



## NATIONAL ORAL HISTORY – *TIME OF CHANGE* PROJECT

Māra Zirņīte

### BACKGROUND – *TIME OF CHANGE*

The change of political power in Latvia has introduced a new scientific perspective, particularly in the fields of social sciences and humanities, like in other countries which began down the path of democracy. Latvia's scientists could now return to the international scientific community, and required a steep learning curve to learn that which had been neglected for fifty years. Freedom of speech finally allowed the social sciences to rediscover research sources such as oral history, life stories, individual, personal experience and qualitative research methodology.

Through qualitative sources researchers gained a new perspective and understanding. Forbidden experience and opinions presented as objects for sociological research – repressions, exile, and political resistance as well as daily life and cultural aspects such as ethnic, national and religious identity, gender perspectives, changing values in a shifting social environment, and the inheritance of tradition.

In the late 1980s during the *National Awakening*, the Latvian Culture Foundation began to collect and publish people's diaries. After the restoration of independence this idea about collecting people's life stories was transferred, together with its initiators, to the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology. The Science Council of Latvia approved a grant for the National Oral History project in 1992. The project was directed by a well respected Latvian philosopher and ethics specialist professor Augusts Milts, who had already shaped a number of new philosophers. At that time, the current Director of the National Oral History research project Baiba Bela started to work on the project as a second year philosophy student.

As a result of the large social changes in Latvia in the early 1990s, the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology initiated a lot of new research directions. A creative, investigative spirit reigned within the Institute with an atmosphere

favorable to progress and innovation. Research was greatly added to by input from foreign researchers, and an intense pace was set by a diverse range of themes and approaches, which was inspired by the openness and trust of interviewees.

International research experience has been incorporated into the foundation of the National Oral History collection and in the development of its methodology. We have studied examples from research centers such as the Immigration History Research Center in Minneapolis (USA), the British Library Sound Archive in London, the Ethnological Research Center in the University of Oslo, the Norwegian Emigrant Museum in Hamar and the Nordiska Museet in Stockholm.

The International conference *Life Stories: History, Culture, Society* which was organized by staff of the National Oral History Project in 2003 in Rīga, introduced a wider international context for oral history research in Latvia.

## **THE LATVIAN SPECIALISTS FROM ABROAD**

We are working side-by-side with anthropologists, folklore specialists and other representatives of the social sciences, Latvians from abroad. We were linked by a common interest in people, the lives of Latvian inhabitants and humane values, which had kept people's spirit alive under the threat of hostile political powers. We were interested in everything which was kept quiet and carefully hidden from the totalitarian regime, national cultural resources and their survival, through many years of occupation. Now finally we could turn to significant questions of national identity in the context of disadvantageous demographic changes for the indigenous population.

The Latvian specialists from abroad have taken part in National Oral history research projects. Among them: psychiatrist Anita Timans Kalns, England; medical anthropologist Vieda Skultāne, Bristol University, England; Inta Gāle Carpenter; folklore project director at Indiana University and sociologist Andrejs Urdze from the University of Bielefeld in Germany; psychologist Sandra Sebre from the USA, now working in Latvia, Solveiga Miezīte from Canada and others. The National Oral History Project was the research base for Māra Lazda and Jānis Čakars, both doctoral candidates at Indiana University (USA), who conducted oral history interviews for their doctoral theses. Latvian researchers with different backgrounds offered each other support.

We began our interaction after living different lives under different conditions. There were differences between foreign and Latvian researchers, and between society in Latvia and that of the Diaspora. One of these was related to the essential component of oral history – language. The language of Latvians in Latvia and abroad differed and there was not always a clear understanding of the meanings attached to words.

## **A LANGUAGE WHICH DIVIDES AND UNITES**

We noted a completely opposite situation in life story interviews from the older generation: elderly people both in Latvia and exile spoke in the same language, they held the same impressions, traditional cultural signs and symbols. They spoke in the same language and easily understood each other, even though they have lived the main part of their lives, 50 years, in different conditions, social systems and territories. This has also been concluded by Vieda Skultāne and is outlined in her book *The Testimony of Lives* (Skultans 1998, 99):

Narratives of people growing up in the 1950s and 1960s are not built upon literary paradigms in the same way as those of an earlier generation. In the narratives of older people values are affirmed through the development of a plot or the unfolding of a life. By contrast, in the narratives of younger people values are affirmed only to be undermined by the course which their lives take. Values fail to find a plot. This applies particularly to illness narratives.

The language used in the life stories, the imagery and forms of expression which dominated were features created by a particular era, a geographical and social milieu which had been adopted in the youth of the narrators. These were the most resistant to change.

Over the distance of time and place, the memory of this older generation has stored themes, places, a personal index that has not been adapted by Latvian history: the names of people who have perished in wars and places of detention; stories about families, generations, homes, parishes, places where there are no longer any witnesses to their habitation. The tales of the narrators reveal unknown parts of familiar events allow one to examine the development of an event through the prism of human experience and daily activity. Life stories show how people live with the radical changes of the 20th century.

People born in Latvia in the early 20th century had in one lifetime been witnesses of two revolutions and two wars, seven changes of power – from tsarist Russia to an independent Latvian nation. Following 20 years of independence, there was occupation by two large neighboring countries: the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. Latvia lost 1/5 of its population as a result of the Soviet occupation of 1940.

## **FIELDWORK LIFE STORY IN LATVIA**

In an attempt to record the unique characterization of an era presented through people's life stories, as well as to gain a broader insight into the lives in which the events included in life stories occur, the older generation became a focus for research in Latvia and in Latvian communities abroad.

Fieldwork constitutes one type of collaboration undertaken by the National Oral History Project in which volunteers from abroad participate regularly. The long-unknown history endured by people in Latvia makes the fieldwork into a sort of ritual of homecoming. After the volunteers have listened to and recorded life stories on cassette, they themselves gain new experience and a deeper understanding of how events have affected people in Latvia.

The experiences of interviewers in Latvia are further used in their home countries. Since 1996 a group of interviewers has been formed, led by Maija Hinkle continues oral history interviewing in America, which adds to the National Oral History collection with life stories describing the experience of exile.

The main element of the method is the researcher-interviewer's tact and responsibility for ethical principles, which they assume when inviting a person's candour. This corresponds with Gadamer's thesis, that the main scientific approach used in the humanities is based on the psychological tact (Gadamer 2005, 8). At the end of the interview the interviewee signs an agreement allowing the interview to be included in the collection of the National Oral History Project.

As a result, over 2 400 life stories have been collected, the majority of them representing the older generation. Approximately half document the cultural identity in various Latvian regions, approximately 1/5 represent the life stories of Latvians outside Latvia. The rest of the collection is dedicated to specific historical experience and special studies.

## RESEARCH THEMES

Research themes corresponding to the theoretical and practical interests of researchers demonstrate that the creative spirit of the researchers has been liberated from the chains of prolonged censorship:

- People's inner freedom in the circumstance of external imprisonment – in the Gulag etc.
- Cultural traditions of the small ethnic group: the Livonian and the rapid decline in numbers of those who can maintain these traditions.
- Latvian traditional culture – its maintenance in exile and isolation from the homeland.
- Women's and men's approaches in a cultural and social milieu.
- Individual experiences in Latvian communities in exile: USA, Canada, England, Norway, Sweden.
- "Home" in Rīga, Latvia, as a model of social changes experienced by individual inhabitants.

- Text and language: narration of everyday experience: rationality, emotionally.
- Ethical values through life stories.
- Latvian regional and ethnic cultural identities.
- Traditional links between people and their social and natural environments.

The attention of researchers was also attracted by new themes introduced by the era. A group of researchers took part in a study ordered by the UN and World Bank about poverty and the opinions of poor people in Latvia, about social isolation and other risk factors that are the result of drastic social change.

Nevertheless, the focus of the National Oral History Project is trained on sources of spiritual strength of the culture, which have helped people in many and varied life situations to maintain their inner stability and self respect. Researchers were interested in the fact that this feature is not represented in the majority of people but is more often the exception. When independence was restored, the indigenous population made up just half of the entire population. (1) This made us, through oral history research, make a contribution to understanding what it means to represent a culture whose representatives were rapidly dwindling in number.

## **THE ROOTS OF REGIONAL IDENTITY – ANSWER TO GLOBALIZATION**

Questions of cultural and regional identity guide dynamic processes and changes that affect all former Eastern European countries. In the context of globalization, region is significant because of its historical roots and the cultural traditions it contains therein as well as a measure according to which existing norms and social ties are much more secure and provide the individual real support – more so than external bureaucracy does.

If biographies or life stories are interpreted as the synthesis between individual experience and social context (Habermas 1989, 126), then the personal stories and individual events found in oral histories can be analyzed in relationship to the larger social context or system to which language dialect links them. Dialect can be assumed as a marker of broader regional identity (2), according to which other markers may be identified (3) in life stories of narrators speaking in the same dialect.

The events recalled – the content of the story – result from the author's experience and mark the local landscape, which in turn may be recognized from one life story to another within the borders of region. In studying a region, one may observe how markers of identity are created, develop, and change, in

accordance with changes in influences and circumstances and how they are repeated and mark life stories from the same territory.

In places where researchers could meet local residents and have had the opportunity to hear their memories, this has great significance as an emotional connection between an individual's life and evidence of material culture (ethnographic objects, buildings etc.), which often outlive their users. Memories reconstruct the conditions of a person's life and the way in which a person has behaved, changed the surroundings, and shaped him/herself. The memories of the local inhabitants who have a long time living experience during more than one generation have a particular meaning in the development of the roots of regional identity.

When we meet people *from these places* outside of the original territorial context, we are nevertheless able to recognize the language, customs, social networks, and other signs in memories that refer to a distinct cultural tradition connected to the narrator's place of birth. Without knowledge of the essence of regional culture, we could not recognize these references, and we would miss these links that characterize identity.

## NOTES

1. The percentage population of the indigenous population decreased from 75.5 % in 1935, when the last pre-war census was taken, to 52 % in 1989, the last census during the Soviet era.
2. *Idem, eadem, idem* (lat) = 'the same', 'one'; *Identidem* (lat.) = 'repetitive', 'repeatedly', 'frequently'.
3. *Identificare* (lat.): to consider or assume as identical, to make the same. To recognize, acknowledge, to as certain (according to specific signs).

## REFERENCES

### Literature

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**Mara Zirnite is a project coordinator in the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, in the University of Latvia.**