



SWEET AND BITTER MEMORIES: REMINISCENCE TALK – STATEMENTS, DESCRIPTIONS, NARRATIVES

Natalia Baschmakoff

INTRODUCTION

Human memory is, in all its definitions, crucial to the construction and *re*-construction of the past. Living persons' memories encompass various aspects of oral and written memory-based data, such as memoirs, recollections, autobiographies etc. However, much of our knowledge about the recent events in the past has been transmitted by the spoken word of the narrating historical actors themselves – a first-hand oral history source. The foreign terms for *oral history*, parallel or overlapping, – *mündliche Geschichte*, *l'histoire orale*, *muntilig historia*, *minneshistoria*, *ustnaia istoriia*, *spoken recollection*, or *reminiscence talk* – each show that when we look into this vast field of data and research between folklore, ethnology and history studies from a methodological point of view, we do not always speak of the same references. This study is an attempt to reflect on the process of the oral account itself. Consequently, this article deals more exactly with *reminiscence talk*, a kind of thinking-out-loud process, as I intend to concentrate mainly on the informants' spoken recollection *in statu nascendi* – as it comes into being.

The notion of documentary proof – written or oral – always refers directly to the problem of “knowledge through traces” (Ricoeur 1984, 6). In this study (1), reminiscence talk is examined from the point of view of those who produce it, i.e. the narrators. How does reminiscence talk originate, how can we make it come out, how is it channelled into speech and further geared into organised oral narrative, and what kind of information do we get through these spoken traces? While studying the genesis of reminiscence talk, I will *simultaneously* try to look into the researcher's or the researcher-interviewer's role while he or she uses reminiscence talk as an information-acquiring tool in the dialogue process.

My observations are based on the experience of three kinds of Russian “non-elite” narrators, whose lives typify a given social experience: 1) a cultural minority whose way of life is dying out, 2) denizens of disappearing small agrarian communities in the periphery of Russia’s Western borderlands, and 3) a post-totalitarian summer-dwellers’ community leading an inherited but disappearing way of life. A common denominator to all three communities and to the representatives of those communities is that they *know* that their way of life and their values are disappearing. Another common denominator to all three is that they tell *personal narratives*. The accounts of the first group mainly follow an autobiographic pattern, whereas the other two are more focused on thematic description of ways of life, events, and habits of the community. A great majority of all my interviewees were women. The first group contained the highest proportion of male informants, whereas the other two simply lacked men willing to give an interview.

First, I interviewed members of the Old Russian diaspora, comprised mainly of native inhabitants of the Grand Duchy and the so-called first-wave émigrés and their children living in Finland, a diaspora to which I belong myself. Some of the representatives of this diaspora were interviewed in France and in Sweden, where they had moved from Finland in the 1930s. Altogether this data contains over 200 interviews, and it was gathered during a rather long period in the 1980s–1990s. Secondly, my observations are based on a 10-year-long experience of everyday life in the disappearing villages in the former Soviet province of Pskov, where I have interviewed and recorded place narratives of the last inhabitants. This data encompasses roughly 30 in-depth interviews of personal recollections, which were conducted during several consecutive fieldwork trips in the villages of Ivakhново and Kurokhnovo near the city of Novorzhev, Pskov oblast' in the years 1985–1989 and 2003–2006. Thirdly, my material consists of the fieldwork experience I gained on the Karelian Isthmus, where I observed and recorded summer-dwellers or *dachniks* telling about the economic crises of the 1990s. This data consists of the narratives of 12 reminiscing summer-dwellers, all of whom had been spending their summers in the Gardener’s Society of Peri near St. Petersburg since the 1950s. The interviewees of the first group represented a wide variety of different social levels from house-wives, workers and teachers to representatives of the intelligentsia and artists. The interviewees of the second group were divided into two subgroups: the permanent inhabitants of the Ivakhново and Kurokhnovo villages – mostly former kolkhoz-workers, nowadays retired independent small-scale farmers – and the summer dwellers. The third group consisted mainly of St. Petersburg intelligentsia, some of them already retired: engineers, physicians, researchers, economists, museum workers, librarians and teachers, but all of them from a rather low income bracket.

WHAT HAPPENS IN REMINISCENCE TALK?

Folklore studies traditionally take oral history for a collective item. Indeed, this is often the case when we see how reminiscence talk is used in scholarly practice. It is the researcher who organises and interprets various individuals' talk into one collective voice of a particular community. Yet the reminiscing person feels that his or her narrative at that particular moment when he tells the story is an individual retreat into a memory-based state, a regression where the person tries to revive bygone situations, events, figures – all of which float somewhere in the distant past. How does this happen in reminiscence talk? As the interviewer's perceptive questions help the narrator work and rework the chosen topic, encouraging him to "rewind" his record, remember the details, clarify meanings hidden for those who have not experienced the events recalled, the interviewer himself tries to listen very carefully what is said "between the lines", helping the interviewee make connections among seemingly disconnected and contradictory reminiscences.

The flow of events mostly follows this pattern: once the reminiscing person has been prompted – by the interviewer's question, on a close relation's encouragement or by a tip from the public – he or she will concentrate, with all senses sharpened, on "conjuring up" or evoking sense impressions, sounds, smells and recollections from the past. Thus the person is able to recall fractions of a lost reality, which will then form into a new impression of reality as seen and told by him. Yet we have to remember that every interview is shaped by the context of time and place and the interpersonal dynamics of the dialogue between the narrator and the interviewer.

Where accurate terms are required, we have to remember that what was told is not a "relic from the past", but a *reconstructed* facsimile of an event in the past, based on recollections and often lacking in detail, but told at the present moment. "Recollection concerns our present efforts to evoke the past. In the moment of memory, we consciously reconstruct images of the past in the selective way that suits the needs of our present situation." (Liljeström 2004, 23.) Furthermore, the memory may, at the moment of recollection, be distracted by a number of associations evoked by sounds, visions or smells from the present. More often than not, the facsimile is also full of "gaps" – memory blocks and details taken from other people's collective memories to fill in the missing parts. In a way we may say that a person acts or *performs* the reminiscence talk, reconstructs, interprets and emphasizes the events as he or she sees them from today's point of view. Consequently, it is crucially important to also consider the person's *feelings* and *emotions* evoked by the event recalled. Lauri Honko compares the interviewer's role in an oral performance to reading a libretto: the interpreter tries to capture something ephemeral – an escaping form (Honko 1997, 253–256). Thus, the *re-enactment* and the role of the historical imagination of the past in the present become extremely important for both parties.

[..] re-enacting does not consist in reliving but in rethinking, and rethinking already contains the critical moment that forces us to take the detour by way of the historical imagination. (Ricoeur 1984, 8.)

When we think of a person as a historical individual who talks about his or her life, the information can be regarded both as a process and as a message relayed to others. Research based on oral history frequently emphasizes the message and tends to neglect the idea of *processing* reminiscence talk. Processing means the use of a comprehensive method which is adopted to deal with information: remembering and memorising partial sequences, noting them, compiling the fragments of the memorized information, then reconstructing it into a new narrative entity and passing it on to the receiver. Sometimes processing reminiscence talk can also mean fulfilling the interviewer's expectations (see Peltonen 1996, 60–65). On the other hand, sometimes when speaking of oral history we implicitly refer to written documents, narratives written down from memory. Ruth Finnegan points out the extremely thin line between the *oral* and *written* in oral history.

[.] 'orality' and 'literacy' are not two separate and independent things; nor [.] are oral and written modes two mutually exclusive and opposed processes for representing and communicating information. On the contrary they take diverse forms in differing cultures and periods, are used differently in different social contexts and, insofar as they can be distinguished at all as separate modes rather than a continuum, they mutually interact and affect each other, and the relations between them are problematic rather than self-evident. (Finnegan 1988, 175.)

Sergei Nekliudov (1995), a Moscow folklorist, has written several articles on the marginal difference between oral and written information in oral history. He emphasizes one important factor: *belief in authority*, which in everyday language is often associated with a high status that people, especially those with little schooling, give to written and printed information. A Russian proverb says: "Chto napisano perom, to ne vyrubish toporom." [Transl. What is written in pen cannot be cut off with an axe.] The written information is so highly valued that the person reminiscing often feels that his or her memories are unimportant and tends to belittle them; thus he likes to refer to the more "reliable", printed sources (cf. quotations in Peltonen 1996, 79, 92, 95). Furthermore, the interviewees do not always point out their sources of information. However, the interviewer can determine or deduce from some details of the narrative or biographical facts like the interviewee's birth date etc. that there are obvious data quotations of the collective voice of the community, which do not fit the individually experienced part of the story.

The person's disparaging attitude towards his own reminiscence may also affect processing. When history has been written, and when the collective memory has submitted what has been written to critical examination, then it still has to be reintegrated into the collective memory, be re-appropriated by it. As Paul Ricoeur puts it:

This is perhaps the other meaning of the word history, no longer the history of things that have been done, but history in process, that of the

actors – in other words, the history that has a future. It is very important to place history in the sense of historiography – which knows only the past slice of time – back within the history that is lived, that is being made, and that has a future. [...] It may well be that memory in this way outstrips the history of historians. For memory is always the memory of someone who has projects. [...] It remains that it is memory that has a future while history interprets a slice of the past, forgetting that it once had a future. (Ricoeur 1998, 124.)

Persons who reminisce about their own lives tend to firmly believe that their memories are true. An individual always has projects and wants to have control over his or her own life, including the past that he or she has been reminiscing about. Yet it is widely recognised that subsequent events, the present ones in particular, strongly affect the meaning-making process of the interpretation of one's real life in the past and shape his narrative about the past.

Analysing the following sample of an interview with a Russian émigré lady from the Karelian Isthmus, we should ask how can the interviewee – who in 1918, when the events she is telling took place, was only an 8-years-old girl – know and remember the historical facts (Lenin's incognito visit to Halila) that were revealed much later? Here we have the case of "filling in" the individual story with facts from the grand narrative ("Lenin came"), which was constructed and written later than her individual story was experienced.

So, I do remember very well [...] those were already the civil guards [shiutskoristy] with pistols who ran after my father. My father hid himself in the cave. That was really scary, because this [Halila sanatory, the place where the narrator's family lived, N.B.] was a nest of Russians. Besides, the [Finnish] Reds were positioned there. Lenin came. The others were the enemies, the Red Army guards. (16, RLF recordings.)

Personal and collective memories overlap in the reminiscing process; memories are conflated as they are continuously being revised. "Over time, the diverse expressions of individual memories gradually coalesce into stereotypical images that shape collective memories." (Liljeström 2004, 19.) An individual's reminiscence talk is also quite often simply good story-telling. The story-tellers involve themselves emotionally, they draw themselves as well as the interviewer into a "magic circle" of the narrative process of historical curiosity. This is one of the reasons *why* the story-tellers fill in the gaps with general knowledge; from then on it is the interviewer's task to analyse and to contextualise the narrative.

One can imagine that the reminiscence talk can be "pure", produced in a spontaneous flow of speech. From a researcher's point of view that would be the ideal model, one which he can only rarely access. Thus reminiscence talk would be at its best when it can flow freely, with no constraint or external stimulus, like a song

struck up by someone for others to join. To make a secret recording of such an event is seldom possible, and even if successfully achieved, the use of this kind of “pure” memorized data would pose ethical problems.

Scholars who are familiar with interview-based studies are well aware that in order to engage a person in reminiscence talk, he or she must be given a signal or a message to launch the process of reminiscence. From then on, the researcher and the reminiscing person become participants in one single discourse. The researcher cannot jump off the discourse, and willingly or not, he or she will guide the process, enter into the narrative and react to it. Reminiscence always involves retrieving, reconstructing and interpreting the past. The cultural orientation of the individuals interviewed also plays a crucial role in shaping their interpretation of the meaning of their life history. Reminiscence through interview is a reciprocal process of *re*-construction and interpretation. What the person remembers and what the researcher *bears* him or her recall is essential when interpreting and re-constructing the past within a common discourse. (Cf. Graae & Hietala 1994; Hareven 1992.)

Taina Ukkonen pays special attention to the interpretative structures of reminiscence talk (Ukkonen 2000a, 113–137). She notes that recent, more numerous studies and new angles to oral history data have brought new insight into typical characteristics and nuances of reminiscence and oral narrative. This has also brought about an increased number of concepts in the field. New, more precise sub-terms such as recollected narration, memoir, social or collective memory, life-story, personal narrative and personal experience narrative have now been added beneath the umbrella terms of oral history and *mündliche Geschichte*. For oral history, another term has come up, namely *popular history* (about unwritten history, its source criticism and the term *folk history* see Knuutila 1989, 112–113). According to Ukkonen, some terms emphasize the narrative aspect of reminiscence, whereas others call it an interpretation of the past, which can be very different from that of an expert historian. Here it has to be pointed out that researchers have obviously begun to regard reminiscence talk as a processing phase of historical narrative. Also, researchers’ interest has now begun to move from reminiscence data’s instrumental and source value to aspects which construct and interpret reality. (Ukkonen 2000b.)

TRAUMA-BASED OR NON-TRAUMATIC REMINISCENCE TALK

In the previous chapter I pointed out the importance of *feelings* and *emotions* reminiscence may evoke in the speaker. When I was conducting my interviews among Russian émigrés in Finland I noted that they did not remember everyday, pleasant or nostalgic events as well as they remembered the traumatic events. Their traumatic memories culminate in events like the chaos of the October Revolution or the horrors of the Civil War, deeply engraved both in the individual and the collective memory. One crucial, if not acute, trauma was the feeling that they had lived in vain, that the

Revolution had “swept away” their life’s chances. This trauma was like an everyday presence of a psychic handicap. My own father used to repeat to me: “Remember, my daughter, you are studying for *two* generations.”

Richard J. McNally underlines the importance of distinguishing trauma-based reminiscence from normal recollecting. Referring to the psychotherapist Daniel Brown’s statement, he points out the specificity of a trauma-based reminiscence: “We are not in a position to generalize the findings from laboratory studies on normal memory to memory for traumatic experiences” (Brown quoted in McNally 2003, 27). The vividness and the flashback imagery produce a disturbing sense of reliving the experience, as if the trauma was happening all over again (McNally 2003, 113–114; cf. Peltonen 1996, 27).

Finnish studies in oral history provide countless examples from the traumatic period of the Finnish Civil War of 1918, of which people remember or forget certain events or choose not to talk about them. Ulla-Maija Peltonen and Outi Fingerroos have questioned this in their studies (Peltonen 1996; 2000; 2003; Fingerroos 2000; 2004). Both the Whites’ and the Reds’ oral history narratives and folklore show the preservation of memories that can be explained by the emotionality of the experiences associated with the terror of the year 1918.

In many of my interviews I have noted the total unwillingness to discuss such traumatic events as wars or violent death in general. The interviewees – mainly women, and some of them war-widows – only referred to the traumatic memories by saying “you know it from history, don’t you”, or they frankly told me “I don’t want to speak about it” or “turn off the recorder, and I’ll tell you”. It was, for instance, almost impossible to get recorded oral evidence about the random executions of Russians in Viborg in 1918 (cf. Fingerroos 2004, 282–338). There was one exception, a lady born in 1903, who was not an eyewitness herself, but who transmitted her sister’s experience of the Viborg events:

In Viborg during the Civil War when the Whites came in 1918, the orthodox priest with his nephews went with flowers in hand to greet them. They were arrested. Anybody who wore a uniform was arrested. Those who were arrested before 4 p.m. were shot. Thus Mrs Hrabrov’s father and mother were killed. My sister’s fiancé, who worked at the [Viborg] telegraph and wore a civil servant’s uniform, was imprisoned at Kolikkoinmäki, but he was not shot because of some delay. An unknown woman came and told that Ivanov [the fiancé], should be released because he had been their ‘natsba’nik’ [boss]. He was released. The deacon Akimov and the proto-deacon Pavinskii were also arrested. My sister went there with a Finnish servant, she saw the bodies of the executed. They kept them in the Sorvali church. They were not given coffins, the dead were buried in Sorvali on a wooden plank just wrapped in sheets. (123, 1 B, RLF recordings.)

When an interviewee recalls wartime traumas from a child’s perspective, his narration may contain keen observations, which, in a way, dispel the horror of the remembered events. A woman interviewee from the village of Ivakhново (born 1929) recalls World

War II events on the local level, such as the devastation of the village by the Germans. She gives a very concrete and down-to-earth account. It is worth noticing that the story told in 1997 by a peasant woman does not follow the official Soviet grand narrative, according to which all Germans were evil.

When the Germans came [to Ivakhново], they burned everything down. But they did not touch us. They wouldn't even burn the village, but our soldiers stayed here at the crossroads for a rest, so we brought them some food, those of us who could afford. The other ones [the Germans] saw from Kurokhnovo [a nearby village across the river Verzha] that there were enemy soldiers there and they immediately [reacted]... We had a big house with this big windows, it was still under construction, the stove was not yet bricked up since the mason was recruited to the army. So, we sit there dining. A German! But, I must say, he was fair enough to knock on the window and warn: Woman, you, run away! And at the very moment: зззhhb, зhb! The fire was set! There was shooting, two men were killed. We ran where we could. We managed to take the cow from the shelter, but the pig was trapped and grilled by the fire. The next morning we came back, peeled the skin off and ate the pig. [...] Then [when the whole village was burned down] we moved to the cemetery. We dug trenches and lived there in the trenches, later people moved off one by one when the frosts came. (Ivakhново recordings, 5/1997.)

Personal reminiscing about historical crises is mostly therapeutic. However, processing the recounted historical past is firmly linked to the narrator's age at the moment of the personal experience. An example of this comes from the Karelian Isthmus where I was conducting fieldwork in the allotment gardens of the Peri Gardeners' Society in summer 2003. Our intention was to find out how Russians remember the crisis years of 1993 and 1998 and the economic collapse after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Did their gardening help the household economy or not? There did not appear to be any difference between the recent crises in people's reminiscence talk. The most important difference was not between the two historically and economically different crises of the 1990s, but between the different generations' recalling those crises, how people of different ages proportioned the difficulties of the 1990s to other hardships in their lives. Those, whom the crises had pushed aside from active working life, brought up the serious trauma caused by the economic crash, whereas a pensioner who had experienced the Leningrad siege proportioned the crises to the siege, her life's biggest trauma, and belittled the post-Soviet "minor crises" as she called them.

The war-time was really hard. We were quickly evacuated. It was a terribly cold winter, -52° C, and we had no clothes, no footwear. Oh, those years, nineteen forty-one, forty-two, were really harsh. [...] It was only in forty-six I was allowed to return to Leningrad. We settled down at my mother's place. You know, the flat was in the

basement, and only 28 square meters big. We were some ten people living there together: grandfather, mother, brother and sister, and still three more persons. It was awful.
(Peri Gardeners' Society-recordings 2003, tape 4.)

The Gardeners' Societies were formed all over the USSR in the 1950s, initiated by state owned enterprises' summer dwelling programmes for the workers. All our interviewees in Peri belonged to a society of this type. Formerly they were all strictly controlled leaseholders, but – after the collapse of the Soviet Union – had become owners of their small lots and dachas. It seemed to us that in reminiscing about the Post-Soviet crises, our narrators were not only generating individual memories or memories of a certain generation, but also trying to narrate a cohort story of the whole Peri Gardeners' Society. I believe that in this particular study the signal given by us provoked a collective auto-reflection of Peri dwellers about *a local history come to its end* (for more about subjective experience-based local narratives see Hakamies 2005, 91–109). Even the youngest interviewees understood that their way of life was dying out in modern Post-Soviet Russian society. A new way of life and a new generation of bourgeois landowners and summer dwellers were succeeding them. The new owners bought their lots at a very low price, built big brick villas surrounded by flowers, all kinds of leisure equipment and rail fences. The fences were like a symbol of the new bourgeois privatisation identity; there was no community spirit anymore. These people no longer cultivated root-crops or vegetables for pleasure or for household needs. Also, school children, accompanied by their grandparents, were sent for holidays to sanatoriums or to the Canary Islands rather than to Peri dachas.

In the interviews conducted among émigré Russians in Finland, the life-long emotional trauma discussed above; the loss of their homeland, property, status and future, came up on many occasions. Crossing the new Finnish-Soviet border was also seen as a dramatic test of survival in personal reminiscences about historical crises (see Baschmakoff & Leinonen 2001, 35–61). Although many of the émigrés had crossed the border into Finland before, under the new circumstances the journey was often traumatic. Many of the interviewees recall how scaring it was, for instance, to experience the break-up of the family with one part of the family staying in Russia and the other in Finland:

Eight months, yes, I think that's how long it was, eight months we sat at the dacha [on the Karelian Isthmus] without "mama". And it seemed father was going through some kind of spiritual breakdown. He couldn't do anything. It was a matter of pride, as well. How hungry we were! Our bellies swelled, our faces were no more than a nose and enormous eyes. Those hard times must have made me tough; now I've lived so long. Well, when "mama" came, everything was put right and we started to live well. We got a cow, planted a vegetable garden. [...]

And this is how it was: "mama" went to Petersburg [Petrograd] to take care of some things; our eldest brother was studying there. He had to stay, you see, he was finishing up his last year at the non-classical school. Mother arranged for him to live with our laundress Annushka. But then they up and closed the border, and she

was stranded there. She had her passport, but she didn't have the required permit to leave the country. She stood there, crying at the border. And then some man in a uniform came up to her, and – what do you know? He used to work for father. He asked: Why are you crying? So “mama” told him everything. And he said: Give me your passport, and come back next week together with your son. Only, when I walk past, pretend you don't know me.

And then, mother said: I crossed the bridge [of Rajajoki], got into the train, and sat there, with my head down, and just kept sitting, and then he walked past and I couldn't lift my eyes. I stared at the floor, shaking all over. And that's how they came. We were so glad! (26–27, 2 B, RLF recordings.)

There was no major distinction between the men's and women's recollection of the major traumas, although women preferred more often to avoid talking about painful memories and they used more emotional expressions, whereas men emphasized the action and the rapidity of the events. In the following fragment a male interviewee's reminiscence talk brings forth the dramatic and the dynamic in the narrative. His language is fragmented, it follows a staccato rhythm, and he gets out of breath when he transports himself into a situation from the past.

Well, I'll tell you briefly how my father lost his money. So, my dad was a merchant. He had Russian money, roubles. Each of the children had twenty thousand roubles deposited in the bank, for their future studies, yes. [...] He had money in the banks in Vyborg and in Petrograd. Two hundred thousand, in those days it was a lot of money. And when doing business he got golden roubles, and kept and collected them. Then [the border was closed] and dad decided to emigrate. He prepared big suitcases, you know like they used to have in the old days, big leather suitcases, which were sent to my mom's sister. Then he sent precious objects. Then, we-ee-ll [...] dad exchanged all the golden roubles for banknotes. Oh! He figured that since we had to flee and the kids were small, the roubles could get lost, but taking banknotes they would have money for a start. The border was closed. Before it closed, the rouble cost three a half marks [...] but after closing, the rouble started to lose value: two marks, one mark, some merchants still accepted roubles, this one accepted, the other one did not accept them anymore. In a short time he was broke. (90, 33–35. RLF recordings.)

NOSTALGIC MEMORIES

Nostalgic and sentimental memories, which are frequently related to traumas and crises, are also likely to stand apart in memorized data. Talking about nostalgic reminiscence, Trevor Lummis underlines its function in uniting generations and forming a certain cohort with similar experiences.

This process of generating cohort memories is most noticeable and distinctive in times of abrupt change, and oral evidence should be able

to chart the complexities and boundaries of these experiences and relate them to the way in which different sectors of the population in different situations remember the social, industrial and political situation. (Lummis 1987, 126.)

In my data of Russian émigrés' generating cohort memories it was very important for the narrators to describe collective gatherings like charity bazaars, performances of the Russian amateur theatre, ballet evenings, concerts of the Russian choir and balalaika orchestra or art exhibitions. There was hardly one single negative word of criticism said or written about these community-building events, and the interviewees considered them to be one of the highlights of their otherwise dull émigré life.

Nostalgic reminiscence talk likes to taste and muse while it tries to gather a circle of narrative comfort and cosiness, as if it wanted to place the listener into the light of a reading lamp. These memories are evoked by the childhood home, school years, summer memories and dreams of youth. In my material of nostalgic reminiscing there were interviews in which the narrator described not things that he or she had left behind, but things that had never happened, like lost possibilities and opportunities. Many émigrés lived all their lives in the conditional mood: "if things had happened differently." Thus the narrator followed a utopian path in the past and tried to rebuild his or her life "as if" the historical crisis had never happened. The nostalgic narrator most willingly showed the events of the past with an imaginary and fairy-like aura. And it is true that nostalgia has a utopian element in it (Boym 2001, 322).

Per-Arne Bodin (2005, 239) claims that what is important to remember in today's Russia is reconstructed through *counter-memory dynamics*. Svetlana Boym (2001, 337–343) calls it *reflective nostalgia*. During the Soviet period, oblivion of the national history was an important propaganda tool for those who were in power; even an individual's reminiscing was strictly controlled. One could recall things from the past, but personal remembering in the USSR was manipulated whereas émigrés living in the West were – more or less – free in their memories and their imagined dream world built up by a *restorative nostalgia*.

A Russian émigré woman in Finland recalled the summers in Terijoki on the Karelian Isthmus in the 1930s, nostalgically remembered by Finnish evacuees as well. Her nostalgic narrative was strongly emotive. When telling about her village she described it by repeating expressions like "very, very, very much", "exceptional", "lovely", "most beautiful", "delightful", etc. She, too, invoked the past, but her restorative reminiscing was all about getting "tuned into the spirit". Her reminiscence talk leapt from one topic to another and was logically inconsistent; sometimes there was no relation between cause and effect: "They [the Solntseffs] had delightful cakes. When I went on a visit and was offered cakes, I could eat up to six! So, you see, there were enterprising people there."

The life in Terijoki was very animated, there were very many dachniks, very, very, very many. And the village was something really special, even in wintertime it was special, there were six thousand inhabitants, a wonderful, most beautiful Russian

orthodox church, and also a very beautiful Finnish church. There was a village cinema, very many shops, three bakeries, where one could buy delicious cakes. There was the Finnish [shopkeeper] Kaisa, and then the enterprising Russian émigrés – you see, all émigrés did not lie [...] on their sofas sighing “when we’ll get back” or something like that – there were people like Solntseffs, who had three daughters. One of them, the eldest, graduated from a Finnish secondary school. But the youngest [studied] in the Russian secondary school. They had wonderful cakes. When I visited them, they treated me kindly, and I could eat up to six cakes! So, you see, there were enterprising people there. (88, 6. RLF recordings.)

CONCLUSION

To summarise, I have inserted fairly extensive quotations to underline the qualitative differences of the processing used in reminiscence talk. Referring to my own experience in the field I have tried to make reminiscence talk visible *in statu nascendi*, i.e. to reflect the “raw material” of oral history examined from the individual’s, the speaking subject’s point of view. However, all three examples to which I refer in this article – a minority group, a village community, a summer dwellers’ community – are also most typical examples of “community text” and of collective memory. Examined from the community’s point of view, the process of making individuals recall, give significance and talk about their memories has been very different in all three cases.

In the cases of Russian diaspora in Finland and the Pskov oblast’ villages there were some big question marks hanging in the air between the interviewer and the interviewees: Why does she ask us to remember? Why now? Why she? Who is she? These implicit questions were a kind of invisible barrier in the discourse.

In the case of the Russian diaspora in Finland the political context represented a major obstacle: since 1917, the community had been ideologically split into two opposite camps. Especially in the late 1940s and 1950s, the years after the war, this break-up became acute. The silent information circulated within the diaspora and the people knew – or imagined they knew – each others’ backgrounds, and who was pro- or anti-Soviet. Another obstacle was the fact that for seven decades, members of this community had kept a low profile in Finland knowing that they were not welcome. A third obstacle was the fact that this community was not only split but also very heterogeneous, divided into smaller groups according to the members’ provenience, ethnic or confessional background. It is hard to get this kind of split, “silent” and, one could say, traumatized minority to talk and reminisce about events they prefer to forget. The easiest interviewees among the diaspora of Russians in Finland were the artists or persons with a performers’ background, and “charity-active” women. (See more Baschmakoff & Leinonen 2001.)

It was also rather difficult to get into natural contact with the local inhabitants of the Pskov villages, even with the help of mediators, a couple of colleagues from St. Petersburg who had been regular summer dwellers in Ivakhново since 1993. Like in the diaspora, the mistrust towards the interviewer raised the question: “Why? What’s so interesting about us?” In these forgotten villages? Men especially were suspicious and we heard one man mutter: “Shpiony!” [Spies!] But the more often we came back and the better we got to know the inhabitants, the easier it was to carry on small-talk with them about everyday matters, to help them by sometimes offering a ride to town etc. Little by little, they became more confident and began to understand that the villages had an unwritten history of several hundred years, but that now this history had come to an end. Finally, women first, the denizens of the villages opened themselves up to the interviewer and in the end we almost became a part of the village community. (See more Baschmakoff & Loimi & Takala 2000.) In the case of the Peri *dachniks*, however, no such hidden questions were perceived. The Peri *dachniks* were well aware of the disappearing way of life they represented; they were willing and interested in recollecting and telling their memories.

In spite of the vast topical and individual range of my interviews, there was also something that I could refer to as a common denominator and a basis for my concluding analysis: once the interviewee acquired a taste for telling his personal reminiscences, once he/she was “in”, he/she became The Narrator and, consequently, the protagonist of the story. Unconsciously the interviewees structured their accounts around themselves, selected and arranged the elements to make themselves the heroes of their stories, no matter how small their actual role had been. The social nature of the interview worked for that and brought out, little by little, the profiles of the narrator’s identity, his/her family’s identity, and the identity and the spirit of the community.

Today’s oral history research has approached the problems and sore spots of the 1980s and 1990s with much greater ease than before. The method formerly used by folklorists, ethnographers and historians has now been taken up by scholars from fields such as social sciences, psychology, gerontology, and literature studies. Today, a clear disciplinary distinction is made in the use of oral narrative: it can be used to exercise the memory, and to build up identity, or it can be used as data for specific research purposes. If the reminiscing person “exercises” his memory, a gerontologist does not care whether the person believes in the truthfulness of his narrative or not. But if a reminiscing person from the Karelian Isthmus takes a burnt rock for a part of the Mannerheim Line, a geologist or a war historian familiar with the landscape and war history can remain quiet and use some other facts relevant to his research, such as narratives depicting the chaotic atmosphere during the evacuation or the hasty exodus. From the point of view of cultural studies, however, the numerous and more or less stereotypical stories reminiscing about Mannerheim or Lenin, (eg. “Lenin on the Isthmus drinking incognito at a well – only the narrator recognizes him and tells the story”) reveal the local mythology of the story-telling tradition on a collective level.

The close reciprocal association with selecting modules of the narrative, remembering and forgetting shows how it affects both the perception of historical experience and the (re-)production of historical narrative. I would like to conclude my analysis in Jan Vansina's classic words, stressing once more the imaginary relations between the experienced reality, and the narrated and reconstructed past:

History is no more than a calculation of probabilities. This is true not only as far as the interpretation of documents is concerned, but for all the operations of historical methodology, and above all for the most important ones. How shall one decide whether a statement is an error, or a lie, or is 'veracious'? [...] We can never hope to understand everything, and indeed do not even understand all that we experience personally. We cannot arrive at a full understanding of the past because the past is something outside our experience, something that is other. (Vansina 1984, 105–106.)

This is equally true in the ideal, "pure" reminiscence talk, as well as in the nostalgic or trauma-based recollections. The central question here remains the necessity of forgetting as a condition for the possibility of reminiscing.

NOTES

1. This article is based on the paper held at the National History Researchers' Seminar, Joensuu, Finland, 28–29 October 2004.

REFERENCES

Archived material

RLF-recordings:

— Russian Life in Finland. Recordings of the Oral History project with Russian émigrés in Finland. Tampereen yliopisto, Slaavilainen filologia.

Fieldwork recordings in Peri Gardeners' Society 2003. Joensuun yliopisto, Vieraiden kielten laitos.

Fieldwork recordings in Ivakhново and Kurokhново, Pskov oblast' 1985-1989. Joensuun yliopisto, Vieraiden kielten laitos.

Literature

- BASCHMAKOFF, NATALIA & LEINONEN, MARJA 2001: *Russian Life in Finland 1917–1939. A Local and Oral History*. Studia Slavica Finlandensia 18. Helsinki: IREES.
- BASCHMAKOFF, NATALIA & LOIMI, NINA & TAKALA, JOHANNA 2000: *Govorit Ivakhnovo. Nabludeniiia nad protsessom vyzhyvaniia pskovskoi derevni v 1996–1998 gg.* Learning by Doing 2. Working Papers from the Russian Department. Joensuu: University of Joensuu.
- BODIN, PER-ARNE 2005: *Historien och evigheten. Essäer om Ryssland*. Malmö: Artos & Norma.
- BOYM, SVETLANA 2001: *The Future of Nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
- FINGERROOS, OUTI 2000: Minä, siirtokarjalaiset ja menneet muistot – kuolema ongelmana ja toimintakompleksina. – Heimo, Anne & Laukkanen Anu & Ukkonen, Taina (eds.), *Teemanumero: Muistelu ja muistitieto. Elore* 7(2) [online]. < http://cc.joensuu.fi/~loristi/2_00/fin200.html > [24.10.2004.]
- 2004: *Haudatut muistot. Rituaalisen kuoleman merkitykset Kannaksen muistitiedossa*. Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran Toimituksia 985. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura.
- FINNEGAN, RUTH 1988: *Literacy & Orality*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- GRAAE, KRISTIINA & HIETALA, MARJATTA 1994: *Suullista historiaa. Veteraanikansanedustajat haastateltavina*. Eduskunnan kirjaston tutkimuksia ja selvityksiä 1. Helsinki: Eduskunnan kirjasto.
- HAKAMIES, PEKKA 2005: New Culture on New Territories. The Karelian Isthmus and Ladoga Karelia in Post-War Years. – Hakamies, Pekka (ed.), *Moving in the USSR: Western Anomalies and Northern Wilderness*. Studia Fennica Historica 10. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society.
- HAREVEN, TAMARA K. 1992: From Amoskeag to Nishijin: Reflections on Life History Interviewing in Two Cultures. – Grele, Ronald J. (ed.), *Subjectivity and Multiculturalism in Oral History*. International Annual of Oral History 1990. New York: Greenwood Press.
- HONKO, LAURI 1997: Pakenevan tekstin metsästyks. – Viljanen, Anna Maria & Lahti, Minna (eds.), *Kaukaa haettua. Kirjoituksia antropologisesta kenttätyöstä*. Helsinki: Suomen Antropologinen Seura.
- KNUUTTILA, SEPPO 1989: What the People of Sivakka Tell about Themselves. – Siikala, Anna-Leena (ed.), *Studies in Oral Narrative*. Studia Fennica 33. Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society.
- LILJESTRÖM, MARIANNE 2004: *Useful Selves. Russian Women's Autobiographical Texts from the Postwar Period*. Helsinki: Kikimora Publications.
- LUMMIS, TREVOR 1987: *Listening to History. The Authenticity of Oral Evidence*. London: Hutchinson.
- McNALLY, RICHARD J. 2003: *Remembering Trauma*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- NEKLIUDOV, SERGEI 1995: Otnoshenie 'tekst – denotat' i problema istinnosti v povestvovatel'nykh traditsiyakh. – *Lotmanovskii sbornik* I. Moskva: "IC – Garant".

- PELTONEN, ULLA-MAIJA 1996: *Punakaapinan muistot. Tutkimus työväen muistelukerronnan muotoutumisesta vuoden 1918 jälkeen*. Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran Toimituksia 657. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura.
- 2000: Kuolema sisällissodassa 1918 – muistamisen ja unohtamisen kysymyksiä. – Heimo, Anne & Laukkanen Anu & Ukkonen, Taina (eds.), *Teemanumero: Muistelu ja muistitieto. Elore* 7(2) [online]. < http://cc.joensuu.fi/~loristi/2_00/pel200.html > [24.10.2004.]
- 2003. *Muistin paikat. Vuoden 1918 sisällissodan muistamisesta ja unohtamisesta*. Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran Toimituksia 894. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura.
- RICOEUR, PAUL 1984: *The Reality of the Historical Past*. Milwaukee: Marquette University Press.
- 1998: *Critique and Conviction. Conversations with François Azouvi and Marc de Launay*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- UKKONEN, TAINA 2000a: *Menneisyyden tulkinta kertomalla. Muistelupuhe oman historian ja kokemuskertomusten tuottamisprosessina*. Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seuran Toimituksia 797. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura.
- 2000b: Muistitieto tutkimuksen kohteena ja aineistona. – Heimo, Anne & Laukkanen Anu & Ukkonen, Taina (eds.), *Teemanumero: Muistelu ja muistitieto. Elore* 7(2) [online]. < http://cc.joensuu.fi/~loristi/2_00/ukk200.html > [4.5.2006.]
- VANSINA, JAN 1984: Oral Tradition and Historical Methodology. – Dunaway, David K. & Baum, Willa K. (eds.), *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*. Nashville, TE: American Association for State and Local History.

PhD (Helsinki University) Natalia Baschmakoff is a professor of Russian Language and Culture at the Department of Foreign Languages, University of Joensuu, Finland.