



ORAL HISTORY AND LIFE STORIES AS A RESEARCH AREA IN ESTONIAN HISTORY, FOLKLORISTICS AND ETHNOLOGY

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Although the term *oral history* has not been adapted in Estonian history, folkloristics or ethnology either as a translation or as a foreign term, the methodological approaches are still analogous to those employed in the area of oral history. A characteristic feature in the general tradition of oral history research in Estonia is that it relies a lot on written narratives, similarly to the tradition of the Scandinavian countries.

The following review focuses on the events of the 1990s to shed light to the current situation in its evolution, which joins the research traditions of Estonia, their interdisciplinarity and international contacts. The turn to the study of life narratives in Estonian ethnology, folkloristics and history research in the 1990s started separately: each departed from the specifics and traditions of its branch. The more general research framework is the same in all of them: as the research paradigm changed, new sources and methods were taken into use. Interdisciplinary collaboration started to develop through the activities, seminars, conferences and mutual publications of Estonian Life Stories Association, culminating in the collection *She Who Remembers, Survives* in 2004. This collection comprises all forms and methods of cooperation in the area of life stories and oral history – collecting, publication, discussion. At the same time it shows how many or few there are of us.

The research of oral history was affected by the political background in Estonia. In 1991 independence was regained in the Republic of Estonia. This was preceded by political pressure in the earlier years (e.g. expansion of the sphere of influence of the Russian language; intensified immigration into Estonia from the eastern parts of Soviet Union; prevention of industrial development and distortion of natural balance), which in turn provoked the resistance movement at first by means of literature and drama, but in the 1980s also in the press and in the work of societies. (See Jansen & Ruutsoo 1999, 551–560.) All these topics were discussed both spontaneously and in dialogue with the above-mentioned open channels. The situation of political changes on the one hand and the intensity of the discussions on the other caused reminiscing and narrating of real life as well as interpretation of the

past through life stories to come to the foreground in the society, and this could not have remained unnoticed in cultural research. It is reflected in the collections of the Estonian Literary Museum and Estonian National Museum from the 1990s as well as research directions and problems described below.

USE OF SOVIET-ERA MEMORIES IN ESTONIAN HISTORY WRITING

In 1988 total restrictions were lifted from the access to archive materials in Estonia, and, step by step, the doors of special funds and departmental archives (e.g. the Estonian Communist Party (ECP) archives) started to open. Still it took some time before the restrictions ended and the documents were made available to the public. Handing over the documents of the Internal Security Agency (KGB) and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic (ESSR) continued until the mid-1990s. The final transfer of the funds of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of ESSR has been postponed to the year 2011. Questions on the nature and illegality of Soviet repressions, which became extremely topical in the Estonian movement of restitution of independence, also demanded urgent replies from historians. The 'blank spots' of Estonian history, e.g. the arrests in 1940–1941, deportation, shootings, the summer war (1) in 1941 and the following German occupation, the re-establishment of Soviet power and resistance, and new deportations in post-war years – all these events that had been concealed for decades needed expressing and writing down. In the situation where the archives were just opening and documents were collected from them fragment by fragment, it was quite a natural process to turn to the contemporaries of these events. The incompleteness of basic documentation, the problems with the reliability of certain documents or parts of them etc. made memories a valuable source of history. Consequently, the extensive use of memories was characteristic of the 1990s to describe the period of Soviet occupation and especially the events experienced by those who suffered from political repressions (Laar 1990; 1993; Usai 1993; Pinn 1993; Laar & Tross 1996; Leemets 1997; Kivimäe & Kõiv 1997; Rahi 1998; Lindmäe 1999; Uluots 1999).

Inevitably, this brought along a discussion of the usability of memories. There were reproaches on the extreme trust of memories, their selective use, which reflected in factual errors, poor analysis, excessive emotionality and other drawbacks, which made historians handle the memories more carefully. If we observe the history literature published in recent years, memories used in works concerning the periods of the Soviet and German occupation are predominantly presented in the form of illustrating examples. Usually the so-called key persons have been interviewed, and their remembrances contribute to the understanding of events and to the interpretation of written sources (Raudsepp 2005). Memories have been more often used for describing everyday life and areas, in which archive materials are inadequate or unilateral.

In the discussion on the usability of memories, the time distance from the handled event to writing the memories has been emphasised as an argument. For instance, Tiit Noormets, the author of the latest discussion of the 1941 summer war *Metsavennad Suvesõjas 1941. Eesti rebvastatud vastupanuliikumine Omakaitse dokumentides* [transl. *Forest Brethren in the Summer War 1941. Armed Resistance in the Documents of the Self-Defence Forces*] declares that “oral history has little if anything serious at all to add today” to the events that happened half a century ago (Noormets 2003, 77). At the same time one has to admit that the history of the resistance movement cannot be recorded without the memoirs of participants, as there was virtually no documentation created in the partisan units participating in the summer war. Moreover, most of the existing materials have got lost in the course of the confusion of several transformations and communications. The above publication, however, published a collection of memories recorded in 1942 by the regional units of the Self-Defence Forces (*Omakaitse*). The fact that these memories were collected immediately after the events and under the supervision of the Headquarters of the Self-Defence Forces (the collected memories were verified and systematised on the basis of facts) has guaranteed the efficiency of this source material according to Tiit Noormets. Also, the generally acknowledged fact in war history is reminded that “usually the descriptions of battle events given by one soldier are different from those given by the soldier who fought next to him, because they are all aware only of the activity in their immediate surroundings. The confusion of individual and incomplete perceptions causes the ‘hazy picture’ of the battle action.” (Noormets 2003, 83.) Consequently, it is almost impossible for the people participating in the fighting to notice and understand what is going on at the more general level.

This is where the next prerequisite for the use of memories stems out, as emphasised in the historians’ works: there should be a mass of memories, which makes it possible to compare and analyse them. Mart Laar, the author of *Emajõgi 1944. II maailmasõja lahingud Lõuna-Eestis* [transl. *Emajõgi 1944. World War II Battles in South Estonia*], admits that it is interesting to observe how the sources start fitting in with each other if a large number of both memories and archive documents are involved, and give quite a precise picture of the battles.

At the moment the massive data collections that are available for use are the life narratives collected by the Estonian Life Stories Association and stored in the Cultural-Historical Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum, the materials collected by the Estonian Heritage Society, stored also in the same archives, the responses of the correspondents of the Estonian National Museum to questionnaires and other materials of personal history collected in the museums. Memories have been collected in the course of several research projects like *Ajalugu kirjades* [transl. *History in Letters*], *Eesti sovetiseerimine* [transl. *The Sovietisation of Estonia*], *Võim Eestis* [transl. *Power in Estonia*], etc. The latter project is led by the National Archives, which besides recording documentary memory has aimed in collaboration with Estonian schools at collecting historical memory belonging to the Estonian cultural heritage, to record people’s

personal relationship with historical periods. The more specific objective of the questionnaires conducted by schoolchildren is to record the descriptions of the situation at the moments of the shift of power. (2)

The importance of memories in testing the reliability of Soviet archive documents should not be underrated, as they have proved efficient in the research of the history of repressions. Often the fragments of memory guide the researcher's attention to circumstances that have consciously been left out of the documents, or because the respective information was classified, or such circumstances were concealed in order to dispel responsibility. Such examples can be found in the documents pertaining to the March deportation of 1949, where the rivalling Ministries of Security and Internal Affairs excluded certain events from their reports (Rahi-Tamm 2004). Classified information, twisting the truth, and forging were elements of the Soviet bureaucracy, but the divergence of legislation and practice should not be forgotten either. For example, the Decree about Special Settlers provides quite a different view of deportation, which is drastically divergent from the actual events. In order to interpret the situation, one should not be limited to reading the documents only. A number of contradictions that can be detected in literature have been caused by the modest use of different sources, which could be overcome by an integrated use of sources.

The individual and the personal level are becoming more and more noticeable beside the overall level, in interpreting and cognising the historical experience of the recent past of Estonia. Trying to answer the question whether it is possible to write history objectively, Professor Enn Tarvel emphasised the need to observe the meaning of certain events for a specific group of people, for the society, the understanding of culture proceeding from current objectives and future plans. For understanding the history of the Baltic countries it is important to consider all the sources and standpoints and all the possible angles of approach. (Tarvel 2005.) It is the historian's responsibility to convey the history in as many-sided and complex way as possible, as a mosaic of different possibilities and choices, placing them in the context of their era.

RESEACH OF ORAL HISTORY IN FOLKLORISTICS

Research of oral history in Estonian folkloristics in the 1990s is associated with the internal and external changes that occurred in research, yet at the same time it should be emphasised that it was based on earlier stages of folkloristics, primarily the works of the folklore researchers of the second half of the 19th century and the 1920s–1930s, which, however, shall not be dealt with in the following (see Jaago 2002).

First, the aspects related with the internal development of research. In the 1990s the renovation process of folkloristics reached its climax. It was connected with the tendencies that had lasted for more than a decade already to observe folklore texts not only departing from their literary context (such practice was intensified by the canons in Soviet folkloristics) (3), but as a scene of modern folklore. Because

of the new observation method, in its turn, folklore started to be analysed more purposefully in the local and informant group-centred context. For example, in 1978 the monograph *Kodavere pajatused* [transl. *Kodavere stories*] by Mall Hiimäe was published, in which the development of the local real-life lore was analysed. The analysis of texts proceeded from the folklore theory of the time (the new research area was matched to the former theoretic framework) and from observing the functioning of the tradition in a relatively small area (Kodavere) within a relatively small informant group (the local village population). This resulted in understanding folklore as a process instead of the earlier static approach, according to which the active use of folklore remained in the past.

In the 1980s collecting folklore from the social aspect intensified, i.e. namely as the folklore of informant groups (traditionally the type of folklore and the collecting place – region had been more important). For example, in the Estonian Folklore Archives (4) the collections of soldier lore, school lore, student lore etc. were developed. The collection of materials of the conference dedicated to the 100th anniversary of folklorist Oskar Loorits (1990) focused on the opportunity to observe the functioning of folk religion in society of the second half of the 20th century (Kõiva & Hiimäe 1995). In the same flow, urban folklore began to interest researchers of folk tales. As a result, article collections titled *Tänapäeva folloorist* [transl. *On Present-Day Folklore*] were published since 1995. Four volumes have been issued so far (Kõiva 1995; 1996; 2000; Kalmre 1999b). Among the folklorists, Eda Kalmre (1996; 1999a; 2001) has studied the mutual relations of urban legends and real life more thoroughly.

The research of the folklore of the 20th century and particularly its end also significantly intensified in the area of the research of short forms, especially riddles. In addition to the research of classic riddles, folklorists started to collect and to study contemporary short forms of modern society. (see e.g. Voolaid 2002; 2003; 2004a; 2004b). The purposeful research of folklore in Estonian settlements in Russia started in 1991. Initially the focus was laid on studying the Estonian tradition in the settlement culture, but it was later shifted to the integral observation of the modern tradition (see overview of expeditions and collections: Korb 2005, 153–158).

More than the above tendencies and works, the research of oral history leaned on the modern interpretation of older tradition. Although the researched texts were produced in the 1980s–1990s, the texts talked of the past, more exactly of how people understand historical events in the circle of their family and kin, either directly of how they survived the Soviet regime or indirectly about the origin of an ancestor from the time of the Great Northern War at the turn of the 18th century. This approach anticipated the cooperation of folklorists with historians. In 1995 the article by Tiiu Jaago *Suulise traditsiooni eripära vaimses kultuuris* [transl. *Peculiarities of Oral Tradition in Intellectual Culture*] and a year later the monograph by Tiiu Jaago and Kalev Jaago *See olevat olnud...* [transl. *It is said to have been so...*] were published, in which they provided comparative analyses of narrated and written family histories. As a result, the development scheme of the narrated stories was defined based on the specifics of both remembering (memory) and value judgments. Family histories had not been in the focus of the folklorists' interest earlier, as this material was considered too close

to real life and too little folklorised. Yet some parts of these histories were regarded as belonging to certain genres of folklore and had found their place in folkloristics as such, for example: settlement histories, legends, personal and everyday narratives. However, in the new, informant group-centred folkloristics these single texts were not classified as types of folklore, but were treated as a whole story – the family narrative. (5)

When folkloristics allowed concentrating on the research of the informant group, and furthermore the research of the text structure as tradition, instead of the spread of the variation of text motives, it meant oral history had found its place in folkloristics (see e.g. overview of folklore research in the 1990s: Viires & Tedre 1998, 41). Interdisciplinarity in the research of real life narratives was also represented in the international conference held in Tartu in 2000, the materials of which were published in the collection of articles *Folklore als Tatsachenbericht* (Beyer & Hiimäe 2001).

Oral history research in Estonian folkloristics is primarily characterised by the question how folklore texts describe the mutual relations of the continuity and the changing of Estonian society and culture. Changes that took place in Estonian society after the collapse of the Soviet empire, described in the beginning of this review, were also reflected in one of the central research problems: why and how do people from the same region, or more generally, the people of Estonia see and describe the same events in a different way (e.g. Jaago 2004a). However, the scope of this question is not used solely for observing the recent past (like in Jaago 2003a; 2003b; 2004b), but also for the research of the earlier, pre-modern period (Jaago 2003c; Ehin 2003).

Another important aspect in oral history research relates to the collaboration with researchers of close areas in the neighbouring countries. This raised the need to present the research made in Estonia in a more general context – in terms of the topic, research methods and terminology. In the course of this work a collection of articles *Lives, Histories and Identities* (2002) was published, based on a seminar held in the University of Tartu two years before. Cooperation continues in different projects, including *Oral history research in the Nordic-Baltic area* in the web-based interactive environment, commenced in the University of Tartu in 2004 in cooperation with the folklorists of the University of Turku, and *Oral History and biographies as resource for local and cross-cultural studies* (2005-2006), coordinated by University of Latvia (National Oral History Project).

THE BIOGRAPHIC APPROACH IN ETHNOLOGY

Similarly to historical research and folkloristics, also in ethnology an important methodological turn took place in the 1990s, but to some degree it differs in how it valued the role and contribution of earlier ethnology. Ethnology revised its research practice as ethnography, which studied the material culture, much more critically than

history or folkloristics did. Among other reasons such as opening of state borders that facilitated intellectual exchange, the radical turn in Estonian ethnology was related to the generational shift experienced more painfully than in history and folklore studies. The “old ethnography” was criticised as being merely descriptive, lacking reflexive attitude to its methodologies (or lacking of methodology at all) and having uncritical attitude of the generation and use of its central concepts such as “folk culture”. Clear features of the crisis accompanying a paradigm shift as described by Thomas Kuhn (1970) could be identified here in the 1990s. The paradigm shift itself was characterised as a movement from the subject-centred approach to the problem- and context-centred approach, from the study of single phenomena of culture to an integrated approach to culture, from the reality happening outside the creator of culture to the group-centred or particularly individual-centred (or experience-oriented) reality (Vunder 1999).

The changes in the ethnological culture research are a clear expression of the change in the concept of culture. Instead of the traditional term “folk culture” (*rahvakultuur*) the term “culture of everyday life” (*argikultuur*), which allows broader interpretation, was taken into use (see discussion Pärdi 1998; Viies 2001). Its interpretation at the beginning of the 1990s largely departed from the works of Scandinavian ethnologists and social anthropologists, for example O. Löfgren, J. Frykman, B. Lönnqvist and M. Gullestad (cf. Järs & Kannike & Pärdi 1999). The analysis of the culture of everyday life emphasised the internal logic of culture; the questions what is intrinsic in culture and what are the “main topics” of culture occupied a central position. The aim was to observe the triviality of everyday life as extraordinary and meaningful, to create systematic knowledge from the self-evident culture. The main problems were: how the cultural values, perceptions and efforts are based on everyday experience and knowledge, how the customary rituals and routines have an important role in developing or reinforcing a certain worldview and how the experience of everyday life in its turn influences people’s cultural perception of the world. It became important to analyse how culture is actively created and recreated, to follow the dynamics of culture.

The 1990s’ “shift to everyday culture” is most vividly expressed in the historical-anthropological articles of Heiki Pärdi (Pärdi 2000; 2001) and in the studies by Anu Kannike on the meaning and creation of home in the late-20th-century Estonia (Kannike 2002). The shift in understanding culture and its research methods is especially evident in the use and evaluation of an important method in Estonian ethnology – the written questionnaire plan and the network of correspondents. The questionnaire plans compiled in early 1990s focused on the changes in the individuals’ everyday life experience. (6) Since the second half of the 1990s the perceivable emphasis has been laid on the experience of recent history and several questionnaires were compiled in cooperation with folklorists and historians. (7) Also the relationship of the ethnologist-researcher with the museum correspondent changes; the role of the latter as an acknowledged “expert in culture” is taken with criticism, the new questionnaires rather emphasise his/her “competence” as an individual.

Life history approach also occupied a central position in the common research project (2002-2005) of the Estonian National Museum and the Chair of Ethnology in the University of Tartu *Strategies and practices of everyday life in Soviet Estonia* (see <<http://www.erm.ee/?node=84>>), which focused on the problem how new strategies and techniques are acquired to behave and cope in the socially, politically, economically, and to a certain extent also culturally new environment, how these strategies and practices are used and how they become routinely applicable, or habitualized (Jõesalu 2003, 2004). The main attention is paid to the individual experience with an aim to open their social and cultural world. The combination of different methods and sources – biographical open interviews, written life stories, structured questionnaires (see questionnaires 211, 214, 216, 221 <<http://www.erm.ee/?node=58>>) – in the project has aroused a discussion in the comparability of these experience and text levels. With this problem setting in the background, it is noticeable that ethnology has moved from the positivist method of historical source criticism (which was not purposefully applied anyway) rather to the narrative approach to experience, which links its practice with oral history and the ethnological research of life stories and memory.

The problem area of life stories and memory actualised in ethnology in connection with collecting written life stories using the public appeal method in the second half of the 1990s. In 1996 the Estonian Life Stories Association (see <<http://www2.kirmus.ee/elulood>>) was founded, concentrating both the writers of life stories and those interested in life stories as a source and method of cultural research. Among the latter there are ethnologists, but also folklorists, sociologists, literary researchers and even theatre practitioners. The mutual collaboration has been fruitful across the disciplines, at the same time favouring the harmonisation of certain viewpoints.

The first monographic life story research in Estonian ethnology is *Ingeri elud ja lood* [transl. *Ingrian Lives and Stories*] by Riina Reinvelt (2002). On the basis of biographical interviews and written life stories she studies the shifts in the culture and self-determination of the Ingrians and the significant turning points in the (life) histories of Ingrians in the 20th century. Characteristically to the biographical approach, her work expresses a recognition of the multivocality of history (both the private and the public/official and generational) and the self-reflectiveness of the researcher, which is a key factor in the case of a biographical interview as a dialogic method. In 2002 Riina Reinvelt also started the project *Narva Biographies* together with the Pro Narva Foundation, “with the aim to collect the life stories of the inhabitants of Narva and through publishing them to bring the citizens of the Estonian Eastern border town Narva nearer to the other residents of Estonia” (Reinvelt 2005, 83).

The problem of the individual and collective experience, its interpretation and identity creation were also central in the research project *Memory as a Culture Factor* (1998–2001; Vunder et al. 1998) at the Chair of Ethnology in the University of Tartu in the second half of the 1990s. The conceptualisation of memory as an analytical category in Estonian ethnology has been interdisciplinary from the very beginning, influenced primarily by phenomenological sociology, cultural psychology, and trauma

theory. The problem of memory as a factor of culture is interpreted in the final collection of the project (Kõresaar & Anepaio 2003), on the one hand, as the problem of social and cultural codes and narrative strategies in auto/biographical texts (both written and narrated in an interview context), and on the other hand, the relationships of the individual and the collective, the private and the public are problematised. Due to the nature of the source (the researched texts – both written life stories and interviews made in fieldwork – have existed since the end of the 1980s) and the changed historical-political context, the research of memory has been and is pointedly oriented at the experience of recent history. The studies focus on what and why people narrate and remember; how and why certain memory images emerge and what it says about the identity and “the culture of remembrance” as a whole. The common question that researchers ask is about the relations of the experiential level of memory and the normative orientations, their dynamics and association with a certain historical and social context (see an overview in Kõresaar 2004). The works departing from this aspect primarily concentrate on the mutual relations of specific life and historical periods (Kõresaar 2005; Siemer 2002), the problems of trauma and memory (Anepaio 2001) and the dynamics of the public and the private in remembering the experience of recent history (Anepaio 2003; Kõresaar 2005).

This year the project “Sites of memory and cultures of remembrance in the 21st-century Estonia” (2006–2009, Ene Kõresaar, Kirsti Jõesalu, Merike Lang, Kristel Rattus) was launched at the Chair of Ethnology in the University of Tartu. The concept “culture of remembrance”, which is used to denote the time-complex questions of the “memory-charge” of the society, of the interests of different groups, mnemotechniques and different ways and means of describing the past, relates the research of memory based on the analysis of life stories with both the sociological (Aarelaid 2003; Lauristin 2004), folkloristic (Jaago 2001; 2002; 2004a; 2004b; 2004c; 2005) and linguistic-literary (Kirss 2004; 2005; Huima 2002; Hinrikus 2003; 2004; 2005) research of life stories in Estonia. At the same time, the concept “culture of remembrance” involves a strong cultural-historical connotation, which brings us back to “where it all started” – to the turn from the research of folk culture to the problematisation of the culture of everyday life in the ethnology of the 1990s.

Translated by Ann Kuslap

NOTES

1. The term “summer war” means the resistance of Estonians to the Soviet rule in the summer of 1941.
2. See the public appeal and questionnaire “Power in Estonia”: <http://www.ra.ee/?news_id=85> [06.02.2006]

3. During the Soviet period the predominant trend in Russian folkloristics was the one that identified folklore research with that part of spiritual folk culture that could be studied using the methods of literary research (Sokolov 1947, 4).
4. At that time “Department of Folklore”.
5. Efforts to describe narrative stories by means of genealogical sources had been made earlier. In 1987 journalist Aleksander Loorits published an article of the tales he had heard in his childhood. Some of these stories talked of Eeva, a woman of Estonian origin, who had married the local manor lord Krüdener. This quite an unusual story inspired Jaan Kross, who used the same theme in his novel *Keisri hull* (The Czar’s Madman, published in 1978). Jaan Kross’s popular novel, in its turn, gave an impulse to Aleksander Loorits to write on this topic (see Loorits 1987, 143).
6. For example, Pärdi 1993: *Kodu ja pere* [transl. *Home and Family*]; Pärdi 1994 *Argielu tavad ja reeglid* [transl. *The Customs and Rules of Everyday Life*], Järs & Õunapuu: *Kobvikud ja kobvikuelu minevikus ja tänapäeval* [transl. *Cafés and Café Life in the Past and Today*]; Pärdi 1999: *Puhtus ja mustus meis ja meie ümber* [transl. *Cleanliness and Dirtiness In and Around Us*]; Pärdi; see further details about thematic questionnaires completed in Estonian ethnology on the Estonian National Museum’s homepage: <www.erm.ee/?node=58>.
7. For example, Saar & Hiiemäe & Kalmre 1998: *1941. aasta küüditamine, elu asumisel* [transl. *The 1941 Deportation, Life in Exile*]; Saar & Rahi & Hiiemäe & Kalmre 1998: *1949. aasta küüditamine, elu asumisel* [transl. *The 1949 Deportation, Life in Exile*]; Saar 1999: *Sõjajärgne küla* [transl. *The Post-War Village*]; see further details about questionnaires focusing on experience of Great History on the Estonian National Museum’s homepage: <www.erm.ee/?node=58>.

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