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RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES OF LIFE STORIES: EVERYDAY HISTORY

Baiba Bela-Krūmiņa

I was a second year student of philosophy at the University of Latvia when I started working as an interviewer for the recently established National Oral History project. I realised that Latvia's recent history is not merely a thing that one finds in history books, but the real experience of my fellow Latvians. Narratives about daily life as it was 50 or 70 years ago created a deeper understanding of changing social life and inspired me not to take norms, ideas and practices that are so common now for granted. After some years of studying biographical accounts from the perspective of social sciences, the very construction of the narrative came to the foreground of my interests and, consequently, my PhD research focused on the social and cultural construction of narratives (Bela-Krūmiņa 2004).

This review article introduces the study of everyday life from the perspective of Latvian oral history research. First, the appearance of the everyday life history is discussed. Then, I will give a short overview of studies focusing on the aspects of daily life in the post-war Latvian countryside.

EVERYDAY LIFE AS A FIELD OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH

Practices of daily life have long been an important field of research in social anthropology, ethnology and folklore studies as well as in biographical sociology. In the field of history, however, the situation is different. We usually associate daily life with routines, repetitions, chores – ordinary activities taking place in an individual's life, such as laundering, cooking, or going to work every morning, whereas history is associated with politicised, significant single events that influence the lives of many people. Examples of these historical events include the founding of the Latvian state

in 1918, its annexation in 1940 and the subsequent deportations, or the Barricade Days in 1991. However, history, like life, does not consist solely of crucial turning points, wars or barricades for that matter.

It is only in the last few decades that a growing number of historians have grown interested in everyday history or social history as an opportunity to expand and democratize the scope of historical interests. Until the last century, the focus of history was essentially political – a documentation of the struggle for power, in which the lives of ordinary people were scarcely given any attention. (Thompson 1988a.) Even local history was the history of a region rather than a record of day-to-day life of the people within the community. From the discipline focused on power and politics, history is turning into a discipline concerned with ordinary people and their lives in the changing communities. This approach was very popular among oral history scholars in the second half of the 20th century.

By placing the man and the interest in the daily life in the centre of historical discourse the attention is given to the issues that have been left out of the historical context by those in a position of power. Firstly, the research of oral history and daily life is a way to approach those social groups who do not play the leading roles on the historical stage, to observe the subjects' circumstances, values and life strategies. In the 20th century Western societies they were workers, women, black people, various immigrant groups – the subordinates and the strangers. The interest in tiny social groups, their role and place in history has turned the scholars' attention to the family as a subject of research (Thompson 1988b, 25).

Secondly, the research of daily life allows us to create a history that brings out the common rather than different traits of nations and countries. The outstanding oral historian and sociologist Paul Thompson writes in the introduction to his book, *Our Common History: The Transformation of Europe*:

Common European past is hidden from us in many different ways: through language barriers and contrasts in appearance, through differences in national politics, but most of all by the traditional presentation of history itself. [...] Under this surface are hidden social changes experienced by all Europe – the uprooting of peasantry, the flight to the towns, the moulding of industrial working class consciousness, the changing position of women and the growth of the small, privatised family. (Thompson 1982, 10.)

Moreover, the oral history approach adds more colours to the historical picture. Oral history has an advantage in that, contrary to most historical sources, it presents various views on one and the same event, often challenging the established, officially accepted version of the events. Oral history reflects the world in its essential variety as a place where either in blissful ignorance or in acrid conflicts various, often very different, social realities coexist – the rich and the poor, country and town, centres and periphery, women and men, children and the aged, the rulers and the subjects, the law enforcers and the rebels.

LIFE STORIES AS A SOURCE OF RESEARCH IN ORAL HISTORY

The interest in everyday life, various experiences, and the placement of man in the centre of history created the demand for new historical sources. Since the middle of the 19th century, the historians had relied on their faithful source – the archives: various collections of documents registering only a specific type of selected information from one aspect and in accordance with specific rules and interests (Portelli 1998, 70). Registers of births and marriages, minutes of councils and the administration of poor relief and welfare, national and local newspapers, church archives, and accounts and other books from large private firms and landed estates, and even private correspondence from the ruling landowner class were, for a long time, the primary sources of historians. But of innumerable postcards, letters, diaries, and ephemera of working-class men and women very little has been preserved anywhere. In the history books people's life is mostly expressed in the language of statistical figures, and even social history research has been focused on administrative and regulatory changes, trade unions and political organizations (Thompson 1988b, 20). Life stories, on the other hand, enable us to create a history which is built around the human life as a subject, and provide answers to the questions that cannot be found in documentary sources.

At this point we should mention one more important dimension of oral history and everyday life. History becomes more humane when it recognizes every individual as a valuable and active being and a contributor to the historical context, and his story well worth hearing. After all, telling and listening to stories open up the space for togetherness and solidarity that is so important in our human existence. Nobel laureate Albert Camus, the French writer and philosopher, has said: "People live and can survive only when they are certain of having something in common, of being always able to meet each other (Kami 1990, 7)." The oral history approach helps not only to add new facets to history and bring out the existing differences; it also helps different people meet each other in life stories. There is an opinion that oral history can reduce the gap between various generations, diverse social groups and between people with different opinions. Through the life stories of concrete individuals the frightening, anonymous, strange phenomena become personally familiar and therefore – less scary and more humanly comprehensible. Thus it is possible to achieve not uniformity, meaning elimination of all different traits, but unity, meaning the harmonization of contradictions and respect for the otherness.

Besides, the history told by people helps us trace the dimension of the past in our present lives. Among the greatest values of a life story is the possibility to access vast historical and social changes through an individual life experience. The breadth of a biography could span all aspects of an individual's lifetime over almost a century (Miller 2000, 8). Life stories vividly reflect the changing nature of everything – political systems, forms of ownership, and radical changes in the simple procedures of daily life. For example, the types of transportation (from the horse and cart to a

car and an aircraft), manners of communication (from a postcard to a cell phone and the Internet), daily life solutions (from a laundry day starting with boiling of lye to a washing machine operating with detergent brought from the shop; from a subsistence economy to a supermarket).

EVERYDAY HISTORY AND NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH

In 1992, after the restoration of independence, it was possible to start the National Oral History (NOH) research. The interest of the NOH research focuses on the life of the older generation and reveals the great events of the 20th century history in Latvia from the human perspective and faithfully reflects the important changes in the social history or rather the people's experiences of everyday life. There are more than 2000 audio-recorded life stories in the collection at the present moment.

We cannot speak of life in general or history in general, we can speak of these matters only in connection with a specific place and time. As an example of the use of life stories in the everyday history I shall refer to the stories describing the first post-war years. The sources of the study are the life stories recorded in the expedition "Life story in Latvia" in Vadakste and its surroundings (Ruba, Jaunauce, Auce) in 1996. A total of 47 people were interviewed by NOH researchers and volunteers. I personally recorded 11 life stories. In this case, my strategy will be to create an example of everyday history by focusing on the historical experience of one social group in a specific period of time.

First of all, a few words should be said about the particular stories as the sources of research. Similarly to history being a record of the most important events in the consciousness of the society, the individual life history also reflects socially important events connected with the the social groups the individual belongs to (Kilis 1998, 21). Thus in the stories recorded in the 1996 expedition, the storytellers selected their stories to a large extent according to the criteria important at the time of the third awakening in Latvia. Most stories were about the life and work in the 1920s and 1930s whereas in the stories about the Soviet times the stress was laid on the negative impact of the Soviet rule on human lives and the attempts of an individual to maintain control over his or her life, either by adapting to or resisting the imposed order. Both central themes of the narrative are connected with the recent history interpretation trends that prevailed in the 1990s, they renew and strengthen the ties with the first Republic of Latvia and are a testimony on the occupation of Latvia and the years spent under the totalitarian regime (Tisenkopfs 1993, 4). Even the omissions in life stories indicate the social pressure present in the process of narration. The stories recorded during the expedition did not mention any positive aspects of life in the Soviet times or, in many cases, involvement of the narrators in the Soviet ideological organizations.

Moreover, the dominant picture of recent history is not the only thing that influences individual stories. The present also gives shape to the past in many ways. Narratives are not verbal icons of the events they recount (Bauman 1986, 5). The individuality of each life story reveals both the variety of experience in any social group, and also how each individual story draws on a common culture. In addition, there are differences between lives lived, lives experienced and lives told (Brunner 1986, 6). However, it is possible to assume the existence of objective reality represented in subjective life accounts (Miller 2000, 13).

AN EXAMPLE: DAILY LIFE IN THE POST-WAR PERIOD IN THE LATVIAN COUNTRYSIDE

I shall now offer some insight into some daily life aspects of life at the time after World War II. My analysis is based on the concept of integration (Aareleid-Tart 2001), which is used as an analytical tool and helps us to understand of post-war realities in occupied Latvia better. Estonian sociologist Aili Aareleid-Tart studied the process of moving from cultural norms of independent Estonia to cultural norms of Soviet rule in post-war Estonia. She argues that in every period of radical social changes there exists a necessity to adapt to the new situation and a necessity to maintain continuity and retain the former practices and values if possible. Integration to new socio-cultural settings is long term process, where in the private level the meaning-making takes place through the conflicts and misunderstandings in everyday life. (Aareleid-Tart 2001, 2–3.) But unlike the Estonian scholar, who focuses on integration and change reflected in the kinship relations, rites of passage and calendar traditions, I will illuminate some changes in the field of production from the perspective of everyday life.

The life stories recorded in the 1996 expedition display a continuous conflict between two contradicting types of discourse: the Latvian way of thinking, a Christian perception of the world and the ideology of independence on the one hand, and the Soviet ideology that strived to change the social and political establishment as well as the people's thinking on the other. The life stories uncover the lengthy and complex nature of this process. People need to rethink both their individual and collective identity and to rearrange their entire everyday lives, from the simplest daily routines (e.g. organization of housekeeping, job relationship etc.) to revision of their value systems and perception of world. The decision to celebrate both Christmas and New

Year or only New Year, to get married in a church and register the marriage in the registry office or choose only the registry office – those are the simplest examples of the complex process of adaptation to new circumstances and change of values. The stories reflect the struggle with daily hardships, the resourcefulness and tenacity of the narrators in adapting to the changes introduced by the Soviet authorities in the devastation of the post-war life.

The folks of Vadakste who had not directly suffered from the repression continued to live and go about their work as usual. However, not all private initiatives were persecuted after June 1940. For example, initially the Soviet rule came to the countryside with the slogan “Land for the landless”, and distributed land to the agricultural workers at the expense of large landowners. The Soviet authorities gave the new farmers 10 hectares of land per household together with livestock and equipment that was confiscated from the wealthy landowners. In the post-war period, until the deportations of March 25th of 1949, the country folk experienced the Soviet rule mostly in the form of a heavy tax burden, forced participation in the communal work and propaganda. It was only after the March of 1949, when a considerable part of Latvian population was deported to the Far East that the authorities could carry out the collectivisation. For example, on March 12th 1949, 11% of the farms were subjected to collectivization and in less than a month, by April 9th, 50% of farms were included into collectives (Bleiere 2001, 568).

The life stories do not contain these statistics; they relate the fate of the deported people and the houses and belongings they left behind. The life stories tell about the changes in human relationships, work habits, and about the complete transformation of everyday life by the introduction of collective farms. Life particularly changed after the deportations and collectivization, when fear became a strong motivating factor to accepting the models of production and behaviour proposed by the occupation forces. People were expected to voluntarily give away practically everything they had: land, livestock, machinery and buildings (for keeping of animals, hay, corn etc.) to the collective farms. The life stories reveal the people’s feelings when they had to part with the animals dear to their heart; the cow, the horse tended by themselves, their own tools, big cattle farms and outhouses. The stories show the emotions of the farmers when the animals handed over to the strangers perished through negligence or ill treatment.

In the story of Elvīra, the losses that her family suffered both in the process of establishing the class of agricultural workers and in collectivisation are reflected in this single episode:

The new peasants take our land; 10 hectares must be allotted to the new farmers, yes. And Mum will have only eight left. Well, so be it. Then the new peasant is put in. You know, it was terribly difficult, all those misunderstandings. And the new peasant with our horses and inventory, and they gave him a cow, you know, for milking, the speckled one. So they milked that cow, I don't know, how long and then they got one and brought home themselves. So the speckled one had to be returned, understand?

How so? You gave it to me. Now it has to be returned, tough, isn't it? So they bring it themselves, saying: "I took away the best cow from the farm. The farmer's wife just cried." All right. But then the collective farm was established, and all those cows had to be brought together. Mum had had cattle all her life – sometimes more, sometimes less, depending on how the life was. And when you have to take one of yours and drag it to the common shed, what do you feel inside? So now they both are taking their cows – the new farmer's wife, too, leads her cow. How much time had passed, I really don't know. I remember Mum saying: "And so we both are going and she cries, the cow must be given away, tears are dripping." And what was my Mum feeling? But she said: "I just felt like laughing." Because I recalled their words: "The farmer's wife cried when we led the best cow out of the shed." So, there is some, no matter how tragic, but some consolation, and some fun too. Although there was little humour in those times, particularly with horses. Oh my God, my! Even our best mare in the first year of the collective farm perished after foaling. Nobody cared what happened. (NOH 352.)

The life stories tell us how it was possible to survive in the situation when in the first years of collectivisation the collective farmers not only went without monthly wages but even their annual wages were paid to them in kind rather than in money. The stories tell us about the useless toil that caused long-lasting devastation – both material and moral. The crops that were sown and tended were often left on the field. (NOH 747.) At the same time, people sometimes were sentenced to 10 years' confinement and confiscation of property for stealing an armful of straw or a bucket of beetroots (NOH 353).

From the stories, we learn about the establishment of collective farms and their slapdash management. The stories describe the strategies that helped to provide livelihood in the situation when the work in the state enterprises was not paid for or the income was miserable, and the livestock and farmland was strictly limited. For example, a household was permitted to keep one cow, one or two pigs, half a hectare of land around the farm, etc. The stories tell us how these limitations were circumvented, how they were enforced and what sort of relationships existed between the collective farmers, the management and the communist party functionaries and how these relationships developed.

The storytellers insist that the only means of existence was the personal farm, while the wages, if paid at all, were so low that one could not survive on them. One could not afford even sugar for tea – this comparison is found in two stories (NOH 343; NOH 747).

The private farms had to pay the state duties in kind (milk, eggs, meat, wool etc.). Some stories tell about illicit keeping of animals in excess of the permitted maximum number. Conflicts related in two stories are caused by paying of the state duties. Both storytellers are women and the two episodes reveal, in an interesting

way, the distribution of roles between men and women. Even though it is said in the stories that in the post-war years there was no division of work into male and female, because women were often obliged to do all the traditional men's work, in the conflict situations the wives used the opportunity to avoid formal responsibilities by traditionally delegating them to the husbands. Justīne tells:

Now I must give away some milk as a duty. I can't give away that milk from my cow we have many mouths to feed, kids, everybody. So I can't give it away. What shall I do now? Once, when I cannot pay that milk duty, there comes over the "partorg" [Partorg – in Russian, the leader of Communist party's local group or regional organization] from Auce and with him this chairman of the village council, and some collectors. Some four people come. It was at the time of the collective farm. So they come over. "Why don't I pay that milk duty?" they ask. "How can I give away milk from one cow if we have nine mouths to feed?" I say. "Well, but how about this and that one, how can they pay the duty?" "Well", I say. "He pays. But he lives alone. One man, one cow." I say, "He can spare some milk. While we are depending on those four teats..." Well, I am standing my ground. That partorg is a tough man and I am tough too. And I am arguing with him. And he threatened me with prison. He says: "We shall take you away." I say: "Very well. You take those kids of mine and I'll go to that prison. I'll be ten times better in prison than with those kids and nothing to eat." Well, you know. I argued and I swore. He sits and thinks. Then he draws up a statement. I must sign it. I say: "I won't sign. Let my husband sign. Why should I do it? I must feed my kids. My man does not bring food for the children. He goes to work." Well. Some time passes and I get news – my milk duty has been cancelled, I don't have to give milk away. (NOH 351.)

The argument "My man does not bring food for the children. He goes to work." is the key to the understanding of the first years of collectivization and the survival practices. If traditionally going to work meant earning the living for oneself and one's family, then in the first half of the 1950ies between the state employment and earning one's living there was no important connection to countryside.

CONCLUSIONS

The life story research in Latvia started to develop at the beginning of 1990ies. The first task was to create a room for personal experiences in the recent history of Latvia and to collect testimonies about events silenced during the Soviet occupation – the

period of Latvia's independence between World Wars, Soviet repressions, deportations and hardships of post-war period and the Latvian exile from the West after 1944. Now it is possible to turn accumulated experience to other fields of research within oral history – like history of everyday life. For a scholar, narratives about daily life are an extraordinary rich subject of social and historical research – life stories provide a wide range of information on patterns of everyday life from the perspective of the individuals. Here I gave only a short insight, or rather an ethnographic description, on narratives that characterize the first post-war and collectivization years, focusing on some aspects of work relations and practices which illuminate the slow process of change, conflicts and survival practices, as well as emotional responses to ongoing events. The concept of integration into new socio-cultural discourse as a long-term process, developed by Estonian sociologist Aili Aareleid-Tart, was very helpful, as the historical events in the Baltic countries followed similar patterns and the challenges faced by people were almost the same.

Life stories telling about worries, conflicts, sufferings, human relationships and daily work help us look into the past as an exciting, strange land that is so different and yet essentially linked with our time and space. There are strong connections between the biographies and history, between the individual experience and the changes in the community.

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Dr. sc. soc. Baiba Bela-Krūmiņa, Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, The Project of National Oral History.