

CONFLICT, EXPERIENCE AND NOSTALGIA IN FAMILY NARRATIVES. ON THE EXAMPLE OF ESTONIA AND FINLAND

Tiiu Jaago

Nowadays, narratives about one's ancestors, the origin of family names, the characteristics and actions of relatives occur in oral narratives as well as in written tribal chronicles, books of memories, autobiographies, and also printed press (e.g. newspaper interviews). Sometimes rather unexpected associations precipitate a recollection about one's forefathers.

Do you have a relative living in country or in the woods?

My grandmother lives in a yellow house at Jaama street in Suure-Jaani. I am baptised and received confirmation at the church of Suure-Jaani, too. Although I was fourteen then and don't remember much of it.

Do you remember what clothes were you wearing at confirmation?

I was wearing a white skirt and a white blouse. And I was a fat child. By the way, my great-great-grandfather travelled from Sweden to Estonia over ice on a sled. He must have been a cobbler or something. (Jürgen 1998: 12)

The need to know one's ancestry has been justified by mythical, legal, as well as scientific explanations (Mitterauer 1991; Merila-Hubbard 1995). But why do we discuss and write about it in modern society? It has no direct practical function: relying on heritage only, it is impossible to resolve any legal matters, be it the right of succession or applying for citizenship; also, we have no religious beliefs which would unite the members of the group by a common ancestor or blood-relatives. Scientific studies (genealogy, genetic relations due to blood relation) are based first and foremost on documented evidence, which heritage could never be.

We might assume that changes in society motivate the study of one's ancestry. For instance, the need to be aware of genealogy became topical in the 1990s with applying Estonian citizenship, and also during the reapplication of unlawfully alienated property or applying for its compensation. In recent years school children are expected to study their ancestry (e.g. the history textbook for the 5th grade written by Tiia Toomet includes a chapter about genealogy entitled 'We are living through history'); special surveys have been conducted for the research (e.g. the BA theses of Tiit Tuumalu called "Family Name as an Issue of Folklore" from 1997). These examples, however, are singular: they have no lasting effect on tradition and are not able to form it. We must search for the reasons for our interest in family heritage in the common elements of the earlier tradition and new forms of culture, therefore it is impossible to strictly separate oral narratives from heritage in written form.

SOME INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS

Family heritage has two aspects. The first aspect is what is narrated in the heritage and the type of information it contains (oral or written). And the second is the form of heritage: how it is narrated or written, how the narrative is performed. Family narratives subject to a certain traditional form of expression.

Historical family narratives and personal narratives are only one aspect of the real history. Narrative truth follows an intrinsic consistency which is not just an objective recollection of facts. The vision of the past, characteristic to narratives, depends on the taste, opinions and attitudes of the period, they affect the narrative event and change in the course of narration. For example, it is very common for the stories of origin in the early 20th century Estonia, that the narrator claims as if his ancestors had emigrated to Estonia from Sweden. According to Martin Lipp it is the inferiority complex of town people with a peasant-serf background (Lipp 1909). In peasant narratives from this period this explanation is not so prevalent, even though peasants often refer to their ancestors' Swedish origin. Rather, it seems to be the case of subjecting the motif of a forefather from abroad to the motif of a forefather from Sweden (Jaago & Jaago 1996).

Narrative information is modelled by time and space, altering it and causing deviations from historic facts. Temporal and spatial aspect also provide the presence of traditional form of expression and its uniqueness. Not everyone discusses everything everywhere. Thus, we could visualise that in different geographical points the heritage has a different axis of tradition, which connects the past to the future. These geographical axes are intersected by same historical events (wars, political and religious movements, writing down family names) and cultural layers (literacy, educational system), which all exert influence on these geographical heritage axes, but the result will be formed only in the co-effect of vertical and horizontal axes. Therefore, I would like to emphasise that we are can talk about family heritage only where corresponding narrative tradition, including proper forms of heritage, exists. Thus, the Estonian of Finnish family tradition is not distributed evenly over the whole area of Estonia or Finland, as the landscape of tradition does not coincide with geographical landscape.

MAIN PROBLEM AND SOURCES

My research on the issue of why people talk about their ancestors and close relatives today was inspired by a conversation with Ulrika Wolf-Knuts, a folklore researcher at the Åbo Academy. She had studied the heritage of refugees and found that narrating about the past of one's tribe and family is strongly related with nostalgia. I was surprised: even though I could not revoke her arguments, I was certain that the material collected and studied from Estonia did not regard nostalgia as the topmost subject.¹ Hence my goal to study what is reflected in the personal and historical narratives today. In addition to the earlier source material I based my study on the accounts containing family heritage collected in Estonia and Finland during 1996–1997.

1. The Estonian Archives of Cultural History in the Estonian Museum of Literature contains a collection *Eesti Elulood* [Estonian Life Stories] (EE) which is, in fact, the outcome of a collection contest on the subject "The Fate of Me and My Close Ones in the Course of History". I covered nearly 1,500 of the total of 20,000 pages of the collection for my research.

2. The second source material was a Finnish collection entitled “Suvun suuri kertomus” (SSK) [The Great Family History], available in the Finnish Literature Society Folklore Archives in Helsinki, which is the outcome of the 1997 collection contest of Finnish family narratives. I covered approximately 1,300 pages of the total of 40,000.

As to the Estonian manuscripts the selection was based on the contents of heritage (the collection focuses on life stories, and therefore does not contain accounts about ancestry and the life of ancestors); as to the Finnish material I tended to give priority to narratives about peasant ancestries, as it seemed to comply best with the selected Estonian material.

Although I did not aim to observe the narrators’ gender, time of birth or the geographical distribution of their origin, the data inevitably emerges. Both the Estonian as well as Finnish corpus of sources contain twice as many works by women as there are of men: thus, women are more active writers. The work of men and women differs considerably, so that if we observe the extreme tendencies we are able to distinguish the style of men and women. The majority of the narrators are between the ages of 60–70. The contents and emphasis of the heritage is formed by the temporal background of the respondents (the period before WW2 could be characterised by social stability, forming a contrast with the tumultuous period of wartime and post-world-war period). I did not study the geographical background of all the respondents, but judging by the studied material I could clearly differentiate the eastern and western region by drawing a vertical axis to the centre of Estonia. The eastern area is more “talkative”, more narrative-like and focused to a person. The western area is more informative, while the narratives are more laconic. The island of Saaremaa will form an altogether separate area.

Of the 14 accounts I covered, one was written in Saaremaa; three came from the western Estonia (whereas one of the authors was born in the western region of Estonia, but had spent most of her life elsewhere, and resided recently in Tartu); 9 accounts came from the eastern region, and the origin of one is unspecified.

The Finnish accounts were mostly from Karelia, Central-, North- and East-Finland. I assume that the narrative tradition has a more solid foundation in these regions. For instance, one respondent from western Finland (Uudenkaupunki) describes mostly the family heritage from his father's line during the period they lived in Karelia, and adds only a few pages of heritage connected to the family of his mother's side and the local region (SSK 9139/9787). A woman from Lappeenranta analyses her childhood and family relations. And she also mentions that her Karelian husband often used to tell long stories about his family, and narrated in a free manner. The woman herself could not tell stories like that, as it was not common in her family. She said she felt better in writing them down (SSK 9505/10096: 11888). The surface of tradition inevitably forms the style and form of expressing knowledge, but also emotions and conceptions.

FARMS AND FAMILY NARRATIVES

So far I have been concerned with studying the oral narrative (or written accounts of it) of people of peasant background during the period from "after the Great Northern War" (according to a popular periodisation) to WW2. This material is characterised by:

1. the embedding of the subjects of home (farm) and ancestors;
2. speaking of one means also speaking of the other; the heritage is "established" on knowing one's genealogy.

For example: In the early 20th century, a farmer from the western part of Estonia passes his farm on to his son, and also gives him important information about his forebear as follows:

To our beloved son Aleksander, he, who has inherited farm no. 10 of Kohatu Jaan (Jaanimardi), we will hereby give information which he and his children and his grandchildren can keep as a memento when we are no longer here, and rest in the grave adorned with flowers or overgrown with weed.

Which is followed by facts on his family (EE 70: 1). Telling of her childhood home, a woman in her 60s from Harjumaa describes the history of her farm over five generations: her forefather Toomas

had been a stingy miser, who had rented his son Jüri an inn at Heldemaa, on the border of Harju and Western county. Jüri, in his turn, was a successful innkeeper and saved money for his son Hans, so that the latter could buy a farm on 50 years mortgage. The farm was kept by Hans's son Jaan, and the last payment was made by Jaan's daughter Hilja (born 1911) in 1936 (ERM, KV 745: 170). A similar, rather amusing account describes how the oldest son in the family, who was to inherit the farm, was named alternately Hindrek and then Jaan; what was built at Hindrek's time, fell apart at Jaan's time (ERM, KV 752: 287).

The motifs of tradition survive the changes in time, but the context of the narratives alters. Nowadays people know their genealogy, too, and this might inspire narratives about one's ancestors, but genealogy is no longer associated with farmsteads, which, as a rule, do not exist in reality.

Life at farms is also described in the two collections mentioned above "The Fate of Me and My Close Ones in the Course of History", available in Tartu, and *Suvun suuri kertomus*, available in Helsinki. The generation of the 60–70 year-olds writes about the life of their parents at the beginning of the 20th century. According to the accounts, their parents' youth was quite hard, mostly due to poverty and hard labour. For example, a 62-year old Finnish woman from Impilahti writes: my parents were talkative but they never talked about their childhood, as it had been hard and people wouldn't talk of hardship (SSK 9509/10102: 6429). A 70-year old Estonian man from Lääne-Virumaa mentions that his parents had been tenants in their youth and they had suffered hard times. At the same time his own boyhood had been blissful and happy, and they had suffered no want (EE 540: 6–9).

Describing life at farms in the recollections of today's narrators could be characterised as reflecting an opposition between the stability and harmony and the crisis after WW2. It has an objective basis because of the life of the generation under discussion and ongoing historical events. In the 1920s –1930s, today's narrators-respondents were young children. As a rule, childhood is a happy time and people are not troubled with worries.² The relatively stable and secure childhood would be followed by a very critical change in society. In Estonia, people's lives were interrupted by war and

political reforms, which ran to the extremes with the arrests and deportations in 1941 and 1949. In Finland, life was affected by the war, emigration from Karelia due to the re-establishment of Russian borders; the most significant change was associated with cultural crisis, where the former natural tendencies were set in opposition with technocracy.

The experience of the narrators reflects the perceived crisis: the stability and sense of security associated with the consistency of life at the farm, of family, and lineage on the one hand;³ and its destruction by various forces (political crisis, technological era), on the other.

Living at the breakpoint has favoured stark contrast: before : after (i.e. now). This might imply to nostalgia, but in the source material under discussion nostalgia is not prevalent. One distinct way to present the contrast is a narrative based on conflict instead. Thus, the material studied centres on conflict instead of nostalgia.



A family photo from the private collection of Kalev Jaago.

CONFLICT NARRATIVE

Conflict can be regarded as an axis on which the narrative is based on. But we should also bear in mind that conflict narratives already exist in the tradition. In peasant tradition they are associated with the topic of marriage, the relationship between a husband and his wife, or a daughter-in-law and mother-in-law (See further Jaago & Jaago 1996: 89–94).

Let us first consider an example where the narrator is faced with the events happening in the outside world and tries to find her peace of mind by writing about it. One of the functions of a conflict narrative is sorting out relationships, analysing them for oneself. A 68-year old woman from Iisaku describes her family history from two aspects: the first is her childhood and life at a farm, connecting it to the life of her ancestors; the second aspect concerns the story about the destruction of the farm, describing ill omens (the Christmas tree fell down at the Christmas of 1940–1941, dogs were howling outside her parents' room's window); this is followed by a detailed and the longest account about the life in Siberia and aftermath. The woman gives no information on what happened after 1958, when the family left Siberia and returned to Estonia, instead, she gives an account of the applications for rehabilitation and the responses of government officials. Hence the conflict became a key to the written life story. Why did not the rehabilitation process solve the conflict where the opposing sides were life at the home farm and years in Siberia? The responses received to the rehabilitation applications created more tension. It turned out, for instance, that according to the responses her grandmother, who died in Siberia, was not listed as a deportee and was claimed never to have been in Siberia! Then, how come she died there (EE 402)?

Certainly, not all narratives about Siberia are based on conflict. Situation in itself can neither condition nor determine the narrative form.

The critical events in the society can also affect person's self-critical faculties. The author of the following example tries to solve a conflict by writing, too, but reaches only to the heart of the problem. A 45-year-old man from Rovaniemi analyses the importance of family in the forming of men and the change of male identity

during three generations. He describes a man's relationship with nature, with his own family, education, work and spirituality in different times from his grandfather's world to today. Comparing his relations, it becomes obvious that a man at wartime and technological era has lost his balance because of growing apart from nature, family and spirituality. The writer comes to the conclusion that he had lived according to an established pattern which is not inherent to him. He argues that the reasons for this painful understanding lie in the time he was growing up: first and foremost the reevaluation of attitudes in nature and people as a part of nature; opening cultural possibilities, primarily education, which due to the inert village communities played no significant role, though (SSK 8239/9165). The account is analytic, with a sad undertone. The pessimism culminates at the end of the story, where the narrator compares his current situation with an open wound *Haava on auki iholla, veretön haava* [A wound is torn apart, a bloodless wound] (ibid.: 27469).

The written narratives based on conflict on the axis *me* and *the events of the outside world* were sent mainly by Finnish men,⁴ but not women. At the same time it is quite common in the works of Estonian women. The characteristic conflict to Finnish female narrators is either *me* and *family* or *family* and *individual*, but it is not typical to Finnish men. The Estonian material does contain references to the conflicts between the narrator and his/her family, but the narratives are not based on this opposition. Either because of the uniqueness of the source (the material centres on person, not family), or for some other reasons: in Soviet times the role of family in personal development was not considered significant, therefore, people with such background are unable to analyse their fate from the aspect of family.

In conflict narratives the opposition (*me – society*) is formed on the same axis of time and era (*past – future*). In conflict narratives one is clearly favoured. If the material happens to contain nostalgic recollections, they are never a part of recent past and do not prevail in the narrative. The opposition between the past and the present day is not necessarily presented in the form of conflict. The narrator does not focus strictly on one axis (the conflict), but regards the events in a wider perspective, which eventually results

in experience. Narratives of experience may also comprise conflict narratives. For example, a man from Uusikaupunki in his 40s unites the memories of his own, his mother's, who was from western Finland, and his Karelian father, into a whole. The story consists of conflict narrative (leaving the Karelian home), ethnological accounts of life in fishing village and fishing (a unique way to preserve a lost culture) and ends with an evaluative summary (the war took home, but gave experience; how his home had affected him; what has it meant for him). (SSK 9139/9787: 371).

NARRATIVES OF EXPERIENCE

Describing the everyday life of parents and grandparents, the writers usually mention how hard they worked. The narrators have regarded it with respect and awe, but it has also inspired them to compare the past and present day. A 40-year-old Finnish woman living near Kuopio argues that her parents did the work that had to be done. She has reached a conclusion that the high rate of unemployment is caused by the fact that today people choose an occupation and refuse to do the work that has to be done, too (SSK 9040/2033: 3458). Children were explained the complexity of parents' (marital) relations through stories, which they did not comprehend at the time, but have come to value through their own life experience (SSK 9269/2137: 513–527). A 77-year old woman from Jämsä contemplates about beggars in the past and today: earlier, beggars would travel from village to village, from family to family begging for food. Nowadays the analogy lies in the call broadcast over the radio, television and printed press to make a donation for some cause or someone (SSK 9139/979: 4515). A woman from Joensuu born in 1924 notes that writing the family history she realises how the world has changed. She had been a child of nature, a part of it; but was no longer. She misses the time, but at the same time realises that it is much easier for an old person to live at our technological era. *Nostalgian ja todellisuuden välillä on ristiriita!* [Nostalgia and reality are contradicting notions]. (SSK 9211/9832: 10334).

As a rule, the narratives contain more or less comparing one's own life experience to the experience of others: not conflict but analogy;

putting the importance of family and parents into words; rendering meaning to one's existence through family history.

The narratives of experience are inspired by the realisation of one's inner self. Principally, the external events could be the same: deportation to Siberia and imprisonment on reasons seeming absurd to the person himself, war, the loss of relatives, except that the narrative is not based on conflict but the course of life (on the life story of one person in Estonia, and on family history in Finland).

WHY IS THERE SO LITTLE NOSTALGIA?

Nostalgia might be intentionally present in the narratives discussed above, but it has remained secondary. The material does contain hints of intentional recollections of the better side of home long lost, aiming to bring excitement to today's life, so that it could be connected to one's identity as well (e.g. to serve not just a new dish for dinner, but the food of one's Karelian ancestors). The desire for past recedes from the attempt to render present day meanings to things or phenomena of the past.

When narrator is performing a narrative, (s)he is active. But when (s)he lapses into nostalgia, then the narrative is addressed to the narrator itself and, most likely, (s)he will not find a listener: the text is not addressed to a listener. In a hidden way, family history is often transmitted via reproach: *When I was young, I... had already a job, or was satisfied with this or that food, these or those things (instead of skis I had two boards and the poles I took from fence – good enough for me)*. The reproach is usually addressed to children or grandchildren. Partly it is the act of transmitting the past, but pushes the listener away with its aggressiveness. It is like nostalgia from the narrator's side: a self-centred mode of expression, which is often a self-defence.

Established specific forms of expression are present in every culture. The tradition of cultural area under discussion contains:

1. narratives based on conflict as a form of relieving tension. Such stories arose from the critical events of the mid-20th century and problems with adapting after the cultural crisis;

2. narratives concerning life at farms before the cultural crisis as a stable and harmonic childhood world;
3. narratives about the forebear and origin have been affected by an intense interest towards genealogy in Estonia, which was inspired by the Baltic-German genealogy in the early 20th century;
4. narratives of experience which mediate knowledge and life experience. This type of mediating experience, not only by literature or media (*this is the life, not history*), is unavoidable for a nation under foreign control;
5. identity is expressed by one's origin. Both in Estonia as well as in Finland the geographical origin is most important (*forefathers came...*). For both cultures the question *where are you from* is what determines the knowledge of a person's self, even more than a question who are you, as it proceeds from the previous question. Another significant factor in the Estonian material is name (the origin of family name), whereas the Finnish material does not mention it.

All the works I studied, talk of love and gratitude towards parents. Knowing and writing down the stories is a form of expressing affection and gratitude.

The already existing surface of tradition shapes the way how oral and written tradition is presented. Stories of conflict do not result in the fact that some people found themselves amid risky situations more often than others, but also that it is an axis of writing and narration in a cultural space where is no stability. For example, a woman from West-Estonia has described the absurdity connected to the partial repossessing of land, deportations and the establishment of collective farms in 1940s. Among other things, the story reflects the emphases of the narrator, things that mattered first and foremost to her:

Of the 1940 revolution I know that they left everyone 30 hectares of land. Who had more, it was taken away: they even asked which part do you want to give away, but did the other way around. We had to give away the hayfield on the other side of the river /---/

and had no more hay for horses. Horses didn't eat the hay from heaths, hay racks remained full and the horses lost weight. There was mint in the hay, the horses didn't want that /---/ (EE 570: 7).

Even when the social situation became more stable, conflicts were inevitable:

[At the time of collective farms] *You were not allowed to harvest your own potatoes, you had to work for the collective farm. Once I was at Otsa digging up potatoes, when I saw an official again, so I ran to the alder brush by the river, even though I was in between two milkings. And so I did several times. Afterwards we weren't disturbed that much. One spring, when Mardi Karla was just doing the first furrows, old Veerpalu came and some other man, and we were both reproved.*

But now I think I have nothing else to write about. (EE 570: 11)

And she cuts her story short just like this.

Narrative heritage intrigues folklorists mainly due to the established cultural stereotypes, as it does not introduce mere historical facts, but reflects also people's attitudes, tendencies of tradition, cultural differences and different narrative structures (what to tell and how).

COMMENTS

¹ Mythical nostalgia is most evident in the family chronicles of the 1930s, expressing delight over bequeathing the farm from father to son through many generations. These accounts focus only on positive facts from the past.

² See e.g. the dynamics of biographies: the descriptions of childhood refer to a routine of alternating seasons and work. Events happening in the outside world are not significant. This is also implied in the titles of chapters, such as "The cold winter", "The laborious spring". The sickness and death of father changes the routine, reflecting problems both in the titles ("The troublesome autumn") as well as in the accounts (*After Dad's funeral, I was faced with life's wearisome hum-drum. It never asks how old or*

strong you are, but demands action right away). War has already begun, he is not yet affected by it, but soon the writer has to face the consequences of war (EE 430).

³ In Estonia the period of childhood discussed here actually did coincide with the period of agricultural prosperity.

⁴ See e.g. for comparison: A man from Kuopio (SSK 8205/9137), who knows his forebear 12 generations back, describes that they all had been living as a part of nature, but the 13th generation no longer does (ibid.: 8856). He happened to live in the period of crisis: all his ancestors had been peasants, but he had learned to be a teacher. His father had been surprised: do they pay for this kind of work? *Hänen mielestään kunnan töitä olivat turpeen puskeminen ja kirveen ja pokasahan kanssa metsässä ryskäminen* [According to him only digging the ground and rumbling in the woods with an axe and saw were real work.] (ibid.: 8857). He could not understand his children and grandchildren, and felt as if on unknown grounds at the river of Babylon, where next generations are the “other countries” (ibid.: 8857). His narrative reflects a clear opposition of before and now, whereas he himself has never adjusted to the new situation.

A Finnish woman from Joensuu born in 1924 (SSK 9211/ 9823) describes life at farm and her longing for her father’s home. For her, farm is a retreat. She writes about the cultural crisis, the change from nature to the world of technology, but never regrets this change, never mourns the lost times. She does not think that today’s children have an easier or harder life than they had. She believes in God and is certain that God is with every one of us (ibid.: 10372). Every one of us has his OWN place and his OWN meaning, there is no conflict in the world. *Elämäni voima, ilo ja rauha on Jeesus Kristus. Opin tuntemaan hänet äidin kuoleman jälkeen v. 1974, ja tiedän, että hän on kulkenut kanssani päivästä päivään koko elämäni ajan* [The force, happiness and peace of my life is Jesus Christ, he came to me after my mother died in 1974 and I know that he has been with me day after day through all my life] (ibid.: 10360).

References

Sources

EE – the collection “Eesti Elulood” [Estonian Life Stories] available in the Estonian Cultural Archives in the Museum of Literature, Tartu.

ERM, KV – Estonian National Museum, the responses of correspondents to the topic “Home and Family”. Tartu.

SSK – Suomen Kirjallisuuden Seura, the collection “Suvun suuri kertomus”. Helsinki.

Publications

Jaago, Tiiu & Jaago, Kalev 1996. *See olevat olnud... Rahvaluulekeskne uurimus esivanemate lugudest*. Tartu.

Jürgen, Madis 1998. Evelin kõnnib öösiti. /Intervjuu Evelin Samueliga./ *Favoriit*. May 1998, pp. 8–14.

Lipp, Martin 1909. Eesti suguvõsade uurimine. *Eesti Kirjandus*, pp. 3–15; 66–73.

Merila-Hubbard, Siiri 1995. Walesi ajaloost ja kirjandusest. *Akadeemia*, 10, pp. 2115–2140.

Mitterauer, Michael 1991. Funktionsverlust der Familie? *Vom Patriarchat zur Partnerschaft*. Ed. by Mitterauer, Michael & Sieder, Reinhard. München, pp. 100–125.