

# THE EQUAL AND THE MORE EQUAL: PUPILS' EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL IN LITHUANIA IN THE LATE SOVIET ERA

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim.** The aim of the article is to reveal the experiences and attitudes of pupils who attended schools in the late Soviet era (1960s-1980s) towards the implementation of egalitarianism policies in the schools of the Lithuanian SSR. The analysis of the qualitative research material focuses on the word “felt” in the phrase “We all felt equal then”, i.e., not so much on the fixation of social (in)equality by analysing the indicators of social class or economic status, but on the subjective experience of equality as a manifestation of human dignity.

**Methods.** Following the methodology of oral history, material was collected during 32 in-depth interviews with people who had attended schools in the Lithuanian SSR in the late Soviet era.

**Results.** Several themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews relating to the expression of egalitarianism in the Soviet school: the social class of the pupils; the economic situation of the parents; and the ability of the parents to have the so-called “blat”.

**Conclusions.** The study revealed that the implementation of the policy of egalitarianism officially declared by the Communist Party in the education system was subject to several reservations. In Soviet Lithuania, just as in the whole society, there were a lot of manifestations of *blat*, corruption, and favouritism. These were influenced by the positions held by pupils' parents, belonging to the nomenklatura and/or the ability to establish informal contacts. Pupils from rural schools had fewer opportunities to pursue higher education.

**Keywords:** Soviet school, egalitarianism, Lithuanian SSR, late Soviet era, oral history.

## INTRODUCTION

Inequality, which was predetermined by the market economy, was one of the biggest problems encountered by post-communist societies. Therefore, one of the most frequently heard leitmotifs of nostalgia for that period was “We all felt equal then”.

It should be noted that post-Communist nostalgia is not characteristic of a particular country, but of the whole Eastern European region (Boyer, 2010). For example, Slovenian researcher Mitja Velikonja (2009, 2017) analyses *Yugonostalgia* or *Titostalgia*, Polish researchers study the phenomenon of *the charm of the PRL* (Balcerzak, 2021), German researchers explore the legacy of the former East Germany (GDR) in the context of *Ostalgie* (Berdahl, 1999; Blum, 2000). Researchers identify various, often contradictory, manifestations of post-communist nostalgia. This includes the search for the “authentic past” or just touristic “factories of experience”, in which material remnants serve as “time locks” for the exploration of everyday realities of the past (Balcerzak, 2021). This relates to exotification of the past, often used as a marketing strategy (Galeja, 2015). Nostalgia for material culture can be manifested in collecting, displaying, or cataloguing objects owned or desired in youth and childhood (Kestere et al., 2023) or the memory of tastes once tasted, smells once smelled (Klumbytė, 2010). According to Daphne Berdahl, we can see the manifestations of this nostalgia as “pseudo” nostalgia, but at the same time such practices of nostalgia reveal a very complex relationship to personal history. The researcher states that “these practices thus not only reflect and constitute important identity transformations in a period of intense social discord, but also reveal the politics, ambiguities, and paradoxes of memory, nostalgia, and resistance” (Berdahl, 1999, p. 206). Soviet/socialist material culture can be considered “different from the increasingly uniform consumerism of globalisation” (Blum, 2000, p. 249), spiritualised and contrasted with post-Soviet/post-socialist culture, “contaminated” by Western production (Kelly, 2003).

The “Soviet” sausage renaissance in Lithuania can be explained as “a critique of the post-socialist state and scepticism toward the ideals of liberal democracy” (Klumbytė, 2010, p. 33). Or approaching it from another perspective, “Soviet sausages can be considered an example of the new post-socialist utopia, successfully consumed in the literal and metaphorical sense, which mixes the imagined Soviet past and the European present in people’s imaginations to produce a distinctive fantasy of their reconcilability” (ibidem). Plombir ice cream can be simply a reminder of the taste of childhood, but it can also be perceived as the ultimate symbol of a happy Soviet childhood or the “holy grail of Soviet nostalgia” (Rüthers, 2019, p. 65).

In some places post-Communist nostalgia functions more as “a kind of socio-cultural variant of the ‘Stockholm syndrome’” (Čepaitienė, 2013, p. 48), elsewhere it is used as the basis for the myth of a “golden age”. According to the researchers, nostalgic feelings turn into myths if they are interpreted, and these interpretations are supported by educational institutions, the church, the media, the authorities or political parties. These myths are not necessarily based on elements of nostalgia for one specific period. For example, right-wing populists do not draw directly on the Soviet/socialist past, but in their discourse post-communist nostalgia is “useful for manufacturing the key narrative of populism, the narrative of a treacherous,

alienated or simply alien elite that casts doubt on ‘the people’s’ purity” (Kotwas & Kubik, 2022, p. 1381-1382).

In post-Soviet Russia, similar mythologies are constructed, both about the imperial era and about the USSR as a superpower, which, in the creation and broadcasting of the myth of the “golden age”, is identified as “one of the leading countries in the world”, with a mighty military, the great people (rus. *narod*), outstanding leaders and a grand mission - to create a society of freedom, equality, fraternity (Mazur, 2015). In fact, there are few collective memories of freedom in the so-called “socialist camp”. It is only mentioned in the context of inner freedom and inner resistance (Ramonaitė, 2015). “Fraternity” is mentioned in the context of internationalism and internationalist upbringing (Bassin & Kelly, 2012). As already mentioned, the motif of “equality” was most prominent in the post-Soviet transformation period. Researchers even identify an “egalitarian syndrome” characteristic of post-communist societies (Tuzaitė, 2011).

Zenonas Norkus states that:

The utopianism of the idea of communism should not hinder us from acknowledging that some of the results of its implementation led to veritable technological, social, and economic achievements (for example, industrialisation, universal literacy, the partial emancipation of women, and universal health care) (Norkus, 2012, p. 34).

However, a closer look at socialist societies shows that in many areas the Communist Party’s policy of egalitarianism was never implemented in reality. For example, the declared gender equality most frequently was just “a smoke screen” (Attwood, 1999; Leinarte, 2010, 2021; Oates-Indruchová, 2018; Kestere et al., 2020). Disabled people were also deprived of equal opportunities (Phillips, 2009; Rasell & Iarskaia-Smirnova, 2013). Despite declarations about freedom of religion, people practising religion faced difficulties (Liutikas, 2003; Streikus, 2003; Bezrogov, 2007). Full social and economic equality was also part of the myth. According to Don Filtzer (2014), a researcher on privileges and social inequality in communist societies, “like capitalist societies, the Soviet Union and the Soviet-type societies of Eastern Europe showed a high degree of social stratification and inequality” (Filtzer, 2014, p. 505). Filtzer views the educational system as one of the most relevant factors that result in social stratification. He states that:

Because privileges in the Soviet Union were only weakly monetarised, and wealth could not be accumulated or inherited, privileged groups perpetuated themselves mainly through the use of internal ‘connections’ and by ensuring their offspring preferential access to higher education through which they would secure elite positions. (p. 505)

Examining the links between social (in)equality and education in communist societies, other researchers (Matthews, 2011, 2012; Zajda, 1980 and others) also note that while the very purpose of education seemed to cap-

ture the reduction of social stratification and help all to move up the ladder of social mobility, the system functioned with reservations. These reservations are particularly noticeable when looking beyond statistics to individual experiences. This is clearly illustrated by the study conducted by Michal Šimáně (2023) on socialist egalitarianism in the everyday life of secondary technical schools in Czechoslovakia. Referring to responses of teachers of vocational and general subjects, Šimáně examines favouritism, corruption and cheating, and other manifestations that are clearly opposed to the egalitarianism advocated in education. The teachers' stories are indeed eloquent, but it is equally important to hear the voices of the pupils of the time.

This article seeks to uncover the experiences and attitudes of people studying in the late Soviet era (1960s-1980s) towards the implementation of egalitarianism in the schools of Lithuanian SSR. The analysis of the qualitative research material focuses on the word "felt" in the phrase "We all felt equal then", i.e., not so much on the fixation of social (in)equality by analysing the indicators of social class or economic status, but on the subjective experience of equality as a manifestation of human dignity. Although the article focuses only on the case of the LSSR, it is discussed in the broader context of the Soviet Union and some countries of the former Eastern Bloc.

## METHODOLOGY

The article presents the results of the project *Educating the New Man in Soviet School: The Case of Lithuania* carried out by the Research Council of Lithuania (RCL) from 2020 to 2022. A total of 32 interviewees were surveyed. The main criterion for the selection of the participants was their experience from a Soviet-era school, i.e., the participants were people aged 45-70 (20 women, 12 men) who had attended different types of educational institutions (rural, urban, boarding and special schools) in Lithuania during the late Soviet era (1965-1980). It is also important to mention that the research participants included informants of different socio-economic statuses (from children of Soviet nomenklatura to those of unemployed and illiterate parents) and the informants with different educational backgrounds living in different areas, which geographically encompass almost all regions of Lithuania.

Due to restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of the interviews (19) were collected remotely by video chat using the platforms Zoom, Messenger, and MS Teams, while the remaining 13 interviews were conducted face-to-face with the informants. All interviews were recorded with the consent of the informants and later transcribed. The data of the informants were depersonalised during transcription. Content analysis was performed using MAXQDA Analytic Pro 2022.

To reveal the moments of educational practice taking into account the specificity of the period under discussion, the oral history method was used. Following Marta Kurkowska-Budzan and Krzysztof Zamorski (2009),

oral history stemmed from a feeling of coldness and emptiness in institutionalised academic discipline: “a lack of direct contact with the human experience of the past, precisely as it would exist in the consciousness of the participants of particular historical episodes” (p. 12). However, this method is not in opposition to other historical studies, just as it is not a purely “historical” method. The oral history approach is interdisciplinary. Despite its most frequently mentioned shortcomings (doubts about representativeness, reliability and validity, which, by the way, are characteristic of all qualitative research), this method is increasingly used in sociological, anthropological and educational research (Yow, 2005).

In research on educational history, oral history is useful for collecting stories from below, i.e., from individuals who have encountered various or multiple forms of social oppression (James-Gallaway & Turner, 2022). The method of oral history is frequently applied for the analysis of the soviet period because it is believed to be suitable “to empirically approach the understanding of important characteristics of totalitarian regimes” (Šimáně, 2023, p. 134). Although on a collective and individual level the memories of the Soviet/socialist period are contradictory and complex, oscillating “between personal biography and state ideology, between individuality and collectivism, between empathy and hatred” (Čepaitienė, 2013, p. 49), it is precisely these memories that allow us to uncover the multidimensionality, but also the absurdity of the era in question. In addition, oral history provides an opportunity to know, understand and accept one’s own past, rather than rejecting it as inconvenient and inconsistent with the collective self-image (Vinogradnaitė et al., 2018). This therapeutic function can also help to understand the manifestations of post-communist nostalgia.

## RESULTS

The informants of the study were quite critical of the Soviet era. If a note of nostalgia was felt in any of their stories, it was more a nostalgia for the elapsed time, for their childhood and young days. When talking about equality at school, some of the informants, mentioned that social stratification was weaker than it is now, but that absolute equality certainly did not exist at all. There were equal pupils, as well as more equal ones.

Several themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews relating to the expression of egalitarianism in the Soviet school: the social class of the pupils (here, the ambiguous position of the intelligentsia stood out in particular); the economic situation of the parents; and the ability of the parents to make the necessary contacts, i.e., to have the so-called “*blat*”. The place of pupils’ residence was also important. Teacher favouritism, pupils’ status in their peer group, further education and career opportunities were closely linked to the aforesaid issues.

### **Belonging to the Soviet Intelligentsia: A Privilege or a Curse?**

Although the pedagogical discourse of the late Soviet period (curricula, methodological aids, textbooks, teachers' speeches during lessons and educational classes) presented the class struggle proclaimed by Marxist-Leninist ideology as one of the most frequently used clichés, in everyday school life the terms "bourgeoisie", "exploiters' class", etc. seemed distant to pupils historically (e.g., referring to pre-Soviet times) and/or geographically (e.g., capitalist imperialism and the "rotten West"). In our study, the informants usually mentioned their origin and their parents' occupation only when asked. By far the most frequent answer was "my parents were ordinary people". The construct "ordinary people" in the informants' narratives encompassed not only the working class and the peasantry but also the so-called Soviet intelligentsia in most cases. Although the concept of the Soviet intelligentsia was not homogeneous (Tromly, 2014), in the late Soviet period, the intelligentsia was most often defined as a social stratum professionally engaged in intellectual work (Raškauskas, 2008). As Rytis Bulota (2008), a researcher on the Soviet intelligentsia, points out, in order to distinguish the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia from the new Soviet intelligentsia and to emphasise their allegiance to Marxist-Leninist values, the intellectually active population was referred to by new terms such as "scientific and cultural workers", "creative intelligentsia", "working intelligentsia" and the like. Professionally, this was a very broad group of workers: from kindergarten teachers to spacecraft designers. The intelligentsia often included the so-called Soviet nomenklatura, who, in the society that promoted egalitarianism, were able to enjoy many privileges, such as more spacious housing, specialised shops, and the opportunity to go abroad more easily, and to take holidays in the best resorts in the USSR, or even in the best resorts in the socialist Eastern European countries. The privileged received better medical care, and their children had access to better education (Matthews, 2011). According to researchers who focus on education in the Soviet Union and its socialist satellites (Matthews, 2012; Tomiak, 1986; Zajda, 1980), the very fact of being a member of the intelligentsia was a guarantee of a higher degree of social mobility and the possibility of climbing the social hierarchy. According to Benjamin Tromley (2014), "the 'kul'turnost' attributed to the Soviet intelligentsia acted as a form of what Pierre Bourdieu calls 'cultural capital', i.e., inherited markers of intelligence and social status that contribute to social inequalities, especially because of their impact on the education systems" (p. 9). This is confirmed by one of the informants in our study, who pointed out that she always felt more privileged because both her parents had acquired higher education and had made excellent careers. According to her, this contributed to her studying at a prestigious school and getting into an exceptional class:

Our class was exceptional. In Soviet times, there was such a peculiar thing: school classes that were assembled somewhat based on parental status, because other classes... That's why I got into that class. And because of that we had an image projector that probably no other class had. This was such a

superior class in the eyes of everyone. But in that illusionary superior class, a significant number of children came from my kindergarten group, which may also have been formed in part by the same principle. <...> There were some special standards... Both parents had to have university degrees. That is why our class was so special.... it was dominated by children of parents with higher education. This was one of the salient aspects, imagine that. (I2, a woman born in the early 1970s)

Meanwhile, "children of blue-collar workers, at least in our school, I can't talk about others... children of blue-collar workers were treated worse" (I2, a woman born in the early 1970s).

Another informant of a similar age, who also came from an intelligent family and lived in a big city, presented a slightly different story. This difference was due to the fact that, unlike the first informant, she did not attend a prestigious school, but an ordinary school, which she had to go to according to her place of residence. The majority of children in this school were children of workers. According to the informant, the fact that she had come from a family of intelligentsia was the main cause of bullying she experienced at school:

The main reason for the bullying I encountered was that I was a child of intelligentsia. The fact that my parents had studied at university was a sign of a loser. <...> The parents of most of my classmates were blue-collar workers. Although one of my friends was even less lucky as her father was a professor. We had lots of books. But that was it. <...> For comparison, I can say that in the second grade I had a friend whose parents were blue-collar workers. Her dad had finished the 4th grade and her mom had finished school. But they lived far better than my parents. They had it all. Their furniture differed from ours, and they managed things differently. <...> And we were such losers... This attitude was coming not only from my classmates, but also from teachers. (I21, a woman born in the late 1960s)

As one of the painful experiences of childhood and adolescence, the informant recalls the teachers' desire to exclude or even separate her from the class, which only exacerbated the bullying she went through:

When everyone was going to the collective farm, I would be the only one left behind. They would say: What is she going to do there? She'll just walk around with her pretty hands raised like this, will stroll in those beets in her high-heeled courts. (I21, a woman born in the late 1960s)

Notably, both informants admitted that both intelligentsia and the working class were by no means homogeneous, and that the main differences lied not so much in the nature of the jobs they had as in the possibility of making *blat* ties, the ability to obtain, albeit illegally, goods in short supply.

### **“Good Relations are the Most Important Thing”: The Manifestations of *Blat* and Favouritism in a Soviet School**

As Alena Ledeneva (1998), who probably studies *blat* most extensively in Russia, notes that the word is virtually impossible to translate directly into English. It is not easy to explain this phenomenon in a nutshell either. Most frequently *blat* is defined as “the use of personal networks and informal contacts to obtain goods and services in short supply and to find a way around formal procedures”. (p. 1). In the planned economy, where money did not function as the main element in economic transactions, *blat* functioned as “a distinctive form of non-monetary exchange, a kind of barter based on personal relationship” (p. 34). Lithuanian sociologist Rūta Žiliukaitė (2015), who investigated *blat* as a form of social capital, stated that namely the “*blat*”, which provided access to the desired consumption goods and services, had influence on the individual’s social status. *Blat*-related connections had permeated all areas of the Soviet life including education.

Although *blat* was condemned as a phenomenon “alien and hostile” to Soviet society and incompatible with communist morality (Fitzpatrick, 1999), it had become a routine part of Soviet society that existed in a grey zone, which, according to Ledeneva (1998), is best described by a Russian phrase: *nel’zya, no možno* (forbidden but possible), or in other words “nothing is legal but everything is possible” (p. 1). It would seem that the existence of this zone should have been hidden from children, but as the stories of the informants in our study show, they were well aware of it when they were of school age. Some informants even noticed that the access to *blat*, the ability to obtain desirable items and services according to *blat* was seen with certain pride:

Children of parents in commerce were in a good position... In the sense that they were good without higher education... But they were good “networkers”. If the father of a child was a shop manager or assistant, then that child could potentially be better... <...> In that sense, I personally felt what it meant to have that ‘blat’ and what it meant not to... Because creating such a certain net, a certain network... you just knew to which shop assistant’s shift you should go... in my house, such things were well known, too. (I2, a woman born in the early 1970s)

Everyone knew and they took pride in the fact that parents could bribe, bring them things and take care of things in such ways. Because they could. They had means, money. Also, they took pride in the fact that some parents could steal: from the meat plant, brewery, tobacco factory. Everybody kept bragging happily about it. Because such people were astute. They knew how to live. And it was a norm, it was a value. If you couldn’t snatch anything or loot, then you were good for nothing. And what could my parents snatch? Nothing. <...> Of course, workers too were not all the same. What could a janitor steal? (I21, a woman born in the late 1960s)

The informants stated that it was also a public secret that teachers were equally involved in such networks:



But I'm really sure that some teacher would often go to some mom and get something better, of better quality... From under the table, from under the counter, some perfume which wasn't regularly available, etc. That definitely was taking place. How much did it affect that child's performance... It's hard to say. But again, I can repeat that looking at it objectively today, the shop manager's child finished the 12th grade, while some other children didn't. (a woman born in the early 1970s)

What could my parents offer them? Nothing. My father worked as an editor at a publishing house and my mother was an economist. And the parents of other children could offer a lot: they would bring our class teacher meat and potatoes, they did her house chores and made repairs. If a pupil was not good at learning, their parents would solve this problem very quickly. (I21, a woman born in the late 1960s)

Even if teachers did not take bribes or use the services provided by parents, according to the informants, they nonetheless had a more favourable attitude towards children from "good", richer families:

There was also a teacher in my primary school who gave certain children better grades if she liked them more. Those children whose parents were, so to say, somewhat rich. Although I can't complain, I had good grades, but still, she favoured certain children. (I1, a woman born in the early 1960s)

Our informants noted that everyone knew who was richer and who was not, especially in smaller communities.

Summarising the informants' stories, it can be seen that reference is made not only to *blat*, favouritism, but also to blatantly criminal acts: bribery, theft, etc. These acts were also often presented in a neutral way, without any indignation about breaking the law, which just like *blat*, had become part of the "knowing how to live" in Soviet times.

### **All The Same, All Eager to Stand Out: Soviet Schoolchildren's Attitudes Towards Possessed Things**

The wealth and social status of pupils' parents had an impact not only on teachers' attitudes towards pupils, but also on the manifestations of favouritism at school. The informants point out that the status of the parents, to a large extent, determined the status of the pupils among their peers. The social position of pupils was apparent from the objects and clothes they possessed.

While most of the informants, when remembering school, initially mentioned that all the children at school looked the same, as more details were added, it became clear that almost all of them wanted to stand out in one way or another. Although jewellery was quite strictly forbidden and girls were not allowed to wear make-up ["You were not allowed to wear earrings, to polish nails. No make-up on your eyes" (I25, a woman born in the mid-1960s)], some of them managed to put on make-up ["I used to go home in the country and put on make-up in the school toilet. Even though they

didn't allow make-up at school" (I1, a woman born in the early 1960s)]. The length of the hair the boys wore was regulated, but some of them still tried to grow it long. In some schools, disobedient pupils were punished quite severely:

I remember an older guy having too long hair. He received some remarks, but most probably did not react to them. I saw with my own eyes how the principal and his fierce deputy (they were both fierce) cut him in the back of the head right there with a pair of scissors. They just deliberately ravaged his hair to make him cut it. There were some teachers who used to persecute the girls a lot implementing their policy of no rings, no jewellery, nothing. (I5, a man born in the late 1960s)

The military training teachers were particularly concerned about preventing the cases of long-haired pupils:

Then slightly longer uncut hair was a signal of favour for hippies, who had just marched in the demonstration. This was the reason for being forced to leave the lesson of obligatory initial military training to have your hair cut. They would also call parents. Pupils were made to wear their hair short. (I3, a man born in the late 1970s)

It was the time when long hair was in fashion. And here military training. <...> Your hair had to be short. So what? It was particularly important when it started. The lesson would begin with a military line-up. The pupil on duty had to report to the teacher that the whole class was lined up and that all was in order. The teacher tended to mock at us. In a military style. (I12, a man born in the late 1970s)

Short hair was not the only attribute that made a Soviet pupil look like a soldier. According to Iveta Kestere and Manuel Joaquín Fernández González (2021), who describe the ideal Soviet pupil as an obedient soldier, state that "the resemblance to the army is reinforced by the uniforms: everyone is well-groomed, wearing simple and cheap pupil uniforms and badges of affiliation with children's and youth communist organisations – Red Pioneers and Communist Youth (*Komsomol*)" (p. 20).

The uniforms worn at school were viewed in a controversial way by the informants. On the one hand, there was no need to think about what to wear, and everyone looked "equal and the same, no one showed off fashion and wealth" (I19 a man born in the late 1960s). On the other hand, the uniform itself was annoying because it was "uncomfortable", "terrible", and "very unhygienic". The pleated fabric made it very difficult to wash, perhaps once or twice a year. According to Zsuzsa Millei et al. (2018), "while school uniforms promoted egalitarianism, they also helped to normalise, unify, and discipline the bodies and conduct of children, making children "docile" for schooling" (p. 152).

Following one informant, Soviet pupils "looked like a flock of sheep" (I10, a woman born in the late 1960s). Therefore, it is natural that efforts were made to stand out. Girls tried to wear fancier uniform collars:

I never wore collars or sleeves you could buy in a store. All the time I had either crocheted... or made them myself, or my mother crocheted them... And my grandmother always sewed me collars. I always had original... that stood out... (I2, a woman born in the early 1970s)

Other clothing details, such as patterned socks, were also used to be different. In many cases, the exceptional details of clothing were the result of creativity and the ability to sew, knit, and embroider. But the real status, according to informants, was apparent from the shoes. You could not make those yourself, usually you could only buy uniform sandals or felts in winter which had a ridiculous Russian name *proščai molodost*, i.e., "good-bye, my youth". Therefore, efforts were made to buy shoes "from under the counter" or from speculators. The most fortunate were those children whose parents were able to go abroad (even if those trips were few and rare) or at least to Moscow "When Dad was traveling to Moscow on a business trip, he was carrying scraps of soles for the whole family. And then he brought us shoes. Or something else... those were the details that made you exceptional..." (I2, a woman born in the early 1970s);

I had a friend <...> her mother was a member of a trade union of some kind. This friend of mine, of course, because of her mother's status and her position, went to Germany on an excursion through this correspondence. In short, my friend Jolanta flew to the GDR. It was a group of pupils who, according to this correspondence, went to visit their friends with whom they corresponded. <...> When my friend came back from the GDR, she brought a lot of presents. And of those gifts, I got red shoes. Nobody had them. One shoe was much bigger than the other, but that didn't stop me from enjoying them and wearing them for a very long time. (I30, a woman born in the late 1950s)

However, a pair of real American jeans was the most coveted item, the most desired thing among Soviet adolescents and young people. Jeans were perceived not only as a luxury item, but also as a symbol of the Western lifestyle and the "spirit of freedom". As one of the most popular items bought on the black market, the jeans are identified by researchers on the socialist system as a kind of sign of resistance to the system. Katherine Verdery (1996) points out that for no reason people "could spend an entire month's salary on a pair of blue jeans, for instance, but it was worth it: wearing them signified that you could get something the system said you didn't need and shouldn't have" (p. 9). However, as our research shows, not everyone could afford to "resist the system" in this way. Jeans were available to those who had relatives in the West and received parcels from them, or only to the wealthy: "It was fashionable to have American jeans, expensive ones. <...> In the country they could not afford and only the richer people bought them. You could not buy jeans freely in shops, only in the markets" (I8, a man born in the late 1970s).

Informants who studied in the 1980s mention that jeans were more freely available in those days, and could be brought from socialist Poland:

Jeans appeared in my life when I was a tenth former maybe... A luxury thing. They used to bring them from Poland. <...> My mother brought me some jeans and a Ferrari sweater from Poland and I felt so cool. (I22, a woman born in the late 1950s)

But even then, many students, especially those who lived in the countryside, could only dream of being “cool” just because they had jeans. So some of them would “fake” jeans by rubbing a brick on a pair of locally made, solid blue fabric trousers, or otherwise trying to create the effect of steamed-up denim, while others would try to accentuate their status amongst their peers by other smaller items such as backpacks, pencil cases, pens, and so on. It is also important that they are different from those of their peers and, of course, preferably not of Soviet manufacture:

And another very important thing that made you exceptional... the backpack was very important... Not even the backpack, but the handbag in which you put your books... And what your pencil case looked like was very important. That’s the thing here... The pencil case was something you could show off through. We would get such imported pencil cases. <...> I had those foreign Romanian or Hungarian things that my mother, of course, got through ‘blat’... (I2, a woman born in the early 1970s)

The pupils, whose parents were not well-off and/or did not have many “western” items, tried to improve their status by displaying things that we would now be considered as rubbish: plastic bags with notes in English and pictures, packaging of Western products, etc. Among younger pupils, even wrapping papers of chewing gum produced outside the Soviet Union functioned as a kind of currency.

The shaming of Communist Party functionaries for being petty-bourgeois (Babiracki, Jersild, 2016), and the admiration for material things, especially those made in the “rotten” West, which were incompatible with the morality of the builder of communism (Gedvilas, 1962), did not overcome the desire of Soviet adolescents and young people to distinguish themselves from the “flock of sheep”. However, according to the informants, not everyone could afford to be exceptional.

### **Life in the Soviet Country and the Town: Two Zones of Education and (In)Equality**

Ondrej Kaščák and Branislav Pupala (2018) use the metaphor of two zones to describe their childhood in socialist Czechoslovakia. These two zones are not limited to the Czech Republic and Slovakia, where, according to the researchers, quite different historical roots, economic and social characteristics influenced the nature and trajectories of childhood differently. The two zones also included rural and urban life, where there were significant differences not only in lifestyle but also in values. There are also differences in school experiences.

Researchers on Soviet education and social (in)equality (Zajda, 1980; Matthews, 2011, 2012; Filtzer, 2014) point to the vivid difference between urban and rural schools (in terms of quality of teacher training, quality of teaching, conditions of learning), as well as in terms of the opportunities for students in urban and rural areas to enter higher education, to pursue their careers, etc. These differences are also reflected in the stories of our informants:

Yes, when we entered that school after the eighth grade, we got into a separate class for kids from the countryside, from those rural eight-year schools. We were in Class D <...> And Class A was for city residents. The daughter of the prosecutor and kids of the head of the city hospital studied in this class. <...> Say what you may, there was this division and we did feel somewhat worse. (I20, a woman born in the late 1960s)

According to the informants, it is no secret that most rural schools were indeed inferior and the teachers who worked there were less qualified. Some of them had only finished high school and never enrolled in any universities. And while the differences between urban and rural schools narrowed over the period (Filtzer, 2014; Zajda, 1980), they never converged. In rural areas, there were no specialised schools for gifted children, nor were there schools majoring in foreign language or other subjects.

Naturally, the social and cultural capital of rural children was smaller. Hard-working parents, according to one informant, only wanted to “eat, sleep, meet friends and have a drink” (I5, a man born in the late 1960s). It goes without saying that not all parents understood the benefits of education and encouraged their children to learn. Especially since there was this common practice in rural schools to force the slightly underperforming children of “ordinary collective farmers” to enter vocational schools:

You know what it was like... At those times, if you were not one of those better pupils, you were supposed to go to a vocational school after the 8th grade. Well, I didn't stand a chance that I would finish secondary school with flying colours. <...> Well, I wasn't the worst, there were some who were forcibly expelled to vocational schools after the 6th grade. To train for tractor drivers. <...> This was meant as a punishment. Meaning you were only good for manual jobs. (I8, a man born in the early 1960s)

At first glance, it would seem that such decisions the schools made were only related to pupils' talents and learning outcomes, yet according to some informants, no one remembers that a child of a chairman of a collective farm or an agronomist, even if he did poorly, would be prevented from obtaining at least secondary education. The latter was viewed as one of the main roads from the village to the city, where many believed to have an easier life:

No one wanted their children to be some commoners. Such was this desire for a child to obtain an education, to enter university. And they didn't say

anything to me. Efforts were made to make things better, to behave well, to get good grades so that a person could make a career, to graduate, to work, to live a happy, carefree life. (I5, a man born in the late 1960s)

With the declining attractiveness of blue-collar occupations, especially in the countryside, an intensive propaganda campaign had been carried out since the 1980s: various events were organised to promote and glorify rural labour, posters were put up, milkmaids or tractor drivers were declared “heroes of socialist labour”, various clubs were set up, e.g. the Young Corn Growers’ Club, every year educational journals published hundreds of articles describing success stories of vocational training in rural areas, etc. (Zajda, 1980). However, regardless of the aforesaid measures, “the Soviet countryside remained a dismal place to live” (Filtzer, 2013, p. 516). Therefore, according to Filtzer, the main aspiration of any peasant teenager was to move to a town to work or study as soon as possible (*ibidem*).

## CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

One of the main leitmotifs that emerges in research on post-communist societies is the nostalgic “We all felt equal then”. It can also be seen that the policy of egalitarianism in the Soviet Union and the socialist Eastern Bloc, despite the Communist Party’s slogans of equality, underwent a number of transformations during the Soviet period. Some of them were quite contradictory. For example, as the ideology of socialist competition grew stronger in the internal policy of the USSR, the difficult-to-translate Russian word *uravnilovka* became a derogatory synonym for egalitarianism (Heller, 1988). At the same time, in the context of the Cold War, communist propaganda used the idea of equality in opposition to exploitation, unemployment, poverty, and militarism of the capitalist West. Some other people assumed egalitarianism and the state’s responsibility for the welfare of its loyal subordinates as self-evident axioms (Norkus, 2012). But for some of them, the privileges of the Soviet nomenklatura were perfectly understandable (and even justified). As historian Tomas Vaiseta (2014) observes, when talking about life in the Soviet era, one often relies on the social consensus that “those were the times”, and when referring to *blat*, corruption, bribery, and other things that were inconsistent or even criminal with the values promoted by the communist ideology, without seeing any major contradictions. Following Ledeneva (1998), people varied in their attitudes in general according to their environment and personal dispositions. For some people, all these things were a matter of routine, for others they were even a matter of pride. This is also evidenced by the results of our empirical study.

According to the informants in the study, almost all those who were able to use *blat* connections used them. Soviet school teachers are no exception. *Blat*, bribery and similar practices by the parents of pupils created the con-

ditions for favouritism, guaranteeing better grades for their children and paving the way for their future careers. Informants' stories suggest that it was informal connections and access to deficit goods and/or services that had a greater impact than a social class or a social stratum. Parents positions (especially in the Communist Party), as well as their financial situation, undoubtedly had an influence as well. Although almost all researchers on the links between egalitarian policies and education in the Soviet Union and in socialist countries point out that the children of intellectuals were in a privileged position because they brought better "cultural capital" to school, this capital was not valued in all environments. In schools where the majority of pupils were children of workers or peasants, belonging to the intelligentsia could lead to rejection or even bullying.

Despite the fact that admiration for material goods (especially Western ones) was treated as a sign of bourgeoisness or even as incompatible with "Soviet morality", it was the possession of things and the clothes worn that determined to a large extent the pupil's status among peers. The fact that pupils stood out from the rest in terms of appearance and style was not only discouraged, but also condemned in the Soviet school system. The ideal Soviet pupil was a cog in a smoothly functioning machine, a uniformed soldier. However, this unification, promoted by teachers and school administrators and by communist children and youth organisations (Young Pioneers and Komsomol), did not always resonate with children. On the contrary, in a community of peers, having something special could ensure a better status for a child or a young person. Items made outside the Soviet Union, ranging from jeans and imported shoes to felt-tip pens and even chewing gum wrapping papers, were particularly valued. Here one could argue with Ruth Applebaum (2019), who studied the international "friendship" between the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia and argues that "friendship propaganda encouraged Soviets to buy Czechoslovak-made underwear, perfume, and shoes, and urged Czechoslovaks to purchase Soviet-made cameras, television sets, and cars" (p. 11). It is not clear what the real motives of the Czechoslovak people were, but on the basis of both the research of other researchers and the stories of informants, it is safe to say that the real reason for the popularity of foreign goods in the Soviet Union was not "friendliness", but rather a severe shortage of quality and at least a little bit exceptional goods. Soviet propaganda failed to convince people that the unification of products, the poor assortment and the limited satisfaction of needs, is a "normal" practice of life (Putinaité, 2007). Although during the Cold War, the US was portrayed in a very negative light in Soviet school and in the public sphere, this did not prevent many children and young people in the USSR from dreaming of wearing American-made jeans. In fact, for most of them, jeans that were only available on the black market and were extremely expensive remained a dream unfulfilled until the late 1980s, when better quality substitutes for American jeans became available.

Social stratification was particularly pronounced between the Soviet city and the countryside. During the period under review, the disparities between urban and rural schools (in terms of teacher training, quality of teaching, learning conditions, etc.) were reduced, but the opportunities for urban and rural pupils to receive quality education, to enter higher education institutions, to pursue a career, etc., were far from being equal. Although researchers (e.g., Zajda, 1980; Šimane, 2023) spoke quite highly of vocational technical schools in the USSR and other socialist countries and of the education they provided, our study shows that the “popularity” of these schools may have been determined not only by the choice of the pupils themselves, but also by the violence of the education system towards them. The informants told us that several rural school pupils were simply forced to go to vocational schools after eighth grade. Such “vocational guidance” was determined not only by the students’ own desires, abilities or learning achievements, but also by education policy, which was influenced, among other things, by the low prestige of some professions, such as a tractor driver or a milkmaid, and the reluctance of most young people to choose them. The details of informants’ stories, as well as those of previous studies, show that, in order to ensure a rural-urban workforce balance, some students in rural schools were not encouraged to pursue higher education at all. On the contrary, they may have had their grades lowered, thus increasing the pressure to leave for vocational schools. According to the informants, it was also an excuse for teachers to deal with “troublemakers”. Provided, of course, that the so-called “hooligans” were not the offspring of the head of the collective farm or other high-ranking person in the village.

The path to higher education not only in the countryside but also in the city could have been blocked by the person’s “bad descent” or parental beliefs. Children of “people’s enemies”, exiles and religious parents, especially those who had refused to join Young Pioneers and Komsomol, faced much greater difficulties at school. This was one of the main reasons for receiving a poor letter of reference at the school graduation, which was important for further education. However, this, as well as the manifestations of inequality in Soviet higher education, is the focus of another article.

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