

THE KARELIA OF MEMORIES – UTOPIAS OF A PLACE

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Abstract: Karelia has always been a place of utopias and dreams in Finland. The images that we have of this area tend to originate in national projects and Karelianism. Karelia has been divided between two states – Finland and Soviet Union – since Finland gained independence in 1917. The Isthmus belonged to Finland until 1939. After World War II a total of 430,000 evacuees, 407,000 of who were Karelians, were resettled in different parts of Finland.

The article concentrates on the memories of Karelian evacuees. The aim of the article is to find, construct and analyse the different ways in which the past is remembered, the experiences of different generations of Karelia, and the phenomenon of “new Karelianism”. Karelia is not just an abstraction but a place of memories and utopias for Karelian evacuees. Their utopias are different than those of supporters of Karelianism because of their misery and dreams about going back there. Karelia is also a meaningful place for different generations. It is a place which Karelian refugees and their children and children’s children as well as researchers and cohabitants in the new hometowns of the evacuees visit again and again.

Key words: evacuees, experiences, Karelia, Karelianism, memories, oral history, places, places of memories, utopias

In this article I consider the Utopias related to Karelia, in particular, from the perspective of the migrant Karelians’ memory and reminiscences. Utopian speech penetrates the text in my excursions throughout Karelia. My personal connection with Karelia through my grandmother takes shape in the choice of topics related to the Karelian Isthmus. The article focuses on the period of the Karelians’ reminiscences: the decades of independent Finland from 1917 onwards. The key words of the interpretation are memory, place and Utopias.

My interpretation is anchored in the points of departure of critical oral history, i.e. context, the subjectivity of interpretation, as well as the political and positional nature of research, although these concepts are not thoroughly discussed in this article (cf. Portelli 1997; 2002; 2003; Popular Memory Group 1982; 2002). The basic questions of oral history are briefly considered at the end of the article so as to emphasise the meaning of popular memory and people’s history in the right way and to unfold the possibilities of the new trends in research in Karelian studies. In particular, I want to highlight the significance of the principle of open memory in speaking about Karelia and Karelianism. I aim to illustrate the scope of interpretations related to Karelia, when they are proportioned to the subjectivity, experiences and temporal contexts of the interpreters.

A UTOPIA OF A PLACE

The word *utopia* has come to the Finnish language from the Greek words *topos*, i.e. 'place' and a negative word meaning 'not'. In other words, one of the meanings of the word Utopia is simply a place which does not exist. In everyday language, Utopias are castles built in the air: unrealistic and impractical plans and even conscious aspirations for renewals whose realization is very unlikely. Utopians are people who present imaginary plans for perfecting the world. On the other hand, the word Utopia is used in future thinking as a tool or device to illustrate a time or place in the future where a current fault has been corrected (cf. Kamppinen & Kuusi & Söderlund 2002: 907). In this view, Utopias are intertwined with absence and presence and as part of production of meaning from the perspective of place. Utopias include aspirations for constructing the reality in such a way that a currently absent place becomes existent, for example, in recollections or desires directed towards the future.

Place is one of the central concepts in cultural geography. In humanistic geography, in particular, "place" is considered a space with meanings derived from the living world. "Place" is social, constructivist and holistic by nature, since it is a system of meaning constructed by dynamic processes and is always personally experienced. When considering "place", the subjective nature of cultural agency is emphasised: "place" becomes meaningful through signification processes related to human and individual experiences. It includes emotions anchored in a particular time and e.g. the place maintained in the memory can become *lieux de mémoire*, i.e. the 'place of memory' (Fingerroos 2004: 111–114; Haarni 1997: 87; Junkala 1999: 21; Karjalainen 1997: 230–233; Paasi 1998: 222–223; Raivo 1997: 198–200; Strassoldo 1993: 7; Tilley 1994: 10–17. On the concept of "place of memory" see Nora 1996).

On the other hand, "place" always involves meanings intertwined with social and political meanings and power relationships. This is, in particular, evident, as far as identities, the problem areas in cultural representations and classifications are concerned (Fingerroos 2004: 111–114; Haarni 1997: 87). Antti Paasi, a cultural geographer, wrote about the Utopias attached to Karelia by migrant Karelians from the community of Wärtsilä in Finland in the 1990s. According to Paasi's interpretation, Utopias are multidimensional entities with features of impressions and idealism, which sometimes have only a slight connection with reality. These Utopias are specially charged, in particular, in connection with places with contents of hope and dreams attached to them (Paasi 1988: 9–11, 17, 29; cf. Paasi 1996).

A UTOPIA OF KARELIA

Utopias anchored in recollections are central in the discourse about Karelia. They are attached to the imaginary properties of place and to the meanings created by absence and cession. The Utopias of migrant Karelians are anchored in places of memory which do not exist: the ceded Karelia, home village and one's own yard.

Similarly, they are attached to places with images of future harmony: “Perhaps the ceded Karelia will be returned to Finland in the future.” Truth and reality do not constitute primary meanings in Utopian speech or memory but the action and contents emerging from Utopian thinking are more significant. Utopias are real in reminiscences and dreams.

Utopian thinking has varied in different decades and developed contents related to that particular period. The earlier impressions are associated with the phenomena described as *Kalevalan cultural nationalism* and *political ethnography* (cf. Anttonen 1996; Tommila 1989: 61). From the historical point of view, Karelianism forms the core of Utopian Karelia discourse. The first people to go to Karelia were the representatives of peaceful nationalism – collectors of folklore, authors and artists –, then followed the advocates of revolutionary nationalism, white soldiers and red workers who dreamed of Great Finland. These visits created a *Karelianist Utopia* of an independent nation of related peoples with Finland, because of its developing ties to Europe, as an ex officio leader. This Utopia was created around myths and therefore a lot remained outside the appropriate discourse and was left unsaid. These outsider voices belonged, e.g. to disapproving ballad singers and locals who took a negative attitude towards collectors disturbing hay making and wondered about the Karelianists travelling around with their notebooks.

Yrjö Hirn used the term “Karelianism” in his book *Matkamiehia ja tietäjiä* (Travellers and Seers) in 1939, in which he described the significance of Akseli Gallen-Kallela and other Kalevala romantics in the nationalistic atmosphere of the late 19th century. Having listed the major national authors and artists who had travelled in Far Karelia – Eino Leino, Pekka Halonen, Juhani Aho, Eero Järnefelt, and Jean Sibelius – Hirn summarised the essence of Karelian renaissance in the “images and compositions” in the late 19th century as follows:

In my opinion, no other feature characterises the intrinsic aspiration of Karelianism in a better way than the enthusiasm cherished by the members of the Geatish Society (Götiska förbundet). The only difference is that the Finnish art trend was manifested in a wider variety of forms and areas. (Hirn 1939: 207–208; highlighting by Fingerroos).

Hannes Sihvo provided useful keys for a comprehensive definition of the concept ‘Karelianism’ in his doctoral dissertation *Karjalan kuva. Karelianismin taustaa ja vaiheita autonomian aikana* (The Image of Karelia: The Background and Phases of Karelianism during the Period of Autonomy) in 1973 (new edition in 2003). Sihvo showed that Karelianism is part of cultural and political phenomenal field, and Karelianism as a phenomenon is intertwined with the course of decades and centuries but also with tradition, the representation of the past, nationalism, identity and ethnicity. He concluded that the Finnish language obstructed the way for *The Image of Karelia* of becoming a similar classical work as Eric Hobsbawm’s, A.D. Smith’s and Edward Said’s works. However, Karelianism sounds “Orientalism in a small scale” and plenty of motifs are available for research.

Karelianism displays parallel motives and idea constructions in different ages, one of which is called a *Utopian structure* by Sihvo. In addition, Karelianism as any other movement has its pre-classics, classics and epigones. As Sihvo puts it,

The “reality” of Karelia, i.e. the realistic conditions of Karelia changed as decades passed, but the basic romantic or realistic attitude of Karelianists did not: they constructed the image of Karelia at times through fascination, at other times on the basis of reality. (Sihvo 2003: 8–9, 406–407).

Sihvo’s perspective only extends until the period of autonomy. However, Karelia has had a prominent role in the discussion about independent Finland; in effect, it forms a very natural component in the national myth of Finland. This myth has been constructed in the literature about the Winter War and Continuation War as well as in the vast variety of manifestations of memory and reminiscences. I made an ethnographic observation excursion with my colleague Terhi Torkki to the Karelian Isthmus in August 2003 and another excursion in July 2004. We had an opportunity to familiarise ourselves with the belligerent side of the history of the Karelian Isthmus in Summa and Tali-Ihantala. The memorials erected for the veterans were shown to us as we walked as pilgrims along a deep trail to the church hill of Ihantala and to a massive monument erected for the memory of the bloody battles (on pilgrimages see also Lehto & Timonen 1993: 100–102). In 2003, we wrote in our report on the journey about the thoughts the monument awoke in us:



Figure 1. The monument of the Battle Tali-Ihantala in Karelian Isthmus. Photo by Outi Fingerroos, 2003.

We saw a great boulder and under it a cave where tens of soldiers could fit in. The monument by the side of the “blood field” was massive. The atmosphere of the place resembled the atmosphere at the Summa monument: clearly discernible trenches in the terrain and blown up concrete bunkers did not leave the spectator cold. The topography of a place blows life into history, even though in both Ihantala and Summa it was about the war and national myths were created afterwards. Later we found some air pictures about Ihantala. The blood field was full of deep craters after the battles. It looked like the surface of the moon. (Fingerroos & Torkki 2003: 11).

The excerpt above shows that memory, history and nationality are closely intertwined terms, and it is possible to detect phases in the existence of national symbols as Pierre Nora has pointed out. A monument typically first symbolises the historical event it is erected for. Later, it develops into a place of memory, which has been detached from its original meaning. It carries the historical memory attached to it by experience (Nora 1996: 6–7; Nora 1998: 636).

The Utopias of migrant Karelians are the outcome of oblivion and ambiguous and altered images. They include myths of the lost Karelia and individual heroic and survival narratives from the reconstructed Finland. Phenomena related to *New Karelianism* and political nationalism can be detected even today, as new monuments are still erected in a variety of Karelian places of memory – on the ruins of the churches lost in the wars of 1939–1945, graveyards, soldiers’ graves and on the most important battle fields. Discussion about the annexation of Karelia to Finland has been vivid, e.g. on the pages of the newspaper *Karelia* and in numerous discussion forums. This annexation is a great Finnish Utopia which has at times been a forbidden topic. A free, national citizens’ movement called ProKarelia considers the annexation of Karelia to Finland and to the EU as its mission (see pages [online] <http://www.prokarelia.net/en>). This mission is regarded as a cultural act which promotes the well-being and knowledge of Karelia (Fingerroos 2004: 160; ProKarelia 2003). In Hannes Sihvo’s view, there is a similar social need for Karelianism today as there was over a hundred years ago, when it was first born. In effect, during the golden era of Karelianism, Finland was part of Russia but now she is part of Europe and the global world (Haapanen 2001).

The global aspect of Karelian descent shows that it has resonance in localities, in cherishing traditions and in the fields of primary, patriotic manifestations. Based on history, it acts as an intersection and border area of the East and the West, where not only the present and the past meet but also those issues which could not be talked about during the autonomy or some thirty years ago. Karelia has been assigned the label of a holy land and it carries strong values supporting the national identity derived from Finnishness and Kalevalaness (cf. Fingerroos 2004: 156; Harle & Moisio 2000: 135; Tarkka 1988: 33–36). Karelia can also be described in Doreen Massey’s (2003: 58) terms: from the perspective of the colonised periphery its encounter with the centre is unreserved and intensive. The centre penetrates the core of the periphery and its representatives – missionaries, administration officials and scholars collecting cultural heritage – make themselves visible.



Figure 2. *The municipality excursion to Sovetski (former Johannes) was arranged by Johannes Seura ry (Johannes Society) in 2003. It combined the present day perspectives of the inhabitants of the relocation communities, of migrant Karelians and of the inhabitants of Sovetski. Photo by Outi Fingerroos.*

The current perspective of the Karelia of memories as manifested in the ideas of migrant Karelians is succinctly displayed in Michel Maffesoli's characterisation of the modern styles of communality and neo-tribalism and in Stuart Hall's interpretation of identity (cf. Hall 1999; Maffesoli 1995: 39–22; in addition, Fingerroos 2004: 162–163; Söderholm 1997: 113–114). Modern Finns can easily vary between styles and tribes. The anchoring points of identity are not always distinct. Therefore, modern nomads have several identities subject to change depending on the situation. Basically, any Finn can momentarily become Karelian kinsfolk and the change back to the original identity takes place as easily as passing the border. Karelian identity has become almost a fashion. In 2003, I participated in a municipality excursion to Sovetski (former Johannes) arranged by Johannes Seura

ry (Johannes Society). The participants included the present inhabitants and administrators of the municipalities where migrant Karelians from Johannes were relocated, i.e. Lieto, Kaarina, Paimio and Piikkiö. One of the participants, Heljä Karjalainen-Manninen from Piikkiö later wrote an article in the local paper *Johannekselainen*. In her opinion, for the Finns the reason for making this trip to the “home regions” was to get acquainted with the home district of the people from Johannes and “to touch the land, where many of their ancestors rest”. This excursion arose many questions, e.g. “What does Sovetski mean to its present inhabitants?” (Karjalainen-Manninen 2003). For Karjalainen-Manninen this excursion to the home districts of migrant Karelians was clearly the climax of the summer. She combines the perspectives of the inhabitants of the relocation communities, of migrant Karelians and of the inhabitants of Sovetski in an interesting way in her descriptions. Thus, municipality excursions can be regarded as a new expression of Karelian descent or a new form of Karelianism: a momentary transition to the past of the migrant Karelians living next door.

REMINISCENCES RELATED TO THE LOST KARELIA

Eeva Kilpi writes in her novel *Rajattomuuden aika* (The Time of Infinity, 2001) about migrant Karelian descent and the need for reminiscences related to it as expressed in Finland in 2000:

Our past, the adoration of our past, our love to Karelia demands from each of us every now and then some recoding of issues from the present viewpoint as well as dialogue, public discussion and critical analysis. After all, very many things have changed and as I believe in the way I would like them to. (Kilpi 2000: 346).

Elina Karjalainen, the author who was born in Vyborg in 1927, writes in the foreword, *Reminiscences*, of her memoir *Isän tyttö* (1999) in a way similar to Eeva Kilpi. She tells about small but significant details in her home and family in Vyborg: a stairway with a big window with a variety of coloured window panes through which the world looked either yellow, blue, red or green. The world of childhood memories manifests itself as a happy world, for the images seem to rise from a mist and become clearer along the way. In the landscape of childhood “the sun is so warm and bright” that the beasts lurking in the shadows withdraw and are forgotten. Therefore, Elina Karjalainen ponders over the nature of her own reminiscences. Can a person choose between reminiscences and forgetting? Do you have to remember, when you can not forget? Does a person exist to remember? She responds to her own questions unequivocally: “I have written this book so as not to forget” (Karjalainen 1999: 7–8).

I read the texts by Eeva Kilpi and Elina Karjalainen from a variety of perspectives. In my view, the powerful experience of generation, still alive in migrant Karelians, as well as in Kilpi’s and Karjalainen’s own personal experiences from the past, force them to remember and to record their reminiscences for others. These memories are covered with gold and Utopias. The same kind of longing for

the past and need to reminisce can be detected in other forms of expression for Karelian identity, e.g. in the newspapers of parish societies, summery home district excursions and festivals for Karelians. In 2003, Paavo Väntsi, the head of the Johannes Seura, presented an invitation to the Johannes festival in the parish paper of the society with central forms of Utopian speech related to migrant Karelian identity: Johannes festival acts as a bridge between the past and the future.

The festival has been a kind of bridge to the past. The lost home district with its memories, the experiences of the evacuation journey, the Karelian culture and the work of earlier generations have all added to the festival in a variety of ways during the decades. However, the purpose of the festival is not only to look back but also to create a connection between people from Johannes now scattered throughout Finland. The festival provides a possibility to meet relatives and friends. The reminiscences of the home district gain new enthusiasm when shared with others. The bridge also reaches for the future. In the festival we join together to speculate on the future. (Väntsi 2003; highlighting by Fingerroos).

The experiences of loss and the depictions anchored in them create *people's history of Karelia*, which scarcely existed before Finland's independence. It is possible and also easy to interview migrant Karelians and people's history is now going through a golden period in village books, reviews and memoirs. People's history was long suppressed by tribal ideas, colonialist aspirations and Karelianism. This is clearly shown in the contents of the heritage archives which include only selected information of Karelia. The lack of systematic interpretation of images about Karelia is also emblematic of this phenomenon (cf. Sihvo 2003). In addition, the scholars studying culture have not comprehensively charted how and from which points of departure Karelia has been studied during the last centuries. The Utopian nature of popular descriptions of Karelia differs from the descriptions of Karelianists who studied, painted and admired it. *People's (popular) Utopias* include concreteness, personally experienced longing for home and dreams of returning to Karelia. They are always personal and anchored in the places of memory. Viljo Huunonen, born on the island of Uura in Johannes, summarises his own personal feelings of the period of evacuation and loss of home in his article: *Kuinka olisi jos oltaisiin* (How would it be if we were). He confesses that the world has changed; perhaps – or probably – we would encounter similar problems in Karelia as we are now facing elsewhere in Finland, even if cession had never taken place. However, this speculation does not wipe off the feelings of the evacuation period and losing a familiar place and home: “The trauma of this period is so deep in Karelians that it will take generations to heal. Will it ever get healed, remains to be seen.” (Huunonen 1998: 153–154).

The experiences related to the evacuation and the Utopias anchored in place have been so strong that they have been passed on from one generation to another, to the images of the descendants of the migrant Karelians. We can speak of both at the same time, the migrant Karelians' *Karelia of memories* and their descendants' *narratives of Karelia* (Lehto & Timonen 1993: 92–93; also Fingerroos

2003: 199; Fingerroos 2004: 150). I myself, wrote in 1996 in the parish paper *Johanneslainen* about my grandmother's home village in a very nostalgic way after being in my grandmother's Karelia of memories for the first time. The image based on my grandmother's powerful narratives was so strong that I recognised the place and felt love towards it. I felt in a concrete way that I had an identity (Fingerroos 1996). In effect, after the wars of 1939–1945 Karelia has become the focus of identity formation in a new way, in particular, at personal level. The memories, places and landscape located in Karelia entangle strong emotions and their interpretation inevitably involves the acceptance of symbolism. In fact, it is precisely the presence of place and landscape that is significant in the realisation of the Karelia of memories and narratives: a personal feeling of the fact that the places and landscape of memory – or I myself – really have an identity, which involves more than the Karelianistic Utopia anchored in the past or in an absent place and landscape.

The discourse about Karelia has increasingly focused on the mental sector after the wars of 1939–1945. It has become part of the migrant Karelians' and their offspring's present experience, despite the Utopias included in the experience. After the eastern border was opened in the 80s, the geographical distance has changed into accessible proximity. Generations of Karelians and co-kinsfolk not only return to the roots of Karelian identity but also to the lost places of memory. The lost place has become a partly real but primarily an imaginary source for identity construction and nostalgia, maintained by reminiscences (cf. Hodgins & Radstone 2003: 12).

However, Karelia is not only a cradle for national myths and a field for the identity games of migrant Karelians and newly constructed tribes. It is also a home for Russian Karelians, where their memories, experiences and Utopias are strongly anchored. All Finns know migrant Karelians, but only a few remember that after the independence of Finland, when the eastern border was closed, as many as 11,500 refugees fled from eastern Karelia to Finland and partly also to Sweden. The Karelians who lived between the East and the West had hoped for independence, but when these desires were not realised, part of them escaped to Finland in the early 1920s. Katja Hyry, a folklorist, has studied these refugees. She describes how refugees from eastern Karelia were received in a new independent Finland, which was ideologically split in two. For the reds they were traitors to be stoned and discriminated. The whites considered them kinsfolk and relative citizens, part of their own identity, and therefore to be helped (Hyry 2004; see also Hyry 1994).

As a consequence, it is possible to adopt a variety of perspectives towards reminiscences related to Karelia. Eeva Kilpi approaches her own past with an evaluative perspective and highlights the need for a dialogue (see the example above). The return to the past includes a need to position oneself as an outside observer. Kilpi's dialogue even includes a critical edge, which proves that open reminiscences are a prerequisite for Utopian discourse. I showed in my doctoral dissertation, *Buried Memories*, that the civil war of 1918 was an important but a hushed up part of the history of Karelia, unknown even to many people from the Karelian



Figure 3. *The graveyard in Ristimäki, Vyborg in 2000. The graveyard for the reds and Russians executed in the aftermath of the civil war is not a generally known place of memory on the Karelian Isthmus. Before the cession of territory it was not permitted to become visible in the landscape. However, Russian officials erected a monument there in 1961. Photo by Outi Fingerroos.*

Isthmus. The civil war compromised open reminiscences, for the negative atmosphere in regard to the reds restricted the public reminiscences for decades. A new era, and in particular, the change in attitudes which took place in the 1960s and drew strength from literature, offered an outlet for the reds' bottled up memories. At the same time, an opportunity was provided to consider the Utopias related Karelia critically (Fingerroos 2004).

Utopias and disputes about the permission for reminiscences highlight the question about the nature of the desired image of the nation and Karelia which has been given, and still is given to us. Powerful images of Karelia are the outcome of a national project and they are not identical with the Utopias remembered and anchored in place by migrant Karelians. Karelia is an essential part of Finland but it is also a sore spot and a place where an enormous amount of emotions are concentrated. If the people's own history and interpretations were not taken seriously, it would be difficult, even impossible, to make polyphonic interpretations.

CONCLUSION: THE MIND OF THE MEMORY

I read Eeva Kilpi's text also as a defence with a subtext and a response to an everyday and common belief that memory contains false information. In other words, the spoken and written recollections are considered people's history with less value than other documents of the past. This attitude towards reminiscences

and people's history is not uncommon in academic circles and I have been told that "everybody can make reminiscences" and "people write and speak about what they want to in their recollections". In this critique of the source, all information based on memory is considered unreliable knowledge because of its subjectivity (Kalela 2000: 90–91). Instead, the aim should be to bore into genuine or at least more reliable truth behind the unreliable sources. Research can not only present polyphonic voices, but the interpretation must be formulated in an appropriate, scientific manner. This approach claims that knowledge based on memory is not in itself sufficient to verify the interpretations of Karelia. People can make mistakes and the popular speech does not meet the criteria of science.

As a researcher in oral history, I was pleased with the wide publicity and high value given to a document book by Elina Sana, *Luovutetut: Suomen ihmisloukutukset Gestapolle* (The Deported: Finland's Deportations to Gestapo, 2003). Elina Sana questions in her book the view that only a scholar can make an appropriate and accurate interpretation or produce fruitful, new knowledge about the past. She writes: "This book is an outcome of many years of interest in research and written in the form of a journalistic document intended for anyone who is interested in the topic." I have wondered why, according to the critics, an author labelled as a journalist should not have been credited for the book and be rewarded the Tieto-Finlandia (Knowledge-Finlandia) prize. What are the motives behind this academic criticism? Does a journalistic document about the past not fulfil the criteria for appropriateness?

Discussion within different fields of sciences has gradually accepted the view that even scholars produce subjective images of the past. A case in point is the discussion about Karelia outlined above: the speech is strongly anchored in context and the views reflect the time of the interpretations. In particular, within the studies of cultures the visibility of subjects is a common topic of discussion. There is a demand for openness for both memory and scholars, because even research produces a specific interpretation of the past (cf. Kalela 2000). The demarcation between professionally produced official images of history and people's history is artificial, because they interact with each other. Scholars do not have a monopoly on the past and interpretation always has social consequences (Kalela 2000: 75). The construction and reconstruction of the boundaries between these two areas is a methodologically challenging and interesting scientific question, which calls for discussion and openness.

Folklorists and historians have used and recorded a variety of data based on reminiscences and memory for a long time. They have also discussed methodological questions concerning the meaning and possibilities of oral history, but this discussion has, as yet, not spread to other fields of science in general. However, oral history provides a significant theoretical and methodological perspective for data-based qualitative research. In particular, when alternative answers are constructed for questions related to social class or private life (Williams 1996: 27–29). Oral history also provides a means to study small narratives and an insight born behind the generally accepted rhetoric on the nation and nationalism.

Why is the methodology in oral history special? An Italian oral historian, Alessandro Portelli (2002: 63–74) provides several answers to this question, the most important of which is that oral history tells more about meanings than events. People charge their recollections with contents, interpretations and perspectives related to the past events. A typical example is oral history charting how things should have been according to the narrator or what the psychological price of an event was in connection of war or class struggle. A researcher working with oral history does not specify false oral history but presents a variety of interpretations of the past and is interested in the subjectivity of the reminiscences, significations, production of meaning and what is left unsaid (Portelli 2002: 67–69).

However, the use of reminiscences is not in itself adequate for the construction of Oral History. People tell about the past in a variety of contexts and the narration includes an element of partiality: a type of infinity and a choice of position. Reminiscences are not presented from a neutral viewpoint and the scholar and the memories are often positioned “on the opposite sides” (Portelli 2002: 73). Conflicts and constant negotiation about sides make oral history a methodologically meaningful approach. In this article, I have aimed to show that an approach which focuses on the reminiscences and their interpretations can be brought to bear in a research on Karelia and Karelianism to provide new perspectives to an area, which has already been studied quite a lot. In my own post doc study, the topic is approached through places of memory and Utopias: the way people tell and write about these past, present and future perspectives in an independent Finland.

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