

The Spreading of Personal Experience Stories about Soviet Estonia

During the years 1996–1999, I and Andres Kuperjanov interviewed the Estonians living in and around Lund, the small town in southern Sweden. Our aim was to obtain an overview of their folklore, everyday beliefs and customs. I have discussed the stereotypes, prejudices and attitudes of the Swedish Estonians in my previous articles (Kõiva 2001; 2007). Throughout the years I have most treasured several spontaneous narrative situations with Jaak Tammert, a brilliant story teller. Captivating stories about incidents that have happened in his close circle of friends and their integration in Sweden deserve further study. Both interviewees were born in the 1950s and grew up in Soviet Estonia. Though both have relatives who had emigrated during the Second World War, they did not reveal it in the interviews, and instead preferred to represent the generation that had grown up in the Soviet times, their stereotypes and knowledge. This strategy proved to be the best for facilitating dialogues and two-sided relations.

Relations between the two communities – Estonia and the diaspora – have greatly varied in different decades since personal face-to-face contact was rare and brief. For a long time letters were either censored or in danger of being censored, therefore the exchange of personal information was also limited. After Estonia became independent the situation changed, but the general attitude of different social groups had no imminent reaction to this, as changing stereotypes is a complicated long-term process (Hinton 2000: 24). Among the Estonians in South Sweden, there were radically minded groups even in the second half of the 1990s, who, on principle, did not communicate with the

Estonians in homeland and refused to give interviews to linguists and biography collectors. Some even refused to talk about their memories on the topic that only the refugees can talk about – their arrival in Sweden and the integration into the Swedish society. This can probably, at least partly, be explained by intra-group perception, where in categorising someone as a member of a group, we attribute the characteristics of the group to a certain individual, and the fact that we tend to view an in-group person in more positive terms than we would an outsider (Tajfel & Turner 1979).

Interviews and especially personal conversations revealed the actual attitudes of both sides: their similarities, differences, as well as stereotypical behaviour. People were found for interviews in various ways: with the help of Aino Laagus, lector at the Finno-Ugric Institute at the Lund University, also from the listed phone numbers with Estonian names, by the snowball method, where the interviewees suggest the next person for interviewing. There were also people who came on their own initiative when hearing about interviewers from Estonia.

The age of interviewees ranged from 20 to 90. The majority, however, were the age of 60–90. By the time the interviews were conducted, the Estonians in Lund were considerably different from what the community had been in the 1970s and the 1980s. The majority of the older generation's spiritual leaders, writers and intellectuals had passed away; no publishing activities and many prior commonplace community events became extinct. Societies continued their work, but like elsewhere in the diaspora the later immigrants had not become part of the local community; the local youth, the third generation, spoke Estonian poorly (if at all) and had not integrated into Estonianism (cf the same tendencies in the Canadian Jewish community, Cohen 1999; in the Armenian community in the U.S., Tölölyan 1996).

One of the main principles in interviewing was conducting these in Estonian, thus creating simultaneously an archive of the language of the Estonians in southern Sweden. The recorded material forms one part of the project "Language and culture of the South-Swedish Estonians". Another reason for the choice of language was the fact that generally these people communicated with the Estonians of the same age in the Estonian language, even though they communicated with their children and grand-

children and other interest groups in Swedish. One of the aims was also to determine the range of topics that are used for communicating in Estonian. Or, to find out in which fields the language functions in its multiplicity of styles, allowing the performer to create a narrative.

The first Soviet Estonian came to this community at the end of the 1970s by marriage. Mixed marriages between Estonian women and Swedish Estonian men were quite common, especially during and after Estonia regained independence. Marriages between Swedish (Estonian) women and Estonian men also took place, but marriage presupposes intricate diplomacy, which in Estonia is traditionally directed and furthered by men rather than women. During the last decade specialists of different fields have arrived in Sweden to work for a longer period of time at the Swedish universities, people, who were not convinced that they wished to return to a state of lower living standards, but who still kept in touch with the local Estonian community. These people enabled us to observe how it was possible to integrate into the local national community (and to make some prognoses) for those who migrated to Sweden during or after the Soviet era. Younger, well-prepared and active young people are in great demand in the local community.

Our aim was not to collect biographies but rather narratives and belief stories, also personal experience narratives. I was particularly interested in how heritage and the concept of Estonia have changed during emigration. The oral heritage that spread to Estonia through relatives revealed that the repertoires of both parties were different.

It can be assumed that folklore in a strictly authoritarian society differs from that spreading in democratic societies. In Soviet Estonia, folklore was used for shaping national awareness and identity, as there were no other means (cf. Kuutma 1996; Hann 2000: 105 ff.; Viires 1991). The radical political and social situation demands a special poetic deciphering of a folklore text. Situations and subjects are characterised with metaphors and passwords that decode the actual meaning of the text. To understand the main text it is important to understand the subtext and metatexts, requiring good knowledge of the social group and context. Otherwise, the response of the other party in the conversation is similar to that of a humourless person listening to

the stories and mockery by a joker. Situations, where everyday communication does not enable direct expression, favour the development of metatext and poetic code. Just as catastrophe folklore shares similarities with ordinary narratives, urban legends, but also differs from them, so do the experiences of the two communities in their reactions towards the everyday Soviet life and in creating narratives on this. A foreign Estonian's point of view on Soviet Estonia as reflected in the narratives, prejudices, beliefs, prototypes and schemas offers a valuable outsider's view on the narratives created by insiders. The extensive folklore archives offer a good chance to observe Soviet folklore and compare it with narratives abroad.

In the present article I will briefly touch upon the narratives of the Swedish Estonians and the Estonians in homeland, focusing on the subject that was willingly brought up by the Swedish Estonians of different age – namely, life in Soviet Estonia. The current article analyses how Soviet Estonia is reflected in narratives and describes differences between narratives performed by different groups. The article is also an introduction to the more detailed analysis of specific incidents.

The Swedish Estonians. Origin, Attitudes, Stories

Several parallels can be drawn between the history and oral narrative history of countries that have gained independence in the 20th century. In the past couple of centuries the Estonian population has been estimated around one million, and during this period there has occurred extensive emigration from Estonia. In the 20th century, especially during the second half, Estonia has also seen numerous immigrants, including minor remigration, which is characteristic of the nation states on the second half of the 20th century and the 21st century (see e.g. Ohlinger & Münz 2002; Tsuda 2001; etc.). During the 19th century, approximately 200,000 Estonian immigrated to both western and eastern countries for economic reasons. In 1918, when the news about the independent Republic of Estonia began to spread, the Estonians from all over the world returned to their homeland in order to

help to build up the young republic. About 40,000 people, all in all, returned, many of whom put their professional skills to use in the institutions of the new republic. In the 1920s numerous townspeople opted out of the Soviet Russia, later people also fled from famine and for political reasons. Times of tumult followed scarcely less than a few decades of peace, resulting in a widely scattered dispersion of the Estonians.

For many the warning signals to leave homeland were the 1939 pact that allowed to bring in Russian troops, the communist coup d'état and the sc. "June 14th deportations" in 1941, in the course of which ten thousand Estonians were sent to concentration camps. During the second wave of deportation in March 25th, 1949, ca 21,000 people were sent to Russian prison camps. A total of up to 100,000 people were deported from Estonia to Siberia during Soviet rule (Kristler-Ritso Sihtasutis). Historians have estimated that Estonia lost about one third of its population, which had swerved around one million, in, during and after Second World War. All the most dramatic human losses were unexpected and thus had an immense effect on oral heritage and general behaviour. Both deportations, where people were rounded up unexpectedly and in secrecy and then sent away in unknown directions, left a particularly tragic tone on Soviet oral histories. Since only a few of the so-called "June deported" returned home alive, the topic was considered much more topical in the 1960s than the hardships of war, or even the period of nationalisations and collectivisations, which had ruined prior way of life. In addition to the Estonians, several Estonian minority groups left the country either voluntarily or by force or were wiped out in political "eliminations" (in 1939 the Germans, during Second World War most of the Estonian Swedes, Baltic-Finnic nations, the Jews, Gypsies, cf. Palli 1998). It has been estimated that during the period following the Second World War more than 200,000 mostly Russian-speaking immigrants settled in Estonia. In the post-war period the political, social and demographic situation changed rapidly, and this has had a considerable influence on the stereotypes, attitude, practical beliefs and oral history of the Estonians. By 1986, the non-Estonian speaking population had grown from 8% to 40%, while the total Estonian population increased, mainly due to the number of immigrants, to 1,542,000 inhabitants (ENE 1987: 257).

During 1942–1944 many Estonians fled mainly to Sweden, Finland and Germany and from there to other countries all over the world. Refugees were mostly educated people, executives, people involved in military and police activities and their relatives, people who had escaped or hidden themselves during the first wave of deportations. Of course, there were also many students and young people, whose family had been deported to Siberia before the Second World War and the establishment of the Soviet order in Estonia, among the refugees. And there were also young spirited political resistance activists and adventurers. Among the older generation, who were more inclined to leave, some were socially more mobile and had come to Estonia from elsewhere, had studied in cities, etc. Some of them had tried to go directly to the United States and other Western countries, away from the war. The narratives reveal that the life of refugees was hard, though the hardships differ in individual stories. The Estonians preferred to settle in Sweden or Finland, which were geographically the nearest. Finland was also favoured because of language similarity, the shared experience in fighting together in the war of independence and the World War. All the informant groups, without exception, agreed in choosing Finland and Sweden as the closest migration destination. The same tendency can, in principle, be observed on refugees from today's crisis areas, who have chosen to resettle in a country close to their homeland. In these days, however, not all the Estonian emigrants could travel directly from Estonia to Finland or Sweden. Many arrived at their new country via Germany.

The interviews and memories share a common characteristic feature: the aged people and the middle aged, the then youth and children, all share memories about German DP (displaced person)-camps, which are generally described as a productive period full of hope. In their memories they happily recall the German camps, where they opened Estonian schools and clubs, founded amateur drama groups, wrote handwritten and published schoolbooks for children (Valmas 1999). The everyday way of life could be carried on. People were firmly convinced that they will return home in a few months, or in a year or two at the latest. After the adventurous, but tense refugee life, the life in DP camps was culturally, economically and politically more stable, many could enjoy much higher social status than before, and the feel-

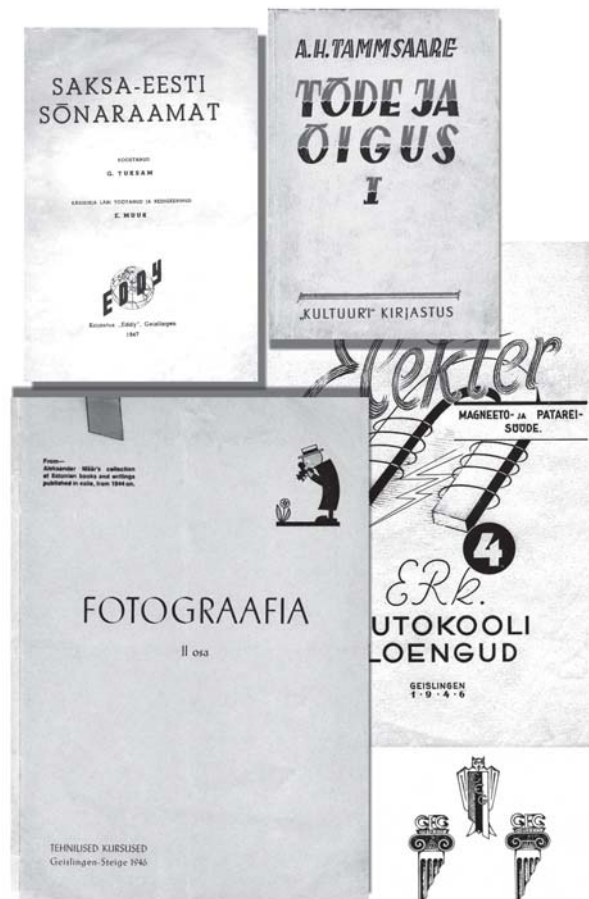


Photo 1. Some examples of the wide range of publications published in Estonian in the Geislingen DP camp.

ing of national identity was strong. The positive tone of memories may also be caused by the fact that people were financially somewhat better off than in several preceding months, even years.

A good narrator constructs a tense and enjoyable story even from an unpleasant incident; self-criticism and humour help to preserve the narrator's individuality. Personal experience sto-

ries variously describe, often through humour, the trial of the refugees: how they chose their migration destination and the so-called 'slave market', or the categorising people by age, gender, physical condition and marital status, when facing the migration committee of the chosen country. The solving of critical humiliating incidents in narrating definitely deserves further study.

The migration of the Estonians makes a varied and colourful story, largely depending on the country they had settled in and where in that country they had settled. Nevertheless, there are other narrative fragments based on common stereotypical evaluations, some, for example, treat the political and existential fears of the minority. Even the middle generation angrily recalls that Finland relocated the Estonians to Russia, and they ended up in prisons and concentration camps. Many left Sweden after Sweden remitted some Estonians to Russia. It is quite natural, that the political steps of the new homeland, but also the general political situation in Europe and in the Soviet Union were carefully observed. Most of the refugees considered their situation temporary, an intermediate period, which should not last longer than a year or two, and hoped that the western countries, together with the U.S., would demand the liberation of their annexed homeland, making their return thus possible. The understanding that the independent Republic of Estonia no longer existed, and returning home was therefore impossible, gradually sank in and influenced the integration process of the first generation. The attitude and behaviour of this generation was also changed by their wish to change the political situation and help those who remained behind the iron curtain. Nevertheless, during the more than forty years of exile, the attitudes towards one's homeland as well as the target country have changed, several facts have been mythologised and folklorised. But the narrative about homeland and the return to homeland is clearly observable among the Estonians as well as other people (cf. Morley & Robins 1995), but these are extensive and many-sided topics, which should be studied separately.

The repertoire that the Estonians present of their life and the narratives that they relate is typical immigrant lore, oral history carried by refugees of different nations that massed into the U.S. and elsewhere. In this respect, these narratives are sur-

prisingly stereotypical. The unavoidably stereotypic attitudes are clearly observable, as are the evolvment of certain alienation and intergroup relationship. The Estonians in Russia sensed a clear opposition between them and the home Estonians during their visits, and both expressed that in their opinions and evaluations (Rootalu 2002; Korb 2001). Similar stereotypes naturally emerged between the Estonians at home and in western countries. Such oppositions appear within one ethnic group and used to be characteristic as “clan differences”: the differences in clothing, eating habits, language, behaviour, economising, hosting guests, exchanging greetings, and other everyday trivia, shaped by one’s upbringing and language, were the primary means of determining group boundaries. In the case of those who migrated to Sweden, the own/foreign (familiar/unfamiliar) paradigm is reflected first of all in attitudes and characterisations that are generalised to the first foreign group, the Swedes.

The stories clearly reflect the ethnocentric view – “us, Estonians” are set in opposition with the local population. The opposition was partly prompted by the distrustful and suspicious feelings of the locals towards the immigrants who often had inadequate language skills. In Sweden some even had difficulties to inform the locals where they had come from and that they were peaceful citizens rather than hostile aggressors: the Swedish were not good at foreign languages and the Estonians were not good at Swedish.

Narratives of the older generation reflect the Sweden of the 1940s: agrarian, neutral nation in war, a society the Estonians thought was more archaic. People were mostly placed into rural regions, where they initially remained strangers: many were city-born. Quarantine and other sanctions applied to refugees were considered degradatory and taken personally. In their post-war childhood many had lived in near ghetto-like conditions, packed in slums, often in crowded conditions. Almost all families lost their status – very rarely could one find a position more or less equal to the one he had held in Estonia. Most parents had to change their profession, start working at a factory, financial institutions, or in the field of veterinary, etc.

Here I will not touch upon the turning points: for, inevitably, there are turning points even in the most homogenous community, making the community more closed or open to adaptation

with the environment they are in. In the case of the Swedish Estonians, one such milestone is the naturalisation permission issued by the state. Since this was accompanied by pressure – if you wish to live in this country, you must prefer Swedish language and culture over everything –, part of the Estonian community deliberately continued to use the Estonian language. The same range of problems in the case of Hungarians has been discussed by Katalin Henriksson, who demonstrates how this led to Hungarian becoming a non-prestigious language and the extinction of formal education in Hungarian (Henriksson 2002). But all this has more hidden aspects, among others, the increasing gap between different generations. The older generation's orthodox preservation of the Estonian language and culture, their keeping close contact with the other Estonians, their attempts to maintain the established attitudes and the social hierarchy was less important for the younger generation. (Under the second generation I mean those born in the 1930s and later, people, who came to Sweden as children or were born there.) They had to adapt to the new country and its people. They went to school with the Swedes, they had Swedish friends and often they were the only Estonians at their workplaces. The Estonian language was used only at home and in communicating with other Estonians.

The younger generation made friends among themselves as they met at national events, summer schools and club activities. Generally they knew all those who still spoke the Estonian language. The older generation had to give up their profession and had to live knowing that their children will not do what their parents thought was best for them but would have to make a living in the fields their parents had not even heard of before. The youth were chosen schools and jobs on practical purposes, not by what one wanted or had a talent for. They preferred fields that led to a better living with less competition and better prospects that were just beginning to open up.

The older generation's emphasised use of correct Estonian language and national identity made outcasts out of those, who married outside of the Estonian community, or those, who due to their working environment or for other reasons could not speak impeccable Estonian. They had to get accustomed to new relatives of another nation, with grandchildren who did not speak Es-

tonian and who were not taught Estonian as their parents believed they were better off this way. Gradually, the Estonian immigrants in Sweden accepted the new customs and there was more chance of preserving of what was more similar to the Swedish culture. The Estonians, for example, had to abandon celebrating the St. John's Day with burning fires, in time the customs of St. Lucia's Day began to spread, while Martinmas' and St. Catherine's Day's "mummers" and masks disappeared, as these customs were considerably different from the local tradition, etc. Some changes were fought against, some just happened.

The local Estonian Houses and clubs created a commonly shared ethnic texture and space, where the traditional cultural activities, dances, music, language, food and other characteristically Estonian activities, could be carried on (cf. Cadaval 1991). There can be no doubt that these institutions have functioned as a symbolic political power and have given the Estonians a chance to political expression in their new homeland. In addition to their inner value, these institutions and activities also had an outward influence on the community of their new country.

Folklore of Different Age Groups

Several of the interviewed had tuned themselves to present a so-called biography for biography researchers (Portelli 1998; Agar 1980; Angrosimo 1976), which we have tried to render as close to spontaneous episodic presentation as possible. Logically, the knowledge about the biography collection in Estonia, especially the collection of migration narratives, influenced their stories; their original versions were therefore very concentrated. Compromises between the wishes of both parties resulted in the recording of all kinds of folkloric narratives but also impressive biographies narrated by informants of the most varied background, experts and scientists, who form the solid foundation of the Swedish Estonian community and national movement.

I prefer to differentiate between the biographies told to a collector and the biographies the narrator has presented in the course of his or her life. Such biography is no doubt an individual narrative genre, constituting in many aspects an extraordinarily

interesting research material. This owing to its structure and analogous motifs, as well as typical motifs, which are often recurrent in biographies. Such a coherent narrative is fairly ideal for researching prejudices, attitudes, and beliefs, as these are difficult to observe outside the context.

There are also differences between written and oral biographies. The former have more in common with autobiography and biography in general as a literary and historical narrative. The latter has also much in common with written diaries and different oral narratives, especially the personal experience stories and oral heritage on the whole.

In the natural situation of performing a narrative, the narrator does not have much of a chance to present the whole biography. In spontaneous narrating situations the biography is not presented in the chronological order and in a logical sequence, but situatively and in cycles, in episodes. Of course, many nations have special folklore genres in the earlier tradition, where the performer does talk about his or her life course. For example, many northern peoples have special personal songs, the text and tune of which belong to a certain person, and where he or she exhibits in a poetic code the nodal points of her life and evaluates them (Dégh & Vazsonyi 1974; Dégh 1976). The earlier genres of Estonian folklore (such as laments) and some newer genres (the so-called village chronicles, soldier and crime songs) often speak about the life of some person, though within a strict framework of poetical canons and metre. Often the name and the personality of the author remain to some extent unknown as we are first and foremost dealing with a typical biography presented with stereotypical means. The dramatic events of personal life remain in the background, and it is quite difficult to shape a complete biography into the frames of traditional folklore.

If we look at the folklore of different groups within one generation, it is clear that their folklore originates in different sources and periods. The narrative repertoire of the older generation clearly reflects Estonia and its heritage as well as changes in the lifestyle and mentality during their life in Sweden. In a way, the narrative repertoire of the older generation is a concentration of folklore from their original home region, songs and narratives of their childhood. Besides village lore urban environment is also rich in various genres of folklore such as



Photo 2. Television set department in Tartu supermarket in 1972. A black-and-white TV set cost an average person's three month's wage. Many people regularly watched sports broadcasts and news in shops. In the 1960s and 1970s, friends and neighbours gathered at a TV-owner's place to commonly watch films. Photo by Armin Alla (courtesy of the photo collections of Estonian National Museum Fk. 1733:30).

narratives and jokes about popular cultural figures and scholars, student tradition and lore peculiar to a particular professional group. Since the older generation or their parents arrived at Estonia from different corners of the world, their folklore was considerably more varied than it was among those who had lived in the rural village community or only in Estonia. Multilingual songs and adventure tales were very common in the close family circle.

Traditional folklore adopted in Sweden and the customs the Estonians continued to follow are relatively ethnocentric. Stories about the escape and adapting in the new society were kept secret for years and were often told to the closest circle of friends and relatives only (on similar issues, see Ingrians Anepaio 2001: 207 ff.). The whole repertoire, including narratives about incidents that happened in Sweden, also reflects the history and

social changes of Sweden, as I have indicated before. Since the repertoire of different generations is largely overlapping and often differs only in the absence of dramatic turning points, and the heritage is not replaced all at once, the whole folklore repertoire will never cease to exist or change as its narrators are ageing or its topicality is fading, only part of it will. The narrative consistency of the Swedish Estonians is threatened by the young Swedish Estonians between ages 20–30, because the transmitting of folklore tradition from the older Estonians is limited due to the generation gap and language differences. As a rule, the younger Swedish Estonians are fluent in Swedish and have quite passive Estonian language skills. The differences are particularly obvious between today's youth and children. To facilitate understanding the grandparents have to render and perform their stories in the Swedish language. This, however, destroys the rhetoric in folklore, where situation humour may remain incomprehensible and is replaced by common stories. Common stories are told in simple language and require neither good generalisation nor language skills.

Good narrators often reproduce the best stories formerly told by earlier and often better narrators, even if the stories introduce an archaic topic and are omitted from active narration. In such cases the narrator refers to the original performer – this story was told

by Uncle, this was Jaan's mom's story (see also Proodel 1967; Proodel-Hiiemäe 1971). This commonly practised technique builds a bridge between generations – these references are like additional roots that help the community to expand diachronically and grow stronger.

Author-narratives also refer to changes in mentality, the need to emphasise the narrator's person, personality and contemporary time (Foucault 1997). While in legends and urban legends the verification of the story with reference to sources and well-known persons is important, the most important thing in these stories, which also require more polished performing skills, is the contemporary need to emphasise the narrative's author, the person, who reportedly experienced the event, the person who narrated it.

The narrative repertoire of the middle generation already contains profuse folklore heard in Sweden, known and performed in

Swedish, English or other languages. I have chosen one group from the city of Lund, namely the friends of Jaak, to illustrate the folklore, beliefs and attitudes of the middle generation. The group includes representatives of various professions and social statuses. Among their repertoire, memorates are rare because the paranormal is not accepted, while it includes numerous anecdotes, jokes and personal experience narratives. Some of these are variations from the well-known motifs or anecdotes that have been adapted to some specific person. This phenomenon is very characteristic of older folk narratives. An example of this is a 'true story' about a local female leader, which is in fact an anecdote about a noble lady, who turned to the police because of a horrible two-tailed animal eating carrots in her garden by picking them up with its tail and putting them into an indecent place. Of course the animal turned out to be an elephant. The following example is of the same kind.

In this house I once heard – I don't even know what the hell was I doing there so early – they had just woke up, it was years ago and the family had sat down for breakfast, it must have been around midmorning or noon, they kept a photo shop and studio [--], they had just had some annual celebration of enterprisers, when I come in, and then, well, neither the mister nor missus was in the best condition. So they are sitting there and the children too. The children were 6 or 8 or something, and are sitting around the table and the discussion is, well, look, we're home, we went to this party last night, we're home now, the car is home, but who drove us home. Did you? No. It must have been you. No. But then who drove us home? Finally the youngest daughter opens her mouth: I know who drove. Parents look at the daughter; how can you know who was driving. Yes, look, I woke up when you came home last night and when dad fell down the stairs, all drunk, then he yelled that damn it! it's much easier to drive a car when drunk than to take the stairs (ERA, CD 0084-14).

However, the majority of narratives are connected with incidents that happened in Sweden. Quite many narratives retell events, tragic and humorous incidents, unusual adventures, anecdotal happenings, etc. that have happened to the members of this group. Since the group was more or less of the same age and communi-

cated in Estonian then these stories are usually told in Estonian. The folklore repertoire of single members of this group is always wider than the common repertoire of the group collectively.

The Folklore of a Small Group as Common Oral History

Observing the heterogeneous group of persons, who circulate around the societies, organisations, events, meetings, training and publishing activities of the Estonian House today, the question of common and commonly shared folklore and its smaller subcategories, including family narratives, arises. How can we characterise the heritage of smaller groups and which genres are represented here? What helps the group lore to survive? Above I mentioned the group of peers, whose folklore is multilingual and connects them with networks that remain outside the group. Clearly, other networks existed all along next to the common national events, the institutions of preserving and promoting folklore. Such networks for conveying various kinds of information and heritage were created by relatives, though occupational or hobby networks, and also the newly formed circles of friends, were also very important in this respect.

Such personal narratives often play an important role in keeping the group together – the narratives are the group's common oral history. Every folklorist has, no doubt, at least to some extent felt this sense of belonging to a temporary group – going together to fieldwork, to a long trip, etc. The language, phraseologisms, catchwords, humorous stories, adventures and mysterious experiences are turned into stories repeated within the group. Sometimes the stories centre on a specific member of the group. This was also the case with the group of Estonians in Lund.

A major part of the repertoire of the group under discussion was made up of humorous personal experience narratives, where an adventurous plot was constructed around a stereotype. The stories are characterised by warm, appreciative humour. The stories quite typically relate what happened to the members of the

group, while not all the members are equally mentioned. There is a clear distinction between the characters who focus the stories and those who are rarely associated with the stories. The role of a story's authors and narrators in shaping and circulating the story is also relatively clear.

Often a member of the group with a history of colourful events and sayings is chosen as the main character. One of the main heroes of the Lund group is usually depicted as a heedless friend, Jaan, with a nickname the Owner of Mikumärdi farm, a simple boy whose boldness, eccentric behaviour and language usage is used to build up expectation and eventually reach a solution. All in all, the main character typically first acts and then thinks, allowing the narrator to attribute him unbelievable adventures. Already his nickname offers possibilities for, say, literary jokes and past-oriented stories, also for comparing two characters – a young man from Lund and the literary prototype.

Mikumärdi – this is a keyword for everybody acquainted with the Estonian literature and culture, referring to a pre-war comedy classic, a story of the eccentric owner of Mikumärdi farm, lazy boy, how he got married and of other humorous happenings (Raudsepp 1932). In essence it is a character comedy. The Lund group is especially blessed with material for folklore and linguistic jokes because he is not just similar by character, but also a blood relative of the owner of Mikumärdi from the comedy. This enables various meta-references and meta-textual play in the course of narrating. Jaan is characterised in the following way:

My friend Jaan, from the Mikumärdi farm, you know, he is the kind of person, when we were younger and travelled together, it was not just travelling but with him it was more like an adventure. There were always all kinds of things happening.

The worst was when we were hanging out with a gang. He was always the one looking for trouble and when it got to a fight, he was nowhere to be found and it was us whose faces were messed up. And when it was all over, he used to say "Oh guys, guys, how could you!".

According to old people, he was of grand heritage: his father was from around Viljandi, the Mulks, and his mother from neat Haapsalu, from a really noble family. Even to-

day you can see the Mulk blood strong in him. You can see all the classical Mulk features in him. Sometimes it gives you the feeling that there are worse than good people among them. Stubbornness, for example – rather let the farm go than...! Bearing grudge for a long time. Also some sort of weakness. Sweden 1996 (Author's private recording collection).

It is worth noting that this humorous characterisation, among other things, include categorisation based on old tribal stereotypes – Jaan came from the Mulk area, and the Mulks are conventionally characterised in jokes and practical belief stories as stubborn, headstrong, stingy, rich, etc, i.e. all the characteristic features that in analogous material is attributed to the Scots, etc. This, in its turn, suggests that in in-group teasing a person can still be identified by his parent's local Estonian origin and the signs of certain culture area.

Jaan's children are also mentioned in a number of stories. In real life, Jaan had four children, two older one, who have given material for stories that remind of Astrid Lindgren's boy characters and their adventures and that largely share the features of humorous narratives described by Bengt Holbek as family anecdotes (Holbek 1990: 103 ff.). Such are, for example, the stories of how kids catch their neighbour's hens and throw them down the roof with and without a parachute. The unexpected arrival of parents reveals a shocking view of a house full of hen feathers and the happy youngsters. The story culminates in a meeting with the neighbour, who some days later complains that her hens seem to be as if traumatised, they are pale in the face, can not walk straight and do not lay eggs.

Many stories relate the common history of the gang – their first trip abroad during which the unsuspecting boys found themselves in deep trouble. Finally they found lodging in a funnily furnished house, which their parents recognise by description to be a cathouse. The boys have no idea and that makes their telling of the story so multifaceted.

There are abundant stories of first dates and related tragic happenings. Some of these describe how Jaan bragged to impress a girl and absent-mindedly drove into the river so that he had to explain his fiancée's broken arm to her father and account for sinking the soon-to-be father-in-law's car. There is also



Photo 3. The May parade celebrating the global festival of workers was a compulsory participation event. The procession was decorated with topical posters, sometimes there were also gymnasts or acted scenes on lorries. In the 1960s, centrally reinforced growing of corn and making of silo were endless sources of folklore. Photo shows students of the Estonian Agricultural University at the 1960 May parade. Photo by G. Paas (courtesy of the photo collections of Estonian Agricultural Museum, FP191:64).

a story of how he was teaching a girl to drive and forgot to show her the brakes and then tried to stop the car by hanging on to it. Nearly all these stories clearly contain the elements of personal experience narratives.

A third person may be depicted as the main character even if the narrator himself or some other member of the group was the one who in fact experienced the narrated event. In this case the narrator becomes the observer and describer, he becomes passive; this enables the narrator to use different space and time strategies.

As pointed out above, narratives often make use of other stories, their motifs or plots that are adapted for the specific people and situation, especially if the narrator wishes to express his personal attitude. The same technique is used for characterising members of other groups. Sometimes personal experience narratives include elements of traditional folk tales. An example of old narrating motifs with classical structure is a story of a nearly eighty-year-old woman's death. This narrative reflects events in Estonia. Since burial customs among the Swedish Estonians have become different from the traditional Estonian burial customs (see also Aarelaid 2001: 189), we can also see the traces of mocking old-fashioned customs. The story materialises through visual imaging of old people visiting bars, and carrying a coffin with them.

There was also this description of his Momma's lady friend. Taken from the best comedy, even though, well, somewhat morbid. Well, when his grandma finally smuggled herself back to Estonia, she could even move to her former house. And this was some old lady friend of hers, it was a single-room apartment and they shared it. This friend was older and died soon. It happened in Tallinn, what's-it-called, Graniidi Street near the Balti Railway Station. So she died. And then this friend and the old woman herself were from the older generation and had to follow the tradition and the departed was laid in the coffin in the apartment and was then taken to the cemetery. And well, they put the lid on and started off down the stairs. Well, luckily they had opened the house doors outside. The house's foundation was much higher than the street, like this— The outer stairs were quite steep, and inside too, and narrow and all these people

of their age and god knows, whether there even was anyone under the age of 80, but it was quite bad, this dearly departed had to be taken down to other people. And they lift up the coffin, these hell-of-a steep stairs – they were on their way downwards and then fell. The coffin slid like a sleigh downstairs, the stairs was quite short, down these stairs and the outer stairs and bang! on the sidewalk, all these people passing by. Fortunately, nobody was in the way and after this collision the lid fell off and the body out of the coffin. And of course all these people gathered around and they, dear Maali, we didn't mean anything bad by it, placed the body back into the coffin, put the lid on and even then, I don't know, what these damn deranged people, walked to the cemetery. Could have ordered for a car or a trailer, but no, it was a matter of honour, they had known her all their lives and had to show their respect, 80-year-old men and women and three of them carrying the coffin. And then they had to rest for a while. They had been to a diner or restaurant before and had already started with the funeral feast, but in this second place they were in such high spirits already that after a short while, well, in the first place people had squinted at them for coming in with a coffin, but from this other place they had been thrown out with the coffin and all (ERA, CD 0084-15).

Leaving aside the fact that the story was connected with one group member's remarkably strong-willed mother, it is an old story plot where the dead body becomes misplaced under unfortunate circumstances (such as incompetent undertakers and the obstinate deceased) and is taken along to a pub. The additional comments to the story make the narrative unique.

The Swedish Estonians and the Soviet Estonia

The distance between Estonia and Sweden is quite insignificant – some 200 km. During the last two centuries travelling to Gotland to bring grindstones was still frequent and for centuries there has been the smuggling of spirits, salt and other contraband. Still the route to our closest neighbouring countries Sweden and Finland was opened only in the 1960s, after 20 years of



Photo 4. Newspapers of 1960s and 1970s reflected the building of blocks as a metaphor of building up communism. Tower crane and concrete blocks were signs of progress. New Tartu was built the same way. Year 1967. Photo by Urmas Karu.

isolation. In these days 3-day tourist cruises were organised. Sometimes it was possible to secretly meet relatives living in the foreign country, in spite of all the strict supervisory measures implemented on people coming from the Soviet Union. The most dramatic events in Estonia were related to the return of the de-

ported a few years after the death of Stalin. In 1954 the return of the 'train of children' from Siberia with the children of the deportees; most of the deportees returned in 1956. Their arrival influenced the society to a degree similar to the arrival of the Russian Estonians, who voluntarily migrated or were relocated back to Estonia in 1940 and after the Second World War. The problems with returning, the observing of adaptation processes of deportees and prisoner of wars as well as the narration of critical events are now being studied (Rahi 2001; Anepaio 2001), but generalisations are still to come. The influence of the repressed intelligentsia and intellectuals on the Estonian community definitely requires further analysis.

The first Swedish Estonians came to Estonia as soon as possible – in the mid-1950s and at the beginning of the 1960s. They were mostly people who had left behind their close relatives: parents, siblings, spouse, and children. There were relatives they hoped to see again and those with whom they wished to share their deportation camp experiences. Tales told in Sweden by the Swedish Estonians about Soviet Estonia at that time were often close to urban legends. The lack of information, speculations and hidden facts resulted in fantastic descriptions of changes and the peculiar way people behaved.

So far the research has largely centred on the complicated life of the Estonians in the Soviet Estonia, especially in the Stalinist period, the period of collectivisation and stagnation (see e.g. Anepaio & Kõressaar 2001; Kõressaar 2001; Hinrikus 2000, and many others), but little is known on the status of the members of diaspora, the people, who visited the annexed country. People, who visited Estonia, became objects of distrust among the local Estonian community upon their return to Sweden (or other communities of diaspora). Sometimes they and their family became isolated, colleagues and friends turned away from them. They were often accused of collaborating with occupant authorities, manipulation with people living under the occupant regime, from fear for KGB, and of several other motifs. Some personal experience narratives touch upon this period, though this is a time rather forgotten than remembered. In addition to their concern about Estonia and their relatives in Estonia, the period was also complicated because they had to integrate in Sweden/their new homeland and to establish their position. The

repertoire of stories resembles the narrating strategies used in Estonia after the second wave of deportation and the establishing of collective farms. Several psychologists have shown that memories that disturb the psychological balance and the perception of a just world are tucked away in people's memory. Similar tacit avoidance of certain periods has been described among the Ingerians and the deportees (Anepaio 2001: 206; Rahi 2001: 207–208). This also explains why there are so few anecdotes and narratives about Stalin and his rule compared to anecdotes about Khrushchev and later rulers. Joking starts with democratic winds and reaches its full absurdity in the years of stagnation. A joke, characteristic of this period is the anecdote where Brezhnev is asked whether he collects anecdotes, and he replies: "Yes, I have two camps full of them" (Author's private recording collection).

Some earlier studies have suggested that the world events played little role in the people's memories of the past (Zonabend 1984). The can still, in a way, be applied to the younger generation of the Swedish Estonians, those, who have grown up in Sweden. Still, it seems to me that the groups, who have endured political repression or violence, who have survived a war or some other national disaster, or who have been forced to emigrate from his home, remember these events and transmit their memories to the next generation, because these are a part of their master story. Many events have survived due to the diaspora community with its rules and accentuate, as in William Safran (1991), the relationships between the diaspora community and the land of origin. Typically, the recollection of several historical events, which were significant from the people's point of view, was avoided for years. Narratives about the flight and about war, and the adaptation to the host society was never consciously analysed or recollected before the Estonian researchers' call to fixate the oral narrative history and personal experiences of this generation. Although the topics have been discussed in more details in the written biographies and diaries, intended for recording the personal experience of oneself and the generation, the past events and the tradition for the future generation, it was not an issue in oral communication.

In the 1970s and towards the end of the stagnation period, attitudes change. The regulation of visits became more liberal, while the state increasingly stagnated, and the main topics of

personal experience narratives emerged. The number of visitors was increasing and a variegated repertoire of stories emerged. This has been shaped especially by the visits of those who left Estonia in childhood – their memories of Estonia were mediated heritage. Their memories were those of a small child, often even a mental picture created by their parents' stories of Estonia. Such memories can never be private property, and they are this overinhabited terrain possessed by other people's experiences (Steedly 1993: 22). Having grown up in a democratic country, their conflict with the authoritarian regime was strange and ridiculous. Contact with the Soviet Estonia produced numerous anecdotal incidents that turned into humorous narratives. The audience conceived it partly as fantasy and fiction, since these resembled true life stories and fitted well with the Soviet stereotype. The older generation, however, started telling humorous-satirical stories of their visits to Estonia. It seems that people coming from the free society could make sense of the Soviet regulations only through humour. It is interesting to observe how the attitude towards the native land and towards the Estonians changes, who in narratives and categorisations are gradually beginning to belong to the other-group. The experience of the younger generation is well described by an informant, who characterises the changes in the independent Estonia and unveils hidden stereotypes towards the Estonians at home:

I know that was there, and my friend Jaan knows that too. One thing was [to stay there for] a whole week, it was kind of interesting, though also rather depressing. The Kafka drama we went to see there was really unique, but once we came back we were really grateful that we didn't have to live in such conditions. It's all right for one week, but even my friend Jaan complained that after regaining the independence you can hardly recognise it, all the fun about going to Estonia is gone: nobody calls you names, nobody lectures you, nobody behaves in a totally absurd way, you go to the store and people are friendly, even smile at you, where's the fun of going there anymore (ERA, CD-0084-11).

Studies into the narratives of specific groups by topics are relatively few. Due to the favouring of village and rural communities as characteristic of the Estonian character in the 20th century folklore studies, virtually no studies into the processes in the urban

environment and urban folklore have been made. The Estonian folklorist Mall Hiimäe has established the typology of narratives from stories collected in the 1960s in the villages of one Estonian parish: significant physical and mental powers, humorous incidents in daily life, relationships among the youth, the reflections of important historical or social events, narratives of unusual events, stories based on the difference or uniqueness of social position, religion and the church, and life in previous times (Hiimäe 1978). The latter is a common topic among the elderly.

According to this classification, the stories of Soviet times by the Swedish Estonians fall to the second and third categories and also to the category of people with a special social position. The latter role is performed by anonymous officials, hotel workers, customs officers and border guards, often the person being a Russian. People who do not speak the language, people with the power to deride people, people at ridiculous positions, and those, who act strangely because they are not familiar with everyday utensils and technical innovations, people who are sloppy in their work, who manipulate laws, or those, who make the tourist's life a living hell. People belonging to the system become identified with the system itself. The us-groups consist mainly of the Swedish Estonians and their relatives, whose attitude is expressed with humour, as I have already mentioned.

The personal experience stories founded on imminent and mediated contact enable us to view the strict authoritarian state through the eyes of a bystander. Many of these stories belong to the category of horror and cautionary tales. This was prompted by firsthand experience while visiting the land of origin – the increasing percentage of the Russian population in the capital. Most visitors did not speak Russian, while people living under the Soviet rule often spoke only Russian and no other foreign language. It was strange to watch the decaying of nationalised houses and the land in neglect. The stories reflect evaluations and situations, where people living in different countries and in different societies do not and can not understand each other because the rules they have to follow are far too different, as are punishments for disobeying them. The Swedish Estonians did not know that the local people were forbidden to build anything without permission as construction permits were exclusively limited to state institutions. A good example of the situation is the



Photo 5. All through the year, city people were sent to the country to help collective farms: kolkhoses and sovkhoses. In the spring, they helped plant, in summer to make hay, weed, ridge potatoes, in autumn harvest linen and potatoes. Harvesting potatoes often involved being sent to the other end of the republic for a week or even a month. In addition, there were forest planting and other useful campaigns, for example in April around Lenin's birthday; a Saturday was spent cleaning the city or work rooms. On the picture, people sorting potatoes on a Communist Saturday at Riisipere sovkhos in Harjumaa, April 21, 1984 (courtesy of the photo collections of Estonian Film Archive of the National Archives of Estonia, s 0-118410).

narration of how a woman, who had grown up in a nationalised, previously private residence in Tartu had trouble in the 1950s because she had forgotten to close the gate, when she went to school. The young girl violated the standard rule of behaviour. In a couple of years the same gate fell off – people were not allowed to repair it themselves, but the institution for this specific purpose could not manage it. Eventually, people planted bushes to hide the dilapidated fence, so that they would not break the regulations, but to still comply to the tacit behavioural norm of the community.

The stories reveal that it was difficult for the Estonians in diaspora to visit their home places since some areas, like the town of Tartu and other military areas, were closed and restricted. The

only way to visit Tartu was to arrive from Tallinn in an official taxi or rented car, awfully expensive due artificial rate of rouble, accompanied by an official and return to Tallinn the same evening. If someone wished to visit a place further from Tallinn, he could barely reach there and had to start coming back. The narratives also reflect the sense that the Estonian language was no longer sufficient to handle things in Tallinn and the rest of Estonia. The narrative heritage also reflects the disturbing understanding that the narrators could influence the well-being of your relatives.

The alienation from the place, where people wished to come and which has become unfamiliar, is clearly visible. Familiar places do not look like they did in memories, because natural and artificial environment has changed: the pictured landscape and the actual landscape differ from each other. But the conflict in the social networks, differences in the economical progress and the official politics is even more prominent, creating a gap between the financially secure and the people who are struggling. Many narratives reveal the alienation between people, caused also by differences between the pictured and actual landscape and human relations. As I have already mentioned, personal experience stories use old and new stereotypical motifs, expressions and linguistic jokes in elaborating a story. Next to humour, sarcasm and parody are used to help to filter information and highlight the reasons why the Soviet Estonian adventures were so special.

The most common motifs were comical situations with people, who could not speak Estonian, language jokes, peculiar encounters with technical “innovations”, the misuse of technical devices, sloppiness and carelessness. Characters of these stories remind stereotypes used for far-away and uncivilised peoples as the Polish in the US, the Maasai in Kenya, and the Chukchee in Russia. Technical devices are often depicted as avengers coming to life, as *deus ex machina* that makes an official seem ridiculous.

The customs officer in the line – you know this vacuum coffee can, right, and here’s this small ring like on many cans, that you have to twist and then pull the lid off. But when you did so, then bang! the air burst in and all the coffee powder burst out, and there was a note on the can with figures how there is small hole that you had to open first, it balanced the air pressure. But this damn Russian, he was overly eager, they usually didn’t do such things, and

a few persons before us and the one whose coffee can it was began to talk back. Of course, this Russian bloke understood Russian only and pulled and, man, there it was – he himself looked like a black person, and the man, whose coffee can it was, realised that there was nothing else to do and did something like that. In the customs office, there was a rule that you can't film there, but it would have been much fun to see his expression and afterwards he was really astonished. All hell broke loose (ERA, CD 0084-12).

Deceiving a slow-witted and stupid official bears similarities with the motifs of older folk narratives. The beginning of events is usually left aside, and the narration opens with the conflict, where officials or privileged people are shown ridiculous. Personal experience stories quite often express the confrontation of the owner and renter mentalities.

Reality as Reflected in Personal Experience Stories

One of the most common questions of a profane concerning most of the folk narratives is about the relationship between reality and fantasy. The degree of truthfulness and the different forms of reflections of truth in folklore have occasioned discussions between folklore researchers for almost a hundred years (cf. Graf 1988; Spence 1982). Many narratives reflect everyday events and life, ranging from universally known historical events to artefacts and descriptions of the world surrounding us, mediating personal experiences from actual reality. That does not necessarily mean that the aim of the narrator or the narrative is to reflect the truth or present a truthful mental image. Human psychology and rules of narratology limit the relating of plain truth but enable to approach it. It is typical that people also incorporate stories they have heard into the present telling, sometimes even presenting them as personal experiences.

Legends and memorates have traditionally been regarded as truthful stories, the same applies to narratives and accounts of irregular structure, which in the Estonian folklore have been called belief accounts, everyday experience narratives and reports, which largely coincide with the term 'personal experience



Photo 6. Soviet stores had a meager choice of foods, while liquor shelves were – up until Gorbachev’s dry rule – bulging with alcohol. Remsi rural store in 1980. Photo by Rein Olli (courtesy of the photo collections of Estonian National Museum, Fk. 1909:24).

narratives’ coined by Sandra Stahl, or with the genre of *pajatus* ‘story-telling’ in the Estonian folklore classification. Humorous stories concerning members of a close family circle could also be called ‘family anecdotes’ (Holbek 1990). The principle of truthfulness and the relatively objective description of reality have been considered quite characteristic of personal experience stories since the beginning of the 20th century. Oskar Loorits has proposed that these descriptive short-lived stories resemble memorates and reflect local events (Loorits 1927). Later the Estonian folklorists have emphasised the element of humour in these stories (Laugaste 1957; Proodel 1967; Proodel-Hiiemäe 1971; Hiiemäe 1978), drawing attention to the wide range of humour from satire to benevolent teasing and self-criticism and also to the fact that the stories are rich in hyperbole and other stylistic devices.

Realism and the presentation of reality is thus rather fiction, because the narrator does not reproduce his story by relating the dry course of events but picks out single events, incidents and elaborates on them according to his own narrative style and

situation (cf. Palmenfelt 1993). Reality is altered even for humorous or for stylistic purposes. And even though individual life stories are recognisable in these stories and narrators quite often draw parallels with their own persons, their aim is not the presentation of a life story or oral history but the presentation of certain moments, selected and polished events in narrative form.

The narrator may even know the associations between all causes and consequences, but he or she may not be willing to share them with the audience for the benefit of the story. Veiling certain facts or rendering them insignificant enables the narrator to emphasise his or her message, present a vivid description of events, delineate distinctive personae, compress the story's structure and express his/her interpretation. A narrator can, for example, interfere into a humorous story told by another narrator about how there were no soft drinks on sale on a hot summer but for foreigners, for people on a special social hierarchical level, soft drinks could be procured, and where the narrator criticised the Soviets, and audience would exclaim "Wait a minute, these were our own dear kin brothers!" The narrator himself, however, is so absorbed with system and the hyperbolised description of the system's absurdity that objectivity is not his goal. And native Estonians are thus excluded from the group of "us" to the group of "other". Evaluations reflected in these stories are quite transparent – "us" group consists of closer relatives and friends, everything else belongs to the oppositional group, called by the common name "the Soviets", whose actions and behaviour is described as something characteristic of another social class, as something unfamiliar.

Many stories are based on the fact that there is a difference between the Soviet rule and how it is followed. How often something clever is invented to shirk the strict laws. In time such exceptions become rules, conflicts emerge when someone strictly follows a rule. Narratives reflect behaviour and decisions that are cognitively difficult to predict. Poverty, deficient goods, old-fashioned customs, clothing and behaviour, topics that are taboo or mentioned only in allegory, and differences between social and economical statuses still remain. Conflicts were also caused by the different expectancies of either party. Since the Swedish Estonians represented not only the Estonian culture they had taken with them but also the Swedish Estonian culture, the

culture and customs as accepted and adapted to Sweden, it was often veiled with slogans about cultural behaviour and culture.

One such slip in logic is clearly observable in the stories from the time of Gorbachev's temperance campaign (the 'dry law').

Well, actually it was friend Jaan who said that "I'd like to buy vodka" and the strange thing there was the Nõmme store [Nõmme – a district of Tallinn], it was at this hour and it was past six. And he couldn't even specify what he wanted, "Probably a bottle of cognac or something like that," but then they said that "don't you –"

First they angrily snapped at you, "What do you want?" "Well," he said that "I'd like to buy some vodka".

Then they snapped back that "Don't you know what time it is?"

"Well, listen, I'm a very civilised person, I wear a watch on my wrist, even though I'm not as civilised as those friendly neighbours who have many watches on their wrists, but I can tell you exactly that it is 18 minutes past 12 a.m. exactly. But that I –"

Then he started to fiddle again that – "If I show you that I'm a civilised person and since you have no watch and perhaps you can't tell the time, then if I have told you that I wish to buy some vodka."

Then they snapped at him again that "Why are you picking a fight, don't you know what time it is."

But when they finally understood, [that we are from abroad] they became very friendly all of a sudden, explained us that according to law it is forbidden to sell vodka after six o'clock. "There's a regulation."

And for me it was the first time in Estonia. Jaan had been there before, staying at his Momma's for a month. And we're about to leave the store.

Then a man rushed in: "Three bottles of cognac, please!"

The bottles are placed on the counter and Jaan stops, gaping, and are irritated and [went] to the counter and [said]: "And what are these here? What are these?" – "Look, it is not vodka but cognac."

And then it turned out that [according to] this regulation – which it is forbidden to sell vodka after six, but you can sell cognac, you see.

Anything but vodka (ERA, CD-0084-11).

An altogether separate category consists of the stories heard from the Estonian relatives about the Soviet life. The discussed topics are often even spatially distant, for instance, how they were sent to the distant regions of the U.S. to help to cultivate new land, pick grapes and make wine, etc. They also retold stories about how scholars were forced to help the collective farms for a month and their comic incidences there. These quite realistic and truthful stories often remind urban legends. Their subtypes in structure and content are sometimes similar to the stories about the food and drinks of a foreign country or society: the unsanitary conditions where sausages, cheese or wine are actually made and the unnatural components included in these, such as, for example, excrements or other disgusting components that are used to make a good wine. The stories tell us of fantastic beverages of distant countries and introduce us their culture. These stories are also



Photo 7. Groups of civil defence were formed in every institution. They published a leaflet and at least once monthly had a training session, teaching how to behave during gas or nuclear attacks, if the Americans were to attack the Soviet Union. A civil defence session in 1978, in Estonian Literary Museum: how many seconds to get a gas mask on? (courtesy of the photo collections of Estonian Cultural History Archive, B-37: 7325).

noteworthy because they affect the side of life that the official history has ignored and that tends to be overshadowed by major historical events. Humour and absurdity enable to take a look at what history writers have not recorded or have tacitly avoided.

As for the structure of narratives, the stories relating about the Soviet regime tend to have a typical introduction. The story may begin with a didactic evaluation, a few sentences expressing the relief that the narrator himself lives elsewhere, pointing out the absurdity of authoritarianism, or wondering about the peculiar local customs, etc. The introduction is followed by the main story. The story may also end with narrator's comment, but not necessarily. The stories are mostly related in cycles or chains, like anecdotes where associations bring along the flow of new narrative sequences. In such stories a clear-cut climax is often missing and different comments and swerves may serve to dissolve the turning point.

Native Estonians about the Soviet Estonia

The main questions here are which kind of folklore was transmitted by the Estonian emigrants and whether the folklore of the native Estonians described the Soviet period and regime in a similar way. Above I have pointed out that human memory and psychology limit the creation of stories on several topics. For narrating absurd or humorous stories about the foundation of collective farms, the life of deportees, etc. it is important to view these events at a longer temporal distance. Many situations that have created favourable tension and motivation for the Estonian emigrants were nothing new for a native, because they were too routine, too commonplace. Walking barefoot you only notice those wearing shoes, but not your companions' bare feet. Regardless of that, the stories and folklore of the native Estonians are rich in lore describing and characterising the same period – anecdotes, urban legends, songs, beliefs.

The local Estonians can also boast a rich body of folklore reflecting life in the Soviet Estonia. However, most of the material is not descriptions or stories based on certain event or behaviour of some person, but messages in a poetic form. Anecdotes that mostly originated from Russia described vividly the Soviet re-



Photo 8. October children (grade 1–3), pioneers (grade 4–8), and Young Communist League were the only active youth organizations in Soviet Estonia. For the development of youth work, there was a pioneers' room in each school. This room was characterised by honourable mentions, gonfalons, cups and other symbols of success but certainly by the flag of the unit and picture and/or bust of Lenin. Photo by Agnes Tõldsepp. Courtesy of Estonian National Museum Fk 834:202.

gime and its absurdity, and reflected the political and economical pressure in the society. The same kind of a critical picture was presented in the symbols of the language of *platnoi*-songs,¹ although they were not adapted from Russian into Estonian – people did listen to the singer performing it in Russian but usually did not sing along. This could be explained by the failure in translating the content and word play. A local analogue of these songs was the category of student songs with hidden political meaning. Though these songs never became a complete genre due to their short period of creation (usually during summer work camps or at song contests) and due to a limited ring of users – the youth and students, and not in mass media. The student songs were characteristically filled with absurdity, carefully chosen allegories, obscenity. Using obscene language was their way of protesting against the contemporary situation. Re-

ality is reflected in a similar manner than in urban legends, especially the legends known throughout the Soviet Union, such as the stories of sausage factories, crimes, etc. (Kõiva 1996; 1997; 1998). One of the best known stories is the travel account with a deceased grandmother wrapped into a carpet (they could not think of anything else to do with the body); the blanket the deceased is wrapped in gets stolen. This story was recorded in 1930 in a slightly different variant, of how someone was stolen and taken for a dead pig. The version spread over the Soviet Union sounded believable as it was generally known that it was prohibited to take pork over the Estonian border – meat was one of the main export articles to other parts of the Soviet Union (Pakalns 1995). Another factor that increased the story's credibility was the fact that carpets were deficit articles that could be bought only with special permits, obtained, for example, as a reward for good work, and even then the social and party status mattered. Thus a dead relative wrapped into a carpet was outwardly contraband and we can also see the motive for stealing. Without knowing the background reality it would be hard to understand why the story triggered so much reaction and why people believed it.

People told each other of anecdotal incidents with collective farm regulations, the pointless laws limiting the private ownership of land, animals or buildings. Still, the memoirs of outsiders are valuable, since local Estonians have often erased these memories as past not worth remembering. As I have already mentioned, several stories remained untold, because they were too commonplace, too ordinary for a narrative material: they could not be fitted in or compared against a wider context or framework. One reason was definitely that in the most extreme form, a traumatic event was too threatening to be made known through narratives. Many stories and incidents about the Soviet period were considered worthy of narrating only after the Soviet period, when the perspective to the world widened and people no longer feared the public narration of oral history.

Personal experience narratives clearly point out stereotypes, typical behavioural patterns and reactions. Everything in these stories forms a valuable addition to oral history and recorded history, because these stories also reflect the behavioural strategies and stereotypes of the native Estonians under strict dicta-

torial regime, in the situation where views towards the ethnic culture and everyday convictions were regulated by coercive control mechanism and laws.

Instead of Conclusion

Sandra Stahl has stated that if somebody wishes to study folk narratives, which are an important part of the everyday life of almost every American, then probably the most suitable genre would be *personal experience narratives*. It is hard to find somebody who has not once in his or her life told a personal experience story or who has not told one or two favourites over and over again (Stahl 1989). However, group stories and group feeling require that the group includes at least one charismatic and skilled narrator. In the Lund group, for example, it is Jaak, who chooses events and shapes them into utterances and narratives, whose style and choice of narratives has shaped the group. He is an excellent storyteller who can turn a humorous story into a narrative that keeps the group together. Narratives help to remember and reproduce the past, as well as to enhance the feeling of togetherness.

Telling these stories is as if a hobby for those that “specialise” in personal experience narratives and whose active repertoire includes twenty to thirty well elaborated stories. Sandra Stahl believes that the performers of such narratives do not make up the elite of narrators or even a separate group (Stahl 1985). Here I would argue that such stories could still be central to the repertoire of good top narrators, that the performers of such narrations can also be masterful story tellers. Moreover, similar stories can spread a long way from the original teller without changing in form, the group that the story describes. Thus a story of some group can be a part of the repertoire of a much wider group. Such distribution gives them the characteristics of an undoubtedly traditional piece of folklore.

The stories aim at communication, a humorous recollection of the “heroic” and extraordinary past, uniting the group. They also depict life in Sweden and Estonia fairly truthfully, providing different attitudes, stereotypes and points of view that are usually not talked about. They are at the same time both indi-

vidual and social stories, giving valuable information about the members of society and about society itself. According to Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps, narratives of personal experience predominantly focus on past events, i.e they are about “what happened”. However, such narratives link the past to present and future life worlds (Ochs & Capps 1996: 24). Personal experience stories are undoubtedly one way to transmit traditions and evaluations from one generation to another, and also a way of accomplishment for the whole generation.

Comments

¹ *platnoi* – Russian term for a repeat offender of law, performing non-political crimes.

Reorderings

ERA, CD – digital recordings in the Estonian Folklore Archives, started in 1997

Author’s private recording collection – in possession of Mare Kõiva

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