

# NARRATING ETHNICITY IN ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEWS: LIFE STORIES OF PEOPLE RESETTLED FROM ESTONIA TO GERMANY IN 1941

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**Abstract:** This article demonstrates the possibilities of using oral history sources in the study of ethnicity. Interviews conducted with people who resettled from Estonia to Germany in 1941 were analysed for this purpose. It was asked why some interviewees are remarkably vague in their ethnicity narratives while some others present highly firm statements. The analysis that relies on the Communication Theory of Identity shows that interviewees' pre-war ethnic, cultural and linguistic background was relatively insignificant. Instead, the most important distinguishing factor was involvement in the Baltic German or exile Estonian communities after World War II; the former was rather related to vagueness and the latter rather to firmness. Thus, it depended mainly on this factor what were the narrating strategies the interviewees made use of to present themselves in a desired way during the interview. In addition, the expressions, both vague and firm, were related to the widespread understanding of the primordial nature of ethnicity to which the interviewees tried to fit their own, often inconsistent, ethnic background and life stories. The results suggest that to understand the appearance of ethnicity in oral history interviews, the patterns of how ethnicity is narrated would be useful to trace and common perceptions on ethnic identity should be considered.

**Keywords:** Communication Theory of Identity, ethnicity, Late-Resettlement, migration, narratives, oral history

Oral history sources have been and will remain highly important for identity research. However, life stories transmitted through oral history interviews are narrative constructions of one's life and 'self' which the narrators use to present a desired picture of themselves in the communication process (Bamberg 2011). Thus, interviews cannot reflect the essential characteristics of narrators. Considering this aspect, contemporary researchers therefore tend to pay

more attention to the ways that people narrate their identity in interaction with others (see, e.g., Bamberg 2014 [2009]; Lee & Roth 2004; Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann 2000; Nesbitt 1998).

Ethnicity as an abstract manner of grouping and self-identifying defined by various cultural and linguistic connections between individuals (see, e.g., Barth 1998 [1969]) is one of the most perplexing aspects of the complex social identity (Roccas & Brewer 2002). The complex appearance of ethnicity has caused endless discussions among researchers over its nature; the argumentation is broadly divided between constructivist and primordialist viewpoints, that is, around the question whether ethnicity is variable and situation-dependent or essential and innate characteristic of an individual (Eller & Coughlan 1993; Hale 2004; Zagefka 2009). It has been shown that the ethnicity of an individual can, in certain circumstances, be dynamic and/or multiple, but usually develops in childhood and early adolescence and then stabilises (Phinney 1990), which may facilitate primordial thinking.

Due to the complexity, oral history researchers who seek to analyse interviewees' ethnic identity often encounter several obstacles. For example, one may want to ask to what extent it is important how interviewees understand and interpret ethnic belonging in general (a study on Estonian diaspora shows numerous different interpretations; see Ojamaa & Karu-Kletter 2014). Researchers may also face the question of how to interpret vague expressions and, consequently, may shift the focus away from the concept of identity to other concepts such as positionality (Anthias 2002). However, instead of a conceptual shift it would be worth to focus on factors that affect interviewees' reflections on ethnicity, such as the environment and background of the interview, interaction between the interviewer and interviewee as well as wider socio-political framework which both sides live in. Interviewees' previous life experiences can also influence their stories. Based on these assumptions, this article aims to clarify the methodically complicated field by examining how ethnicity is narrated in oral history interviews and by formulating possible approaches for using oral history in research on ethnicity.

The article is based on a group of people who resettled from Estonia to Germany in 1941. The so-called Late-Resettlement was an aftermath of the resettlement of Baltic Germans which took place in 1939–1940, and was the start of numerous resettlement waves of Germans living in wide areas of Eastern Europe (see, e.g., Ahonen et al. 2008). These resettlements were directly connected with the infamous Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which divided Eastern Europe between Germany and the Soviet Union, leading to the annexation of the Baltic states by the latter in 1940 and subsequently to extensive repatriations (Hiio & Maripuu & Paavle 2006). Thus, in Estonian historiography the

Late-Resettlement is known as an event during which, along with about 3,000 Germans, about 4,000 Estonians used the opportunity to escape the Soviet repressions (Rand 2006: 43). However, research in recent years has shown that the ethnic background of these people is not as unequivocally clear as the previous research suggests (Liivik & Tark 2016; Plath 2016; Tark 2019). Interviews conducted with the former late-resettlers have been a very useful resource in achieving this result. However, since these interviews have not been systematically analysed yet, major conclusions remain to be drawn.

As of now, it is known that numerous interviewed late-resettlers are remarkably vague when they reflect their ethnic belonging, while several other interviewees are, on the contrary, remarkably firm. Clearly, such results do not correspond with the unambiguous categorisation in the early studies and statistics. Yet, there is no obvious explanation for such patterns either. Additionally, late-resettlers' ethnic identity and how it is presented during interviews is expected to be affected by their migration experience (see, e.g., Plath 2016) since in several studies it is shown to be a crucial cause of identity shifts (see, e.g., La Barbera 2015; Vermeulen & Pels 1984). With such characteristics, interviews with the late-resettlers form a good sample for examining the difficulties occurring when researchers aim to interpret ethnicity expressions in oral history interviews.

## **INTERVIEWS**

The article is based on thirty interviews conducted between 2013 and 2019 under several research projects on the Late-Resettlement and people who left during this neglected migration wave.<sup>1</sup> Based on the state of research at that time, the initial aim of the projects was to identify Estonians among the late-resettlers. This aim, however, changed over time and, subsequently, the focus was set on collecting material about late-resettlers and their background without attempting to differentiate them based on their ethnic belonging. Regardless of the time of the interview and aims of the projects, ethnicity remained one of the core topics of the interviews, which is, in one way or another, reflected in every interview. The emphasis on the ethnic belonging was closely related to the peculiarity of the Late-Resettlement as a clearly ethnicity-based action since formally only Germans were eligible to leave.

Invitations to share their stories were distributed mainly in the organisations of exile Estonians and Baltic Germans as well as in the periodicals of both groups. After the first network of contacts was formed, researchers used a more personal approach and some of the interviewees were found with snowball

sampling. As a result of such sampling methods, it appeared that interviewees were or had been in the past more or less active members of or had been in contact with the exile Estonian or Baltic German communities. Numerous people outside of these communities as well as those who do not attach much importance to the Late-Resettlement in their lives or perhaps do not want to talk about this event were therefore inevitably left out of the sample. Such sampling peculiarity has a major impact on the analysis and results. Approximately half of the sample is broadly divided into two parts: first, interviewees clearly connected to exile Estonians and, second, those connected to the Baltic German communities while the connection with one or another community is not fully excluded in several other cases either. This peculiarity allowed to identify significant differences between the two groups.

Among the interviewees were 15 male and 15 female respondents. They were born between 1918 and 1938, more than half of them after 1930, and only two were 18 years old or older at the time of the Late-Resettlement. Over the decades, the interviewees had settled all over the world so that at the time of the interview their permanent residences were in different countries. Sixteen interviewees, that is, more than a half lived in Germany, six and five interviewees lived in Sweden and Estonia, respectively, two interviewees resided in Australia and one in the United States. Regardless of the places of residence, interviewees tend to be multilingual, and this has affected their performance during the interviews. Although all interviews were conducted in Estonian or German, occasional code-switching was usual during the interviews. As it will be shown below, the interview language is, however, not related to the enacted ethnicity of the interviewees.

All the interviews are semi- or unstructured and performed as narrative life stories. The interviewees usually begin with the descriptions of their childhood and ancestors and move on until the post-war years and often to the present. The Late-Resettlement, although being the impetus for conducting these interviews, is not at the forefront of all interviews, and the interviewees have used the opportunity to talk in detail about other events and nuances in their lives as well. Thus, the interviews are relatively long (however, the length varies widely) and detailed. With five respondents one or two follow-up interviews were conducted, in four cases by different interviewers. A total of three researchers conducted the interviews, their research interests and questions to interviewees varied, and the interviews as a result of the choices of interviewers differed in structure and content to some extent.

Although the following analysis is mainly based on the interviews, it does not rely merely on them. In certain cases, information collected from other sources has been used as well to add depth to the interpretation of the statements

made during the interview. Such supplementary sources are several archival documents, newspapers as well as questionnaires that half of the interviewees filled in before the interview.<sup>2</sup> Interviews as well as all the additional sources are used in a manner that preserves the anonymity of the interviewees. Respondents are referred to with the indicator combined of gender and birth year of the interviewee and date of the interview.

## **COMMUNICATION THEORY OF IDENTITY AND NARRATING ETHNICITY**

To interpret migration-related interviews in identity studies, the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) developed by Michael Hecht (Jung & Hecht 2004; Hecht et al. 2005) has been hitherto used by several researchers (e.g., Bergquist et al. 2019; Mutua 2017; Urban & Orbe 2010). However, the emphasis in the studies is put on the impact of processes and events outside the interview, while the role of the latter as a communication process which inevitably influences the complex appearance of identity is rarely considered. Thus, the possibilities of the application of the CTI to oral life stories has not been fully explored in the current research. In the following, it will be explained how the CTI can be useful when analysing how ethnicity is narrated in oral history interviews.

The CTI is a complex theory that models the structure of identities in interpersonal communication. Jung and Hecht (2004) distinguish four frames of identity. First, the personal identity is formed by the self-image of an individual. Second, the enacted identity is the identity that is expressed in the communication process. Third, the relational identity is formed by four levels, that is, development of identity under the influence of how other people see the individual, individuals' self-identification through their relationships with other people, the relationship of individuals' multiple identities and, finally, the relationship between two or more people itself forms an identity. Fourth, the communal identity as a final frame is a collective self-image, that is, how whole collectives define their identity. All these frames are intertwined with each other but not necessarily always overlapping. Discrepancies between the frames may thus lead to identity gaps. In the communication process, however, people seek to be understood (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann 2000: 200) and reduce the potential identity gaps to feel comfortable with the situation and achieve satisfaction from the communication (Jung & Hecht 2004).

In this article, interviews are treated as a communication process between the researchers and respondents, during which the identities of the latter are

constituted as a complex intertwinement of the identity frames. Particularly important is how interviewees enact their ethnic identity during the conversation with the interviewer. Gaps between the enacted identity and other identity frames can appear in various parts of the interview and in different terms. As a characteristic example, the interviewees may enact as Estonians while describing how their families resettled as Germans. In such situations, they point out aspects that explain the discrepancy and should lead them to the feeling that the interviewer has understood their 'self' as desired. Otherwise, their satisfaction at communication will be reduced. The contexts in which ethnicity is discussed in the interviews determine which other frames of identity in addition to the enacted identity are relevant and which gaps occur in between them. While personal identity is inevitably left out since interviews cannot provide insights into the interviewees' thoughts, different levels of relational as well as communal identity are present as are the gaps in between them with which the interviewees deal, using different narrating strategies.

The CTI can be a valuable tool to understand the rationale of how identities are manifested in interpersonal communication; however, when applying it to narrative biographical interviews, a significant obstacle occurs. Particularly in terms of ethnicity, it is not always unequivocally clear which frames and gaps in between them are reflected in the stories. When interviewees, for example, interpret their ethnic belonging through families and the circle of acquaintances, such a contextualisation can refer to both relational and communal frame at the same time, that is, interviewees self-identify themselves through their relationship with other people, but they may also indicate the common understanding of what it means to belong to one or another ethnic group. Furthermore, gaps between the identity enacted during the interview and references to the identity enacted in the past relate to the relational identity frame caused by the communication process between the interviewer and the interviewee, that is, interviewees may want to present their ethnicity as different from the one enacted by themselves in various situations in the past. Therefore, fragments of interviews referring or related to ethnic belonging are followingly not categorised based on the model of the CTI but rather analysed as comprehensive narrations of the 'self'. The appearance of identity frames and gaps will be interpreted in the context of narrated life events.

The 'self' of the interviewee is intertwined with the life events performed during the interview (Peacock & Holland 1993). Life events of the interviewees fulfil the purpose of revealing their 'self' (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann 2000: 204). During the story telling, references to oneself are made in different ways: first, they occur as a response to the explicit question of the interviewer; second, references to oneself have grown out of the specifics of the communication situation;

or third, they occur as an explicit initiative of the interviewee (Bangerter 2000: 449–450). The interviewees may define themselves by mediating the words of others or relating themselves to other people (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann 2000). Unlike the strict question-answer structured interviews, biographical interviews contain reactions of interviewers which, on the one hand, makes the conversation more natural and the transition between the representation of oneself and the description of events smoother (Bangerter 2000). On the other hand, such a setting of interviews makes the narratives more dependent on the choices of the interviewer since the interviewees may refine their stories according to the reactions of the interviewer.

Ethnicity in the interviews with the late-resettlers is clearly addressed as intertwined with the life stories of the interviewees. The respondents describe the ethnic identity of themselves and their families of origin when they narrate their life events. Ethnicity always acquires meaning in the context of the stories and is not reflected as a fully separate abstraction. Two aspects are important here. First, ethnicity can be discussed as an organic part of the life stories, but it can also be a reaction to the respective question of the interviewer. Contextualisation in one or another case differs and, as a result, discrepancies between different parts of the life stories can occur. These discrepancies appear as identity gaps since they reveal confusion or inconvenience of the interviewees in addressing their ‘self’. Second, although several life events of the interviewees may have been memorised and repeated in different contexts in the past, ethnicity as a part of the stories does not usually seem to be a nuance prepared in advance. Thus, the strategies to address ethnicity are rather spontaneous and strongly affected by the communication with the interviewer.

Ethnicity likewise with the life events is discussed in two different time-spaces in the interviews (Perrino 2011). The interviewees’ statements about their ethnic belonging in the past as well as those of their families of origin may not necessarily reflect how they self-identified themselves in the past. Most of the interviewees were small children at the time of the most crucial events, that is, during the Late-Resettlement, and their ethnic identity was not fully developed yet (Phinney 1990: 502–503). The distance between the past events and the time of the interview also influences the interpretation of the ethnicity. Various factors that have influenced the lives of the interviewees during decades between the events in the context of which ethnicity is discussed and the interview may have affected the outcome, for example, the migration process itself, the social and cultural environment the interviewees lived in before and after the Late-Resettlement, geopolitical changes and altered perceptions of ethnicity during their lives.

## **ETHNICITY IN INTERVIEWS**

Although the interviewees' ethnicity narratives differ from each other in both wording and content, it is still possible to detect some remarkable patterns. The most striking general pattern is extensive vagueness; however, there are interviewees who express their ethnicity relatively firmly or, conversely, explicitly refuse to associate themselves with any ethnic group. These groups are, however, not easily separable from each other since an interviewee may express confusion and vagueness in one part of the interview and give firm expressions in other parts. That said, while the interviewees express vagueness and firmness in various parts of the interviews and not only when answering a respective question, denying statements are always a reaction to the interviewer's interest in the interviewees' ethnic identity. In such cases, stories are clearly more dependent on the interaction between the interviewee and the interviewer rather than the interviewees' life paths. This indicates that the role of the interaction may have been crucial in other cases as well. Sometimes, the self-identification occurs rather implicitly throughout the interview and is not expressed straightforwardly. In such cases, the implicit self-identification is revealed, for example, through the descriptions of belonging to the exile Estonian communities or ethnicity is indicated explicitly in the questionnaire filled in before the interview, as a result of which the interviewer had no reason to address the issue separately.

The phrases the interviewees use to describe their ethnic belonging are various, including explicit statements such as "I am a mixed-blooded but true Estonian" (W1925, 12.11.2013), "I am nothing other than an Estonian, everyone in our family was Estonian" (W1933, 28.12.2016), indications on belonging such as "I was looking rather for Estonians" (W1936, 27.8.2013), "I have been in connection with Estonians all the time" (W1918, 13.11.2013), and self-identification through antithesis such as "we were not Germans" (M1928, 7.7.2015), "I never felt myself like a German" (M1930, 29.4.2016). Almost all the quoted phrases are organic parts of the interviewees' stories, except for the statement from a woman born in 1918, whose answer given during the second interview was a reaction to the confusing question caused by a misunderstanding between the first and the second interviewer. Such phrases are narratively connected with the life events, the former being explained and/or justified through the latter and vice versa.

While intertwinement of the ethnic 'self' and the narrated life events is a common feature of the interviews, particular stories followed the direct question about the interviewees' ethnicity. Vague statements tend to be the outcome of this scheme. Instead of giving a concrete answer, the interviewees provided



a detailed overview of their family and ancestors. These descriptions often contain or are followed by phrases like “I can’t tell whether I am a German or an Estonian” (W1934, 14.11.2013), “I am such a typical *Vermischung*” (M1927, 19.11.2016) or even “as long as Estonia was not free or [I] didn’t go to Estonia that much, I was German, but now my acquaintances here ask, ‘Who are you actually?’ I don’t know. In fact, sometimes one, sometimes the other” (W1927, 21.12.2013). Such descriptions show that the interviewees seek to explain their hesitation to the interviewer, and perhaps they also try to self-reflect on their belonging at that moment.

It is remarkable that the vagueness generally applies only to the statements made by the interviewees about themselves. When talking about their parents, relatives and ancestors, the interviewees usually give much more concrete and clearer answers compared to their own vague self-identification. With only one clear exception, who stated that she did not know how her father self-identified (W1935, 13.10.2015), the interviewees use firm ethnonyms such as ‘Estonian’, ‘German’, or ‘Russian’, accompanied by colourful adjectives such as ‘native’, ‘full-blooded’, or ‘pure’. One interviewee gives an archetypically characteristic answer: “There it comes, quite a big question, a big difficulty, so my father is a full-blooded Estonian and my mother is a pure German, so what am I now, what am I, fifty-fifty or...” (M1926, 1.11.2014). Such a discrepancy between the statements on the ethnic identity of oneself and the ethnicity of others seems to reflect the interviewees’ perceptions of the nature of ethnicity.

The interviewees connect the issue of their own ethnic identity clearly with the ethnicity of their parents and ancestors. Usually, they do not express multiple or dynamic identities clearly, except for the above-quoted woman who explained her dynamic identity by geopolitical changes. The interviewees’ approach to the ethnicity suggests that their understanding of ethnicity is mainly primordial, with only one clear exception, who stated that “ethnicity is something one feels” (M1937, 2.2.2018). Thus, the interviewees implicitly interpret their ethnicity as inherited and unchangeable and express the feeling that they cannot be both at the same time. Their hesitation is thus drawn on the assumption that their own mixed origin does not allow them to be members of any particular ethnic group. However, ancestry is important also for those interviewees who, in fact, present their ethnic identity firmly and explicitly. Such interviewees seem to doubt whether their statements are convincing enough if they do not provide a detailed overview of their ancestors. The expressions of the interviewed late-resettlers are thus in line with the view that people may sometimes consider their origin and roots to be an important part of their identity (Hecht et al. 2005: 265). However, it needs a more detailed explanation why some interviewees enact firm and some others vague ethnicity in this regard.

The vagueness or firmness of the interviewees is related to their various life events, which they describe in detail in the interviews. In these descriptions, three common patterns appear which are analysed and explained below: first, the multi-ethnic family background and childhood; second, the role and meaning of the Late-Resettlement and third, post-war community choices. Since these patterns appear in the interviews mainly in chronological order, this scheme will also be followed in the analysis.

## **MULTI-ETHNIC BACKGROUND**

The interviewees grew up or were born in Estonia before the outbreak of World War II, and spent the first years of their lives there. Although most of them did not have very clear memories of that time, they did describe their childhood and family background in detail. Therefore, it is possible to find general patterns in their childhood experiences and draw links between these descriptions and how they narrate the ethnicity of themselves and their families of origin.

The interviews reveal that numerous respondents were born into mixed families whereas half of all the interviewees describe their mixed families explicitly. According to the stories, the interviewees were born into German-Estonian, German-Russian, or German-Swedish families. As they grew up in such families, they tended to describe their multilingual environment, earlier migration stories of their families, roots of their parents or ancestors, Germanisation of ancestors and tensions regarding their ethnicity. However, the mixed family background itself does not define the ways that the interviewees narrate their ethnicity, and it is not possible to convincingly conclude that the vagueness is directly related to the mixed origin and the firmness to the monoethnic background without accompanying factors.

It is remarkable that several interviewees from mixed families (but also from families described unambiguously as Estonian) report that their home language was, exclusively or among other languages, German. This peculiarity is related to the aftermath of the centuries-long so-called Germanisation trend. Since the higher social layers in Estonia were German-speaking, as a result of social mobility numerous people abandoned their first language and culture and had to adapt to the new environment (Jansen 2003; Leppik 2008). The next generations grew up already in German-speaking environment. However, in independent Estonia some of these people started to reconsider their ethnic belonging, especially since by that time the Germanisation had evolved into a condemned phenomenon in society (Tark & Liivik 2019). Consequently, some people identified themselves publicly and officially as Estonians but were

German-speaking at home and preferred to send their children to German schools. The interviewees with such a background do not pay much attention to their Germanised ancestors in their stories or seemingly try to avoid this topic to reduce the gap between their enacted ethnicity and various elements that define the communal and relational frames of ethnic identity. One of the stories shows the inconvenience caused by such a background expressively. The respondent identified himself and his parents as Estonians but had to admit that he attended a German school, and the home language of his family was German. He avoided expressions that could show his family as Germanised and instead drew a link between the choices of his family and the importance of language skills:

*Both [parents] were Estonian, full-blooded. ... I am constantly being asked [why he went to a German school], it was just intelligence, because how much easier it was for us than for Estonian children when we went to Germany; we got into a German school right away. ... But the German language was almost common, everyone knew German almost fluently. ... There was no political or national betrayal, just logical thinking of how hard it is to learn a language correctly and we knew it from an early age. (M1925, 2.4.2016)*

In other interviews, the issue of languages is addressed in a different way; the language does not appear as a justification of the choices but rather as a natural part of everyday life. As a repeating motif, 'three local languages' is mentioned. This phrase is a reference to the fact that three languages – German, Russian and Estonian – were publicly used in Estonia before the declaration of independence (Hennoste 1997: 59), which meant that at least educated people living in cities were fluent in all the three languages as were also those who had left for some other parts of the Russian Empire in search of work but later returned, not to mention those who had immigrated and settled in Estonia before or after the declaration of independence in 1918. According to the life stories of the interviewees, it seems that the home language was often German but outside home they and their family members used other languages as well. As a result, several interviewees did not have any problems changing the language during the interview. That said, the interviewees' childhood primary, secondary, or tertiary languages or the language they used during the interview are in no way connected to their enacted ethnicity.

It is, however, noticeable that the more the interviewees' families were included in German-speaking social life, the more they enacted themselves rather as Germans or hesitantly. The latter could be related to the fact that they were not isolated from the Estonian-speaking environment either. In this

regard, positive or negative tonality of the descriptions of such contacts is to some extent also related to the ways ethnicity is enacted. Two excerpts illustrate such patterns vividly. One interviewee, for example, said that her father was Estonian on his father's side while his mother was a little bit Swedish, a little bit German. The interviewee went on:

*My mother was a Russian, born in Saint Petersburg, her grandfather migrated from Germany to Russia, married a Russian there. ... I am a mixed-blooded but true Estonian. ... It happened that my classmates and friends were all pure Estonians. ... I was indeed more like an Estonian. ... I grew up so that my first mother tongue was Russian, because of my mother, I suppose; she didn't speak Estonian at first, then there was our servant Anna, she was an Estonian, from her I learned Estonian at home as a little child; [father] spoke both, German with his mother, with me often more Estonian, wait wait wait, it means, mother – Russian, Anna – Estonian, grandmother, father's mother spoke German with me. (W1925, 12.11.2013)*

It seems that attending an Estonian school and having Estonian friends may have influenced this interviewee in some way to enact herself as an Estonian in her later years. Likewise, with this quote she refers to her constant relationship with Estonians also in the context of her later years. Her enacted ethnicity in various time-spaces is entangled with relational identity. The described personal relationships play a role here as an explanation for her enacted Estonian identity during the interview. However, emphasising the ethnicity of her ancestors, she also implicitly refers to the common perception that ethnicity should be defined by the line of ancestry.

The above-quoted story suggests that descriptions of inter-ethnic contacts with rather positive tonality are accompanied by firmer ethnicity narratives while rather negative tonality is related to vagueness and confusion. Another interviewee who also went to an Estonian school and had Estonian friends enacts his ethnic identity in a remarkably confusing way, although he did not have such a mixed origin like the aforementioned interviewee. His description of his pre-war life refers to the impact of ethnic conflicts on his enacted ethnicity:

*Damn Germans, we said, do you understand, I was in an Estonian school, had Estonian friends, we were the only Germans in Suure-Jaani, only my father and mother were Germans, and I was as well, but I didn't want to be. ... This is always a big question, damn Germans, ... [they] were not so loved in the country. ... I didn't want to speak German, do you understand, an Estonian boy doesn't speak German. (M1928, 1.3.2015)*

The interviewee who, on the one hand, refers to his family as Germans, enacts his past identity as an Estonian in the context of this particular story. Here, one can notice the occurrence of a relational identity frame: not a very warm attitude to Germans in society in the small town could have made the interviewee want to consider himself an Estonian, which would have caused a double gap between the enacted and relational identity. The relationship with his German family and the relationship with his Estonian friends competed in his enacted self-identification. His confusion to self-identify himself during the interview occurs like a mirror of ethnic conflicts experienced in the childhood.

The stories contain a wealth of childhood details that could potentially have affected the manner that the interviewees narrated their ethnicity during the interview. The multilingual environment and interethnic relations that shaped their childhood determined some of the strategies they used. The interviewees sought to present a coherence between who they and their families were and how they self-identified themselves during the interview. Since such a coherence is not always naturally achievable, gaps between the enacted, relational and communal identities appear in a complex and intertwined way, not always clearly separable from each other. However, childhood stories do not form such a pattern that would clearly show a general rationale of how early experiences affect the interviews. The latter differ even in cases where the interviewees' background and environment have been relatively similar. Therefore, experiences of the Late-Resettlement and post-war life tend to be more significant than the interviewees' childhood.

## **THE ROLE OF THE LATE-RESETTLEMENT**

According to various sources, a few thousand Germans still lived in Estonia and Latvia after the Soviet Union had occupied and annexed the Baltic States in the summer of 1940 (Hehn 1984: 178; Rand 2006: 36). To organise another resettlement in these new conditions, Germany and the Soviet Union concluded an agreement on 10 January 1941, guaranteeing the right to leave only for Germans and their family members; however, leaving it unclear how to determine who is and who is not German (Tark 2019: 75). During the negotiation process for the agreement, life in Estonia and Latvia had become dangerous and unpleasant for numerous people, and as a result of this they were looking for ways to escape the grip of the Soviet Union. On the one hand, many people who self-identified as Germans but for various reasons had not joined the previous resettlement wave in 1939 were now trying to correct the mistake (Thomson 1960: 6). On the other hand, now that an opportunity to escape arose, a number of people

were ready to prove their Germanness, even if their self-identification at that time did not correspond to it (Rand 2006: 42–43).

In connection with the Late-Resettlement, the interviewees reflected on dilemmas, issues related to fixing ethnicity during the registration for resettlement and conflicting feelings for the whole process. The Late-Resettlement seems to have deep and long-term effects not only on their later life path but also on the self-identification during the interview. Broadly speaking, three major topics that help to explain this influence are repeated in the interviews in an intertwined way: first, opportunities and motivation to leave; second, attitude to German citizenship, and third, the hybrid nature of the Late-Resettlement as a combination of organised resettlement and escape. As it will be shown in more detail below, while the first and the third are characteristic of almost all interviews, the issue of German citizenship is emphasised in the stories of those respondents who identify themselves as Estonians.

The interviewees describe the leaving in 1941 as an undesirable inevitability. Therefore, regardless of the self-identification, they do not consider it a mistake to stay in Estonia after the end of the first Resettlement wave. They refer to the decision to stay as a conscious choice or completely and explicitly rule out the possibility of leaving earlier. The latter may, of course, seem perfectly understandable if the interviewees identify themselves as Estonians. However, the interviewees who are vague in their ethnicity narratives or identify themselves rather as Germans also seem not to regret staying in Estonia in 1939, although they did not have obvious reasons to describe the situation in such manner. Leaving in 1941 was primarily an escape in the eyes of the interviewees, even if they refer to other motives for leaving as well, such as the takeover of property by the Soviets or the overall chaos in society. In some cases, the interviewees reflect conflicting opinions within their families in 1939 about whether to go or stay. One of the most striking stories described by a respondent from a mixed family, who had clear pre-war German ties but was vague during the interview, sounded as follows:

*Yes, that was also quite, I think, historically quite an interesting thing, my mother was a true German after all, she spoke only German and poor Estonian, she wanted to go to Germany with her relatives, my father did not want, ... he said, I think, already in '37 or '38 that Hitler was geisteskrank, ... he said, I don't want to go there, I don't have any connections with this country. ... In 1939 everything in Estonia was fine, Estonia was free, everyone was afraid that something could happen but, on the other hand, nothing happened after all, only in the summer of '40 the Russians came. ... My father said, I now have two options, to go to*

*Siberia or to Germany, and Germany he then preferred, so we went to Germany.* (M1927, 19.11.2016)

When describing the resettlement as forced leaving, the interviewees also hesitate to connect it with their own ethnic identity, although the initial aim of the operation was to resettle only Germans and their family members. Furthermore, it seems that the interviewees tend to interpret the spring of 1941 and the events of that time as a confusing period in their lives, which does not fit well into their otherwise smooth narratives. Descriptions of the process of registering for resettlement illustrate these attitudes vividly. Unlike the above-quoted man to whom the right to resettle was obvious and not even worth discussing in detail, the interviewees who identify themselves as Estonians feel a more urgent need to explain how they managed to prove their German roots when they considered themselves and their families as Estonians. Explanations vary and depend to a large extent on the family background of the interviewees. In some cases, according to the narratives, documents left behind by a distant German ancestor allegedly helped the family to escape. In other cases, membership of German congregations or organisations was crucial. Some interviewees refer to pastors who helped them to obtain the necessary documents. However, the interviewees are not very specific about the documents submitted to the resettlement commission by their families. Although the interviewees who were children during the Late-Resettlement may not have known anything about such nuances, it is also striking that they clearly refuse to associate the documents with their and their families' 'real' identity. At the same time, the interviewees do not explicitly state that their families used forged documents, contrary to the authors of some published memoirs (e.g., Mäe 1993: 158–159; Raamot 1991: 189).

A characteristic example of the retrospective interpretation of how the Germanness was proved before the commission was presented by an interviewee whose father was clearly more connected with the Baltic German community than the Estonian one before the war. Although most of her paternal relatives resettled already in 1939 and although her first language was German (she reveals all these facts in the same interview), she described her family unambiguously as Estonian during the interview, perhaps trying to meet the interviewer's assumed expectations reflected, for example, by the question "your mother ... herself was still an Estonian?". However, regarding the Late-Resettlement, she argues that her mother and not the father received the needed documents in a suspicious way, implying possible forgery:

*She had a schoolmate, a minister, and she went to him and got a certificate that we were Germans, although we were not Germans. ... Maybe it [the ethnic origin of the interviewee] was from the mother's side. ... Women had all German names but whether they actually were Germans, I don't know, I have not studied it myself. (W1938, 28.6.2015)*

Since the interviewees describe the whole action of the Late-Resettlement as an undesirable event, it is also natural that they portray the German citizenship as unwanted. Although the issue of citizenship is not a common nuance in the stories, which means that most of the interviewees do not consider it to be an important detail in their lives, stories that touch upon the issue are all the more expressive. The interviewees describe the process of applying for citizenship as forced by the German authorities and in terms of propagandistic pressure. They also feel the need to emphasise when they did not acquire the German citizenship at all. The interviewees who reflect the issue of citizenship enact themselves predominantly as Estonians while the issue of citizenship does not arise or is addressed in passing in the stories of those interviewees who do not emphasise their Estonian identity.

One interviewee described the forced citizenship remarkably expressively and interpreted it as a violent attempt to Germanise her family, although in other parts of her interview she described her ancestors and relatives as being of mixed German-Swedish origin. This multi-ethnic background could be one reason why the issue of citizenship was a confusing one for her in the first place; being Estonian seemed to be not self-evident for her family before the war but rather a result of a conscious choice according to the story:

*They [aunts of the interviewee] were formerly of Swedish origin, these people, they considered German a more noble language.*

*[Later in the same interview]: Ah, it was awful, we were made Germans, it was a very dirty thing; well, already the fact that ... we had to accept the German citizenship which no one really wanted to get internally. ... I was very upset with my father, [the interviewee said] 'How could you, you have always said that we are Estonians'. ... I was very angry with him and then my father said, 'You know, I tell you why, if we refused ... to take it, then we would be killed. ... Inside we are still Estonians'. (W1931, 16.9.2015)*

Not only the action of the Late-Resettlement but also the fact that late-resettlers fitted well neither to the resettlers nor to the refugees had an impact on the interviewees' stories. Those interviewees who reached displaced persons (DP) camps and/or were in refugee status after the end of the war, felt their uncomfortable



status most. Not all of them had the experience of being “kicked out” (W1933, 28.12.2016) of a DP-camp for being resettlers but several interviewees had various controversial connections with refugees, nonetheless. The interviews show that the refugees who left Estonia in the summer and autumn of 1944, during the offensive of the Red Army, did not consider the late-resettlers to be as equal to themselves. Sometimes they did not understand and tolerate the people who had left Estonia a few years earlier because of the suspicious way of their migration. Furthermore, the ethnic background of the late-resettlers caused confusion among the refugees. For example, there are interviewees who, regardless of whether they had a DP-status, took the opportunity to attend the Estonian-language schools that were established in the DP-camps. Their background and habits which differed from those of the refugees sometimes led to conflicting situations, for example, in connection with the language usage: “One could not speak German there [at the Estonian school in Geislingen DP-camp], then others would have immediately said, ‘What you are doing here?’ ... They were not very friendly, these children” (W1935, 14.9.2016). Such descriptions reveal gaps between enacted, relational and communal frames of identity that could have been present in the past and affected the identity formation of interviewees in later years.

The Late-Resettlement is the most important event in the lives of the interviewees, which evokes gaps between the ethnicity enacted during the interview and at the time of the event. Being late-resettlers had probably been a burden for years and not only during the interview. However, it seems that they have successfully found the way to deal with this nuance in their lives, otherwise it is unlikely that they have agreed to take part in the research projects, particularly those focussing on the Late-Resettlement. Interpreting the situation as escape is one of the most important coping mechanisms which allows to reduce the primary identity gap in the stories: if back then the interviewees’ families ‘faked’ their ethnicity to escape, it could not call into question their enacted ethnicity during the interview. However, this only applies to the interviewees who self-identified as Estonians during the interview.

## **POST-WAR COMMUNITY CHOICES**

As stated in the beginning, half of the interviewees divide into two dominant groups, that is, respondents either connected with the exile Estonian or Baltic German communities. Although there are interviewees whose post-war community choices are not apparent or who returned to Estonia during the war and did not leave again, their narratives do not form significant patterns compared

to the first two groups. It appeared that all the interviewees who are related to exile Estonians identify themselves also as Estonians while all those explicitly related to the Baltic German communities present rather vague or confused ethnicity narratives.

The interviews also suggest that primarily the community choices are related to the ethnicity narratives and not the countries of residence. The interviewees related to the exile Estonian communities live in various parts of the world where there are large Estonian populations, that is, in Australia, Sweden, and the United States but also Germany. All the interviewees connected with the Baltic German communities have resided in Germany most of their post-war life. However, in their stories the interviewees do not draw any connections between their ethnicity and home country while the communities they are related to form an important context for the ethnicity narratives.

Exile Estonian and Baltic German communities are structurally very different. The former is a typical diaspora whose members' identity is mainly based on orientation to the old homeland (Brubaker 2005). Members of these communities engage in certain practices of preserving identity, such as joint activities and gatherings; remembering the common history and fate; preserving and reproducing common culture, language, and values through various publications; establishing organisations and schools, etc. (see, e.g., Ehala 2017; Keevallik 2010; Laar 1990). For the members of the exile Estonian communities, explicit self-identification as Estonians seems to be an important part of their lives at least situationally. On the contrary, Baltic German communities established and acting mainly in Germany are not really a diaspora. Although they still consider the connection with the old homeland important (Pabst 2013), they are an organic part of the German society both linguistically and culturally. Thus, connections with Baltic German communities do not have an impact on the self-identification of individuals as compared to the exile Estonian communities.

Those basic differences between communities had their effect on the life stories and ethnicity narratives of the interviewees. Although the interviewees who were involved in the exile Estonian communities self-identified themselves as Estonians during the interview, they had in fact no unambiguously Estonian background and roots. Furthermore, as described above, the circumstances of their migration were suspicious in the eyes of the refugees in direct post-war years. Although the interviews do not confirm that hostile and suspicious attitudes continued decades after the end of the war, it does not mean that joining the exile Estonian communities was easy for the late-resettlers. With a vague or mixed family background and the burden of emigrating as Germans, the late-resettlers first had to prove that they belonged to that ethnic group they

wanted to join during the post-war years. Therefore, it is natural to assume that their integration to the exile Estonian communities was not always smooth and without frequent identity gaps.

It seems that the interviewees and their families of origin had to work intensively with their identity to be part of these communities. It was not uncommon that during the post-war years they obscured the fact that they were late-resettlers as well as their Germanised ancestors if the latter was relevant. For example, active members of the exile Estonian communities were often portrayed or mentioned in the community newspapers. Such stories contained several biographical details but only rarely information about the Late-Resettlement, usually in cases where it was not possible to hide it. Similarly, in their life stories, such interviewees pay more attention to the details that connect them with exile Estonians, such as returning to Estonia and escaping again in 1944, post-war activities, or the fact that they never applied for German citizenship. During the interview, they often felt the need to emphasise that they were Estonians if they had a feeling that the interviewer might have doubted their ethnic belonging.

One interviewee who, incidentally, had been portrayed in the exile Estonian newspapers several times, without mentioning the fact that he was a late-resettler, described in his interview, lengthily and in detail, his escape to Sweden after his return to Estonia during the German occupation in 1941–1944. This description was preceded by the following statements:

*We never had the [German] citizenship, no, we never got the citizenship. ... I have those old papers, but they are just residence permits, we never acquired citizenship, maybe it was a Fremdlingspass or something like that. ... We never applied for citizenship. ... And the return was quite natural when there was no Soviet government, when there were no Russians. ... It took a while until we got the permit to return, it was in '43. ... I don't know why it took so long. (M1927, 20.9.2015)*

The interviewees involved in the Baltic German communities did not face obstacles comparable to those of the above-described group. Usually, they did not have experiences from DP-camps and their community ties were rather formed with the help of already existing networks and contacts. As one interviewee described it, it was no problem to join a Baltic German organisation after the war: “There was a Deutsch-Baltische Landsmannschaft here and we were members there. ... Nobody asked who we were back then, some wondered only later that our father was an Estonian” (W1927, 21.12.2013).

The background and origin of the people connected with the Baltic German communities were in fact also not unambiguous and they usually had close ties with both Baltic Germans and Estonians before the war. Despite the rather similar pre-war background, their stories are remarkably different from those of the interviewees related to the exile Estonian communities. The interviewees from Baltic German communities tend to emphasise their mixed origin, as well as persistent contacts with both Baltic Germans and exile Estonians as well as with people living in Estonia. At the same time, they neither emphasise nor obscure their Germanised ancestors or Estonian origin. For them, compared to the former group, these details seem to be no issue at all. However, floating between two communities, the interviewees from the Baltic German communities express more vagueness and hesitation than those interviewees who are related only to exile Estonians.

Identity gaps regarding community choices thus appear in almost every interview but in different ways. The post-war environment in which the interviewees spent their youth and adult life had a crucial and meaningful role in shaping their ethnicity narratives. Due to the community ties and personal contacts, the interviewees who identify themselves as Estonians feel the need to express their ethnicity more firmly and explain in detail the choices of their families to be understood by the interviewer during the interview, but at the same time, the gap between their pre-war and post-war cultural and lingual environments that form the relational identity frame becomes apparent. On the contrary, in the life stories of the interviewees from the Baltic German communities the identity gaps are rather related to their persistently diverse environment. Thus, their solution to reduce the gap between the enacted and relational identity and to build a satisfying narrative is to express vagueness and hesitation.

## **CONCLUSION**

The interviews conducted with the late-resettlers from Estonia show that ethnicity narratives presented during interviews depend on the combination of various elements including the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewee. Both pre- and post-war developments in the lives of the interviewees played their roles, but the latter were more crucial in a specific way. The main distinguishing line runs between those who had joined either the exile Estonian or Baltic German communities. The former group is generally firmer in enacting ethnicity but at the same time they feel a greater need to clarify the circumstances of their resettlement and are sensitive to their ancestors' identity

changes, as these details do not fit very well into their ethnicity narrative. The members of the latter group, however, enact their ethnicity more vaguely and more ambiguously but do not attach much importance to the circumstances of resettlement and to the identity changes of their ancestors. The narratives of these interviewees rather do not contain such discrepancies between pre-war and post-war life that are characteristic of the former group.

Regardless of the post-war community choices or family background, the interviewees in their ethnicity narratives tend to attach more importance to their origin and ancestors rather than cultural and linguistic background, which indicates a widespread primordial thinking. Consequently, this aspect has led to uncertainty and confusion. Having a multi-ethnic background, the interviewees seem to think that they do not fit well into certain ethnic categories which they actually consider natural and self-evident. Therefore, it is not surprising that the interviewees do not usually struggle much when categorising other people, including their own parents and ancestors, but they do have difficulties with self-identification.

This study thus demonstrated how enacted ethnicity and identity gaps accompanying the ethnicity narratives appearing during the interview relate, first, to the need to justify and explain the choices made during life and second, to the widespread understanding about the nature of ethnicity. The interview was an event during which the interviewees processed and reconsidered their ethnic belonging and, in this sense, this study showed once again that interviews are not mere reflections of one's self-image and their content is affected by the communication between the interviewer and the interviewee.

Two suggestions can be provided for future research. First, a fruitful choice would be to trace the patterns in the interviewees' narrating strategies to interpret their ethnic belonging in the context of their life events and to detect in connection with which events identity gaps emerge. Second, common perceptions of ethnic identity should be considered. If, for example, ethnicity is widely perceived in the primordial sense, it affects how the interviewees present themselves during the interview. Depending on the background of the interviewee, primordialism may be used as a reasoning in enacting the desired ethnicity or, conversely, it may increase confusion and thus create identity gaps. The CTI can be a useful auxiliary tool to interpret the ethnicity narratives; however, a clear-cut categorisation based on this model should be avoided since fragments of narrative interviews do not fit well into predefined boxes.

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## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Materials collected during seven projects have been used in the article (titles are not official but translated by the author): “*Nachumsiedlung* and Estonians”, PI Tõnis Liibek (2013); “*Nachumsiedlung* and Identity”, PI Olev Liivik (2014); “The Self-Identification and Geographic Mobility of the People Resettled to Germany in 1941”, PI Olev Liivik (2015); “The Ethnicity of the Late-Resettlers, Its Changes and Influencing Factors”, PI Olev Liivik (2016); “The Ethnicity of the Late-Resettlers, Its Changes and Influencing Factors (II)”, PI Olev Liivik (2017); “From Ostland to German Reich. Resettlement from Estonia to Germany before the Great Escape in 1944”, PI Olev Liivik (2018); “From Ostland to German Reich. Resettlement from Estonia to Germany before the Great Escape in 1944 II”, PI Olev Liivik (2019).
- <sup>2</sup> Questionnaires were distributed among the late-resettlers within the framework of the same projects used for conducting the interviews. Filling in the questionnaire was not a prerequisite for the interview and thus not all the interviews are accompanied by a questionnaire. The questionnaires are laconic and do not provide significant additional information on narration strategies. Although they contain a separate field for the ethnicity of the respondent, it proved to be of little avail as it was often confused with the citizenship by the respondents.

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Materials of interviews conducted between 2013 and 2019 by Olev Liivik, Ulrike Plath, and Triin Tark preserved in private collections of interviewers.

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