

# ESTONIAN LIFE STORIES

Compiled by  
Rutt Hinrikus

Edited and translated by  
Tiina Kirss



Central European University Press  
Budapest New York

English translation ©2009 by Tiina Kirss

*Published in 2009 by*

CENTRAL EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY PRESS

*An imprint of the*

Central European University Share Company

Nádor utca 11, H-1051 Budapest, Hungary

*Tel:* +36-1-327-3138 or 327-3000

*Fax:* +36-1-327-3183

*E-mail:* ceupress@ceu.hu

*Website:* www.ceupress.com

400 West 59th Street, New York NY 10019, USA

*Tel:* +1-212-547-6932

*Fax:* +1-646-557-2416

*E-mail:* mgreenwald@sorosny.org

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted,  
in any form or by any means, without the permission  
of the Publisher.

ISBN 978-963-9776-39-5 cloth

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Eesti rahva elulood. English

Estonian life stories / compiled by Rutt Hinrikus ; edited and translated by Tiina Kirss.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-9639776395 (cloth)

1. Estonia—History—20th century—Biography. 2. Estonia—Biography. I. Hinrikus, R. (Rutt) II. Kirss, Tiina, 1957–III. Title.

DK503.745.E3413 2009

947.98'0840922—dc22

[B]

2009017738

Printed in Hungary by

XXX

# Table of Contents

Preface by Rutt Hinrikus .....	v
Introduction by Tiina Kirss and Jüri Kivimäe .....	1
Hilja Lill (1905) .....	33
Tuuli Jaik (1910) .....	57
Elmar- Raimund Ruben ( 1918) .....	73
David Abramson (1923) .....	95
Evald Mätas (1921) .....	107
Heljut Kapral (1923) .....	125
Hans Karro (1923) .....	145
Hillar Tassa (1923) .....	161
Leida Madison (1925) .....	181
Valter Lehtla (1924) .....	201
Linda Põldes (1928) .....	223
Tanni Kents (1920) .....	247
Hans Lebert (1924) .....	265
Voodel Vörk (1925) .....	285
Peep Vunder (1936) .....	303
Selma Tasane (1926) .....	331
Asta Luksepp (1932) .....	351
Heljo Liitoja (1923) .....	365
Juta Pihlamägi (1927) .....	381
Volita Paklar (1937) .....	401
Raimo Loo (1929) .....	419

Aili Valdrand (1936) .....	439
Valdur Raudvassar (1939) .....	457
Ene Ergma (1944) .....	477
Tiia Allas (1973) .....	495
Glossary .....	511
Chronology .....	521

## PREFACE

# On the Collection of Estonian Life Stories

More than 30 years have passed since, after graduating from university, I was hired at the Estonian Literary Museum and got my first taste of collecting manuscript sources—the personal archives, correspondence, manuscripts, and memoirs of distinguished Estonian cultural figures. Paradoxically, the institution which in Estonia bears the name “Literary Museum” is really not a museum, but rather an association of three archives of Estonian oral and written culture—a folklore archive, a cultural history archive, and an archival library. The Estonian Literary Museum, which has grown to become the central institution collecting life stories in Estonia, has developed alongside the Estonian National Museum, founded in 1909. The two institutions were run by the same organization until 1940, at which time they became independent. Throughout the Soviet occupation, it was safer for a memory institution to bear the name “museum” rather than “archive,” since archives were closed (or at least half-closed) institutions, where access and use of materials was subject to closer surveillance. Furthermore people never completely trusted any Soviet institutions. During the Soviet era, efforts to collect memoirs—if they were at all successful—yielded texts with the “proper” ideological slant. Conversely, the regime did not trust the people, and archives were closed even to those who wished to research family trees.

Estonia is certainly not the only place in the world where memories have been feared, avoided, or distorted. Fortunately destruction and forgetting do not always rule in history; alongside these forces there has always been remembering—the preservation and collection of “memory-objects.” During the rising tide of Estonian nationalism in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term “old treasures” (*vanavara*) was adopted, to refer to things of ethnographic value to keep in museums, but also to oral tradition. The first nationwide campaign to collect oral

folklore (*rahvapärinus*) was initiated in 1888 by pastor Jakob Hurt, leader of the conservative wing of the movement of national awakening, with his call in the newspapers, “Appeals to Estonia’s Awakened Sons and Daughters” (“Paar palvid Eesti ärksamaile poegadele ja tütardele”). The people were urged to write down and collect old songs and stories. Over 1,400 people participated in the campaign, sending Hurt mainly old folksongs, which it was high time to gather, since they were fast disappearing.

In the 1930s, unpublished memoirs began to be collected by the Cultural History Archive of the joint museums. A tradition of gathering and publishing autobiographical materials made a modest beginning and even had a brief season of flourishing. Soon the clock was striking the last hours of the Estonian Republic.

After 1940 and during the 50 years of Soviet occupation that followed, the collection and preservation of narratives of both collective and private experience was fraught with danger, except for the “old treasures”—ethnography or folklore, and by extension, cultural history. Memoirs were published by actors, composers, and cultural figures, but seldom by scholars, and none by politicians, except for propagandistic texts. Published memoirs that sought to avoid willful falsification required compromise—tactical omissions, and abbreviated chronologies, such as ending with the ideologically palatable events of 1905. How many people wrote their memoirs surreptitiously during this period, consigning them “into the drawer,” is of course an interesting question. A portion of these previously written “hidden” memoirs have by now reached publication.

After the year 1988, remembering in Estonia was not quite so dangerous any more: life stories that told more of the whole story began to be published. The Estonian Heritage Society sponsored a heritage collection campaign spanning the years 1988–92, which drew a great many participants. To date the Estonian Heritage Society’s collection, held at the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu, consists of approximately 2,000 manuscripts. As the leader of this campaign, Mart Laar, pointed out in 1989, a portion of historical memory was being restored—those chapters of national and personal pasts that up until then could not be discussed openly and publicly. Another leader in the field of life story collection, theatre director Merle Karusoo, who renowned for her documentary productions based on life stories, explained her work with the imperative that the collected stories must be given back to the people.

The increasing openness of society created optimal conditions for the collection of life stories. The Cultural History Archive of the Estonian Literary Museum published its first call for the collection of Estonian life stories in newspapers in the fall of 1989. During the following year more than one hundred life stories were submitted. Though taboos were lifted and the general fear of repercussions subsided, in 1997 the question was still being asked: what will happen if I give my memoirs to the museum and after that the Russians come back?

A significant portion of the material from the Literary Museum's life stories collection has been elicited by means of life story competitions. The first call, "My destiny and the destiny of those close to me in the labyrinths of history" yielded 265 life stories (about 20,000 pages), with manuscripts ranging in length from a few to a few hundred pages. Most were memoirs that focused on dramatic historical events. The 1999 competition, "One Hundred Lives of a Century" set as its goal the collection of material for the anthology "Estonian Life Stories." The most outstanding of the 230 life stories collected were chosen for publication in the anthology.

In the following years, more competitions were organized, on topics such as life in the Estonian SSR, the German occupation, and the influences of war on the writer and his/her family. One of them, "My life and the Patarei prison" focused on the historic Tallinn prison where many wartime and Soviet-era political prisoners and victims of repression were held. A special campaign was a contest for schoolchildren organized by Lennart Meri, President of the Estonian Republic, in 2001, on the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the June 1941 deportations. The students were to find a survivor of deportation among their relatives or neighbours, and write down that person's reminiscences. A selection of the best 1,500 projects—lengthy biographies, biographical research, and short answers to interview questions, is now a separate collection at the Estonian Literary Museum.

It is sometimes asked why memoirs are collected through competitions. Potential authors are motivated by a firm deadline for completion of manuscripts, the incentive of small awards, and chance to meet other writers on Life Story Days, as well as by the possibility that their memoirs will be published someday.

The life story authors span several generations and occupations. While in the older generation there is a balance of men and women, starting with the generation of born in the 1940s, 70% of the writers

are women. There is a slight slant in favour of rural writers. Memoirs written from the point of view of survivors and victims are plentiful, but there are almost none from perpetrators or those repentant of being led astray by official propaganda. Deportees and one-time political refugees, whose home is far from Estonia, and those who kept life going in Estonia due to their everyday work are the majority of the writers: leaders and lead-workers are few and far between.

The goal of the life story competition “One Hundred Lives of the Century” was to put together a composite “Estonian life story,” a mosaic portrait composed of one hundred life stories. The jury was headed by one of Estonia’s most recognized writers, Jaan Kross, and the editorial board for the anthology included most of Estonia’s life story collection “fanatics.” At that time there were not too many of these, while today we can find active collectors in almost every corner of Estonia.

The task of selecting and editing the life stories fell mainly to me: I had been present throughout the process of collection, and had a connection with each one of them. Before beginning to choose texts from among more than 300 submissions, as well as from those collected earlier, some framing selection criteria had to be set: first, to choose people with very different life trajectories, to include a diversity of social backgrounds, ages, and sectors of life. We also wanted to choose the best-written texts, the most vivid and striking tales, though we placed the priority on content (diversity of life experience) over form. It was decided to include more older authors, born in the first half of the century, and fewer younger ones.

*Eesti rahva elulood* (“Estonian Life Stories”) was published at the end of the year 2000, not as the 1000-page volume we initially envisioned, but in two volumes of 50 life stories and 500 pages each. A third volume was added in 2002. The twenty-five stories translated for this collection were chosen from the total of 150 encompassed by the three-volume work “Estonian Life Stories,” reflecting the disproportion in the original by highlighting the 1920s generation, whom World War II hit the hardest. The men were subject, sooner or later, to mobilization by one or the other of the occupying powers, or chose to avoid it by fleeing to the woods or across the Gulf to Finland. Until the fall of 1944, there was still hope that the Estonian Republic would be restored, and it did not altogether disappear in the postwar years: the majority of Estonians believed and hoped that the Allies would not abandon them to Russian rule, that injustice would not prevail, and

that the Western nations that temporarily forgot the Baltic countries would soon return to liberate them.

The oldest author in the book was a schoolteacher, Hilja Lill, born in 1905, who belonged to the first generation of educated Estonian women. She died a few years ago, and her story was submitted by her relatives. It is rendered unusual by the fact that for a few days the author hid the ailing minister of agriculture of the Estonian Republic's last legitimate government, whom she later helped to bury secretly. As punishment, Hilja Lill had to spend 10 years of the second half of her life in a Siberian labour camp, and spent the rest of it as an invalid under the care of her relatives. In addition to Hilja Lill, the collection includes accounts of the years spent in imprisonment or "resettlement" in Siberia by Heljut Kapral, Hillar Tassa, Peep Vunder, and Valdur Raudvassar. The collective trauma narrative of those who suffered the crimes of the Soviet regime has many common threads, but does not lack for differences: the fate of the repressed depended on age, health, the place of imprisonment, but also on luck and coincidence.

Frightened by the terror of 1940/41, and dreading the repercussions of the return of the Soviet regime, 70,000 Estonians fled their homeland at the end of World War II to Sweden and wartorn Germany, and on to the USA, Canada, and Australia. Their life stories are represented in this volume by Evald Mätas, Tanni Kents, Hans Lebert, Heljo Liitoja and Raimo Loo.

Fortunately, some members of the generation of the departed and the refugees remained behind in the homeland. The emphasis in many of these life stories is on the complicated, materially restricted postwar years in Estonia. Included are a Cinderella story with an unfortunate ending (Tuuli Jaik), those who returned home in the ranks of the victorious Soviet army (David Abramson, Valter Lehtla), one story of a man who was mobilized in 1941, another who hid the uniform of one army only to have to don the uniform of the opposing one. In those days, it was important to keep in mind the saying, "A mouth is for eating," not for babbling about the past. With a bit of luck, one saved one's skin (Hans Karro); but fear was an omnipresent reality (Asta Luksepp).

Of those born in the 1930s, still children during the war, there are the stories of Aili Valdrand, who was deported to Siberia and had a hard time finding her place back in the homeland; Volita Paklar, an eternal optimist who found her way back to the homeland of her ancestors and finds joy wherever she looks; and a top scientist, Ene Ergma,

who is current speaker of the Estonian Parliament. The youngest author in the book is Tiia Allas, who sharply reflects and articulates the life of her generation during the “era of stagnation.”

A life story is a text, but also one person’s interpretation of themselves and of their time. In the old university town of Tartu, the Estonian Life Stories collection in the Literary Museum, now houses approximately 5,000 life stories, of varying lengths and genres, from summaries of few pages to long microhistorical reports hundreds of pages long. Considering the collection efforts of other institutions, particularly the Estonian National Museum, one can estimate that at least 10,000 texts of autobiographical memories have been gathered in Estonia to date. Some texts are excerpts from memoirs supplemented with facts from family trees; others are family chronicles fleshed out by a range of supporting documents. These texts collected in the 1990s must be seen in the context of the memoirs, diaries and other autobiographical texts collected in previous decades. Not only are life stories and memoirs popular reading material, but they also provide perspective on the history of the 20th century through various people’s eyes, recollections, and memories.

Besides anthologies in the Estonian language, two collections of life stories have been published in Russian, one a translation of Estonian life stories and the life stories of Russians living in Estonia; the other of life stories written in Russian by members of different ethnic groups living in Estonia. To date, two collections have been published in English, *Carrying Linda’s Stones* (eds. Suzanne Stiver Lie, Linda Malik, Ilvi Jõe-Cannon, Rutt Hinrikus; Tallinn UP, 2007.); *She Who Remembers Survives: Interpreting Estonian Women’s Post-Soviet Life Stories* (eds. Tiina Kirss, Marju Lauristin, Ene Kõresaar; Tartu UP, 2004); and *Soviet deportations in Estonia: impact and legacy: articles and life histories* (eds. Kristi Kukk, Toivo Raun; Filiae Patriae Sorority, 2007 (not Tartu UP??)). Widespread international attention has been aroused by Imbi Paju’s documentary film *Denied Memories*, and her book of the same title, which refracts 20<sup>th</sup> century Estonian history through the prism of autobiographical texts. The book has already been translated into Finnish, Swedish, and Russian, and an English translation is nearing completion.

RUTT HINRIKUS

# Estonian Life Stories and Histories

TIINA KIRSS and JÜRI KIVIMÄE

Embarking upon the reading of a collection of life stories challenges the curious reader to decipher and master entry codes, as is true for any genre of written discourse. Life stories are a border phenomenon, poised—sometimes precariously, between autobiography and history. According to Eberhard Jäckel, “Human life consists essentially of relations with the past.” He adds, “History is remembering subjected to order, a report of what has occurred; in another, colloquial meaning of the word, History also means narrative.”<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly a life story is a narrative about the past, but history is not the summa of life stories, of remembered “great lives.” Though they share a common anchor in the past, life stories taken together do not yet constitute history. The relationship between life stories and history is more complex than it seems at first glance; where do individual life stories end, and the general history of a people begin? How do episodes of a remembered past become “subjected to order,” configured according to broader continuities and ruptures, structures of sequence, emphasis, with the intention of explanation?

It is important for the reader of *Estonian Life Stories* to understand the nature of the collection and its component stories neither as “simple autobiographies,” nor “real history,” but rather as texts written in response to a summons to collect life narratives at a particular juncture in Estonian national history. This summons was issued as an open, public invitation with a specific form—life story writing competitions sponsored in the second half of the 1990s by an association of professionals and citizens, under the aegis of “memory institutions,” primarily

---

<sup>1</sup> Eberhard Jäckel, *Umgang mit Vergangenheit. Beiträge zur Geschichte* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1989), 118.

the Cultural History Archive at the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu. The three-volume text *Eesti rahva elulood* (Estonian Life Stories, the first two volumes of which were published in 2000) emerged from the 20,000 pages of manuscript submitted to the competition jury. *Eesti rahva elulood*, the source text for the 25 stories translated here, has a complex canonical status in Estonia, due to the way it positions itself between autobiography and history.<sup>2</sup> Accounts of the lives of “simple people,” accounts they have written themselves, may seem to be the very stuff of “lived” history—events and circumstances witnessed and experienced by real people. In view of Estonia’s historical destiny in the twentieth century, particularly the period of Soviet rule from 1940–41 and 1944–1991, the silences and official silencing of certain aspects, chapters, and social groups, further reinforce the assumption that now, finally, after Estonia is again independent, the real truth can be told and the blank spots of history filled in. A further implicit assumption is concealed in this undertaking—that “memory” holds the key to “true” history, a very old problem indeed, the contemporary manifestations of which historians and the scholars connected with the amorphous field of “memory studies” have subjected to an intensive and sharp critique in recent years. Such assumptions—that life stories automatically constitute compensatory or supplementary history, are misleading, as we shall attempt to explain below. These assumptions are politically suspect as well, given dubious but persistent “use value” that is drawn from life narratives, in Estonia no more and no less than elsewhere in Europe and in the world.

What kinds of texts are the stories that have been included in *Estonian Life Stories*? What is a life story? What is a history? And what have these terms, categories, and designations meant for Estonia and for Estonians? Since the life stories in this book cannot be simply inserted or slotted into a political history of Estonia (be this conceived as a history of the “land,” the “people,” or “the nation”), we have chosen not to begin with an overview of Estonian history, let alone with a diagnostic

---

<sup>2</sup> Rutt Hinrikus (ed.), *Eesti rahva elulood* (Estonian Life Stories) I–III (Tallinn: Tänapäev, 2000, 2003); cf. also Tiina Kirss, Ene Kõresaar, Marju Lauristin (eds.), *She Who Remembers: Interpreting Estonian Women’s Post-Soviet Life Stories* (Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2004); Suzanne Stiver Lie (ed.), *Carrying Linda’s Stones: An Anthology of Estonian Women’s Life Stories* (Tallinn: Tallinn University Press, 2006).

list of the problematic knots and nodes of twentieth century historical events that remain loci of public polemic and Estonia's international image.<sup>3</sup> Rather, we have elaborated on specific contexts of cultural history crucial for approaching and reading these stories. On this basis we suggest some interpretive orientations for the patterns the stories themselves emphasize, and situate Estonian life stories provisionally in the fields of current scholarly debates about history and memory. The reader is reminded that a historical chronology, glossary and notes have been provided as guides to the landscape of each specific story.

## I. Oral and Written: Life Story and History in Estonian Letters

In traditional societies, the life story is a form and genre of oral narrative. Stories about people's lives—ordinary and extraordinary insiders, as well as strangers—range from the everyday anecdote to long formal poems or narrative cycles recited on ceremonial occasions, births, weddings, departures, and burials. Life stories told and transmitted in the family or village network support intergenerational remembering, lengthening its span, which rarely reaches back beyond one's grandparents. Not only the events of a person's life course, but his or her demeanor, behavior, and character make the oral life story a potent resource for education, "life-lessons" offered through examples in contexts of daily work and play. Oral storytelling, which has no archive, is inevitably selective: some lives are memorable, others are forgotten. Those that are remembered may have many faces, depending on the one who tells the story.

The writing down of oral tradition never happens automatically. As Jack Goody has shown, the transition to a writing culture is a process involving profound changes in cognitive operations, in the organization, culmination, and storage of knowledge, and in restrictions placed on those who have access to written texts.<sup>4</sup> The shift to written culture is a defining one, and in many respects irreversible: while standard-

---

<sup>3</sup> See Toivo U. Raun, *Estonia and the Estonians*, updated 2nd edition (Stanford: Hoover University Press, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> Jack Goody, *The Power of Written Tradition* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 23–25.

ized written language provides a basis for distance communication, the reference point of a written text enables the stability of what Jan and Aleida Assmann have referred to as “cultural memory.”<sup>5</sup> The complex consequences for oral transmission, oral genres, and “communicative memory” may include the atrophy of oral storytelling over time; with the instilling of reading habits, there is increased reliance on written media, such as sacred texts, schoolbooks, newspapers, or the calendar. However, there may be circumstances in which oral transmission of life stories assumes a new importance and significance, such as in regimes where written records can incriminate or endanger people’s lives.

The cartography of oral and written is a founding problem in the study of Estonian culture and a key to understanding Estonia’s particular profile as an imagined community and the dynamics of its implicit or explicit ‘belonging’ to Europe. With respect to the passage from oral to written culture, Estonians do not differ significantly from other European peoples, particularly those in northern Europe. The Lutheran Reformation and the Catholic Reformation wrought and shaped written culture, and, on its foundation, learned culture. Establishment of educational institutions ranging from rural village schools to the university was part of this development, as was the translation of the Bible into the northern Estonian dialect, a long process that culminated in 1739. The first impulses and models for putting life stories in writing clearly came from German language and written German discourse, including locally particularized Baltic-German autobiographical forms, though the specific functions of memoir in the larger context of Baltic-German written culture have only been partially been understood.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Jan Assmann, “Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,” *New German Critique*, no. 65 (Spring–Summer 1995): 125–133; cf. Aleida Assmann, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit: Erinnerungskulturen und Geschichtspolitik* (Munich: Beck, 2006), 51–54.

<sup>6</sup> Maris Saagpakk, *Deutschbaltische Autobiographien als Dokumente des Zeit- und Selbstempfindens: vom Ende des 19. Jh. bis zur Umsiedlung 1939* (Tallinn: Tallinn University Press, 2006). Liina Lukas makes some mention of Baltic-German autobiography in the context of literary studies in her dissertation, *Baltisaksa kirjandusväli 1890–1918* (The Baltic German Literary Field 1890–1918) (Tartu, Tallinn: Underi ja Tuglase Kirjanduskeskus, 2006), 639. See also Michael Schwidtal, Jaan Undusk (eds.), *Baltisches Welterlebnis: die kulturgeschichtliche Bedeutung von Alexander, Eduard und Hermann Graf Keyserling: Beiträge eines internationalen Symposions in Tartu vom 19. bis 21. September 2003* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2007).

Moravian Pietism, a religious movement that spread widely in the Estonian countryside in the eighteenth century, encouraged literacy and indigenous leadership of congregations, and included the written conversion narrative among its spiritual practices. The appreciable collection of these texts authored by Estonian peasants certainly belongs to autobiographical traditions in Estonia.

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, biography and autobiography came to have new meanings in the context of the processes of defining the identity of *eesti rahvas* (Estonian people) and *eesti rahvus* (Estonian nation). Both in learned discourse about the *maarahvas* (literally “people of the country”) generated by Baltic Germans, and the writings of the emerging Estonian intellectual elite, life stories and histories are mutually implicated and not yet functionally distinct. Intersections between telling the story of lives and narrating collective pasts, and the struggle for their differentiation point to two intriguing theoretical questions. How long did orally transmitted life stories perform the functions of histories? Indeed, if in a people’s consciousness (history), emerges, cumulates, and is woven from the life stories of individuals, when and how do life stories and histories begin to diverge?

Well before the nineteenth century, both secular history and life story were earmarked by elements of excitement and the exotic, which rendered them attractive to readers. When History recounted, great and heroic events, it could not escape the criterion of the exciting. Participation in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78 was among the favorite storytelling themes of the nineteenth century, and though we have little sense of the actual social impact of the stories told by the returning *nekrutid* (Estonians conscripted for long-term service in the Russian military), these stories have a much wider view of the world than the Estonian villager or peasant could imagine, and they are replete with elements of the marvelous.

The conscious elicitation of the history of the Estonian people came in the era of national awakening in the second half of the nineteenth century: it was the declared intention of both of its major activists and ideologues, Jakob Hurt (1839–1906) and Carl Robert Jakobson (1841–1882), to honor the worthy past of the Estonian people, and to urge people to study it. Furthermore, Hurt argued, a small nation must define itself through cultural stature rather than territorial size. Though quite different in ideological and philosophical orientation, Jakob Hurt’s *Pildid isamaa sündinud asjadest* (Sketches of Real

Events that Happened in Our Fatherland, 1879) and Carl Robert Jakobson's *Kolm isamaa kõnet* (Three Speeches to the Fatherland, 1870) are calls to write and teach history; in Hurt's words, to fragments of the past must be gathered as essential grain to be stored in a national "granary".<sup>7</sup> An important question in this context is to what extent this projected written history is history of the land (Est. *maa ajalugu*, cf. German *Landesgeschichte*) or history of the people (Est. *rahva ajalugu*, cf. German *Volksgeschichte*). Narrating the history of a nation mostly composed of oppressed peasants, envisioning and seeking to reconstruct a "golden age" before colonization, unavoidably made use of the Baltic-German cultural models through which these same peasants had been churched and schooled. The Estonians could not be the only players on this imagined historical stage: the German landowners, pastors, and schoolteachers, as well as German, Russian, and Swedish traders and soldiers cannot be erased from the story.

Jakob Hurt's call for the Estonian people to write its history was inseparable from his campaign to collect folklore; the oral tradition was regarded as "the people's own" national treasure that needed to be rescued from oblivion.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, folklore collection campaigns proceeded from the perception that the old folkways and the songs that sustained them were disappearing, as modernization and urbanization began to have a significant impact on rural life. More importantly, collecting folklore in the 1880s was an active apprenticeship in valorizing a collective past. For Hurt, more than for his colleague and rival Matthias J. Eisen (1857–1934), folklore collectors had to rise from among the people, be equipped with local dialect and local knowledge, and hopefully "educate" their informants about the value of folklore beyond the practical exchange value of a song for a drink or a kopeck.<sup>9</sup> Folklore collection efforts, though driven by scholarly impulses, were primarily motivated by national consciousness; there was often only a partial recognition that the folk story, folk song, or traditional custom was in-

---

<sup>7</sup> Jakob Hurt, *Mida rahvamälestustest pidada* (What to Make of the People's Recollections) (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1989), 32–33.

<sup>8</sup> Ea Jansen, "Jakob Hurt ja ühine isamaa töö," (Jakob Hurt and United Work on Behalf of the Fatherland) in Ea Jansen, *Vaateid eesti rahvusluse sünniaegadesse* (Perspectives on the Era of Birth of Estonian Nationalism) (Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2004), 19–35.

<sup>9</sup> Andreas Kalkun, "The World of Seto Female Autobiographers," *Pro Ethnologia* no. 17, Perceptions of Worldviews (Tartu, 2004), 196.

escapably and irrevocably a hybrid. However serious the belief in, or pursuit of authenticity, and despite chafing, resentment or resistance, it was impossible to identify or erase the imprint and impact of the German “civilizers” (Kulturträger).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, when writing a national history became a conscious, political priority, people in Estonia also began to write down their life stories. The impulse toward written autobiography is contemporaneous with historical consciousness; people began writing down what they had lived through, using larger public or collective events as reference points. For those who attended school, even for a few winters, models and frames for writing life stories also came from the first Estonian-language school textbooks, which were written around this time. Two astonishing examples of autobiographical endeavors and achievements deserve special mention here. First, Märt Mitt (1833–1912), a politically active farmer, perhaps the first nineteenth-century Estonian to pen a full-length autobiography, titled his memoirs *Märt Miti elulugu aja-looga ühendatud viisil* (My life story, as related to history). Indeed, Mitt clearly designates “history” as the larger scaffolding around which he narrates his own life, which in Estonian is a compound noun composed of “time” and “story.”<sup>10</sup> Second, beginning in the 1880s, Jakob Hurt became aware of the significance of the life stories of his correspondents and the informants collecting folklore in Estonian villages. Whether they were university students, local schoolteachers, or permanent recruits serving long years in the Russian military, Hurt asked his correspondents for a written account of their own lives. Dozens of these brief life stories or autobiographies can be found in Hurt’s correspondence from the 1890s up to his death in 1907, and these provide important clues about what average, or moderately educated, Estonians thought a life story was: its requisite ingredients, selection criteria for significant events, and patterns of causality. The components and structures of these cameo life-stories can in turn be traced to models in textbooks, newspapers, devotional or instructional texts.

---

<sup>10</sup> Märt Mitt earned the credentials of a schoolmaster, was manor overseer in Kanepi, and one of the founders of the Tartu Farmers’ Association. He was a member of the *Eesti Kirjameeste Selts* (Society of Estonian Literati) and was active in the Alexander School initiative.

From the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, written Estonian life stories have a double conceptual structure, derived from the imprint of institutions of church and school. Temporal markers of Estonian lives were connected with the local church: confirmation, the church wedding, christenings (all too often also burials) of children, and funerals. These events were written down in church record books, and in families that owned one, on the last, blank pages of the family Bible. The framework provided by formal education left its marks even in life stories written down much later, as in the deceptively simple, but untranslatable rhetorical device *koolitee*—"school journey" or "journey to an education" which designates a highly esteemed cultural value. Going to school marks a crucial life transition and the beginning of a journey, whether this quest entails indefatigable effort to reach one's goal despite all obstacles—as for the writer of the first story in our volume, Hilja Lill (born 1905),<sup>11</sup> who becomes a village schoolteacher—or whether it is a truncated, interrupted, and episodic pursuit. This second pattern was typical of the eldest sons of farm owners (see Hans Karro's story in this volume) or the daughters, who were expected to return home to work on the family farm.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the centrality of the "school journey" and measuring oneself against a scale of educational accomplishment are more significant identity markers in Estonian life stories than gender differences.

Some life stories in this volume are documents of successful, often very high academic achievement (Ene Ergma, Tanni Kents); other writers completed their primary and/or secondary education in normal conditions, older ones before World War II began (Elmar-Raimund Ruben, Linda Põldes, Evald Mätas). Yet several writers in this volume remark wistfully that their educations remained incomplete for reasons outside their control. For young men, mobilization or volunteering for the military (Voodel Võrk, Hans Lebert) interrupted education, often in the last year of secondary school; for others there was deportation (Peep Vunder), or the chaos and battle activity that closed local schools. For still others (Tuuli Jaik, Aili Valdrand) the reason ed-

---

<sup>11</sup> From this point on in the introduction, we draw our examples from the life stories in this collection, and refer to them by author's name.

<sup>12</sup> The second sons of farm families were often had the chance to pursue an education beyond the local four-grade school, where this was financially feasible for the family.

ucation remained incomplete was simple poverty or ill health (Selma Tasane). Some studied the same subject under three different regimes (Raimo Loo, Juta Pihlamägi, Heljo Liitoja). Still others (David Abramson, Leida Madison) received all or part of their education in Russia. Amid the differences, what is significantly held in common is the high value placed on educational goals and achievement, and the ethic of persistent work devoted to reaching them.

Written life stories often end with a summary reflection on the whole of one's human life, as well as a judgment, humble or proud as to whether things have turned out well or poorly, whether there are regrets, unexpressed gratitude, something to begrudge or someone to condemn. Three seemingly contradictory concepts and proverbs, frequent in oral conversation as well, are often cited in life stories: *saa-tus*, or fate, are terms with a spectrum of connotations for that which one cannot control about the course of one's life.<sup>13</sup> Seemingly contradicting the appeal to this dimension of mystery or determination is the popular saying *Igäuks on oma õnne sepp* (Everyone is the smith of his own happiness),<sup>14</sup> which points to a much stronger sense of personal responsibility or individual agency. Finally, there is another popular saying, a laconic gloss from the biblical Book of Ecclesiastes, *Inimene mõtleb, Jumal juhib* (A person thinks, but God guides), which indicates at least a double, perhaps paradoxical relationship between the forces shaping a human life. Such stock phrases or "serious clichés" along with some curious variations—abound in Estonian life stories. They are not absent from the Estonian life stories in this volume, most of which were written down, or at least made public, since the early 1990s. Postmodernism notwithstanding, such wisdom sayings have a resilient life of their own and continue into today's oral and written culture.

Indeed, as written culture creates its foundations, it does so both for histories and life stories. Early written life stories resemble historical annals; as the form develops, they come to resemble chronicles, with

---

<sup>13</sup> See Vieda Skultans, *The Testimony of Lives: Narrative and Memory in Post-Soviet Latvia* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), 47–48; see also Leena Huima, "Saatus tahtel," (As Fate Would Have It) *Maetagused* no. 16. [URL: <http://www.Folklore.ee/tagused/authors//lhuima.htm>].

<sup>14</sup> Estonian word *õnn* refers to good fortune or fortunate life-outcome, but the subjective and objective dimensions of this are impossible to untangle.

their interpolations of facts and descriptions. In addition to dates of family significance, such as christenings, the network of characters expands: the names of godparents are written down in the family Bible. Information is recorded, perhaps about places where family members have lived, or longer journeys they have undertaken, such as emigrations to the Crimea, Estonian villages in Siberia, or across the Atlantic to America. People may jot down notes about what they remember, on an ongoing basis as a rudimentary diary or as retrospective jottings in old age, even though a life of hard work may preclude sustained time to reflect and expand them into a longer narrative. Such notes and jottings, which can be found in the collections of the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu, dating from the period 1900–1910, could be considered fragments or “sprouts” of the new genre of the written life story. The memoirs of Gustav Malts († 1924) served as source material for Eduard Vilde’s novel *Prohvet Maltsvet* (1903), about Malts’ uncle, a popular Moravian Brethren preacher. However, there are some examples of life stories published in newspapers, as in the case of postal worker Mihkel Lindebaum-Sardo, who emigrated with his family to western Canada in 1906, only to take a realistic measure of the land and his own strength, and returned to Estonia. He published his account in the newspaper, warning his countrymen, tempted by waves of emigration west and east, against making rash decisions to leave the homeland.<sup>15</sup>

Another divergence begins to make itself felt in this period of the first decade of the twentieth century, with the appearance of written memoirs. A social faultline develops: memoir is the name given to what “famous” people and public figures write based on personal reminiscences; “simpler folk” have (only) life stories. There is a rich but shadowy terrain of buried or forgotten life stories, not considered worthy of publication immediately before and after the turn of the twentieth century, and one has to dig to find them in archival collections.

### Periodizing Estonian Life Stories and Histories

Taking into account that a real temporal gap prevails between experience and inscription, between the “times” and the histories written about them, we can tentatively periodize Estonian written life sto-

---

<sup>15</sup> Mihkel Lindebaum-Sardo, *Minu väljarändamine Ameerikasse 1905. aastal* (My Emigration to America in 1905) (Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2006).

ries, memoirs, and histories in relation to the “lived history” they recount. Beginning with the Russian Revolution in 1905, Estonians become caught up in the turbulence of great political upheavals. Indeed, twentieth-century Estonian history is a sequence of such upheavals: the 1905 revolution, the First World War, the German occupation of 1918, the War of Independence 1918–1920, which culminated in the Tartu peace treaty of 1920 and an independent Estonian republic. In the early years of the twentieth century, stories from the Russo-Japanese War 1904–1905 come to stand alongside the narratives of conscripts who participated in the Russo-Turkish War. However, there is remarkably little autobiographical material recorded in the immediate aftermath of 1905.<sup>16</sup> Granted, there was much rich material for the writing of memoir here, but the speed and intensity of the changes was so great that many people physically had no time and opportunity to record them in writing. There is even relatively scant autobiographical material from the 1920s. More distance in time was needed in order for the events of the recent past both to generate curiosity and provide a space for reflection. A surge of interest, and a need to reflect, rethink, and re-live these events also coincided with political imperatives. The attempted Communist coup of 1 December 1924, while generating ripples of fear, did not significantly imperil the Estonian state, which, at the beginning of the 1930s, was not in any real danger. The 1934 coup of State Elder Konstantin Päts and General Johan Laidoner, which followed the attempt by the right-wing Estonian War of Independence Veterans’ League to take over the government, was a much more serious threat, and became both a litmus test of political views in society and an impulse to reflect and write about the recent past. Those who were discontented with the authoritarian turn found themselves asking, how did things turn out this way? Those who favored the turn saw the need to justify it, and those right-wingers, whose abortive attempt at a takeover failed, felt compelled to underscore their influence on society.

---

<sup>16</sup> See 1905. *a. revolutsiooni päevilt. Mälestiste kogu* (From the Day of the 1905 Revolution: A Collection of Reminiscences) (Tallinn: Rahva Sõna kirjastus, 1931); Hans Kruus (ed.), *Punased aastad. Mälestisi ja dokumente 1905. aasta liikumisest Eestis I* (The Red Years: Reminiscences and Documents from the Movement of the Year 1905 in Estonia) (1905. Aasta Seltsi Toimetised II:1) (Tartu: EKS, 1932).

Campaigns to collect oral history as well as written reminiscences about the events of the 1905 Revolution and local history more generally were organized by government and various associations; university students were recruited for this work and sent out on stipends. While more and more memoirs were being written by those in culturally prominent positions or the politically repressed, the 1920s and 1930s were not particularly productive as concerns the collection of life stories written by the people themselves.<sup>17</sup> By the outbreak of the Second World War, there is no evidence that large numbers of Estonians had written down their life stories.

It was not until the 1930s that Estonian professional historian Hans Kruus (1891–1976) articulated the conceptual principles of Estonian national history.<sup>18</sup> On the eve of the Second World War, the application of these principles had begun, both in school textbooks and in historical research; on Estonian national movements of the second half of the nineteenth century; and, even more, on the revolutionary changes of the opening decades of the twentieth century. However, a level of academic maturity had not yet been reached in applying the frameworks Kruus had worked out. In this situation, historical belles lettres seemed better positioned to shape and influence the popular historical consciousness.

If, as we have argued, not enough time had elapsed for there to be a sustained and deep engagement with the events and issues of “recent history,” by the end of the 1930s, the right atmosphere had been created to facilitate such interest, both on the level of life stories and histories. Reminiscences of the War of Independence were being elicited and systematically collected—but most of this material was to perish in the Second World War. Indeed Estonia and Estonians once again stood on the brink of historical cataclysm. With the first Soviet takeover in 1940 and the loss of the Estonian Republic, any sense of (largely unwritten) recent history now collapsed. War brought with it Soviet deportation to Siberia in 1941, mobilization of Estonian men into several armies, flight abroad. The German occupation (1941–1944) not only

---

<sup>17</sup> Johan Jans, *Mälestusi ja vaatlusi* (Memories and Perspectives) (Tartu: Noor-Eesti, 1940). An activist in the collection of reminiscences of the 1905 Revolution. His own memoir Jans (1880–1941) concludes with the early 1920s.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Hans Kruus, *Grundriss der Geschichte des estnischen Volkes* (Tartu: Akademiiline Kooperatiiv, 1932).

did not reestablish the Estonian state, but also proscribed public discussion and writing on topics of national history. After the return of the Soviet regime in 1944, those left in Soviet Estonia, lived on with the fear-complexes instilled by what had been lived through and (up to Stalin's death in 1953) the continued anticipation of terror and repressions. In addition to political arrests and the flushing out of armed bands of partisans from the forests, there was another wave of deportations, directed at enforcing collectivization, which sent large numbers of people to resettlement in Siberia in 1949.<sup>19</sup>

After the end of the war, there was no prohibition to write life stories in the homeland, but their publication in uncensored form was impossible. Autobiographical texts were published very selectively, such as war memoirs that did not offend stringent censorship conditions, and even an autobiographical novel about deportation—not, however, to Siberia: Ülo Tuulik's *Sõja jalus* (In the Way of War, 1974), recalls the deportation of village folk from the Sõrve peninsula to Germany, moving them out of the path of the final battles on the island of Saaremaa in October 1944. Regardless of the smaller scale and locality of this deportation, only a small proportion of these deportees survived and returned home. Though Siberian survivors began returning to Estonia in larger numbers in the late 1950s and, with very few exceptions, no Siberian memoirs could be published in the 1970s, or even in the 1980s.

Autobiographical information had other manifestations, public faces, and consequences in the postwar years: the official autobiographical document, the anketa, and the personal file, which served Soviet bureaucracy. These could determine one's place of work and residence, and educational opportunities, including one's risk of deportation and resettlement. Personal pasts and stories about them retreated to the hush of family circles, where often, even children were not told about their parents' past lest they leak compromising information in school or be otherwise adversely affected. In broader terms, with the life story genre confined to circles of close kin, there was a return to orality. As a consequence, the discrepancy between life stories and histories grew.

While it would seem that conditions for life-story writing were more favorable for Estonians who fled into exile, this picture was also more complex and heterogeneous. There is indeed a flowering

---

<sup>19</sup> See Kristi Kukk, Toivo Raun (eds.), *Soviet Deportations in Estonia: Impact and Legacy* (Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2007).

of memoir-writing in the postwar years, above all by those Estonians who had been in positions of leadership in the prewar Estonian society. However, thick silences surrounded certain facts, such as serving in the German army during World War II, facts that were not looked upon favorably by the countries where the refugees resettled. “Estonia abroad” also practiced its own censorship, at various levels and by different unofficial and official means—the publication of certain facts was thought to be dangerous for relatives living in Estonia, an attitude that was intensified by Soviet propaganda.<sup>20</sup>

After the Baltic Revolution, favorable conditions reemerged for the writing of both life stories and histories in Estonia. On a social (or collective) level motivation to narrate the past comes “from below”: it is almost as if the mill-wheel of revolution sweeps memories up to the surface. There was a powerful impulse to write things down, “that my children might find out how things really were,” and the result was is neither life story nor history, but something in between. After such long silence, strong motivations emerged to write didactically on the Rankeian principle of “how it actually was” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*), though this last small wrinkle on Ranke’s famous statement is often and conveniently forgotten. Life story writers spurred by this popular (if not populist) motivation were not sequestered individuals, but people with emotional burdens of their own, and with a sidelong glance at others who also might be writing. On the one hand, there may have been an overt or elusive need to get things off one’s chest, things hard to formulate and hard to write down, on the other a stroke of jealousy or self-justification when looking across to one’s neighbor, as if to say,—“I, too, was someone important.”

The aftermath of the “great turn,” that is the Baltic Revolution, thus led to a virtual outpouring of the testimonies of “simple people,” who were also a ripe target group for general and systematic campaigns to collect the stories of their life experience, in connection with the “great events.” The rhetoric of the call for the Estonian Literature Museum’s first life stories competition in 1989 indicates clearly and intentionally the urge to fill in the blank spots of history with the narrated accounts of individuals, providing the detail that accounts of grande

---

<sup>20</sup> See Tiina Kirss (ed.), *Rändlindude pesad: eestlaste elulood vöörsil* (The Nests of Migrating Birds: Life Stories of Estonians Abroad) (Tartu: Eesti Kirjandusmuuseum, 2007).

histoire—even compensatory or revisionist ones—leave out: “Minu ja minu lähedaste saatus ajaloo keerdkäikudes” (My Fate and the Fate of those Close to me, in the Labyrinths of History). Parsing this rhetoric, with its images of how people are connected, what or who directs the course of their lives, and the shape and nature of history, is a crucial prelude to the interpretation of the Estonian life stories in this book. Still we must go further in our efforts to understand the fruitful tangle between life stories and histories.

## II. Reading Life Stories

Who are the writers of Estonian Life Stories? Their introductions of themselves in the opening lines of their stories can be disarmingly, even poignantly brief, a formula with variations: year and place of birth, who their mother and father were, where they came from, and how they met. The writer steps forward on the credentials of belonging to a family, a place, and a time. Most, if not all, of the places will be unfamiliar to the readers of this collection, who may not know where Estonia lies on the map of Europe, its major cities, the geographical profile of its regions—not to speak of the locations of its small towns, villages or hamlets. It is not easy to classify the writers into “country folk” and “city folk,” since many of those born in rural areas go to town to attend school, later to work. The country/city distinction and the trajectory of individuals and families (whether they remain in one place for generations or move in search of better living and working conditions) is, however, an important one, both for understanding ways of life and grounding values, as well as ways of coping in hard and turbulent times. All but the last writer in this collection (Tiia Allas, born in 1972) have lived through World War II, eight of the twelve men as combatants. At the end of the war, five of the writers (Evald Mätas, Tanni Kents, Hans Lebert, Heljo Liitoja, and Raimo Loo) have left Estonia, and two (Leida Madison and Volita Paklar) are arriving there for the first time in their lives. Not all of those vulnerable to deportation were actually deported in 1941, as Peep Vunder was as a small child, or in the postwar deportation in 1949, as was Aili Valdrand. At the close of the war, political arrest and the Gulag lay ahead for three of the writers—Hilja Lill in 1945, Hillar Tassa in 1948 and Valdur Raudvassar in 1961, of whom only the latter two were dissidents.

Estonian life story writers can be grouped according to three “situational” or “experiential” cohorts according to the way World War II shaped their lives, and where they were when the war ended: those who were deported, those who fled West in 1944, and those who stayed in the homeland. Another way to arrange the stories is on the model of the itinerary: how much territory does the narrator himself or his family encompass over the course of the narrative. Indeed, one of the most basic narrative paradigms in Western autobiography is the journey, with its forking paths of “travel tales.” In addition to those who took the long journey taken to Siberia or into exile, those like Hans Karro, who remained in the homeland, survived the postwar years by leading a peripatetic existence under a series of false identities. Leaving aside the question of typicality or exceptionality, such patterns alert the reader to practices that enhanced survival, regardless of the circumstances: skills for making and doing things (sewing, milking a cow, riding an ox or a horse, driving a car), knowledge of foreign languages (German and Russian, Swedish and English), resourcefulness, people skills, tolerance, and a strong work ethic instilled early in life. Common sense and survival skills are one of the many rich kinds of ethnographic information made available in life stories. An unusual example is Ronald Rüütel’s book-length life story, *Atarma*, nominally a deportation narrative, most of which is devoted to describing a Finno-Ugric river fishing technique that the author learned in Siberia as a young deportee in 1941.<sup>21</sup>

At the threshold of reading any autobiographical text, readers face several adjustments of focus, both with respect to genre (what kind of text are they reading?) and reliability or trustworthiness. Who is writing and why? Is it articulating the experience of an individual telling a story, or making larger claims to truth? Life-stories are mixed genres, containing codes that align them with the folktale, with literature, and with historical writing. Philippe Lejeune’s concise term “autobiographical pact” refers to the ethical transaction that takes place when a reader embarks on reading a life-story.<sup>22</sup> The writer’s proper name, his or her signature, confers the expectation of truth-telling, but paradoxical though it might seem, it does not bar invention. Life stories are caught

---

<sup>21</sup> Ronald Rüütel, *Atarma: Minu elu Siberis* (*Atarma: My Life in Siberia*) (Tallinn: Faatum, 2002).

<sup>22</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, 2nd edition (Paris: Seuil, 1996).

between the double impulse or revealing and concealing, paradoxical tides of public truth-telling (including testimony) and giving account of the self. The features of *apologia pro vita sua* (reflection, explanation, and justification of one's own life) are not absent even from those life stories that seem to have the simplest structure and that avoid any philosophical discourse. Life stories are interpretive accounts: not only does this mean selectiveness about included (and omitted) events (such my first conscious memory, initiatory transitions like entering school, the war, joining or not joining the Komsomol), but they are structured along lines of guiding myths, in which the writer acts as the hero or heroine of fairy tale or epic, who is tested by ordeals or goes on a long journey, survives and prevails, the victim, or the rogue (*pizaro*).<sup>23</sup> While the autobiographical pact might constrain a writer to tell the documentary truth, the sheer magic of storytelling may result in an enchanted tale (Selma Tasane)—or a tall one (Voodel Vörk, Hans Karro, or Raimo Loo). Scholars of oral history know this effect well, and they acknowledge that witnesses of the same event may tell conflicting stories, that in retrospect one may look to oneself as much more of a rebel than one's staid life suggests, and that a storyteller sometimes lies, engaging in "just wishful thinking, gilded memories, or better-than-reality narratives."<sup>24</sup>

The issues of reliability, truthfulness, and trust beg another major question. What we know of these writers is what they claim to remember—and what they choose to tell—their original reading audience: a

---

<sup>23</sup> Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh, *Narrative and Identity: Studies in Autobiography, Self, and Culture* (Amsterdam: J. Benjamins, 2001); Paul Thompson and Raphael Samuel (eds.), *The Myths We Live By* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>24</sup> Vilmos Voigt, "Why Do People Lie? Origins of the Biographical Legend Pattern," in *Suggestions Towards a Theory of Folklore* (Budapest: Mundus Hungarian University Press, 1999), 165; Luisa Passerini, "Women's Personal Narratives: Myths, Experiences, and Emotions," in *Personal Narratives Group* (ed.), *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narrative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989). See also Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990). Readers faced with violations of the autobiographical pact—even playful ones—can become very angry, as Lea Rojola argues through some striking examples from Finnish public figures' autobiographies. On augmenting one's rebellion or resistance to social norms, see Luisa Passerini (1989).

jury in a life story competition, and a larger audience whom they imagine to be listening. The readers of *Estonian Life Stories* in English have to reckon with the necessary approximations of cultural translation—some nods and cues to the local (or national) reader are hard to translate, other codes are inaccessible or shut down, but can be compensated by footnotes and other scholarly apparatus. Silences and spaces between sentences may be charged with meaning, since these mark the boundaries of reticence, of what, in cultural and situational terms, is appropriate to tell at all.<sup>25</sup> How, then (not only how much, or to what extent) do these writers remember?

### Memory

In life stories individual autobiographical memory is embedded in a collective matrix (or matrices) of remembering. The writer of a life story relies on his or her personal memory as a source, but usually also employs, consciously or unconsciously, the support of photographs, documents, and a family tree, all of which can engender or spur expanding clusters of smaller narrative elements. Oral stories told by relatives and members of the proximate community or village belong to this body of implicit or explicit sources. Some writers of life histories, such as Peep Vunder, are careful to note the limits of the power and extent of their individual memory, either by marking their sentences with phrases such as “I remember X,” “I do not remember Y,” or by referring to their informants and sources in precise terms. Other life histories do not demarcate the tactical operations of memory, or do so covertly or subtly. Either way, the vocabulary used to refer to memory is a significant point of analysis when reading life histories.

Clearly, the “remembering” at work in life stories is highly mediated by networks of relationship, education, personal reading, and social mentalities. As both Vieda Skultans and James Wertsch<sup>26</sup> have shown, remembering and life story writing are mediated through textual resources in the cultural space: schoolbooks; popular sayings; political speeches; assigned reading, such as Oskar Luts’ enormously popular

---

<sup>25</sup> Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin’s Russia* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge University Press, 2002); Skultans, *op. cit.*

novel about schoolchildren, Kevade; or songs. Life story writers either draw on these resources consciously (for example, Aili Valdrand draws analogies between situations in her own life and at least four or five novels), sketching out similarities or identifying with a favorite character, or less consciously—through approximate quotations or allusions to such texts.

In view of the controversiality of Maurice Halbwachs' theorizing of "collective memory," and the highly debatable assumption that it is undergirded by a palpable "collective subject," it seems best to us to speak instead, as Peter Burke does, of "social memory." By adding the term "social histories of remembering," Burke invokes the dynamic historicity of not only of the content of social memory but of its processes, and raises questions about the modes of transmission of public memories and changing uses of the past and of oblivion.<sup>27</sup>

The social memory and textual resources represented in the stories in this volume lead to several characteristic narrative strategies and devices. First, the genealogical synopsis with which life stories often begin is a custom with multiple intentionality. Is this an expression of a deeply-held sense of social or intergenerational continuity, a legacy of school instruction in history, or rather a very old tradition that comes from folklore or from epic literary forms such as the Icelandic sagas? Pragmatically it is a task of some complexity for a life story writer, faced with a topic such as *Minu ja minu lähedaste saatus ajaloo keerdkäikudes* (My Fate and the Fate of those Close to Me in the Labyrinths of History), to define who these "close ones" are," to draw the line bounding the potential *dramatis personae* of the story. The narrator's life story is an insertion in a latent web of kinship narratives. Whatever explicit criteria may be used to define the "close ones"—such as the model of a traditional rural household with its extended family, hired help, and orphaned godchildren, implicitly these choices demarcate the perimeter of a circle of care. In the life stories of urban intellectuals, circles of friendship, affiliation, informal or institutional professional association, may supersede family or kinship formations. Thus, not only individual narrative choices, but tacit cultural factors governing definitions of *lähikond* (one's "close" ones) and the closeness of the cut made in the genealogical fabric are significant to the interpretation

---

<sup>27</sup> Peter Burke, "History as Social Memory," in Thomas Butler (ed.), *Memory: history, culture, and the mind* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), 100.

of life stories. The gender of the ancestor the narrator mentions first, the number of past generations evoked, the splice or tie line between the narrator's story and the family story, and the kinds of stories told that connect place and family, all create variations on the genealogical opening formula. Also of significance are slips, lapses, incoherencies, redundancies, and factual mistakes made in the recounting of such genealogies, and in marking the outer temporal limits of the narrator's personal memory.

A second, related, "figure of memory" in life stories concerns ways in which the writer is connected to various small and large collectivities. The reader should pay close attention to this intermediate level of narrating local collectivities—for rural folk, this primarily means the village and neighboring farms, for city folk circles of friends and acquaintances around schools and organizations. For writers born in the 1920s, youth organizations such as the Young Eagles and Home Daughters had a formative impact, complementing the home in instilling a framework of values; therefore it makes sense that charismatic or authoritative youth leaders are described, while companions in these organizations are seldom mentioned in later contexts. For the seven men who were combatants during World War II; war buddies, often schoolmates, are spoken of frequently and fondly. Depending on the point of view, the subject of narration, while a self with an autobiography, is always in some sense "more" (and paradoxically also "less") than individual. This condition is radicalized in traumatic experience, and in the epitaphic or memorializing gestures of survivors: a Siberian deportee, such as Peep Vunder, takes up the stories of those who have died, disappeared, or been annihilated, those who cannot speak for themselves, and who may be buried in unmarked graves. In more ordinary terms (or more normal circumstances), the narrator is a node through which the strands of kinship cross, making the narrative always potentially polyvocal.

A third figure of memory is the "house tour," in which the writer calls to mind their home or schoolhouse, systematically describing their way through it room by room, including the yard and immediate surroundings. The rooms and outdoor spaces are populated with family members, friends, and farm animals, and there are descriptions both of the normal, ordinary round of life, punctuated by extraordinary events that intervened. One might even consider the house-tour as a narrative mnemonic technique; visualizing or kinesthetically "walking one's way

through” a remembered site may jog the memory to recall more details, though it may bring with it a frustrating ambivalence where memory fails. If in Linda Põldes’ life story the highly descriptive “house tour” approximates an ethnographic reconstruction of a *Lebenswelt*, in Selma Tasane’s story, the addition of elements of superstition and folk belief suffuse the home with symbolic, even ritual meanings. To varying degrees, the reconstruction of the home through description is connected to loss of the home place: neither Linda Põldes, Jutta Pihlamägi, or Tanni Kents can ever go home again; Selma Tasane, while keeping her physical home, experiences it as haunted, as does Peep Vunder, who returns home after being deported as a small child in 1941.<sup>28</sup>

A fourth organizing feature is the traditional folk calendar, which often provide the narrator with hooks on which to hang a story, and to which are added various national holidays. When Linda Põldes and Selma Tasane describe their rural childhoods on the island of Saremaa, they recur not as dates in diary entries, but rather as St. John’s Eve (Midsummer’s Eve), Christmas, St. Georges Day (23 April), and Victory Day (23 June), the latter more frequently than Estonian Independence Day (24 February). Victory Day is indexical of the social construction of patriotism in Estonia in the late 1930s.<sup>29</sup>

### Marking Time

The examination of time in life histories leads inevitably to an analysis of textual structures and operations of temporality in narratives, which calls on the theoretical and interpretive lenses of historians, social scientists, and literary scholars, and offers no easy synthesis. Initial, thought-provoking observations can be made from life histories that focalize these large theoretical issues, to call Eberhard Jäckel’s claims to mind. For example, is a life history written in the present or past tense,

---

<sup>28</sup> Ene Kõresaar, *Memory and history in Estonian post-soviet life stories: private and public, individual and collective from the perspective of biographical syncretism* (Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Marek Tamm, “History as Cultural Memory: Mnemohistory and the Construction of the Estonian Nation,” *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (Dec. 2008), 499–516; cf. also Meike Wulf, “Theoretische Überlegungen zum kollektiven Gedächtnis in Estland,” in Peter Nitschke (ed.), *Kulturvermittlung und Interregionalitäten* (Wissenschaftliche Reihe des Collegium Polonicum. Sonderband) (Poznań: Collegium Polonicum, 2003), 167–192.

or a mixture and, depending on the language of the writer, what use is made of the grammatical resources of temporality in that language? To what extent is the depth and subtlety of the deployment of tense an index of the educational level of the writer, and what other sociological earmarks might it conceal? If past and present tense alternate, is the switch to the present tense connected to the degree of drama in the narrated event? And to what extent is the choice of tense connected to the operations of memory?

The question of tense in life stories points back to the development of written culture. The inscription of temporality is a matter of linguistic and cultural deep structure, and points once again to the fact of hybridity. While the aspect of temporality in the narration of Estonian life stories is certainly connected with indigenous cultural perceptions and practices concerning marking sequence and duration, one cannot discount the “civilizing” impact of the grammar of the written German language. As in other oral traditional cultures, in early examples of written Estonian life stories the past tense exists alongside the present tense of narration; hesitancy between them can be traced even in much later texts, particularly by rural writers. There is also the question of the formulation of the future: Estonian has no structure for the future tense. Needless to say, this has complex implications for the articulation of life goals and plans in written discourse, and for perceptions and attitudes concerning agency.

Other time markers of interest move toward the intentional or unintentional periodization of a life. If, as discussed above, Estonian history can be seen as a series of upheavals, life stories create narrative orbits around these upheavals that amount to compensatory continuities: broad-brush periodization, such as in expressions like “during the Estonian time” (the German time, the Soviet times). Into these larger frameworks are inserted stories of how specific battles or events touched the writers’ personal lives. If some life history writers indicate their periodization scheme explicitly, such as Volita Paklar when they observe that their lives could best be regarded according to its “decades,” in many life histories temporal divisions are drawn from the pivotal events of personal and family life: (e.g. birth, going to school, confirmation, military service, marriage). Examination of the choice and frequency of these pivotal events across a large sample of life histories from a given culture could be illuminating, as it would doubtless reveal culture- and gender-specific patterns of the life cycle.

The periodization schemes of *grande histoire* rarely serve as the overarching temporal scaffolding of life stories, though they intersect with and intersect the individual periodization scheme. Depending on the ways in which world events (World War II most significantly) impacted the narrator and his or her locality, dates from *grande histoire* become time markers, or boundaries of lived periods. One pervasive example in Baltic life stories is that draft-eligible men came to understand their lives as globally (and forever after) emblemized by *aastakäik* (their year of birth), which would be a major determinant of the army that would mobilize them, and sometimes radically differentiate their experience from friends a year younger or older. More interesting are examples of life stories in which certain well known reference points from public or national history are altogether absent, such as narratives that do not mention the deportations of 1941 and 1949. For some readers, such omissions create immediate suspicion, undermining the “autobiographical pact,” as if the writer were trying to hide something, for surely all Estonians were touched by these collective events? Perhaps it is far more accurate to say that in such cases, it is the underpinnings of the reader’s construction of national history that is being revealed or laid bare.

Issues of temporal sequencing and order of narration are interesting and consequential, with important indicators as to the narrator’s sense of causality. A majority of writers of life stories choose a chronological trajectory from the past to the present, but rarely is a life history without loopings into the past, flashbacks and flash forwards, sometimes, as in Linda Põldes’ life story, resulting in lapses, such as the unexplained and unannounced disappearance of a major character in the story for a period, and sometimes creating awkward redundancies, as a Siberian survivor struggles to manage the effects of the Siberian era of her life on the period following her return. In rarer cases where the life story begins with the present, the flashbacks may be indicative of associative processes of the narrator’s “memory work” that breaks the narrative surface with forays into the past, opening heretofore closed chambers of the memory that the narrator herself was unaware of before beginning to write. Counter-intuitively, writing may lead to remembering, rather than the other way around.

A further issue of temporality concerns the “density” and duration of lived time, and qualitative perceptions of eventfulness and the pace with which time passes. A simple example is Voodel Võrk’s subheading,

“About the War,” for there is more to say about this eventful period than about much longer intervals of more placid living. How synchronous are the chronometries of social time and autobiographical time of an individual life? Why does the narrator of a life story report at length about a short period of his life, and then proceed to skip over the next ten years? Some periods of a lifespan seem longer to the writer than others, despite their length in chronological time. In addition to these intentional (or semi-intentional) expansions and contractions in time, the life story text may also bear marks of an accelerando of historical time, as in the periods of rapid sociopolitical and cultural change Katherine Verdery has documented in her anthropological studies of postcommunist Eastern Europe.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, life stories may be indexical texts for locating ways in which too much change in too short a time overwhelms a person, resulting in disorientation palpable through difficulties in telling the story of a life.

### III. Histories and Life Stories: Who Owns History?

“When the lilacs were in bloom, the Estonian Red Army soldiers returned home from Kurland.” (Juta Pihlamägi)

“I should say at the outset that the war did not touch our family tragically. Both my older brother and I went to war (with the front lines running between us), but both of us came home.” (Voodel Võrk)

“In 1947 we were listed as kulaks. And so my carefree childhood ended in August 1944, when my mother and I were left to manage the farm alone together.” (Aili Valdrand)

The historical consciousness in life stories moves simultaneously in both directions, both along with the current of *grande* and *histoire*, and against its flow. The life story writer knows local events better than the professional historian, while he or she overemphasizes secondary, even insignificant episodes, since these details, occurrences and circumstances seem to the writer be the main thing. To what extent and in what ways does a life history writer signal his or her consciousness that

<sup>30</sup> Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

the events of their lives have taken place both with and against the flow of *grande histoire*? How are causal, correlative, or other connections made in the text between significant events in personal and public life, little events and big events? Who or what agency is held responsible for these background events, and what degrees of power and will are perceived to be possible for the individual to maintain and carry out life plans? To what extent is the unforeseen alteration, distortion, or failure of those life-plans attributed to the fairness or injustice of history, to rapacious powers swamping a small nation? Conversely, what might be signified when a large event receives no mention in a life history?

A related question is how history is personified in life histories, as distinct from other impersonal or transcendent frameworks and forces. As Vieda Skultans has eloquently pointed out in relation to Latvian life stories, the concept of Fate (Latvian *liktenis*, Estonian *saatus*) belongs to the deep structure of the culture with its roots in folkloric traditions.<sup>31</sup> A writer's use of the concept of fate in a life narrative is most likely beyond cliché on a scale of seriousness, and carries explanatory force, though it may also fall short of a full-bodied scheme of causality. Finally, life stories signal their connection to history in the degree to which their writers implicitly or explicitly have pretensions to be participating in the writing of history, even acting as "historians"; revising or filling in historical accounts they deem misleading, incomplete, or dubious. Two separable subject positions are discernible here: that of the unique standpoint of an eyewitness to great historical events, and the spokesperson for a bygone or irrevocably destroyed world: in both cases the memory of the witness claims to stand between "the way things really were" and oblivion.

As has been amply outlined within cultural studies of trauma,<sup>32</sup> the rhetoric of testimony is a rhetoric of justifying and redressing of wrongs done, of righting the record, demythologizing and dispelling disseminated falsehoods. Departures from this imperative or resistances to it thus become especially interesting. The one hundred life histories selected for inclusion in the anthology *Eesti rahva elulood* (Estonian Life Stories) are a good diagnostic sample for the discernment of such multiple intentionalities, since one of the criterion for selection was to rep-

---

<sup>31</sup> Skultans, *op. cit.*, 48–49.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Aili Aareleid-Tart, *Cultural Trauma and Life Stories* (Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2006).

resent as many types of destinies as possible for an Estonian who lived during the twentieth century.<sup>33</sup> Those who answered the call for life stories and submitted their narratives for the competition in 1999 did so having read Merle Karusoo's impassioned appeal for such a "memory bank" of Estonian destinies, by which Karusoo hoped to generate a repertoire of textual resources about the complicated recent past for future generations. Besides sensing that there was value attached to their singular stories, participants in the competition were at least moderately conscious of their individual stories connecting to a larger, shadowy whole, and helping shape the contours of a collective history.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps the availability of fate or destiny as an explanatory concept for individual life stories was heightened by its prominent place in Karusoo's call, though it would be difficult to test such a suspicion empirically. We discern interchangeability and symmetry in Estonian life histories between History, Fate (saatus), and God, with the latter invoked most rarely, and then by writers (like Heljut Kapral) with acknowledged religious commitments.

It seems difficult to confute that interpretive schemata, including meta-narratives of Estonian national history, were embedded in the elicitation strategies of the Estonian Life Stories project long before collection began: the total sample of stories was defined ahead of time as a canon of petite histoire. A crucial, though ethically delicate question, is the linkage between the quantum or "weight" of loss and suffering in a life story and its eligibility for inclusion in this national canon. Individual sufferings, when seen as constitutive components of a tragic national destiny, may provoke writers to handle losses in particular narrative ways, emphasizing or enhancing their position in relation to the whole. Conversely, as Terje Anepaio has pointed out, the appetite for success stories in post-Singing Revolution Estonia may be correlated with deliberate efforts to pull off the black cloak of suffering and to stop talking publicly about Siberia, an amnesia that she finds disturbing.<sup>35</sup> Speaking primarily of recollections of totalitarian

<sup>33</sup> Rutt Hinrikus, "Saateks," *Eesti rahva ehulood* I, 7–12.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 7–8.

<sup>35</sup> Terje Anepaio, "Eesti mäletab? Repressiooniteema retseptioon Eesti ühiskonnas," in Ene Kõresaar, Terje Anepaio (eds.), *Mälu kui kultuuritegur: etnoloogilise perspektiive / Ethnological Perspectives on Memory* (Studia Ethnologia Tartuensia 6) (Tartu: Tartu University Press, 2003), 206–230.

regimes, Tzvetan Todorov rightly distinguishes between the processes of recovery (*recouvrement*) and use (utilization) of memories. Though with a different set of cautions than those offered by historian Dominick La Capra, Todorov boldly and skillfully challenges the notion of incomparability or total uniqueness of accounts of suffering. “Learning from the past” can happen only if accounts (including testimonial accounts) are used as instances in a general category, as models to comprehend new situations. Otherwise, the past comes to “repress” the present in the psychoanalytic sense; the sacralization of the past is what renders it sterile.<sup>36</sup>

What are some alternative utilizations of the past represented in life stories, including those from Estonia? Michel de Certeau claims that “life stories are most often the stories of hard work,” and calls attention to the dimension of everyday practices alluded to in the opening paragraphs of this introduction:

Giving a voice to the memory of “people who have no history,” they gather together and compose the polyphonic narrative of anonymous and fragile practices, tell the story of an indefinite proliferation of ways of doing things, and bring it into the common treasure of a cultural memory, as does, in another register and for groups, the animated history of the city and its staging in images.<sup>37</sup>

We might well ask whether the Estonians whose life stories are contained in this volume are “people without a history.” Most likely they are not “without” a history, though professional history writing and research has rarely caught up with events of upheaval, or jumped the irreducible gap or time lag between experience and reflection. De Certeau’s concluding point is more sobering, however: “...it is also the recognition of a fraction of the culture of work that enters into memory, but with the limitation that often the tools, machines, and gestures of their users have already disappeared.”<sup>38</sup> This argument may prove to be quite fruitful in the interpretation of Estonian life stories, especially if we presume that the material continuity and mentality of the old Estonian peasant society declined in the 1960s.

---

<sup>36</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, *Les Abus de la Memoire* (Paris: Arlea, 2004), 15, 30–32.

<sup>37</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Capture of Speech and other Political Writings* (Minneapolis: University Minnesota Press, 1997), 132.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

## Who Owns History?

At first, the question “Who owns History?” might seem at best metaphorical, at worst unjust. If history is taken to mean the past, as it so often is in public opinion and popular historical consciousness, then the question itself is unreasonable: the past as such can neither be owned or privatized,<sup>39</sup> not to speak of changing or revising it. But the question gathers real substance if we consider whose possession or power the past is subjected, or, as Natalie Zemon Davis has written, to the question of who is entrusted with the work of constituting the past.<sup>40</sup> This problem is not a new one for professional historians; arguments about the continued effectiveness or supplementation of the historian’s methodological “toolbox” are never-ending, at least within the boundaries of the discipline. Selecting evidence, weighing it critically, granting acceptance to explanations, interpretations, and forms of representation are the criteria that differentiate the professional historian from the curious lay amateur. Yet even with the most stringent choice of methods and the pursuit of objectivity, the outcome remains a multiplicity of histories, because the historian, homo factor, remembers and lives in his or her era and is subjected to the demands and influences of that time.

The historian’s own present issues new challenges to history as a discipline: alongside the multiplicity of histories there has now arisen a multiplicity of life stories. The relationships among histories and life stories have brought up a range of dilemmas, which often focus on the thematics of memory and remembering. The writing down, collection, publication, as well as the scholarly analysis of life stories are worthy of serious, thorough discussion from a number of perspectives—but above all from the aspect of the functioning of the human memory.

The Stalin era, one of the specific periods referred to or narrated by the writers in this book, serves as a good example of the gap between life stories and histories. So far there has been interesting academic research by historians on this period,<sup>41</sup> but these works do not always

---

<sup>39</sup> Frank R. Ankersmit, “The Postmodernist ‘Privatization’ of the Past,” in Frank R. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001), 149–175.

<sup>40</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, “Who Owns History?” in Anne Ollila (ed.), *Historical Perspectives on Memory* (Studia Historica 61) (Helsinki: SHS, 1999), 20.

<sup>41</sup> Olaf Mertelsmann (ed.), *The Sovietization of the Baltic States, 1940–1956* (Tartu: Kleio, 2003); Tõnu Tannberg (ed.), *Eesti NSV aastatel 1940–1953:*

include the particular problems of historical responsibility, victimhood, or “participation”. However, opinions, collective attitudes, and questions of blame continue to be in circulation in the public arena, and have been since the “Great Turn”; these have been opened, revived, or “derepressed” and articulated discursively. The unprocessed and unofficial substratum of collective attitudes is nutritious soil for the telling and writing of life stories, which, though their initial impulse may come from kinship networks or the suggestions of friends, envision a public reader. In “going public” as an author, the writer of the life story issues at least an implicit claim that, on the “authority” of his or her life experience, he or she deserves to be heard. The deficit in academic historical research creates the space for a plethora of personal, singular, life “histories” that reflect popular historical consciousness. The resulting imbalance is far from a “complete” or “corrected” historical record. Rather, a public shift in authority has taken place, a shift away from scholarly research and toward valorizing singular experience.

What lives and moves in this somewhat ambivalent sphere of popular historical consciousness, and how do life stories draw on it? Are life histories “expressions” of popular historical consciousness, and does this mean they are “more” or “less” than histories? Signs of the operation of historical consciousness in life story texts doubtless include a repertoire of clichés (such as the “Red Baron” Valter Lehtla refers in the opening sentences of his story), or leitmotifs at various levels of superficial or deep structure. These already indicate that the writer is not writing “pure personal truth”, nor navigating across a wide ocean of attitudes, judgments, and opinions, but that he or she is both deliberately and unwittingly writing themselves into that flow. The writers of life stories borrow from History in order to create a (solid) framework for the narrative of a life. If there were no scaffolding of *grande histoire* to borrow from, life stories would resemble Icelandic sagas. “The Stalin era”, “Estonian times” and “the Soviet time” are larger pieces of the borrowed historical scaffolding, while specific dates and (pivotal) events (Stalin’s death, the marching of Soviet troops across the Estonian border in June 1940, the Baltic Chain), are smaller-scale pieces.

---

*Sovetiseerimise mehhanismid ja tagajärjed Nõukogude Liidu ja Ida-Euroopa arengute kontekstis* (The Estonian SSR in the years 1940–1953: The Mechanisms and Consequences of Sovietization in the Context of the Development of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe) (Tartu: Eesti Ajalooarhiiv, 2007).

The relationships between life stories and popular historical consciousness on the one hand, and with *grande histoire* on the other, are not specific to Estonia or to Estonian discourse. “Give us back our history,” as the slogans of the Singing Revolution proclaimed, is connected to contemporaneous phenomena in the rest of Europe and the world at large, where strong public voices have called for a revalorization of history; Pierre Nora referred to this public demand as a “memory boom”, in which he included the resurgence of interest in the writing and reading of life stories.<sup>42</sup> One must be cautious and avoid regarding this as permanent or irreversible. Life stories may well be a kind of fashion, even a passing fad, which—in Estonia, at least, may come to be replaced by different forms and syntheses once academic history has compensated the existing deficit, and crossed the necessary reflective distances to fairly evaluate the past, including its difficult, terrible, and traumatic chapters.

In this context, the difficult matter of memory cannot be emphasized enough, when a “simple person” sets out to compose a narrative of his or her life story, memory is what he or she first relies on. Psychologists of memory specify that what is meant here is episodic memory, the capacity to remember experience.<sup>43</sup> The expression of human memory consists of two wondrous, tandem aspects—remembering and forgetting. When writing down one’s life story, the writer is at best only able to recall fragments from several decades ago, including significant events—details that have been engraved deeply in the memory, and stories about such events. When writing about our own lives, we splice together a story using language and style, and this is what we call our life story. But we cannot write about what we have forgotten, what it is unpleasant to call to mind, what is detrimental to us, or what is inappropriate. In the complex processes of remembering there are hidden reasons that simultaneously connect and differentiate life stories and histories. Life stories can offer histories unique kinds of evidence; histories can in turn offer writers of life stories requisite frameworks for past events, especially those in the distant past, and help in finding chronological sequences for the composition of a narrative.

---

<sup>42</sup> Pierre Nora, “The Reasons for the Current Upsurge in Memory,” *Transit –Europäische Revue* 22 (2002), available from [www.eurozine.com](http://www.eurozine.com).

<sup>43</sup> Endel Tulving, *Mälu* (Memory) (Tartu, 2002), 261.

In the postmodern era many frameworks of values in social life have disintegrated or been radically transformed; thus there seems to be no practical use for imposing hierarchies that differentiate between life stories and histories. In today's fast-changing, unencompassable world there is more value in reciprocal toleration and cultural diversity, which transcends the representation of both histories and life stories.