

Bloodsuckers and Human Sausage Factories

In the mid-1960s, I was a schoolgirl in a small town in Central Estonia. Some of the smaller rural schools had just been closed down, so our school expanded and began to operate in two shifts. Secondary level classes were not over until eight in the evening so we used to go home in groups. Our way through the dark town was creepy and thrilling. On our way we had to pass an ancient castle in ruins since the Great Northern War; mysterious humming and indistinct sounds were often heard from behind its ditches and walls. “Sots,” we used to think at that time, although other possibilities could not be ruled out. Ghosts, for example. Or something even worse: black cars (Russian Pobedas, as I remember) were said to drive around Estonia to kidnap people and drain or suck all the blood from them. The drained bodies were said to be thrown by the roadside.

It was a serious thing; we believed the stories. Alternatively, almost believed. They were not very different from the stories that adults, especially women, told at work and play – a mother killing her children for her lover, the blockade of Leningrad during Second World War, robbers, suspended animation, etc.

There were other stories, too. Fairy-tale-like thrillers that would make your flesh creep, which no one would believe, but which provided a good pastime – about red and blue hands playing the piano. Or shock stories, like the one about the man with a golden foot, where someone’s cold hands grabbed you while you were listening.

Stories and beliefs about sausage factories are obviously a type of contemporary or “urban” legend and circulated throughout the former Soviet Union. These legends are interesting in

that adults and children tell them in different stylistic versions and forms; another remarkable feature is the longevity of such stories.

Classification

Among adults, bloodsucker and sausage-factory narratives are belief accounts, memorates, and sometimes legends. In the children's tradition they serve as belief accounts, with an important role played by children's thrillers, some of which speak about sausages, hamburgers, pies or cookies of human flesh. Thrillers are completely different from legends.

The term *urban legend* was introduced in Estonia in the 1980s though, in Russian folklore studies, it has never taken root. Instead the genre that attracted attention was children's thrillers, the first classifications being made in the 1980s. Psychologist Maria Osorina and folklorist O. Gretchina from St. Petersburg distinguished a class of children's narratives called *strashilka* (from *strashnaya istoriya*, 'frightful story') (Gretchina & Osorina 1981: 101). These are special children's thrillers with elements of folk tales and legends, urban legends, modernised versions of older legends and pseudo-thrillers. They can be briefly characterised as folktale-like narratives, having much in common with folktales in their structure and motifs, while being combined with typical features of legends.

From Urban Legend to Thriller

On the border-line between urban legends and children's thrillers are the post-Second World War narratives about sausages made from horse or human flesh, and about the black cars of the bloodsuckers. These stories are more diverse in form than the children's thrillers. At the same time, the differences between the traditions of children and adults are more marked, and it is easier to track the passage of the belief (or belief account, respectively) into the children's tradition.

As has been found out, play and belief are so similar to each other that often a man cannot be sure whether his fear is real or a mere playful simulation. I believe that the stories about bloodsuckers and sausage factories were very real and taken very seriously in their time. That fear aroused suspicion towards all kinds of strange officials and is reflected in several narratives in the Estonian Folklore Archives (Kõiva 1995: 313 ff.).

Between the 1940s and the 1960s, an extraordinarily large number of stories about infanticide and various crimes that were all assumed to be true spread all over Estonia. Their action was localised in and connected with Estonia's new industrial towns established after the war and where the inhabitants were mostly aliens, including Russians. (Before Second World War 90% of Estonia's inhabitants was Estonians; now around 60% are Estonians.) Most of such stories are based on ancient legends (for example: mother accedes to her lover's demand to kill her child; ties him naked to a tree; a passer-by saves the child and takes his mother to the police station).

The adult thrillers are induced by various social tensions, lack of information, uncertainty about one's existence, numerous unwanted bearers of alien traditions in the neighbourhood, and many other reasons. On the other hand, the stories reflect factual crimes: people reported missing, murders and robberies, of which there must have been many in the post-war period. Together with the stories about war-time events, black cars for arresting people, human experimentations and human blood collection by Jews and others, which were propagated by the KGB, served as starting points for the stories about sausage factories. This variety in the tradition is closely connected with folklore known probably all over the former Soviet Union. These stories may have been partly inspired by night-time deportations in the 1930s and later. People were quietly gathered into black cars, and disappeared. The trials of physicians and geneticists could also inspire and propagate such stories. Large-scale epidemics and wars bring forth stories of cannibalism, so the sausage-factory stories spread in the former Soviet Union together with the narrative traditions about the war and cannibalism during the blockade and famine.

In the narratives collected from adults, the borders between real events and fantasy are elastic and the transitions smooth. In quite a few cases the incident is made more concrete and truth-like by added belief stereotypes and facts:

It was told that after the war there had also been blood-takers, blood-suckers in Tartu. They had been dark men, but they had also had some Estonians in their company. A blonde girl danced with a young man at a party and started to try how her ring would fit on the boy's finger. And finally she left it there. But later she phoned and asked him to bring her ring back. The boy went but did not come back. His family started to search for him and found him when half of his blood had been removed from his body and he had fainted. But he still survived (< Tallinn – woman, 74 yrs. old).

In the adults' tradition narratives about sausage factories are in the style of seriously believed legends. The story line and composition are very simple: people claim to have been lured to the sausage factory or near it and either miraculously escaped or remained lost. They mention a town or ruined street in a town where that kind of factory has been situated; in most cases these are Tartu or the capital city Tallinn.

Often the mode of presentation is emphatic: the incident is described as a first-hand experience. So, for instance, a woman with a university degree told her children how she, a young and healthy girl with rosy complexion, had been entrapped in Tartu. She even saw the dreadful place, but escaped miraculously. The following is another narrative told in the first person:

That was also in Tartu. We went to buy cheap things. We took our onions and went to Tartu. A girl came, a young girl. We say that we would like to buy some saccharine. She says, "Come with me."

"How far is it?" – "Not far, by the Emajõgi."

We went with her. We peeped in from a door. God, there were heaps of heads. They had a sausage factory there. Many children had been missing there. They wanted to make sausage out of us. We called the militia. Only then the militia found out about that factory. It was under-

ground, in a kind of cellar. A father recognised his daughter from her apron. It was after the war, when sausages were made from human flesh. A man found only the head of her daughter: a pink ribbon was tied in her hair (RKM II 395, 131/2 (2) < Võnnu parish, Lootvina village < originally from near the lake Võrtsjärv – Kadri Peebo < Aleksander Molodost, over 70 yrs. (1986)).

In another story a man lures a woman to take milk in a strange house; the woman again escapes miraculously:

In Turu Street in Tartu there was a sausage factory after the war. A friend of a friend of mine who had been at hospital in Tartu together with a woman who had escaped from there told me about it. She had come to Tartu with a horse and cart from the countryside to sell milk in the market. A man walked up to her and said that he would buy the whole barrel of milk if she just drove with the horse into his yard. The woman drove in through the gate, but the man closed the gate at once behind her back. The woman then understood that something was wrong and ran out through the wicket. The man threw an axe into her shoulder. But people came to her help and took her to hospital. Then those sausage manufacturers were caught (< Tallinn – woman, 74 yrs.).

In some cases such narratives have been complemented with comments on what exactly was made from human bodies:

My aunt also told us that soap was made from bones; sausages were made from bowels and human flesh. And fat was used for making some kind of paste. Scouring paste. And this paste was said to give rich lather (RKM, Mgn II 3568 (13) < Otepää parish, Pühajärve village – Mare Kõiva < Harald Asor, b. 1968 (1982), lit. by Mare Kõiva 1989).

Such stories were not only told about towns but also about remote village farms. Similar stories can be found in older folklore as well. Usually they deal with farmers who catch travellers and rob them; sometimes the criminal landlord salts his victims in a barrel, and the meat is used for eating or for feeding the pigs. Slaying of travellers is an old motif that can also be found in

Aarne-Thomson's catalogue (Aarne & Thomson 1961) of folk tales (AT 1536; for Swedish parallels see for example Ljungström 1995: 285). The experiences of occasional guests who have stayed overnight in a house form the basis of many traditional legends (e.g., devils trying on the skin of a corpse, Aa S104 – asking advice from a witch), fabulates and jokes.

Egomorphic presentation – first person narration – has been analysed in folk tales and found to be more frequently used in certain types of narratives and by certain narrators (Viidalepp 1985: 69–82, Peuckert 1965: 13 jj). In the case of legends, the narrator's participation in the supernatural event defines the text as a memorate. According to a common view legends are narratives, the veracity of which is not doubted by the narrators. And yet, even here one may find fiction, humorous presentation and story lines that are not held possible or veritable by the bearer of the religious tradition (cf. the Irish story-teller's opinion of the truthfulness of the beliefs about fairies, Lysaght 1995: 303). Egomorphic presentation is very commonly used in the bloodsucker and sausage factory narratives:

In the time of flax-pulling we went into a house to stay overnight. We were given a place to sleep on the kitchen floor. The kitchen cupboard was closed. We heard something dripping in the cupboard. The hosts all went to sleep. My mates got up and somehow managed to open the cupboard. In there we saw a man hung up by his feet, his throat cut. Put ready so that sausage could be made out of him. That was in Metsküla village. We quickly put on our clothes and ran away from that house in great terror [---] (< Vönnu – man).

In the adult tradition these stories are in the style of seriously believed legends or memorates. In their analogous repertoire children use egomorphism only in very rare cases; in most cases the narratives are timeless. Their whole body of tradition is more diverse than the adults'. Contemporary children's thrillers partly copy the tradition of adults – they hold what they have heard to be historical truth – but a part of them are much different from those that the grown-ups tell, despite being sources of inspiration and influence.

The majority of children's narratives are based on the same motifs, but they are adjusted to suit the structure of a thriller. Their composition is again reminiscent of primitive folk tales. The story begins with breaking some taboo (the child steps on forbidden ground), but the taboo may also not be present and the narrative may begin with the initial formula Once upon a time there lived... that determines the characters. A child, unsuspecting and innocent, but bearing some peculiar mark (a name written on the finger-nails, varnished nail, a ring inscribed with a name), is sent out to do some shopping and encounters the evil character, a man/woman/mother hating his/her family. Less frequently the main evil character may also be White Hand or Black Hand or some other character typical of thrillers. The characters are not numerous: mainly mother, child, and abductor; only rarely there are three children. The sausage factory narratives differ from others of their kind in that they consist of a single episode; thus they are shorter than a common thriller. Factories of minced meat, hamburgers, pies or cookies are prevalent in the children's narratives, which leads us to believe that the stories developed in urban environment in the late 1960s or the 1970s.

A mother had a daughter. She gave her child a ring as a birthday present. Soon she sent her daughter shopping. The daughter went along an asphalt road and disappeared underground. Mother waited and waited, waited but her daughter didn't come. Mother went and bought some minced meat. At home she began to fry the meat. Suddenly she saw the same ring in the minced meat. Then she realised what had happened to her daughter (RKM II 324, 243/4 < Nõo parish, Elva High School – Merike Pille, b. 1959 (1976)).

Fantastic elements like underground tunnels, suddenly opening armchairs and streets, or names on fingernails are abundant; only small children are likely to identify the story with reality. Tests made with three- and four-year-old children show that even they are intuitively prone to look for a realistic explanation and that magic explanations are learned only gradually (Rosengren *et al.* 1994: 69). At the same time, some adults seem to falter in

their convictions when it comes to the paranormal and magic, and believe in the possibility of what is beyond common sense. This explains the great popularity of the urban legends and other tradition bordering on them.

Conclusion

As a rule, children do not believe such stories; they are equated with thrillers which everyone can invent at will and which have no connection with real life. They do, however, offer tingling emotions. People remember that adults used to tell such sausage-factory stories very often, that they were believed and presented for believing. The stories made a deep impression on children. A recollection describes the narrating situation:

I know, it was in the 'fifties, I went to Tartu with my mother, and she knew a hospital assistant, and they were just building a new cinema across the river. And then she showed us several houses where sausage factories had been. They were ruins, as a rule (man, 50 yrs.).

Old narratives may revive unexpectedly. For example, after the take-over of the security service building in Tallinn in 1990 there were rumours that an enormous meat mincer had been found from the interrogation block in the cellar of the house. For making minced meat out of the detainees, to be sure.

Each period adds its own areas of interest to urban legends: rumours about kidnapping fair-skinned (Estonian) women in the southern Soviet republics, fear of new foods and drinks (Pepsi-Cola), mishaps at forbidden activities (stealing meat/calves from collective farms), etc. Stories induced by social tensions and subconscious fears do not remain in the repertoire for long; they spread quickly and disappear as quickly. They are closely connected with urban gossip and rumours. Among these we can mention the post-Second World War stories about horsemeat sausage or factories where sausage was made from human flesh, and black cars in which blood-takers moved around. These stories presupposed a serious belief in what happened, and they balanced on the borderline between belief and doubt.

Manuscripts and Recordings

- RKM – Manuscript folklore collection of the Folklore Department of Estonian Literary Museum in the Estonian Folklore Archives (1945 to 1995)
- RKM, Mgn II – Collection of analogue recordings of the Folklore Department of Estonian Literary Museum in the Estonian Folklore Archives (1953 to 1993).

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