

“Memory and History: Crossdisciplinary Approaches to Twentieth Century Baltic Life Stories” An International Workshop

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Since systematic collection of personal reminiscences in the Baltic region became a more open, public possibility in the glasnost era, the life story has emerged there as a fascinating though controversial genre, located at the crossroads of autobiographical writing and historical source material. The publication of Vieda Skultans' monograph, *The Testimony of Lives: Narrative and Memory in Post-Soviet Latvia* (Routledge, 1998) and the two-volume anthology *Eesti rahva elulood (Estonian Life Histories, 2000)* placed two landmarks in the collection and analysis of Baltic life stories, though critical attention to these texts has not yet significantly penetrated Western academia. Since the recent research programme of the Chair of Estonian Studies at the University of Toronto has included a clearly-outlined component of gathering oral histories and written memoirs of the Toronto Estonian diaspora, the idea of sponsoring a workshop on Baltic life stories took shape in the summer of 2001. The goal was to create a forum in which life story texts could be critically analyzed through close reading, and brought into the purview of theoretical perspectives from the fields of history, literary studies, psychology, and anthropology. Such a forum would ask participants, in addition to conducting a formal presentation, to read a core selection of theoretical material and life story texts in advance, which would form a common ground for panel discussions.

Participants in the day-long symposium on 9 November included two scholars from Estonia, Dr. Peeter Tulviste, Professor of Psychology and former Rector of Tartu University, whose research specialization is cultural psychology, and Rutt Hinrikus, senior researcher at the Estonian Literary Museum in Tartu, organizer of life story writing competitions, and compiler and editor of *Estonian Life Histories*. Dr. Jaak Rakfeldt, Professor of Psychology at Yale University brought to the conference both his disciplinary expertise, skillful moderation of panels, and the recent publication of ongoing work on his parents' narrative of escape from Estonia in 1944. Dr. Ilze Matiss, who holds a Ph.D in Psychology from OISE, presented synopses and textual examples from her dissertation, subtitled, "A Life History Analysis of Latvian-Canadian Women's Stories about being Latvian." Two doctoral candidates in comparative literature, Jura Avizienis (The University of Washington at Seattle), and Violeta Davoliute (University of Toronto), both of whose dissertations intersect with the problematics of life stories, history, and memory, brought two contrasting Lithuanian perspectives to narratives of Siberian survivors. Representing Estonian Studies at the University of Toronto, Dr. Jüri Kivimäe, Professor of History and Chair of Estonian Studies presented a paper entitled "Memory and History: A New Challenge of an Old Question; Dr. Tiina Kirss presented a research report on life history workshops among Toronto Estonians. Incisive introductory and closing remarks were presented by Dr. Juris Dreifelds (Brock University), President of the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies (AABS).

The opening section of the workshop, presenting theoretical perspectives on life stories from the fields of psychology (Prof. Tulviste) and history (Prof. Kivimäe). After mentioning the pertinence of life stories for the study of *Alltagsgeschichte*, Prof. Tulviste focused on the “tools” that culture provides its members for constructing life plans and for interpreting and absorbing unforeseen changes in them. Specifically, he underscored the importance of comparative analysis of the expected and actual life plans of the 1944 diaspora and the Estonians who remained in the homeland, as well as their differential uses of historical consciousness of the prewar period of independence (1920s and 1930s) in identity construction. Life stories are crucial sources and sites for such comparative analyses, allowing the incorporation of political, humanistic, and scholarly approaches, and permitting the illustration of ways in which “living memory” supported unofficial versions of history in the Soviet era.

Prof. Kivimäe began his presentation with a reflection and overview of the popularity of the code words “history and memory” in recent scholarly literature in history in Europe, North America, and throughout the world, and resituated this formulation as an old, even ancient one: for Caesar, history was deemed the life of memory (*vita memoriae*.) However, according to Peter Burke, renowned scholar of the early modern period, both history and memory (and their purported opposition) have become increasingly problematic terms. History-writing has needed to take into account not only how knowledge of the past is acquired and validated, but how it is transmitted, preserved, and altered. Marking some positions in the 20th century debate between memory and history within the discipline of history, Prof. Kivimäe focused on the extensive interdisciplinary cross-pollination that undergirded the emergence of the French *Annales* School; the “biographical turn,” and the revival of narrative history writing; and medievalist Jacques Le Goff’s discussion of the coexistence of human and artificial memory. Lively, even contentious points of discussion include the concept of “collective memory” formulated by Maurice Halbwachs, and new questions about the role of memory in the writing of the history of the Holocaust. Referring directly to the topic of 20th century Baltic history, Prof. Kivimäe proposed that the treatment of politically fraught issues around national identity construction in which “public history” is opposed to “personal memory” might benefit from an informed, intensive, and systematic dialogue between historians and researchers working in the area of the psychology of memory.

Twentieth century Baltic life stories can provisionally be sorted into three situational or “destiny” cohorts: survivors of Siberian deportation, those who remained in the homeland in the Soviet era, and the western diaspora who fled the homeland in 1944. Through specific examples and case studies, research reports by Rutt Hinrikus, Tiina Kirss, Ilze Matiss, and Jura Avizienis in the second morning session emphasized the relationships, both close and problematic, between the generation and collection of life narratives—through published autobiographical texts, writing competitions, oral history interviews, writing workshops, and evolving narratives co-written by researcher and interviewee—and protocols of interpretation and analysis. In the first afternoon panel discussion, “Interpreting Life Histories,” (moderated by Dr. Tiina Kirss) Rutt Hinrikus, Dr. Jaak Rakfeldt, Dr. Ilze Matiss, Jura Avizienis, and Violeta Davoliute examined translated examples from all three cohorts, asking questions about individual and collective subjectivity; the representation of personally and culturally significant events,

the texture of everyday life, and traumatic ruptures; conventions for beginning and ending a life narrative, and issues of national identity. Copies of the sample texts were made available for the audience, and elicited a range of well-formulated questions. In the second panel discussion, moderated by Dr. Tulviste, participants Dr. Kivimae, Dr. Kirss, Rutt Hinrikus, and Violeta Davoliute returned to theoretical and methodological issues, such as evidentiary practices by which life stories are evaluated as sources for history-writing (including the study of “mentalities”), the multiplicity of histories, ways in which potential political tyrannies of “inherited memory” can be put into perspective by their incorporation into written, public history, and the healing and conciliatory potential for embedding narratives of traumatic events in the larger framework of a “whole” life story.

The workshop was well attended both by colleagues at the University of Toronto and members of the Toronto Baltic communities. The organizers gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the Estonian Studies Foundation, the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies, CREES, and the University of Toronto Department of History. For the participants, the event provided feedback on specific research projects, and a fertile ground for dialogue on new initiatives, which include the anticipated publication of the working papers of the symposium within the next year and the organization of sections on similar topics at the Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies convention in June, 2002, and other relevant scholarly conferences.

Tiina Kirss