

## Biographical Learning in Religious Education in Slovakia\*

### Biograficzne uczenie się w edukacji religijnej na Słowacji

**Tibor Reimer**

Comenius University,  
Bratislava, Slovakia

ORCID

0000-0001-5005-3942

Tibor.Reimer@frcth.uniba.sk

Received: 17 Nov 2024

Revised: 12 Feb 2025

Accepted: 10 Mai 2025

Published: 30 Jun 2025

**Abstract:** In this study we explore the issue of biographical learning in religious education, specifically in the Slovak context, where the reform of primary education is currently in progress. Biographical learning is defined as working on one's own biography and dealing with other people's biographies. Through biographical learning, children and adolescents can identify with other people as their role models, which supports the process of forming their own identity. The aim of the study is to implement this innovative method of biographical learning in the teaching process of religious education. Biographical learning is also an important part of the religious education curriculum because it allows students to reflect on significant stages of their life journey and to learn to think about them from a faith perspective. Working with one's own biography as well as the biography of other people enables pupils to form a cognitive, emotional and social relationship with themselves and to reflect on their lifestyle, their values and norms. The result of the study is a proposal of a method how to work with biography in religious education in schools in Slovakia. On the example of the life of Eleonora Zacharova, a native in Nürnberg (Germany), who lived most of her life in Slovakia, we will present a method of biographical learning within the Roman Catholic religious education curriculum in Slovakia with concrete suggestions for didactic implementation of biographical learning in religious education using the example of Eleonora Zacharova's biography.

**Keywords:** Biographical learning, (auto)biography, Religious Education

**Abstrakt:** W artykule poruszona została kwestia biograficznego uczenia się w edukacji religijnej, szczególnie w kontekście słowackim, gdzie obecnie trwa reforma szkolnictwa podstawowego. Biograficzne uczenie się definiuje się jako naukę opartą na własnej biografii oraz na biografii innych ludzi. Dzięki poznawaniu biografii dzieci i młodzież mogą identyfikować się z innymi ludźmi jako wzorami do naśladowania, co wspiera proces kształtowania ich własnej tożsamości. Celem badania jest wdrożenie tej innowacyjnej metody uczenia się w procesie nauczania religii. Biograficzne uczenie się jest również ważną częścią programu nauczania religii, ponieważ pozwala uczniom zastanowić się nad ważnymi etapami ich życia i nauczyć się myśleć o nich z perspektywy wiary. Praca z własną biografią, a także z biografiami innych osób, umożliwia uczniom nawiązanie poznawczej, emocjonalnej i społecznej relacji z samym sobą oraz refleksję nad własnym stylem życia, wartościami i normami. Rezultatem badania jest propozycja metody pracy z biografią w edukacji religijnej w szkołach na Słowacji. Na przykładzie życia Eleonory Zacharovej, pochodzącej z Norymbergi w Niemczech, która większość swojego życia przeżyła na Słowacji, zostanie przedstawiona metoda uczenia się biograficznego w programie nauczania religii rzymskokatolickiej na Słowacji wraz z konkretnymi sugestiami dotyczącymi dydaktycznego wdrażania tej metody.

**Słowa kluczowe:** biograficzne uczenie się, (auto)biografia, edukacja religijna



This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>).

\* This article was prepared within the framework of the project KEGA 047UK-4/2024 Biographical Learning in Religious Education in Primary and Secondary Schools at Comenius University Bratislava (2024-2025).

## INTRODUCTION

Currently, Slovakia is in the process of reforming primary education, which inevitably requires changes in both the content and the form of education. This fact is based not only on years of national and international analyses and comparisons, but also on the experience of the pandemic situation, which confirmed this fact and fully revealed the weaknesses of the education system, which have been discussed for years by analysts, experts and professionals. According to Pupala et al. (2022, 12), the main goal of education reform is to provide pupils with an education adapted to contemporary society, with the intention of increasing pupils' literacy and the skills needed for life in a global and digital economy and society.

Changes in the content as well as in the form of education also concern Roman Catholic Religious Education. Introduction of new didactic methods for effective teaching in Slovakia is also part of this school reform. In this article we concentrate on an innovative method of biographical learning in Religious Education in Slovakia. In doing so, we will seek to answer the question of whether biographical learning is also an appropriate method in Religious Education. We will try to define biographical learning and apply it to the learning process of Religious Education in schools in Slovakia using the example of a specific biography. Biographical learning, understood as working on one's own biography and dealing with other people's biographies, emphasizes the basic equivalence and yet diversity of different life experiences, also in a religious sense. Therefore, as an innovative learning method, it can be a central element of Religious Education that focuses on a personal relationship with God. Biographical learning reminds us of everyday heroes who are "like you and me" and can enable pupils to put their own approaches to religious issues into dialogue with others.

### 1. BIOGRAPHICAL LEARNING IN SCHOOLS

Biographical learning is defined as the working on one's own biography and dealing with other people's biographies. Children and adolescents as well as adults identify with other people as their role models, and this supports the process of forming their own identity.

The concept of autobiographical and biographical learning comes from the Greek *αὐτός* = oneself, one's own, *βίος* = life, way of life, and *γράφειν* = to write down, to record, to inscribe. Writing life in the sense of writing, reflecting on and shaping life, therefore, always has a present and even future orientation in addition to its historical dimension (Volck 2016).

Historically, biographical learning in the post-World War II school context has long been condemned for political and historical reasons and came to a crisis in the context of the Cultural Revolution of 1968, as it was massively ideologically abused by totalitarian conceptions of the 20th century. Nevertheless, above all, the American psychologist A. Bandura (1971) developed his social-cognitive theory

of learning, which was based on the term and concept of learning from models. A. Bandura pointed out the importance of learning from models, noting however, that the so-called model or imitation learning is difficult to control, and attitudes can be manipulated, or other attitudes can be adopted without reflection. In this conception, learning was aimed at getting a person to adopt a new behaviour as a result of observing other people's behaviours or to adapt and change the existing behavioural models accordingly (Bandura 1971, 5).

Biographical and autobiographical texts thus came to the attention of world literary studies as a genre in the 1970s. This increased interest was related to the question of the position of (auto)biography in the entire literary field and its position on the border between non-fiction and fiction. The continuing fascination with autobiography in particular is also due to its compositional and genre instability and the absence of a clear norm and definition. Since biography and autobiography entered the field of literary theory, the number of works on the subject has grown to untold proportions, and autobiographical texts have become the subject of research in many other disciplines.

Biographical learning, in particular, has established itself as a pedagogical, didactic and methodological concept since the 1980s. Biography is a source of learning that, according to D. Nittel determines not only the actual paths of learning, learning resistances and modes of acquisition, but also the future learning goals and perspectives of the learner. In addition to communicating and reflecting on biographical experiences, biographical learning promotes the formation of new possibilities for interpretation and action, because a person's biography includes both the subjective and objective aspects of the life course (Nittel 2018, 146-148).

The work on a biography incorporates various aspects of the social world as well. Thus, biography can also be a gateway to the knowledge of society, since its formative structure is directly linked to the life of the individual. In this context, P. Alheit uses the term "biographicality" to refer to the ever-changing interpretation of one's own life contexts that one experiences as formable and shapable (Alheit 2003, 13-16).

Biographical learning assumes its significance primarily in school education. According to S. Volck, pupils are drawn into the action as they work on biographies, which enables them to open their eyes to wider contexts and life experiences and to understand the tensions in life stories. Following the lives of others provides pupils with the opportunity to create a distance that enables them to distance themselves from their own constructions of identity. In addition, they can mentally replay different attitudes to eventually arrive at their own new orientation. This is all the more important because identity today is often a mosaic of identities that requires comparison with other life conceptions: in the search for meaning, in moral development, and in the search for one's own position (Volck 2016).

Thus, engaging with their own and others' biographies enables pupils to relate to themselves cognitively, emotionally and socially and to reflect on and compare their lifestyles, values and norms. According to Volck, therefore, working with

biography acts as a mirror in relation to working with one's own identity, as the external perspective provides them with an opportunity to practice their perspective, to which they can ultimately critically comment themselves (Volck 2016).

According to E. Stiller, biographical learning is inherently oriented towards the acquisition and development of competence, because it comes from and is focused on the learners themselves. By engaging with another's biography, pupils are given the opportunity to reflect on their own lives and to describe, reinterpret and reorganise the contexts to which they are exposed. It is thus a holistic learning that goes far beyond mere knowledge transfer. Rather, it is an effective method of initiating, concretely applying and intensifying the procedural competencies that are also articulated in the Roman Catholic curriculum in Slovakia. For this, biographies of other people who are historically more or less well-known and influential personalities, as well as contemporaries from the pupils' real-life environment and pupils' autobiographical self-reflections can be used (Stiller 1999, 199).

Several authors distinguish several approaches to biographical learning: biographical self-reflection, analysis of other people's biographies and learning through other people's life stories. According to A. Knauff, biographical learning can be understood primarily as autobiographical learning, that is, as learning from one's own life story. Autobiographical learning refers to learning processes that are explicitly triggered by one's own life story with experiences, challenges and crises. Biographical learning processes are guided by the learner's own logic and the layering of life-historical experiences as a horizon of meaning within which new learning is categorized. Individual biography is both the background from which learning takes place and the horizon in which learning takes place. It is thus a capacity for biographical self-reflection, which takes place not only through individual reflection, but often also in communicative processes, e.g. through biographical narratives, through which the subject gains a clear picture of himself or herself and puts his or her own history in relation to others and the environment (Knauff 2023). Autobiographical thinking, according to D. Demetrius (1996, 56) awakens images, emotions and memories, but also encourages us to question ourselves and ask questions, and is particularly appropriate where it manifests as introspection, as a process of self-inquiry, of self-discovery around our being. Compared to other narrative typologies, autobiography is defined as "writing reality," an attempt to rediscover truths hidden beneath an apparent surface.

Biographical learning can also be understood as biographically oriented learning, that is, learning with reference to one's own life story. The aim is to make the connection between content and life experience through correlation. In addition, biographical learning can also be understood as learning with the help of other people's life stories. In this way, other people's biographies can be an orientation aid or an aid for one's own life decisions. It is important for the individual as well as for the community that beliefs and traditions are passed on not only through books, but also through people and that they can be read from their life stories (Knauff 2023).

Similarly, B. Dausien distinguishes three forms of biographical learning. The first form is to understand biography as a background for learning, always taking into account previously acquired experiential knowledge. In addition, biography can be seen as a site of learning, whereby the learner can explicate and compare his or her interests, previous history and previously unreflected knowledge with others in communication. A third way is to understand biography as an object of learning. By analysing one's own biography as well as the biographies of others, one can create a space for reflection on one's own identity and belonging. Biographies often represent collective experiences, but they can also offer a counterpoint to socially dominant narratives (Dausien 2011, 116-120).

In summary, we can say that biographical learning is the conscious engagement with biographical issues either by thematizing one's own life story or by engaging with the biographies of others. Both biographical reflection and self-reflection enable pupils to find meaning and prepare them to become subjects of their own lives by dealing with their own or others' past experiences, reflexively re-appropriating them and becoming aware of their relevance to present decisions. The reciprocal exchange and sharing of these reflections by pupils within the classroom about individual experiences even opens up the possibility for some pupils to experience themselves as less deficient and to be able to accept themselves better or even to believe in themselves more (Ziebertz 2010, 360).

## 2. BIOGRAPHICAL LEARNING IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

Biographical learning is also an important part of the Religious Education curriculum as it enables pupils to reflect on significant stages in their life journey and to learn to think about them from a faith perspective. Working with one's own biography as well as the biography of other people enables pupils to form a cognitive, emotional and social relationship with themselves and to reflect on their lifestyle, their values and norms.

The interest in both biography and autobiography in Religious Education in the 1980s was characterized primarily in terms of model learning until biographical learning was established as a new concept from 1990 onwards. This modification of the term was associated with another paradigm shift: from a behaviorist-psychological conception of imitative learning to a more learner-centered approach to working on one's own biography.

Since religious learning always takes place through imitation and identification, learning from role models is essential for Religious Education in schools. Living religion can be expressed and made intelligible to pupils through models of Christian life. It is characteristic of the Christian faith that it cannot be understood in the abstract, but is expressed and made tangible in practical behaviour. Such models of lived Christian faith can support adolescents in their search for the meaning of life and individual identity and provide them with orientation, which is increasingly important, especially in view of the changed

religious situation and the complexity and plurality of possible life plans in today's modern society (Sajak and von Eiff 2017, 2).

It is important to note, however, that biographical learning does not primarily imply a model-orientation. Several authors stress the fact that learning from role models is always deficit-oriented: a role model shows me how my life could be better, fairer, more just, more in solidarity, more consistent, etc., and how I could improve it by imitation. Conversely, the self-determination and self-development of the learners themselves take a back seat to the admiration and imitation of the role model. In places, therefore, biographical learning must refrain from direct transfer to one's own life world and therefore also means more than learning from role models (Hofmann-Driesch et al. 2018, 6).

According to K. Lindner (2023, 282), children in primary school are already able to reflect on their life so far and on their self-image, which they gain primarily from feedback on performance and from interaction with peers. Thus, children in primary school reflect on themselves and thus on their biographies in exchange with their environment and other people's perceptions of them. As they grow older, it increasingly becomes their task to develop a life plan to find their place in the social system. Religious Education in school aims at encouraging children to become subjects and therefore must enable them to work on their "biographical role" in the context of the classroom. Dealing with other people's biographies hold potential in this respect, not least because children like to focus on other, usually adult, people. They look for role models whose behaviour or lifestyle they admire because biographical representations of others make it easier for them to visualise their desired future.

K. Lindner points out that biographical learning in Religious Education does not focus on a particular methodology. However, he characterizes some areas of biographical learning in religion classes in primary school, which are working on one's own biography, dealing with the biography of ordinary people, and thematizing biblical figures and saints. Working on one's own biography enables primary school pupils to reflect on themselves and their life plans. In the context of Religious Education, it is also important to consider religious self-projection, the stimulation of a subjective sense of religion. The experiences thus collected and systematized as well as the contextualizations of experiences constitute an expression of biographical self-reflection and - not least motivated by the encounter with other biographical life-plans - allow one to reflect on entanglement, including one's own entanglement in religious contexts (Lindner 2023, 284).

Dealing with other people's biographies runs the risk that strangers are often out of touch and out of context in children's lives. H. Mendl points to the importance of "saints of everyday life", of "local heroes" for orienting the processes of learning. It is people "like you and me" who prove that forms of altruistic Christian behaviour are also possible in our society. The aim here is not to admire and imitate these people, but to have a productive dialogue with them. Another advantage is that working with everyday saints, motivates pupils to actively seek

out “local heroes” in their own environment. In order to embark on this search, children need to develop an idea of religiously based positive behaviour. It is here that religious education takes place unobtrusively, not least because it can lead to reflections on one’s own altruistic acts, which are implemented in aid projects. Primary school pupils thus become “local heroes” themselves (Mendl 2005, 125). If this is accompanied by corresponding reflections in Religious Education lessons, children can get an idea of what it can mean to be committed to others on the basis of Christian convictions.

In particular, another source of biographical learning is the study of the Bible, which is not only a document of faith but also a collection of human experiences and life stories. If we note, for example, the experiences with God narratively described in the Bible, they are always connected to life stories, human destinies, and existential biographical experiences. In the same way, the pupils’ own experiences of God, or at least their accounts of their experiences of God, are always linked to their own biographies. For the development of religious competence, this means that it can only be recognized and developed in interaction with one’s own biography (Sajak and von Eiff 2017, 5-6).

In addition to biblical figures, the theme of saints is an integral part of Religious Education in primary school. Saints as intercessors with God are increasingly appearing in the Catholic Religious Education curriculum. Working with biographies from biblical stories as well as historical saints offers the opportunity for children and young people to consciously shape their own biographies and be inspired by role models from the history of Christianity and other religions. B. Husmann summarizes that church history explicitly comes alive through people, through individually acting heroes who propel history forward, who can be revered and who are appropriate role models, and thus become a relevant teaching subject. However, since individuals are always situated in a particular social, societal and political context, Husmann sees the central role of biographical learning in Religious Education as seeking and finding a middle ground between the hero who acts alone and the nameless prototype who acts as a product of society and politics (Husmann 2011, 58-59). Pupils can be encouraged to look at the ways in which people try to realise their Christianity - even radically. This requires, among other things, contextualizing the people revered as saints in their time. In this way, their provocative potential can be realized, especially if they also become accessible in their weaknesses and with their doubts. It is then that their courage to radically orient their lives to Christ can arouse the curiosity of the pupils and challenge them to take a stand. Whether the saints, men and women, become an inspiration or even a point of orientation for the pupils cannot be planned, but is left to the free decision of the children as subjects of their learning and educational process (Lindner 2023, 290).

Biographical learning does not necessarily have in mind a clearly defined “application knowledge”, but is always “open” in some respect, while at the same time it cannot be separated from the actual organization of life (application), and is therefore itself competence-oriented: both the biographies of other people and the

exploration of one's own life story give the learner indirect offers of identification.

This is an opportunity especially for middle and secondary schools, where the heterogeneity of pupils' different life stories is very high. Here, pupils who have already had threatening existential experiences (parental separation, moving away, bullying, running away, exclusion, etc.) meet others who have grown up in sheltered family and social structures and who often still have little differentiated experience of their own existence in the world. The following ideas and methods are therefore intended to encourage pupils to anchor their work on biographies more firmly in the classroom. Most aspects apply to both work on the biographies of others and to autobiographical work.

### 3. AN EXAMPLE OF BIOGRAPHICAL LEARNING IN RELIGIOUS EDUCATION IN SLOVAKIA

Religious Education in Slovakia is taught as denominational religious education. Religious Education is a required elective course in alternation with ethics education. In addition to the Roman Catholic and Greek Catholic Churches, the religions of the Evangelical Church of the Augsburg Confession, the Orthodox Church, the Reformed Christian Church and the Church of the Brethren are also taught in schools.

The main aim of Roman Catholic Religious Education in Slovakia is for pupils to develop their religious literacy and to have the opportunity to acquire and deepen their personal and responsible Christian and religious identity. Religious literacy is understood as the pupil's comprehensive ability to deal responsibly with his or her own religiosity and with the religious beliefs of others. A pupil's religious literacy is developed through acquired religious competence. At the same time, Religious Education also develops the ethical-value dimension of pupils, which is common to the subject of ethics education, and thus contributes to integral education in primary schools (Reimer 2020, 137).

Biographical learning is already in its basic orientation directed at the development of pupils' competences, because it comes from the pupils and focuses on the pupils themselves. By engaging with another's biography, pupils are given the opportunity to reflect on their own lives and to describe, reinterpret and reorganise the contexts to which they are exposed. Although the description is reproductive, it always takes place simultaneously in a reorganizing setting within a broader context. The active, formative confrontation with one's own or another's biography constitutes an organizing achievement that has already been preceded by an internal process of appraisal. This means that learning from biographies is always a holistic learning that goes far beyond mere knowledge transfer. Rather, it is an effective method of initiating, concretely applying and intensifying the religious competences formulated in the Roman Catholic religious curriculum.

According to S. Volck (2016), children's autobiographical memory develops from the age of 5 or 6 years. The so-called narrative self develops, which helps

to process emotionally exciting events. However, biographical learning is not a completed process, but is ongoing permanently. Working with biography, and especially autobiographical approaches, opens up reflective questions such as: what has given or is giving me strength in difficult life situations? What has brought or is bringing me progress? How does my environment affect me? What characterizes me? What makes me the person I am now? What are my goals? It is also worth thinking about these issues from the perspective of someone else's biography: What would that person answer? In addition to adopting a perspective, the pupils themselves also engage in the questions. The external perspective provides them with an opportunity to practice their perspective, to which they can eventually critically comment themselves. On the other hand, learning from external role models is linked to young people's growing desire for "heroes". These heroes form the starting point for dreams and goals and thus - consciously or unconsciously - define the normative framework for behaviour.

In this regard, the curriculum of the Roman Catholic religion in Slovakia is very rich in opportunities for biographical learning or work on the biographies of others. In the first cycle (grades 1-3) it is more about identification with the saints in the way of following Jesus Christ (St. Nicholas, St. Martin, St. Francis of Assisi). From grade 4 (second cycle) onwards, it is primarily the biblical figures and their belief in God that come to the fore (Noah, Abraham and Isaac, Jacob and Esau, Joseph, Daniel, Moses, Elijah, Elisha, David, Gideon, Samson, Solomon). However, it is more about the historical perception of these biblical figures and not as objects of identification. In the third cycle (grades 6 to 9), the saints, especially the Slovak saints and blessed of the last century, come to the fore again. Confrontation with ordinary people, in the sense of biographical teaching, is present in the curriculum of the Roman Catholic religion in Slovakia only in the ninth grade of primary school in the theme of lifestyle, where the pupil has the opportunity to confront his or her role models. The acquired competence is expressed in the pupils' ability to perceive the connection between freedom and their own actions in order to construct their own ranking of values. An explicit opportunity for biographical learning also occurs in secondary school, in grade 10, in the topic "Saints of Next Doors", where pupils have the opportunity to reflect on their own lives as a journey towards their own identity and as a journey towards God, while also working to identify their own vocation to holiness (Reimer 2020, 150).

As can be seen from these examples, confronting the lives of biblical characters, saints and ordinary people alike, is a good opportunity to connect the content of the lesson to the life world of the pupils and to make them reflect on the personal meaning of what they have learned through personal and foreign experiences. This moves their own lives to the centre of the learning process. In this way, pupils can experience themselves as actors in their own lives, rather than as "pawns of overarching events" (Lindner 2023, 290).

### 3.1 Example of a biography: Eleonora Zacharova

The story of Eleonora Zacharova is a good example for biographical learning in Religious Education, despite the fact that, although she does not explicitly talk about her belief in God, she makes many of her life choices with a basic trust in goodness and with immense hope. We encountered this biography as part of the school project “Fates That Wrote the 20th Century” (she was interviewed in the spring of 2024), which introduced various living figures through whom Slovak history of the last century can be better understood. The life of Eleonora Zacharova can be placed in the Religious Education teaching in the ninth grade of elementary school in the topic of lifestyle. We briefly summarise her biography and also present her personal testimony.



Fig.1: Eleonora Zacharova  
(source: archive)

Eleonora Zacharova is a native of Nürnberg, Germany, who also helped in the Slovak National Uprising. She saved several people at that time. She is incredibly 101 years old and lives in Svit (Slovakia). Of the 101 years of her life, she has lived 80 here in Slovakia, and only 20 in her native city of Nürnberg.

*“I was born on 19.2.1923 in Nürnberg. My parents came here once upon a time. My family is from another region, near France, and I had a big family, my paternal grandparents had a cigar factory and my maternal grandfather had a coal warehouse on the Rhine. I had a wonderful childhood”.*

She could not imagine living anywhere else but in this historical city. However, her young years were forcefully interrupted by events that we know today more from history books: in 1933, she was 10 years old and Adolf Hitler had come to power in Germany. Today, she is one of the last living witnesses who saw him with her own eyes. The rise of Nazism in Germany happened right before her eyes. She has never forgotten how her father threw a radio out the window one day when Hitler was giving a speech. In her family, the Nazi regime was bitterly rejected - not least because many of their friends ended up in Nazi camps as enemies of the Reich for political reasons. *“In every third house there was someone who ended up in Dachau. We also couldn’t say what we wanted,”* she said.

As a young girl, she also watched in horror the infamous pogroms against the Jewish population in Nürnberg, which today is also known in the history books as Kristallnacht. When Adolf Hitler triggered the Second World War, these events had a powerful impact on the lives of Eleonora and her family, changing them from the ground up.

*“It was a difficult time, but we still tried to live our lives the best we could. My father, who lived through the First World War, used to say it was a huge tragedy. Schools*

*closed and the war affected our lives. We were handed out ration cards for basic things. Everything was strictly controlled. When the war was on, we were divided. Some went to the factory, others to the market or other businesses. I went to a factory called AEG. There they taught us different things, how to work with Morse code and stenography. The planes came in and we watched them in the telephone central. We had to be prepared for everything. After the alarms, we went back to work. I was doing new things in the factory and we had little breaks there. I remember that period very well. The bombing started first in Berlin. That was the worst for me. We heard the sirens and we all had to go to the basement. In the morning the newspapers said that the whole of Berlin was in the basement. We survived the storm there, too. Later they started bombing Nuremberg as well. The carpet bombing raids were particularly terrible. Everything was destroyed. My girlfriend had a grandmother who died during the bombing.”*

However, during the turbulent times, she met a Slovak, Anton Zachar, in her hometown, who was returning home from Belgium. They fell in love, married and started a family. And in 1943, they decided to leave for Slovakia with their already several-month-old daughter Charlotte.

*“Nürnberg was already being bombed by the American air force at that time, and we often had to run to the basement to hide. It was impossible to sleep at night, so my husband and I said that we would leave in time with our 5-month-old Lotka - as we called her - to Slovakia, where it was probably quieter.”*

In 1943, they came to Liptov, to the village of Lúčky, near Ružomberok, where Anton came from, it was really quieter, although the first partisan units were already operating in the mountains. It was a big change for Eleonora. The Zacharovs thought they would return to Bavaria after half a year, but they stayed a little longer. When the Slovak National Uprising broke out, her husband Anton immediately joined it, and as a German she also helped him in this activity. *“When eight men from Lúčky were taken by the SS to the prison in Ružomberok because someone had denounced them for helping the partisans, I wrote to the German commander, who accepted me and, after my persuasion, released them. Before I left, however, I had to sign a reversal that I would be shot if it turned out in the future that these guys were cooperating with the resistance after all. It started to be a hard life for me in Lúčky. The shop assistant knew a little German, but when I addressed him in German, the mayor overheard and threatened me to stop and switch to Slovak. I got so scared that even with my husband I spoke only Slovak after that.”*

At the end of the war, the Zachars' house burned down, and they moved in with their godparents in an emergency shelter. Their son Janko was born, there was reason to rejoice, but after the liberation, they started to move out the Germans. The “betrayers”, as Eleonora calls them, reported her as well and she was summoned before the Russian headquarters in Ružomberok. *“I went with my son Janko to the Russian headquarters and was received there by an officer and a translator. I told him how it was with us. Then Janko started crying, he was hungry. The officer showed me the room next door to go there to nurse the boy. Only I lost my milk out of fear. When*

*I told the Russian, he hugged me and said: You are a Slovak mother and you are bringing up Slovak children here, not in Germany. I'll give you a letter for the mayor to let you live in peace."*

After the war, Eleonora considered returning to Nürnberg with her family. But other circumstances occurred. In 1948, the communist regime took over in Czechoslovakia and everything changed. After the war, a decree of the President of the Czechoslovakia was issued that deprived ethnic Germans of their civil rights. Until then, there was also an official ban on visits to public rooms, entertainments, forests and parks by members of the German minority. An exception was to be made for German anti-fascists. In 1948, she was employed in a factory in Svit in a telephone exchange. There, she was given a two-room apartment, became involved in public activities in the Red Cross and in the Women's Union. She was not issued a citizenship card until sometime in 1951.

After twenty years, she was finally able to track down her own parents. However, during the communist regime it was not easy to travel to the West. She came to Slovakia in 1943 with a German Reich passport and only later dared to apply for a Czechoslovak passport. At first, the authorities refused to issue her a passport. Then, she was advised by an official to join the Communist Party, otherwise she would not be allowed to go to West Germany. *"Well, I signed the application form. What was I supposed to do? They let me go with my daughter, my sons had to stay in Svit, so that I wouldn't escape. They gave us a promise of ten marks per person in foreign currency for a three-week stay. Ridiculous money, you couldn't live on that."* In the meantime, however, her father had died, but she was not allowed to attend her father's funeral. Only later was she able to visit her native Nürnberg with her daughter Lotta. By then Charlotte was already 20 years old and they were planning her wedding. It was not until 1984 that she came to Germany again, to Munich for a change, to visit her sister. Today, she has no relatives there. She has been a widow for almost forty years and is survived by a daughter who died when she was 40. Two sons, four grandsons and six great-grandchildren live in Slovakia. She turned 101 years old in February. *"They all came down to Svit to see me and kissed me so much that I got the flu, from which I couldn't recover for a long time,"* she laughs.

### 3.2 Examples of the implementation of biographical learning in the teaching of Religious Education

Working with the biographies of today's people makes it easier for pupils to draw a correlation between themselves and these ordinary "everyday heroes", as they are not great saints but rather "saints next door" (Pope Francis). The following reasons support the biographical learning on the biography of people today:

- they live in close proximity and are people "like you and me";
- they prove that different forms of altruistic behaviour are also possible in our society;
- in their everyday life they form a bridge between the prevailing concepts of life of today's people and the added value of Christian social behaviour;

- heologically, the orientation towards the “little saints” can be justified by the “model of succession”, because the introduction into the Christian life is not done hastily but in small steps;
- direct face-to-face encounters are facilitated mainly by people in the immediate surroundings and present (Mendl 2015, 260).

Here, we give some examples of the didactic implementation of biographical learning in religious education, using the case of Eleonora Zacharova’s biography:

a) As a didactic implementation of biographical learning in the teaching of Religious Education, the map of Eleonora Zacharova’s life can be used as a method. Biographies are subject to a certain chronological sequence in which life stages and decisions form moments that characterize and divide a life. Based on the psychology of perception, spatial references are much easier to visualize and remember than temporal ones. It is, therefore, important to transform biography into a locatable schema: the life map describes reality in a model-like and reductive way, while pupils notice and represent the different sections they read in biographical texts and describe their interrelationships spatially on the life map. The life map can be oriented to historical circumstances but also to internal life stages. For example, a country, but also a neighbourhood or entire continents, can be chosen as the basis for the map. Each “space” has its own specificity, which can result from the temporal or content arrangement. The pupils are first of all asked to research Eleonora Zacharova’s biography, name the different stages of her life and show them symbolically on the map. The map of Eleonora Zacharova’s life could consist of a life journey that passes through three main stages: the town of Nürnberg, the village of Lúčky near Ružomberok and finally the town of Svit under the Tatra Mountains. In the second step, pupils can name how these areas of life are related (are they connected, are they separate?), how they are connected and what consequences follow from this. Assessment of individual pupils’ outcomes can be done by looking for common elements and differences in the proposed maps of Eleonora Zacharova’s life.

b) The didactic implementation of biographical learning in Religious Education can be concretised as the creation of a fictional photo album of Eleonora Zacharova. Similarly, to the real photo album, pupils are asked to recall specific events in her life: her childhood in Nürnberg, the events of Nazism, her marriage and the birth of her children, her departure to Slovakia, her help and support for the Slovak National Uprising, her life during communism, her visits to her native Germany, her life in Svit. Pictures for this purpose can be found on the Internet. However, pupils can also reconstruct the events, e.g. take pictures of them with a mobile phone and possibly “historically” edit them using suitable software or image editing applications. An important element is a suitable commentary on the photographs. The photo album can be supplemented with additional questions, e.g. What gave you strength at special moments? What exciting and important moments in Eleonora Zacharova’s life are worth sharing?

c) Another option for the didactic implementation of biographical learning in Religious Education is the creation of a fictive profile on a social network (Facebook,

LinkedIn or Instagram). The social network profile combines several of the possible methods of working with biographical learning, such as photo album, interview, etc. Different stories can be created that depict life stages, but also attitudes, preferences and external influences. Combining text with photos is very appealing in this respect. A good idea is also a page with fictitious “published” chat messages from different people and “answers” by Eleonora Zacharova. As a next level, it could be, for example, to create a dialogue between Eleonora Zacharová and another person from the present or the past. Similarly, the profile could be supplemented with additional questions, e.g. what obstacles did Eleonora Zacharova encounter? What would be important to her? What would be disadvantageous to her? How would Mrs. Zacharova behave towards contemporary movements, etc.

d) We can also implement biographical learning through an acrostic, made up of the letters of Eleonora Zacharova’s name. The acrostic belongs to the methods of creative writing and has proved itself, for example, in writing the characteristics of a person. The most commonly used form of acrostic is the so-called true acrostic, in which we read the name from top to bottom. Pupils can write a characteristic of the person or feelings that occurred to them when reading the biography.

For example:

<b>E</b> m p a t i a	(empathy)
<b>L</b> á s k a k r o d i n e	(love for family)
<b>E</b> n e r g i c k o s ť	(energy)
<b>O</b> p t i m i z m u s	(optimism)
<b>N</b> e o b y č a j n o s ť	(extraordinariness)
<b>O</b> d v a h a	(courage)
<b>R</b> o z h o d n o s ť	(determination)
<b>A</b> d a p t á c i a	(adaptation)

Other opportunities to work with biographical learning in Religious Education might include creating an interview with Mrs. Eleonora Zacharova or a fictional interview, creating a book of her life, a biographical comic, a family tree, designing a diary, a network map, writing a letter/email from Mrs. Zacharova, transferring a biography to a current situation, writing a prayer or poem.

## CONCLUSION

Biographical learning as working on one’s own biography and engaging with other people’s biographies emphasizes the fundamental equivalence of different life experiences. The central life questions for young people at this age are, “Who am I, who have I been, and who do I want to be?” Young people seek the answer to the question about themselves in the mirror of others. Biographical learning places equal value on different life plans in this field of tension. Biographical learning

is therefore possible in principle for every person. What is important is that the pupils experience and learn things from each other. Or quite elementary: that they perceive the other.

Biographical learning is therefore a central element of Religious Education, which focuses on a personal relationship with God. Biblical texts but also the biographies of the saints speak of the testimonies of people who had experiences with God and passed them on. Here again, biographical learning can open up avenues of reflection beyond right and wrong and enable pupils to put their own approaches to religious issues into dialogue with others.

The featured life story of Mrs. Eleonora Zacharova reminds us of local everyday heroes who are “just like you and me”. Engaging with “everyday heroes” motivates pupils to actively seek out “local heroes” in their own environment.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## REFERENCES:

- Alheit, Peter. 2003. “Biographizität’ als Schlüsselqualifikation. Plädoyer für transitorische Bildungsprozesse.” *Arbeitsgemeinschaft Betriebliche Weiterbildungsforschung. Projekt Qualifikations-Entwicklungs-Management: Weiterlernen – neu gedacht Erfahrungen und Erkenntnisse. QUEM-report, Schriften zur beruflichen Weiterbildung*, Heft 78,13-16. Accessed on: 10.10.2024. <https://www.abwf.de/content/main/publik/report/2003/Report-78.pdf>.
- Baierl, Michaela. 2009. *Biografiearbeit in der Schule: Eine Methode zur Förderung der Identitätsentwicklung bei Kindern*. München: Grin.
- Bandura, Albert. 1971. *Social Learning Theory*. New York: General Learning Press.
- Dausien, Bettina. 2011. “Biographisches Lernen und „Biographizität. Überlegungen zu einer pädagogischen Idee und Praxis in der Erwachsenenbildung.” *Hessische Blätter für Volksbildung* 2: 116-120.
- Demetrio, Duccio. 1996. *Raccontarsi. L'autobiografia come cura di sé*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore.
- Hofmann-Driesch, Nadine et al. 2018. “Zwölf Thesen zum biografischen Lernen in Begegnung.” *RPI Impulse* 4 (6): 6-7.
- Husmann, Bärbel. 2011. “Wen interessiert die Person? Eine Einführung in biografisches Lernen.” *Loccumer Pelikan* 2: 58-62.
- Knauff, Angela. 2023. *Biografisches Lernen und Biografie-Orientierung, außerschulisch*. Accessed on: 20.09.2024. <https://cms.ibep-prod.com/app/uploads/sites/18/2023/08/9fb2218b219f4eb4a9f597ba8b4fddb4>.
- Lindner, Konstatin. 2023. *Biografisches Lernen: Kleine Leute und große Gestalten*. Accessed on: 10.09.2024. <https://fis.uni-bamberg.de/server/api/core/bitstreams/0cbfcf10-d4b7-49a5-bbe4-f12411f3774d/content>.
- Mendl, Hans. 2005. *Lernen an (außer-)gewöhnlichen Biografien. Religionspädagogische Anregungen für die Unterrichtspraxis*. Donauwörth: Auer.

- Mendl, Hans. 2015. "Modelle – Vorbilder – Leitfiguren. Lernen an außergewöhnlichen Biografien." In *Religionspädagogik innovative*, edited by Rita Burrichter et al., Band 8. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Nittel, Dieter. 2018. "Biographietheoretische Ansätze in der Erwachsenenbildung." In *Handbuch Erwachsenenbildung*, edited by Rudolf Tippelt, Aiga von Hippel, 145-159. Wiesbaden: Springer.
- Pupala, Branislav et al. 2022. *Vzdelávanie pre 21. storočie. Východiská zmien v kurikule základného vzdelávania*. Bratislava: Štátny pedagogický ústav.
- Reimer, Tibor. 2020. *Náboženská výchova ako rozvoj náboženských kompetencií*. Bratislava: Don Bosco.
- Sajak, Clauß Peter and Miriam Sophia von Eiff. 2017. *Biografisches Lernen*. Accessed on: 5.09.2024. <https://www.die-bibel.de/stichwort/100230>.
- Stiller, Edwin. 1999. *Dialogische Fachdidaktik*, Band 2. Paderborn: Schöningh.
- Volck, Steffen. 2016. *Lernen an Biografien zum Kompetenzerwerb*. Accessed on: 10.08.2024. [https://lehrerfortbildung-bw.de/u\\_gewi/religion-ev/gym/bp2016/fb5/5\\_autobio/1\\_einf/lernen\\_an\\_biographien.pdf](https://lehrerfortbildung-bw.de/u_gewi/religion-ev/gym/bp2016/fb5/5_autobio/1_einf/lernen_an_biographien.pdf).
- Ziebertz, Hans-Georg. 2003. "Biographisches Lernen". In *Religionsdidaktik. Ein Leitfaden für Studium, Ausbildung und Beruf*, edited by Georg Hilger, Stephan Leimgruber, Hans-Georg Ziebertz, 349-360. München: Kosel Verlag.