naumovic, Miroslav Jovanovic (eds.), *Gender Relations in South Eastern Europe. Historical Perspectives on Womanhood and Manhood in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Zur Kunde Suedosteuropas-Band 11/33. Belgrad-Graz, 2002, pp. 211-219.

<sup>7</sup> Pető, Andrea, 'As He Saw Her': Gender Politics in Secret Party Reports in Hungary During 1950's', *CEU History Department Working Paper Series*, No.1, 1994, pp. 107-121.

<sup>8</sup> See Pető, Andrea, 'Conservative and Extreme Right Wing Women in Contemporary Hungary: An Ideology in Transition' Knezevic, Durdja, Koraljka Dilic (eds), *Women and Politics. Women in History/History Without Women*, Zenska Infoteka, Zagreb, 2001, pp. 265-277.

The argument of early women's historians ran that the history of women was invisible<sup>9</sup> because official history only described the public sphere while women's history took place in the private sphere, where women had been delegated. Women's stories are not visible; women's stories were not told: these were the sad observations of those historians who aimed to recover women's political agency in history. Most of our history books were written by men, and they told stories in Eastern Europe, which refused to include those topics, which were considered as not important for national history writing, such as mother/daughter relationship, women's friendship, women working together, women in love with women.<sup>10</sup> Feminist histories of child care, sexuality, household technologies and the cult of domesticity documented a history that for some had been the core of the lives of their mothers and grandmothers. Different forms of assignment that asked students to look into the history of their mothers, grandmothers and (grand-)aunts were integrated in early courses of women's studies and women's history.

### **Chronology of our educational practice**

The authors of this article, Andrea Petö and Berteke Waaldijk feel indebted to and inspired by this tradition. In 1987 Berteke Waaldijk has integrated the assignment to write a paper about the life of a female ancestor in a course called 'Between Margin and Center, Women and Cultural Traditions'. It dealt with women's literature and women's history and was part of the core program of the Women's Studies Curriculum at the Faculty of Arts at Utrecht University<sup>11</sup> one of the interdisciplinary (literature & history) course about women's cultures. A visit to the IIAV, the Women's Library and Archives in Amsterdam,<sup>12</sup> was an integrated part of the assignment. One of the main aims of this assignment was to teach students about the different sources for writing women's history: personal communications (memories of people who knew the woman described), primary and secondary historical sources (archives and history books) and literary texts that were produced and consumed in the life-time of the woman who is described.

<sup>9</sup> Bridenthal, Renate, Claudia Koonz, Susan Stuard (eds.), *Becoming Visible. Women in European History*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, 1977 and 1987.

<sup>10</sup> For an exception see: *Women and Men in the Past. 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Additional Teaching Material for Secondary Schools*. Kristina Popova, Petar Vodenicharov, Snezhana Dimitrova, (eds). International Seminar for Balkan Studies and Specialization. South Western University, Blagoevgrad, 2002. translated to the 9 languages of South Eastern Europe and used in secondary level of teaching history.

<sup>11</sup> Over the years, Waaldijk has co-taught this course with several colleagues with a literary background: Anneke Smelik, Maaike Meijer, Rosemarie Buikema, Agnes Andeweg and Paula Jordao, they have all contributed to changes and adaptations of the assignment.

<sup>12</sup> For more see the website [www.iiav.nl](http://www.iiav.nl)

Andrea Pető has used the format in several seminars with the explicit aim of introducing students to the methodology of oral history.<sup>13</sup> The assignment was to write a one page long life story of a woman who personally mattered to the participant before the training. They were asked to answer the questions : why was this lifestory important to her ? The essays were copied and distributed among the participants and each of them was given the opportunity in the seminar to reflect on her essay and/or on the essay of the others. The participants were also given a brief list of readings about the theory of women's history, which they successfully connected to their own way of recalling their past; they also referred to it during the group exercise of commenting on the experience of the other participants. This assignment is aimed at making NGO activists, sociologists, journalist, who are using oral history as a method and as way of challenging dominant historical narratives in Eastern Europe and in Central Asia, aware of how history as a personal past was constructed through different mediation channels : like family stories, discussions in the family, personal experience and through visual sources. The foremothers' stories represent an emotional opportunity to tell a story, which might help the participants to think about themselves in different historical terms. It also helped them to understand how the national, canonised history taught in the history textbooks is connected to personal histories. The essays of the participants in the oral history training from the different countries were written with very deep levels of emotional involvement. They helped them to recover the intellectual and emotional 'maternage' or maternal lineage and thus to reconstruct broken feminist genealogies.

In 1994 an expanded and revised version of the assignment to write about a woman who could be described as a foremother, was integrated in the History Cluster of the NOISE summerschool that took place in Bologna.<sup>14</sup> The focus of the assignment was on clothing : students were asked to describe what their 'foremother' would be wearing, who had produced the textiles, who had stitched it together, who washed it, and what cultural meaning were attached to different dress-codes. In 1996 and in 1999 the NOISE summerschool was located in Utrecht, and many students and faculty staff who had known each other through the Athena Socrates Network were involved. Here the authors of this article, with Joanna de Groot, Margarita Birriel and Maria Grever have revised the assignment again and tried it with groups of students who came from a range of different countries, and whose background and knowledge about women's history differed widely. We will describe the assignment used in these last two

<sup>13</sup> In September 1998 the inaugurating conference of Association of Teaching Gender Studies in Eastern Europe was organized by the Open Society Institute Women's Network Program in Belgrade which was followed by the conference 'Women's History and History of Gender in Countries in Transition' in Minsk. The conference papers were published in : Elena Gapova, Al'mira Usmanova, Andrea Peto (eds), *Gendernye istorii Vostochnoy Evropy* (Gendered histories from Eastern Europe), European Minsk, Humanities University, 2002. These two conferences gave a picture of the present state of

<sup>14</sup> In this summerschool the History Cluster was formed by Jane Rendall, Joanna de Groot, Lucia Ferrante, Françoise Basch and Berteke Waaldijk.

summerschools in detail and then discuss the theoretical uses and didactic advantages of the format. We will argue that the didactic advantages of a feminist view of education is closely connected to its theoretical implications.

**The format : assignment, the questions, and the medium**  
*paper, online discussion, classroom discussions*

The 'History Cluster' was part of the Noise Summerschool in 1999 that had as its title 'diasporic identities and medi@ted cultures'. The cluster wanted to address historical dimensions of feminist reflections on this topic. We cite the introduction to the cluster :

*Migration and Diaspora have been of great importance in European history. Firstly it is impossible to point to one European country that has not been influenced deeply by the experience of national and international migration (...). Secondly the impact of European imperialism has caused the many forms of voluntary and compulsory global migration that are typical of modern world history. Some histories of migration and Diaspora are forgotten and neglected, others are famous and are being told over and over again in history books and in popular culture. All those histories, whether famous or forgotten, contribute to different identities and cultures: they mediate feelings of belonging and marginality, they create national inclusion and exclusion. They are crucial in our understanding of multiculturalism as a result of the interaction between gender, ethnicity and class. Historical scholarship has two things to offer to feminists who address multiculturalism as an issue that involves identities of migration and Diaspora :*

*1. specific historical knowledge about global, national and local developments that resulted in unequal power relations.(...) and 2. understanding how official and unofficial historical knowledge, organized memory and personal recollections, national histories and private memories interact in constructing different identities, different senses of belonging and exclusion, empowerment and marginalization.<sup>15</sup>*

The three days of the program were devoted respectively to : 'Connecting histories of women to general histories', 'The interaction between private memories and public narratives' and 'The organization of history and Memory - the feminist challenge' Students had to prepare for the work on the foremother-assignment by finding out as much as possible about the 'life of a woman who was alive and more or less grown-up in the year 1949'.

This could be a personal relative (mother, grandmother or aunt) or a friend or a public figure. Students had to bring to class a one page description of the life of this woman, paying attention to nationality, class, ethnicity, her education, experiences with migration, and should contain a short description of the way she lived in 1949. The one-page texts by all the students were copied and made into a booklet at the beginning of the summerschool. Students were advised that they could protect the privacy of the women they described by changing names or dates.

<sup>15</sup> Brimiel, De Groot, Peto and Waalkijk, 'Cluster II - Women's History' in : NOISE Summerschool Programme-Book

For the first day 'Connecting histories of women to general histories' the students had to prepare for an online discussion about experiences of their 'foremother' with nationalism, racism, ethnic repression, migration, poverty or wealth. They were asked to think whether the life of the foremother would shed new light on 'big histories of imperialism, dictatorship and multiculturalism', whether there are parts of her life that were 'famous or forgotten' and what may have caused fame or invisibility. The next part of the assignment asked the students to compare their own life with that of their foremother, to reflect upon the sources that were available to acquire knowledge about her (either official - books, newspapers, national archives, or unofficial - personal stories, family secrets, gossip). We asked the students to think about the ways in which the woman could be part of a history : how her life could be part of a national history, and how they could envisage a history about all women in 1949.

For the second day 'Interaction between private memories and public narratives' the students had to prepare for a class discussion about the way their foremother related to the national state where she lived in 1949. Was she a citizen, what were her rights, was she supported in any way by the state or prosecuted ? Did she have nationalist feelings, did she participate in transitions that took place then ? The second set of questions asked students to think about the cultural identity of their foremother : what forms of culture did she participate in (books, films, music, fashion, consumer cultures, etc.) and whether these forms of culture were nationally or ethnically connotated ? They were invited to collect material that might help to understand the connections between popular culture and personal memories.

The third day 'Organisation of history and memory' took place at the IIAV and here students were invited to search for material in the rich collections of this library for information that might shed light on the life of the foremothers. Students then should discuss the way the politics of memory worked and what information should be collected to write about the histories of their foremothers.

Two optional extra assignments allowed students (1) to explore theoretical writing about history and memory and (2) to make a website about their foremother. Scanning and website building instructions and support were available.

### **Theory - what do the students learn ?**

#### *Women's history*

As indicated in the introduction, we think that reflection about the lives of individual foremothers (whether biologically or otherwise related to the students) provides an excellent opportunity to discuss the core issues of writing women's history, namely : the distinction between public and private lives and the historiographical issues. Let us begin with the distinction between public and private. As one of the oldest concepts used in women's history we think feminist scholars should be aware of the advantages and limits of the use of this opposition. The advantages are well known : facts of women's lives that have received no public recognition were assigned to the personal sphere that in itself was supposed to have no history. Many students recognized

this clearly when they were asked to think about what elements of the foremother lives could be found in official history books : hardly any. However women's historians have formulated important critiques of the value of the gender distinction between the male public and the female public sphere. As it was pointed out, 'liberating women from the domestic sphere' was a political and historiographic ideal that was mainly directed at middle class women in Western Europe and the US.<sup>16</sup> For many women, the 'cult of domesticity' was not the issue. African American women who lived in slavery struggled together with African-American men for the right to have a private sphere and a family life. Women in communist societies did not experience the private sphere as the site of their oppression. Working class women often combined wage earning with the care of a family. The assignment allowed students to think about the distinction between public and private and the advantages and drawbacks of the concept.

An interesting point should be noticed here. The assignment was formulated in such a way that the students were free to choose a woman from their personal history (family or close friend) or a woman that they knew through her public role (a politician, a cultural hero like a flimsier or novelist, a feminist). Almost all students in the NOISE summerschool have chosen a woman to whom they were 'privately' related. (None of them recognised 1949 as the publishing date of the most influential work by Simone de Beauvoir). This assignment also helps to overcome not only the South-North but also the East- West division, to break away from the semiotic burden of the Cold War. Both in the Summer School in Utrecht and in the different oral history workshops the large majority of the women chose a kinship-foremother, mostly grandmothers as foremothers. Again the East and West or South and North division became meaningless, since the general lack of women in public eligible for foremother status is a worldwide phenomenon. In the history textbooks there are very few women with whom the readers might identify, because most of them are either heroines or victims of violence. The symbolic space available for women in public is related to misery and suffering. Those 'great ladies' who are visible they are characterized by loneliness and they have servants, not students.<sup>17</sup> And surprisingly these great ladies, like Kolontaj, Luxemburg, Zetkin are those who were remembered as few exceptions by students who came from former Soviet-countries which is related to the hierarchical character of remembering in the Sovietized countries.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Waalcijk, Berteke, 'Of stories and sources : feminist history' in : Rosemarie Buikema and Anneke Smelik, *Women's Studies and Culture*, Zed Books, London, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> See Pető, Andrea, *Vorstellungen (images) und Fantasien. Europas Töchter und 'Damen' in der Vergangenheit*, Lecture for the conference : 'Europas Töchter: Traditionen, Erwartungen, Strategien von Frauenbewegungen in Europa' in Berlin, 2002. Organized by Evangelischen Akademie Thüringen, Boell Stiftung, Ost-West Europaischen Frauennetzwerkes. The conference also organized a collective foremother exercise.

<sup>18</sup> Pető, Andrea, 'Memory Unchanged. Redefinition of Identities in Post WWII Hungary' Eszter Andor, Andrea Pető, Istvan Gyorgy Toth (eds.), *CEU History Department Yearbook 1997-98*, Budapest, 1999, pp. 135-153.



The second important issue that the assignment allows us to address is the history of feminism, the women's movements and other struggles for emancipation. The knowledge available about women's movements in the USA and Western Europe is overwhelming, but for some other countries this is less the case. When teaching women's history to a really international group of students, there is the risk that the specific knowledge about some western countries will become the measuring stick. By asking explicitly from the students to find information about the emancipation of women in their own country, the knowledge about the history of feminism and women's movements can become incredibly diversified.<sup>19</sup>

In the third place the assignment enables critical reflection on the way history is being written. This historiographical focus, always strong in the field that combines empirical research with feminist theory, is often a difficult topic to teach, especially to students who have not been trained as historians before. It is too easy to present a simplified opposition between bad history books in general that do not pay attention to women in history, and the feminist alternatives. However, we think that students will learn much more about this problem, when they are invited to think about the distinction between national historiography and their own specific interest in an individual woman. The questions aimed at reflection upon the ways in which the foremothers were integrated or excluded from national histories, and the question about the resources available for more knowledge about their life are aimed at this aspect. This also allows us to make use of excellent work done by women's historians. The re-invention of the wheel, however, should not be the aim of this assignment. Furthermore these questions make students aware of the different roles in which women can be integrated in general histories : as victims, as heroes, as survivors, as marginalized outsiders or as metaphors of national identities. The work of Gianna Pomata on particular and general history has been very useful in this context; it helps to make students aware of the different perspectives that structure the way they write about women.<sup>20</sup>

No teaching of women's history can do without getting the students acquainted with the different sources and resources that are available. While trained historians can envisage the limits and possibilities of the source material that they have been trained to use, beginners in the field of writing about women in the past will not have a clue. By asking the students from the very start to report about the different sources they have used to write the story about their foremother, the issue of availability of sources is made urgent. Students will experience what it means to write about events that have not made it into history books, they may feel proud about unearthing material that nobody has used before (talking to relatives, looking at pictures), and they will begin to experience the enormous need for work in the field of collecting material for the untold histories about women in the past. The visit to a women's archive, or a

<sup>19</sup> Offen, Karen, *European Feminisms. A Political History. 1700-1950*. Stanford University Press, 2000; Smith, Bonnie, *The Gender of History. Men, Women and Historical Practices*. Harvard University Press, 1998.

<sup>20</sup> Pomata, see note 4

center for information about women's history is therefore a crucial element in the assignment.<sup>21</sup> It will confront the students with the politics of remembering, conservation and opening up for researchers of historical material.

Finally we want students of women's history to be aware of the responsibility incurred by everyone who writes a history : the power to include and to exclude. Because students are not only writing their own personal forefather's history, but have to discuss and compare the histories of women in countries, in classes, and of ethnicities that differ from their own, the fact that histories are written from different perspectives, becomes very tangible. Students are thus invited to reflect on the way their story has effects for other stories. By taking one year as the common point of reference, the cross-comparisons were very present : the echo's of WW-II, the cold war and decolonisation all contributed to the shared need for multi-voiced histories.

### *Feminist theory and interdisciplinary*

The assignment helps to teach not only central elements of women's history, but we think it is also a useful tool for explaining elements in feminist theory. Especially the problematizing of 'experience' is crucial, when a group of women's studies students with different national and academic background work together. For beginners in the field of women's history, it is sometimes tempting to expect that women's experiences have been basically the same in different eras and in different locations. The critical work done by women's historians who addressed not only discrimination and subjection on the basis of sex, but also investigated the ways in which race, class and sexuality have interacted with gender has made abundantly clear that there is no such thing as 'the woman's experience'. Several authors have made the theoretical elaboration of this point; we mention here the article 'Experience' by Joan Scott, who criticizes the way 'experience', has been seen as the indubitable fundament of emancipation movements. She shows how feminism should move away from this absolute belief in an independent subject who is influenced by experiences and argues for a view that pays more attention to the ways in which some events are being turned into 'experiences', while others remain untold. For women's historians this lesson is valuable, because it allows them to reflect on the responsibility of constructing a story.<sup>22</sup>

The assignment allows students who are trained in other disciplines (sociology, cultural or literary studies, economics, political sciences, and media studies) to use this knowledge in working on the assignments. Because the questions asked about the foremother cover a wide range of facts, students will be invited to use the knowledge. This actually happens when in-class comparisons were being made : students discussed the differences between industrial

<sup>21</sup> This may be real life or virtual through one of the electronically available centers. The oral history projects of the OSI NWP are located in the different women's studies centers and documentation centers in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

<sup>22</sup> Scott, Joan, 'Experience' in Joan Scott & Judith Butler (eds.), *Feminists Theorize the Political* New York, London, 1992, pp. 22-40; see also Riley, Denise, *Am I that name. Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History*, MacMillan Press, London, 1988.

and agricultural countries/regions, they discussed class differences and cultural developments that have not stopped at national borders. They discussed films and novels that had been shared by women in different countries, compared the way fashion had been an issue between different generations of women across Europe and noticed that private lives were deeply embedded in inter- or transnational structural developments.

### **Feminist pedagogies : how do students learn in an international context ?**

One of the greatest challenges of teaching women's/gender /feminist studies in an international and multicultural context is to make the diversity within the classroom productive instead of an impediment to teaching. Many international seminars have experienced the serious problems of co-operation across national, cultural and ethnic lines and setting up meaningful frames for transnational comparisons. Education is so thoroughly intertwined with the way students and teachers see the world, that different language-proficiency, differences in expectations about the role of the teacher, the role of the students in the classroom can literally destroy learning experiences. Political differences will also add tensions and conflicts in the class. In one of the early NOISE-summer-schools a session was devoted to introducing national differences through songs and national anthems. The teachers, who expected that women from all European countries would be critical towards all forms of nationalism, including that within their own country, were proved very wrong. Indeed, as we can see now, it would be an illusion to expect women to be unaffected by histories of genocide, discrimination and subjection, directed at their nation, race or ethnic group.<sup>23</sup> The challenge for international teaching programs in women's studies is to create an environment where the differences among students and among teachers can be made productive. The network ATHENA is the ideal platform for such experiments.

The assignment helped us to do this because it asked students to write about an aspect of their history while not asking them to immediately address their own position. With this displacement, some space is created where students can take some distance. In our experience this has allowed them to talk about problematic and difficult issues, as deportation, genocide, that would have been too difficult to address without effective forms of mediation. Asking them to tell the story of one woman allows them to differentiate amidst the massiveness of a national history of violence. For example : writing about one German and one Dutch woman and their experiencing of WW-II, or about one Hungarian and one Russian woman about the effects of Stalinism makes conversations possible where a confrontation between national histories would have silenced the students. The displacement has allowed students and teachers to speak about racism and imperialism as crucial issues in European history without being paralyzed by national definitions of guilt.

The assignment can be also used in gender sensitivity training in Eastern European classrooms where serious resistance is expected against anything related to feminism and to the women's movement. This resistance due, besides other factors, to the epistemic character and implications

<sup>23</sup> Gabriele Griffin & Rosi Braidotti, (eds.), *Thinking differently*, ZED-books, London, 2002.

of the Cold War can be successfully challenged through introduction of personalized histories connected to women's experiences.<sup>24</sup>

Related to this form of empowering students to address the larger issues in European and world history, is the form of empowerment for students that results from having them enter the classroom as 'authors'. The assignment addresses students as specialists. They are the only ones who know about their 'foremother'. This means that students can enter the discussion not only as learners, but also as 'teachers'. This point is particularly important, because of the different national traditions of education. While some countries have a tradition of training students not to accept what their teachers tell them, other countries do not. In some countries teachers are trained to see discussions and seminars where students contribute their knowledge and views as the core of the curriculum, in others the lecture format is more central. These differences are related to different styles of authority in different countries. Within feminist pedagogies there exists a strong tradition of the ideal of empowering the students.<sup>25</sup> The production of foremother's stories has a spiritual dimension: it is a reconstruction of identity construction because it helps us to believe no outside or interiorised approval is needed to please the others and it also purges out those stories which are imposed on women by the dominant traditions. By creating open stories it constructs the missing or distorted continuity between generations of women. Our experience with international summerschools, where both staff and students come from different educational systems, shows that it is crucial to address explicitly the different ways of dealing with authority, lest these patterns may be repeated. Making students into specialists is a good beginning; but we strengthened it by allowing for different formats. The written paper, the classroom discussions, the lectures (where teachers can refer to foremother stories) and digital discussions were encouraged. The last format has proven to be very effective in adding different hierarchies. Some students who had been silent in classroom discussions posted great contributions to the bulletinboard, which offered them a different type of visibility and different level of identification.<sup>26</sup> The explicit instruction to be prepared to learn from others motivated students to ask questions, also from fellow students. The somewhat more anonymous format (although all students knew with whom they were talking) of online discussions also contributed to students' ability to speak about very painful and traumatic experiences. This aspect of communication in an educational context certainly deserves closer attention, and may be explored more in the future.

<sup>24</sup> Pető, Andrea, 'Writing Women's History', in: *Open Society News*, Fall 1994, pp. 10-11.

<sup>25</sup> Ellen Carol Dubois (ed.) et al. *Feminist Scholarship. Kindling in the groves of Academia*, Urbana U.P. 1985; bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress. Education as the practice of Freedom*, Routledge, New York, 1994.

<sup>26</sup> We used WebCT. We now regret it that the files of this discussion have not been kept.

Finally the forms of empowerment that the assignment made possible have helped students to create their own voice vis-à-vis the 'big narratives' of European history. A history that is permeated by so much violence, dictatorship, and exploitation, needs students who feel they can tell other stories and formulate alternatives. They may thus contribute to the alternatives that have also been part of European history : protest and idealism. Analyzing women's lifestories is an attempt to give a voice to women's stories, which does not let them, be dismissed under the false generalization of 'big narratives'. It also helps to define what 'normal' actually means. This methodological approach is more about understanding and opening rather than about controlling and closure. Changing the narrative frame and the social dimension of remembering gives a new orientation in the world, which teaches respect for equality and freedom.

### **Conclusions and plans for the future**

ATHENA, the European Thematic Network of Women's Studies provided us with the opportunity to try out a classic format developed in feminist education. We used it for teaching women's history in the context of European history. The redefinition of European history is a tool to break with the geographic definition of Europe and to find those elements and emotions, which are constitutive forces of the European identity. The meanings and contents of European identity are in a constant flux but they are also under serious challenges from the side of populist and extreme rightist anti-Europeanist political forces. The ATHENA network, while connecting the European women's studies centers, also serves as a niche for alternative teaching practices leading towards the re-conceptualization of European history and hence also different meaning of European identity.

The assignment to write about a 'foremother' has a wealth of possibilities, of which we have only explored a few, but we feel confident to say that for international training in seminars where students and staff from different national educational systems come together, the format cannot be dispensed with. It also helps to address issues like differences within the national history, comparing experiences which although taking place within the same geographic unit, are totally different. An example would be comparing a life story of a Turkish or German woman in today's Germany or a Jewish or Hungarian woman in Hungary.

Students get acquainted with the 'basics' of women's and feminist history and teachers learn from each other what they think should be asked in the assignments. We are particularly appreciative of the new form of empowerment it creates in students and teachers in women's studies. By making differences productive, and by making students author(ite)s before they enter the class room, this assignment gives students from different countries in Europe a chance to address their histories. The most interesting ways to further explore the prospects of the format are : the impact of different media (paper, life, digital, textual, visual) on the way students can experience the role of specialists, the interaction with other disciplines (one could imagine including questions in the assignment that come from colleagues in sociology or cultural studies). In order to do this it is necessary to list and evaluate systematically the material (types of questions, supporting articles and books, the role of visits to women's centers) that has been productive for the learning experiences of the students.

It's crucial in our opinion to think of better and more accessible ways to keep the records of all that happened (oral, printed and digital communications) in the teaching situations where the assignments are used. The accessibility of works in other countries would allow teachers to deal more effectively with the different educational backgrounds of students from different countries. Around this theme discussion groups, even virtual discussion groups, could be set up between countries with conflicting interpretation of their past aiming at reconciliation and conflict resolution (Hungary-Romania, Ireland-England, Serbia-Albania etc.) Apart from this didactic aim, it would help to make available the results of this form of students' research, thus collecting and opening these contributions to new women's histories about the European past, in a hope for a peaceful European future.