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<http://ioha.org>

Online ISSN 2222-4181

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Words and Silences
September 2019
“Memory and Narration”

Presented @ IOHA
KEYNOTE II
Delivered on June 19, 2018, University of Jyväskylä

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NOT TO BE QUOTED WITHOUT PERMISSION

Life Story and the Politics of Memory after 1989: a Baltic Perspective

Introduction

We know from the history of oral history that the significance of individual and group memories grows in times of social and political change. The change that makes the context of this paper is that of the post-communist turn and its aftermath from the end of 1980s till the end of the 2000s in the Baltic states during which the collection as well as the study of autobiographical life narratives was predominantly concerned with making sense of the Soviet past. As such, the rise of oral history and life writing in Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania was directly linked to state-building and the related mnemonic processes in post-1989 societies. The perspective I am to offer is that of a memory scholar interested in the role of the autobiographical in mnemonic processes in society. Recently quite a few forums have been dedicated to analysing and critically reflecting on the practice of oral history and life writing in Eastern and Central Europe, particularly with respect to memory politics.¹ The discussion is still getting up steam and I'd like to add a Baltic perspective to it.²

¹ See for example Luca, I. And L. Kurvet Käosaar (eds). 2013. *Life Writing Trajectories in Post-1989 Eastern Europe*. A Special Issue of *European Journal of Life Writing*, Vol. 2; Mitroiu, S. 2015. *Life Writing and Politics of Memory in Eastern Europe*. Palgrave MacMillian; Nordic-Baltic Special Issue of *Oral History Journal*, Vol. 44, No. 2, Autumn 2016; Kõresaar, E. (ed.) 2018. *Baltic Socialism Remembered. Memory and Life Story Since 1989*. Routledge.

² A part of this paper has been presented earlier in: Kõresaar, E. and K. Jõesalu. 2016. "Post-Soviet Memories and 'Memory Shifts' in Estonia." *Oral History*, 47, 47–58. , and Kõresaar, E. 2018. "Life Story as Cultural Memory: Making and Mediating Baltic Socialism Since 1989. In: Kõresaar, E. (ed.). *Baltic Socialism Remembered: Memory and Life Story Since 1989*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Ltd, 1-19.

This paper is organised around two focal points. First, the practice of collecting oral history and life stories will be discussed as a part of doing memory work. Then, the main dynamics of post-Soviet memory culture from the perspective of the autobiographical will be outlined. Methodologically, an idea of a life story as a medium of memory lies in the centre of this presentation.

Life story as a medium of memory: a few remarks to begin with

The idea of a life story as a medium of memory seems useful against the background of the epistemological challenge for memory studies caused by the discrepancy between those who study “individual” and “collective” memories. Memory scholar and sociologist Jeffrey Olick, when inspecting the field of memory studies in the 1990s, saw in it a conflict of different perceptions of culture: the individualistic “collected memory”, as a category of meanings contained in human minds, versus the holistic “collective memory”, understood as patterns of publicly available symbols.³ Indeed, until very recently the relations of memory studies and the study of life story and oral history were unilateral rather than otherwise. From the point of view of oral history, Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes recently observed that the interdisciplinary scholarship on (historical) memory is rarely engaged with oral history or examines how this form of active memory-making reflects and moulds collective memory.⁴ The mediation perspective can be fruitful here to observe connections and points of contact for the different treatments of memory. Astrid Erll suggests that media and mediation can be understood “as a kind of switchboard at work between the individual and collective dimensions of remembering”.⁵ As she points out, the actual transition from a ‘media

³ Olick, J. 1999. "Collective Memory. The Two Cultures." *Sociological Theory*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 333-348: 336.

⁴ Hamilton, P. and L. Shopes. 2008. "Introduction: Building Partnership between Oral History and Memory Studies." In: Hamilton, P. and L. Shopes (eds.) *Oral History and Public Memories*, vii-xvii. Temple University Press, vii-xvii: vii-x.

⁵ Erll, A. 2011. *Memory in Culture*. Palgrave Macmillan: 113.

phenomenon' to a 'medium of memory' "often rests on forms of institutionalization and always on the use, the functionalization of a medium as a medium of memory, by individuals, social groups and societies. Because media must be used as media of memory, the memory-making role must be attributed to them by specific people, at a specific time and place".⁶

The first question of this paper departs from this definition: what were the nature and the effect of collecting oral histories and life stories in terms of functionalizing the autobiographical in post-Soviet memory work?

Collecting life stories as memory making

An anthropologist and life stories researcher Vieda Skultans, the author of an influential book "The Testimony of Lives" (1998), when conducting medical anthropological fieldwork in Latvia in 1990, observed: "The past could not laid to rest and left people little motivation to talk about the present. ... Eventually I let myself be carried by the narrative flow. In this way I found myself listening to accounts of events central to Latvian and, indeed, Soviet history".⁷ By that time the process that researchers have retrospectively called the biographical or memory boom had already started. Stories of the former deported persons and Gulag prisoners, which were closely connected with people's personal memories of the post-war partisan resistance, the Soviet and Nazi occupation and the dissident movement in the Soviet period, encouraged the publication of an increasing number of similar stories. The emergence and circulation of these stories as well as institutionalized collecting of them were part of symbolic truth and justice processes in the Baltics.⁸ On one hand the actions of these civic and heritage organizations were connected with the cultural restorationism in society

⁶ *Ibid*: 124.

⁷ Skultans, V. 1998. *The Testimony of Lives: Narrative and Memory in Post-Soviet Latvia*. Routledge: x-xi.

⁸ Pettai, E.-C. and V. Pettai. 2015. *Transitional and Retrospective Justice in the Baltic States*. Cambridge University Press.

that valorised traditional forms of culture, nation, and national identity. On the other hand, their activities were directed against the Soviet image of history thus delegitimizing the Soviet regime. In the early 1990s oral history and life writing institutions were founded which became to define the role and profile of the autobiographical in the meaning-making of the past as a part of symbolic truth-seeking and commemoration. Also, main methodologies of collecting memories in respective countries took form during that time. The level of how and how much the respective states invested in the politics of retrospective truth and commemoration⁹ also had a role in the institutional development of collecting life narratives.

In Estonia, where the state had a relatively modest role in the process of truth and remembrance, especially compared to Lithuania, academic organizations and related NGOs became the main institutions to collect life stories. From the late 1980s the Estonian Cultural Historical Archives organized public campaigns to collect written life stories related to the 20th century historical experience. Parallel to this the Estonian National Museum also collected written life historical material via open ended questionnaires. Whereas the National Museum departed from a purely academic interest, the academics behind the public appeals of the historical cultural archives initially aimed at influencing social processes. The first appeal from 1989 emphasized the historical mission of collecting life stories as collective memory and pointed out that ‘every life history, each fate, is a part of the history of the Estonian nation’. In 1996 they founded an NGO Estonian Life Stories Association which especially in the 1990s and the 2000s enjoyed quite a wide public acknowledgment. Even in the second half of the 1990s when the public interest toward the issues of the past was the lowest due to economic hardship, life writing was culminating.¹⁰

⁹ See Pettai & Pettai 2015: 215-270.

¹⁰ For an analysis of collecting written life narratives in Estonia see Kõresaar & Jõesalu 2016.

In Latvia, the state contributed much more into retrospective truth politics including for example a higher number of commemorative state holidays.¹¹ In 1993 the Latvian Museum of Occupation was founded, based on private funding but with a significant state support. It owns a large audio-visual oral history collection of testimonies in a form of “life stories of those who witnessed the occupation period (for example those repressed, deported, refugees etc.)”.¹² Similarly to Estonia the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the Latvian Academy of Sciences launched the Latvian National Oral History Project in 1992 with an interest in “everything which was kept quiet and carefully hidden from the totalitarian regime, national cultural resources and their survival, through many years of [Soviet] occupation.”¹³ Thus, in the spirit of national revival and retrospective truth, the methodology of oral history interview became dominant in Latvia.

Lithuanian practice falls in between the practices predominant in Estonia and Latvia: both oral history interviews and the public appeal method are used, whereas the latter seems to be used more in academic settings. In the 1990s two life writing appeals were initiated by the Vilnius University.¹⁴ Lithuania, however, was a leading Baltic state in investing in retrospective truth politics and the major institution dealing with the memories of victims of the Soviet regime is a result of this investment. The Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania (founded in 1992, reorganized many times but working in its present form since 1998 – and funded by special legislation) focuses on memories of participants in major historical events in Lithuanian history, mainly of anti-Soviet resistance fighters,

¹¹ Andrejevs, D. 2018. "Revisiting the Social Organisation of National Memory: A Look at the Calendars of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia." *Memory Studies*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750698018784116>.

¹² The Museum of the Occupation of Latvia homepage <http://okupacijasmuzejs.lv/en/about-us/the-museum-collection#cilnes> (last visited May 30, 2019).

¹³ Zirnīte, M. 2006. "National Oral History – *Time of Change* Project." *ELORE*, Vol. 13, No. 1, http://www.elore.fi/arkisto/1_06/zir1_06.pdf (last visited May 30, 2019): 2.

¹⁴ Šutinienė, I. 2009. "Eluloo- ja suulise ajaloo uurimine Leedus." *Mäetagused*, Vol. 43, DOI: 10.7592/MT2009.43.shutiniene (last visited May 30, 2019): 148.

deportees and Gulag prisoners in the framework of the Centre's research and public history programmes.¹⁵

Throughout the 1990s and the 2000s, the symbolic politics of the past in the Baltic states has relied on public preferences to issues of historical justice in relation to totalitarian past.¹⁶ It already showed in the profile and declared aims of the newly founded oral history and life stories organizations. All three Baltic societies shared a historical understanding of their nations' recent past as that of collective victimization by and collective resistance to Soviet rule.¹⁷ Although in the practice of oral history and life writing more room was left to the divergences and complexities of past experience than in the public politics, the issues of inclusion and exclusion in terms of collective 'others' were also evident here, most notably concerning Baltic Russians.

When looking at national life history projects in Estonia and Latvia, several filters become evident that influenced the inclusion of Russian communities (see Table 1 below).

¹⁵ The Genocide and Resistance Research Centre of Lithuania (LGGRTC) homepage <http://genocid.lt/centras/en/>.

¹⁶ Pettai & Petta 2015: 268.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

The Latvian National Oral History Project ¹⁸	Estonian Life Stories Association ¹⁹
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● People’s inner freedom in in the Gulag ● Maintenance of Latvian traditional culture in exile ● Narration of everyday experience ● Ethical values through life stories. ● Latvian regional and ethnic cultural identities. ● Traditional links between people and their social and natural environments. ● Inclusion of Livonians in a spirit to maintain the legacy of groups suffering during the Soviet era 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 1989 – Tell Me Your Life Story ● 1996 - My Destiny and the Destiny of Those Close to Me in the Labyrinths of History ● 1998 - The Hundred Life Histories of the Century ● 2000 - My Life and My Family’s Life in the ESSR and Estonian Republic ● 2003 My Life during the Nazi Occupation ● 2004-5 Impacts of War in My Life and the Life of Our Family

Table 1: Thematic focuses of Latvian and Estonian oral history and life writing organizations in the 1990s and 2000s.

The *language filter* is obviously the most visible one. In both projects, command of languages of new titular nations defined one’s participation. Only the very first life writing appeal in Estonia, in 1989, was directed at both the Estonian-speaking and the Russian-speaking populations. Russian language responses were sent immediately in 1989-1990, while contributions in the Estonian language also came in the following years.

¹⁸ Zirnite 2006.

¹⁹ Kõresaar & Jõesalu 2016.

1989 and 1990 were a time when the Estonian-speaking population mobilised ethnically and consolidated into an anti-Soviet independence movement. At the same time, Soviet-minded organisations, supported mostly by the Russian-speaking population, demonstrated in the streets. Two life worlds that an oral historian Uku Lember has described as parallel life worlds in the Soviet context collided publicly.²⁰

This brings us to further filters through which the collecting of life stories in the Baltics has taken place. The stories sent in 1989 already demonstrated that opposite meanings have been attributed to historical experiences, most notably to the post-war period, by Estonians and Estonian Russians. The development of respective national *memory regimes* in the following years added an aspect of hierarchy to it, although the discord between the Estonian Russian lives and the dominant memory culture as one of the main reasons why there have been so few autobiographical responses of Estonian Russians to life writing campaigns is rarely admitted by the collectors themselves.

This brings us to the third filter – a *filter of trust*. If we try to put the attempts to collect Estonian Russian life stories on a timeline, it becomes evident that the entire life story collecting work among Estonian Russians has so far, in one way or another, taken place in crisis situations, at times of tense situations between the two language-based communities. As mentioned above, the end of the 1980s was a national awakening period for Baltic titular nations and a time of pro-Soviet mobilization for mostly Russian speaking community. In the 2000s several conflicts in Estonian and Latvian societies about remembering the Second World War escalated and revived earlier problems in the process. After the so-called Bronze Soldier riot in Estonia in 2007, no extra effort was made by the Estonian Life Stories

²⁰ Lember, U. 2014. *Silenced Ethnicity: Russian-Estonian Intermarriages in Soviet Estonia (Oral History)*. PhD Theses. Central European University.

Association to include Estonian Russians in life writing campaigns.²¹ The Latvian National Oral History Project, on the other hand, launched a research project “Ethnic and Narrative Diversity in the Construction of Life Stories in Latvia” as late as 2013 that also included oral history interviews in Russian.²²

Generally, the life writing and oral history initiatives of Estonians were in one way or another supported by the questions ‘who are they – the Russian speakers?’ and ‘how did they come here?’.²³ These questions seem to inform also publications of Russian life stories by both Estonian and Latvian national projects. During the 2000s, two life story anthologies were published (in Russian) by the Estonian Life Stories Association - “Tell me your life story” (2005) and “Estonia – my home” (2009) followed by a similar collection of stories collected by the Latvian National Oral History Project (“We are all children of our time”, 2016). All three life stories collections published in Latvia and Estonia (so far) seek to gain some kind of mutual understanding, to define some sort of common experience, be it suffering under the persecutions of the Soviet regime (Latvian book) or overcoming similar difficulties of the Soviet everyday (Estonian book from 2009). At the same time, from the part of the editors, a border between ‘us’ and ‘them’ is still clearly maintained.

Life story as a political genre in memory making process

As said above, foundation and activities of oral history and life stories organizations as post-communist memory agents relied both on state led symbolic truth and justice policies and on public expectations toward revealing ‘the truth’ about the totalitarian past. In what follows, the main features of how the autobiographical, whether in a form of oral history or

²¹ For a more in depth overview of collecting Russian life stories in changing mnemonic contexts see Kõresaar & Jõesalu 2016.

²² For a summary of the project see <http://www.dzivesstasts.lv/en/free.php?id=22739> (last visited May 30, 2019).

²³ Jaago, T. 2011. "Nõukogudeaegne migratsioon ja selle ilmnemine omaelulugudes." *Acta Historica Tallinnensia*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 140–149.

life writing, that has been used by the narrators themselves to participate in collective memory work since the end of the 1980s, will be highlighted. Few ‘turning points’ in the subjective meaning making of the past will be selected, based on case studies of Baltic researchers, that have furthered, even changed the memory discourse.

It is characteristic to the 20th century that social-political constellations change rapidly; the autobiographical is increasingly tied up with the political and one’s life becomes an object of justification, legitimation and debate. In this process, Carsten Heinze argued, a life story format is chosen consciously to take stands on political, social, cultural and historical issues.²⁴ Since the epistemological shift into the ‘interpretive paradigm’ in oral history from the 1970s onwards there has been an interest in narrative forms and creative dimensions of life narratives. Beside the ground-breaking research of Luisa Passerini and Alessandro Portelli, the Popular Memory Group reoriented oral historians toward the social and cultural contexts and the fundamental role of language and cultural discourses in shaping individual interpretation of experience. The theory of composure (Graham Dawson, Alistair Thomson) has been influential in making sense of subjective remembering as dynamics between the private and the public, dependent on social recognition and actively managing the memories of the past. But, as Anna Green wrote: “... surely the interesting issue is not that individuals draw upon contemporary cultural discourses to make sense of their lives, but which ones, and why.” (original emphasis).²⁵ A Latvian social scientist Martins Kaprans has observed that “when life stories become part of the public sphere [---] the inner cognitive image of individuals are propelled into the formation of social representation of bygone

²⁴ Heinze, C. 2011. “‘Das Private wird politisch’ – interdisziplinäre Perspektiven auf autobiografisches Schreiben im Horizont von Erinnerungskulturen und Zeitgeschichte.” *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, Vol. 12, No. 2: Art. 9. URL: <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs110294> (last accessed May 30, 2019).

²⁵ Green, A. 2004. "Individual Remembering and 'Collective Memory': Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates." *Oral History*, Vol. 32, No. 2, Special Issue: Memory and Society, 35-44: 42.

times. [---] ... autobiographers are not just isolated and lonely storytellers, but also memory agents who mould the past by adding a subjective dimension as well as furthering the memory discourse.”²⁶

How did life story narrators in Baltic countries functionalise autobiographical genres to take part in actual social memory work? In the Baltic retrospective justice process since the end of the 1980s, remembering the early Soviet period was the main anchor point of identity building. Within Central and East European remembrance cultures, the “unconditioned denial of the socialist past” in the Baltic states has been contrasted to a more ambivalent treatment of the past found among other post-socialist and post-Soviet countries.²⁷ This process was both advanced and contested by life story tellers and in what follows a few moments in this process will be presented.

Forming a narrative

The first example goes back to the years 1989 and 1990. An Estonian man born in 1927 wrote his life story in response to the first life writing appeal of the Estonian Cultural Historical Archives in 1989. He argued:

“For more than 70 years attempts have been made to instil in us the myth that we, the Soviet people, are the ones to forge our own fortune. All the means of propaganda were made to trumpet that according to the Kremlin directions. However, when they saw from that tall tower there that you can oil the machinery with as many lies as you want, still faults and setbacks occur, so the decision was made to open the doors of violence. Mighty waves of bloody repression swept over the country. ... The repression machine named NKVD, with its special divisions, rolled over the country. Millions of innocent people remained between its wheels. ...”²⁸

²⁶ Kaprans, M. 2016. "Between improvisation and inevitability: former Latvian officials' memoirs of the Soviet era." *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 4, 537-555: 539.

²⁷ Troebst, S. 2007. “‘Budapest’ oder, ‘Batak’? Varietäten südosteuropäischer Erinnerungskulturen”. In *Zwischen Amnesie und Nostalgie. Die Erinnerung an den Kommunismus in Südosteuropa*, ed. by Brunnbauer, U. and Troebst. Böhlau, 15-26: 24-25.

²⁸ Man, b.1927, written in 1989-1990, Estonian Cultural Historical Archives.

This quote shows a kind of political argumentation narrators used to frame their individual and family life courses and testify against the oppressive regime. The story is a part of the anti-communist discourse forming at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s. The juridical-political repertoire of the end of 1980s was focusing on the condemnation of the crimes of communism (or rather inventing the concept in the first place), on demonstrating the illegality and illegitimacy of the Soviet power. This discourse was also characterised by a kind of ‘full’ language with colourful symbolism: expressions like ‘under the big red sky of Stalin’, ‘the empire of the evil’ etc. By referring to ‘blank spots’ and the major cornerstones of the Soviet ideology, the Soviet narrative was exposed as a bare myth in opposition to the repressive and violent nature of the Soviet regime which victimized millions of people.²⁹

Supported by state-led politics of retrospective truth, the trauma narrative of the Stalinist repressions of the 1940s became a dominant mode in narrating one’s past during the 1990s.³⁰ Testimonies of the pre-war generations (including this man) have played an important role in this process. As a biography researcher Marianne Liljeström has noted, the life experiences that dominated in a so-called post-communist ‘people’s memory’ were repression and survival, imprisonment and exile, political dissidence and military as well as everyday resistance to the Soviet power.³¹ Situated in the specific context of post-violence memory work, researchers also tended to consider memories of repression being more authentic and therefore more ‘truthful’ than memories of routine and peaceful everyday life.

²⁹ Note that at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s first steps were undertaken to investigate the scale of the Soviet repressions in the Baltics, the discourse of victimhood was not yet ‘nationalised’, that is it could refer to the Soviet people in general, not only Estonians, Latvians or Lithuanians. Also, the cultural symbolism of the time was not only characteristic to Estonian or Baltic rhetoric on the past.

³⁰ See Kõresaar 2018.

³¹ Liljeström, M. 2003. "Success Stories from the Margins: Soviet Women’s Autobiographical Sketches from the Late Soviet Period. In: Bartaux, D., Thompson, P, Rothkirch, A. (eds.) *On Living Through Soviet Russia*. Routledge, 235-251.

This approach was also connected to the researchers' interest in how individuals make sense of their experiences in the framework of the 20th century political history.

Life narratives of the 1990s in the Baltic countries were characterised by testimoniality. According to a historian Martin Sabrow a witness constitutes via his/her narrative a *personal* world of events, documents via his or her personality the temporal and spatial unity of the past, and thereby authorizes a certain perspective from *innen* on the past as a carrier of the experience.³² Oral history and life story narratives of the 1990s add a perspective of the *observer* and that of the contemporary by witnessing about the sufferings and injustices of *others*.³³ As Marta Kurkowska-Budzan argues for Polish oral history, historical witness in the 1990s was a figure of national identity and moral values, who testified against the false and polluted historiography of the totalitarian regime.³⁴ In some cases researchers felt compelled to develop terms to make sense in this highly political context of storytelling of stories that differed from the genre of testimony. For instance, based on Latvian oral history research, Baiba Bela coined a term 'apolitical life story' to make sense of storytelling that focused only on "personal events and actions that usually take place in the close surroundings of the narrator' and with any resource to dates, or to the conventional points of reference that would make the individual life story compatible with the general history."³⁵

³² Sabrow, M. 2012. "Der Zeitzeuge als Wanderer zwischen zwei Welten." In: Sabrow, M. and N. Frei (eds.) Die Geburt des Zeitzeugen nach 1945. Eine kritische Reflexion über den Zeitzeugen als Phänomen der öffentlichen Geschichtskultur. Wallstein, 13-32: 14.

³³ Kõresaar, E. 2005. *Elu ideoloogiad. Kollektiivne mälu ja autobiograafilise minevikutõlgendus eestlaste elulugudes*. Eesti Rahva Muuseum: 109-110.

³⁴ Kurkowska-Budzan, M. 2014. "Ajaloo tunnistaja ehk Poola suulise ajaloo spetsiifikast." *Mäetagused*, Vol. 56, 21-38: 30.

³⁵ Bela-Krūmiņa, B. 2002. "Usually silenced: changing world in the apolitical life story. In: Jaago, T. and Kõiva, M. (eds.). *Lives, Histories and Identities 2: Studies on Oral Histories, Life and Family Stories*. University of Tartu & Estonian Literary Museum, 204–210: 205–6.

After effects of justice narrative and its contestation

The issue of remembering everyday life that followed the Stalinist period became topical in Baltic memory work by the end of the 1990s and the 2000s. Studies from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania argued that compared to narrating about the Stalinist period, there was a significant lack of coherence in stories about the later life. A Lithuanian sociologist Dalia

Marcinkevičienė observed:

“The women could describe in detail their lives before the Soviet occupation in 1940, they also had vivid memories of the Second World War and of the post-war years. However, when narrating about their lives from mid-1950s onward, interviews became fragmented, limited to sketchy, isolated details narrated in a language resembling [Soviet] propagandistic clichés.”³⁶

By the turn of the millennium the silencing effect of the hegemonic discourse of suffering and resistance was widely noticed by oral historians and life story researchers as well as being increasingly voiced also by the narrators. In the Estonian context of collecting life stories the turning point was the Estonian Life Stories Association’s campaign “My Life and My Family’s Life in the ESSR and Estonian Republic” 2000-01. As a reaction to the appeal (and to previous campaigns), some life-story writers debated the idea of seeing the Soviet time only through difficulties, while stating their wish to avoid the interpretation of the Soviet period predominant in the 1990s. Rutt Hinrikus, a chairwoman of the Estonian Life Stories Association has summarised it as follows:

“When the Estonian Heritage Society and other institutions began the collection of memories and life stories, they often left the impression that they valued only those stories that reflected the victims’ experiences of the Stalinist repressions. For this reason, many life story writers shyly apologize that they have written about their lives even though there was nothing worthwhile to write about, such as being sent to Siberia.”³⁷

³⁶ Marcinkevičienė, D. 2007. *Prijaukintos kasdienybė s 1945–1970 metai. Biografiniai Lietuvos moterų interviu*. Vilniaus universitetas, 19. Cit in Šutinienė 2009: 151. A side remark: the issue of so-called propaganda in life narratives is a complex one and very much linked to how researchers approached the application of the Soviet time public discourse in life stories. See above Liljeström 2003.

³⁷ Hinrikus, R. 2004. "Deportation, Siberia, Suffering, Love. The Story of Heli." In T. Kirss, E. Kõresaar, and M. Lauristin (eds). *She Who Remembers, Survives. Interpreting Estonian Women Post-Soviet Life Stories*. Tartu University Press: 63. Cit in Kõresaar & Jõesalu 2016: 49.

The everyday paradigm that characterized storytelling labelled as apolitical life story by Bela, gained further acceptance during the 2000s. As an Estonian life stories researcher Kirsti Jõesalu has eloquently demonstrated, new generations, i.e. those born in the 1940s and the 1970s entered the field of memory work by sharing their experiences of living in the Soviet Union. By making sense and voicing their own generational memories of the late Soviet socialist past they contributed to diversification of mnemonic discourses in society. Seen from the point of view of life storytelling, the dynamics from the turn of the millennium consists in the symbolic differentiation of everyday life experience as an alternative parallel to the public memory culture with more stress on continuity of life and habitus, and with attempts to depoliticize everyday experience by presenting alternative, pragmatic, and nostalgic perspectives.³⁸

This process of what has been called a normalization of the Soviet past has had a somewhat different density and length in different Baltic countries. In Lithuania where the issue of collaboration has been more ambivalent than in Estonia and Latvia due to political reasons, alternative discourses on late socialism appeared already in the second half of the 1990s and were established in the memoirs of Soviet *intelligentia* and *nomenclatura* during the 2000s.³⁹ In those memoirs – in Lithuania as well as in Latvia – a ‘pragmatic’ pattern, emphasizing utilitarian motives (self-expression, professional advancement, etc.), prevailed and ‘oppositional’ aspects of pragmatic conformism were stressed, and equated with ‘silent resistance’.

³⁸ Jõesalu, K. 2017. *Dynamics and Tensions of Remembrance in post-Soviet Estonia: Late Socialism in the Making*. PhD Thesis. University of Tartu Press.

³⁹ Šutinienė, I. 2016. "The Construction of Continuous Self in the Life Stories of Former Soviet Officials in Lithuania." *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 4, 513-536.

The logic of normalization suggested that the officials were depicted as participants and actors of importance for the country's social, economic and cultural changes.⁴⁰

The achievements of the modernization and urbanization of the Soviet era were highlighted, stressing the merits of the representatives of the nomenclatura. From my own research I can add that this approach applies also to middle managers' life stories.⁴¹ Several life stories researchers (Irena Šutinienė, Martins Kaprāns, and Kirsti Jõesalu) have pointed out that highlighting professionalism, altruism, and solidarity and focusing on horizontal and work relationships was a way to achieve positive identity in remembering socialism and these cultural themes are by no way limited only to Baltic life stories, let alone ex-communist stories.⁴² Furthermore, as Kirsti Jõesalu has pointed out 'believing in the future and making the world a better place is not only common for narrators from the eastern side of the Iron Curtain, but similar ideas can be found in the reminiscences of those who were active in the student movements of the 1960s in the West'.⁴³

It would be a simplification, however, to argue for a unified discourse of normalization since the millennium. Arguably, there is at least a generational discrepancy in terms of how – for example – the locus of control is placed in remembering one's participation in the Komsomol, as well as further collaboration. According to Kaprāns, Latvian autobiographers, who represent the first generation of the 'builders of communism', are more likely to claim that *external* processes forced them to support the system, whereas younger autobiographers, born in the 1940s and 1950s emphasize *the inner* locus of control

⁴⁰ Ivanauskas, V. 2011. *Lietuviškoji nomenklatūra biurokratinėje sistemoje: Tarp stagnacijos ir dinamikos*. Lithuanian Institute of History. Cit in Šutinienė 2016.

⁴¹ Jõesalu, K. and Kõresaar, E. 2012. "Working through Mature Socialism: Private and Public in the Estonians' Meaning-making of the Soviet Past." In L. Bennich-Björkman, A. Aarelaid-Tart (eds.). *Baltic Biographies at Historical Crossroads*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Ltd, 68–85.

⁴² Šutinienė 2016; Kaprāns 2016; Jõesalu, K. 2016. "'We Were Children of Romantic Era': Nostalgia and the Non-ideological Everyday through a Perspective of 'silent generation'". *Journal of Baltic Studies*, Vol. 47, No. 4, 557–577.

⁴³ Jõesalu 2016.

in relations with Soviet institutions. Such generational differences reveal another dimension of how the discourses of rupture and continuity interact in post-Soviet Baltic biographies.⁴⁴

To sum up the 2000s, the transformation of the image of the Soviet period is especially observable within biographical discourse and popular culture where, unlike in the 1990s, people were more willing to reflect on topics that require a balanced view of the Soviet era. After an intensive period of retrospective justice that gave the victims the long denied and much needed recognition but also turned their stories to sole representatives of the nations' past, the social memory of Baltic societies over the previous decade has experienced certain emancipation from the hegemony of anti-Soviet representation. As this paper tried to demonstrate, life storytelling took an active part of this change.

Conclusion

In lieu of summing up: the practice of oral history and life writing in the Baltic countries from the end of the 1980s until the end of the 2000s was embedded in both social and state-led memory processes in multiple ways. First, fostered by the epistemological shift in humanities and social sciences, the collecting of oral histories and life stories was also a part of symbolic retrospective justice of the post-communist turn that contained its inclusions and exclusions. Second, both collectors and narrators made use of the autobiographical genres to argue politically and empower new historical agents and alternative discourses of the past (alternative to both Soviet and post-Soviet historical narratives). And last but not least, the topics and problem-settings as well as interpretations of researchers focusing on the relationship of the individual and the collective, the personal and the historical, private and public were also departing from actual mnemonic processes in Baltic societies.

⁴⁴ Kaprāns 2016.