

EXPERIENCE AND INTERPRETATION: EMOTION AS REVEALED IN NARRATION

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ABSTRACT

I discuss in this article some key narratives of women I interviewed in Ingria 1992–1993. The narratives of those women were about dramatic stages of their lives during the World War II. The main themes of the life stories were forced transfers and deportation suffered by the Ingrian Finns. I examine with some examples how various paralinguistic devices, such as speech tempo, emotional outbursts or silence, were tied in with the verbalisation of experiences. The three factors I discuss here are woven into the narratives of the women I interviewed. The first factor is “impassioned narrating”, which shows how a narrator reveals how she is reliving the event, she told about. The second factor is weeping and we may ask how the tears affect the narrator. The third factor is silence and reticence. In retrospect I have thought about the therapeutic effect of speaking, forgetting and remaining silent.

KEYWORDS: emotion • paralinguistic devices • life story • key narrative • Ingria

“Narrative as a research tool has been both criticised on the grounds of giving an incomplete and unreliable version of the truth and, conversely, extolled on the grounds of giving a more authentic ‘experience-near’ version of the truth.” These words belong to the medical anthropologist Vieda Skultans, who has analysed experience narratives in post-Soviet Latvia (Skultans 2004: 293). My own material consists of narratives, in other words, of the life stories of people, mostly women whom I interviewed in Ingria in summer 1992 and 1993 in villages located south-west of St. Petersburg. My interviewees, numbering 28 and yielding about 40 hours of material on tape, produced a number of experience narratives, some of which had become key narratives carrying special significance for their owners. The main themes of our discussions were often the forced transfers and deportation suffered by the Ingrian Finns.

The Ingrian Finns are a group who left Finland in and after the seventeenth century, settling in the St. Petersburg area. In the latter half of the 1920s there were close on 138,000 Ingrian Finns, but after decades of dispersion this population has dwindled to only around 20,000 in this region. An estimated 61,000 or so people of Ingrian descent are, it is thought, nowadays living in various parts of the former Soviet Union. Like the other minorities, the Ingrian Finns were victims of Stalin’s ethnic cleansing, imprisonment and deportation. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 made it possible for Finnish researchers to begin conducting fieldwork in the areas inhabited by this old Finnish population.

When people tell of their lives, they usually begin with childhood memories and proceed towards major turning points. In age, the people I interviewed were on average just the either side of 70. Obviously the very distance in time from the present affects the life story so that some parts of it have become less clear and generalised, while others have become sharper, key narratives structuring the life story. Is it possible for a researcher to say what constitutes a key narrative (Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2007)? The narratives of the women I met were about dramatic stages in their lives, and dealt with subjects that were traumatic. In them they interpreted their lives and events in the past for the listener. They all have one typical feature, and that is that the normal focal points in life – such as courting, marriage, the birth of children, and working life – have come to take second place. They did also report moments of happiness, but only if I asked about them. Anyone who has ever experienced war, flight from the advancing front line, evacuation, forced transfer and return to the home region after years away will never be able to forget what happened. Very many of the women I interviewed began by talking about the war. For them “the outbreak of war” meant 22nd of June 1941, when the Germans began advancing on Leningrad.

When I set off for Ingria, the things that interested me most were, initially, aspects of the identity of the Finnish population. The question “Who we are?” was reflected from time to time in our conversations. While making the interviews and analysing them, I became most interested in people’s experiences and the way they narrate them as my aim was to elicit personal narrative. Though the narrative focused on the life of my interviewee, I soon found that it would begin with the experience of war that was shared by all. The narrative as a whole was always shaped by what the interviewee wanted to say, since I used no list of questions. I have wondered about the course of the interviews and my personal role in them. Russia was only just beginning to open up, and virtually no foreigners had visited the remoter villages so the people were unreserved and readily approachable. As a result, our discussions were about their lives and not, for example, the narrative tradition, which has virtually ceased to exist. But the interviews were mentally taxing for both the speakers and their listeners. It was impossible to talk about people’s life experiences unemotionally. The contact between interviewer and interviewee cannot be stressed too much (Vasenkari, Pekkala 1999: 63–65). The interviews were bound to the socio-cultural era and the interviewees looked back from the perspective of the present moment, in this case the early 1990s. The past was viewed on the present’s terms.

By the time of the interviews, a good fifty years had passed since war broke out and people had been forced to leave their homes. Should I therefore question the accuracy of my informants’ memories? Should I be debating their veracity? This is, however, the wrong question to ask. Rather, I should be asking myself how memories tie in with the life of the community, the social structures, and the cultural tradition in which they are told. I am not too concerned about the historical reality, being more interested in the experience and its interpretation rather than its full correspondence to what actually happened. For as Vieda Skultans (2004: 293) says, we have a duty to listen to narrative simply because the narrator is a human being. And if the told story diverges from the lived story, it may well be that the told story tells us more about the values and aspirations of the narrator than might the lived one.

When life is full of dramatic twists, some questions in a person’s life story may go

unanswered. The interviews I made imply questions that are not always verbalised: why did this have to happen to me and my family? Why was my father considered a *kulak*¹ and punished? Why were my brothers sent to Siberia? Why were we taken away from home? Why didn't we stay in Finland? Why was our family scattered all over the Soviet Union? Very few levelled direct criticism at the ruling powers, but some blamed themselves for not, for example, remaining in Finland, where they had found temporary refuge. When people have for years said nothing about a subject they did not dare to mention, the very act of talking about it is an indication of a reassessment and reinterpretation of life. I could now ask what these narratives did to people and the question is as fascinating as it is difficult to answer. I shall later be examining how various paralinguistic narrative devices, such as speech tempo, emotional outbursts or silence tied in with the verbalisation of experiences, for they speak their own language about the relationships between the narrator and her memories.



Photo 1. A lasting memory from my late summer visits to Ingria was the lushness of the village gardens and the ease with which Ingrian women related to strangers.
 Photo: Finnish Literature Society, SKS KRAK 1993: 2289.

THREE WOMEN, THREE NARRATIVES

I wish to examine three factors that are woven into the narrative of the women I interviewed. First I will talk about “impassioned narrating”. In our book *Narrating, Doing, Experiencing* I dwell at length on the story told to me by Lena, of which I now quote only a brief extract. (For a more extensive analysis see Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2006: 38–41.) When I asked Lena my usual question: “Could you tell me something about your life,” she replied immediately by asking, “Do you mean how we lived during the war and before the war?” I hardly had time to nod before she began to talk. In other words, she herself set the war as the cornerstone on which to anchor her narrative. In Lena’s case there was no need to try to establish a trusting interview situation since she and her narrative chose me the moment we met and were seated in her living room. In the words of Ulf Palménfelt (1993: 176–196) Lena drew me unconditionally into her personal narrative world. Let me quote a short piece of Lena’s long story about her escape when the German forces were advancing on Leningrad:

Then Germany drew near, Germany drew near and the Russians are coming, the bodies of Germans are being carried away. I took off and came away. My mother remained there, my brother, my sister remained there. They all remained there in the forest, my father.

Where do you think you're going, you'll meet the Germans. Yes where? I came home in the evening. There's no one in the village. I heated up my aunty's oven, my own oven. I set about cutting bread, to dry it and make rusks in the oven. I dried the bread, and I saw them all coming back from the forest, they were all coming home from the forest. They all came home. We dried the bread. We had some flour. I made a tub of dough, to bake some bread. A day later they all came home from the forest. There they sit, I've already got the bread in the oven. Our own folk, I mean our own folk, the [Ingrian] Finns urge us to leave immediately. My aunt and I looked for lice. We killed lice on each other's heads. – We have to go into the forest, to Nearton.² The Germans are coming. We have to go to Nearton. We had bread in the oven. Please let us finish the bread in the oven. They didn't. My aunt, she came and stood up for us. They grabbed her by the hair. They threw her out. We have got to leave home. She is not going, the loaves are in the oven. Threw her out by the hair. The children started to cry. The children were still small, they began to cry.

After telling me the long and complex story (it lasted over 20 minutes) about how they fled into the forest to escape the approaching front, the German forces and bombardment, Lena seemed tired. All of a sudden, there she is in the midst of events: it is as if she is seeing again a film familiar to her and trying to tell me what she can see before the events speed ahead. The experiences were Lena's and the film was hers, and the maker-narrator of this story is "I". At the same time Lena's narrative is also the history of her whole family seeking refuge in the forest from the advancing army. When we met, Lena felt no need to "test the ice", because her first impression had convinced her that this memory was suitable for my ears. In her mind, she felt the event was worth narrating. The chaos of the narrative is the instinctive stylistic device that reveals she is reliving the event. It is the driving force behind her account about the superimposed chaotic events. The many repetitions serve to heighten the drama. The emotions attached to the events, but not verbalised by Lena, are the cause of the passion in the narrative. As you read or listen to the whole narrative again and again, the concrete, cinematic quality and speed of the events become striking. We may well wonder how people can bear to relive such horrors so fully, and how they withstood such gruelling experiences.

I recently read an article by a forensic psychologist about memories of a traumatic experience. She writes: "Traumas may be accompanied by hyper-amnesia; the senses become sharper and the mind picks up even the smallest details" (Haapasalo 2005). In her narrative Lena goes from detail to detail, just as if she were doing the commentary for a documentary. It has also been said that in narrating a memory "we reconstruct the emotion. [...] The memory is felt and rethought, again and again" (Vilkko 1997: 211). To me, what mattered most was how Lena reported her memory. One thing that strikes the listener in Lena's narrative is the wealth of repetition throughout the long story. It is as if she wants to linger on each occurrence, repeating the events with only minor variations, as in following citation:

We ate the mushrooms there and milked the cow. My cow got left behind. I left the

cow there. We left because we thought we'd only meet our deaths in the forest, we'd starve to death. I went to Leningrad, I gave the cow to some poor people...

The phrases are short, like instant images. Lena's gaze rests on something and pauses there for a moment before going on to another detail.

The second factor I wish to mention is weeping. Most of the narratives are entirely lacking in expressions of emotion. Emotional restraint was common and narrators used virtually no strong adjectives or expressions of horror at the violence. I think that when a person has to flee to safety, she has no time to experience emotions – or to analyse them in narrative. It has also been established (Ukkonen 2000: 138–139) that in telling how they survived, people do not make a point of their feelings of fear, anxiety and uncertainty. In the course of their narratives, quite a few of my interviewees nevertheless burst into tears or sobs. This was hardly surprising, but I was taken aback by the unpredictability: people would suddenly burst into tears and just as suddenly stop. Take the case of Sara, who was 20 when war broke out. She was one of those who, despite the warnings of her Finnish employers, friends and the Church, decided to return to Ingria after spending some time in Finland as a refugee. Ingria was where her home, her relatives and friends were. She just had to go back, though the decision may well have been difficult. Sara approaches the pain of experience by repeatedly using certain key words. She tells about her return to the Soviet Union from Finland, to which she and some 43,000 Ingrian Finns were evacuated in 1943–1944. The return to the Soviet Union was not entirely voluntary, but many nevertheless recall being pressurised to leave: if you don't go now of your own accord, you will later be taken by force. Sara, like so many others, decided to leave. Though safe and sound in Finland, she was permanently homesick. I quote our discussion:

Annikki: So how long did you spend in Finland?

Sara: It wasn't long. Because then we were told you're going to be taken *home*, to your *homeland*. [...] We were always *homesick*. [...] we wanted to go *home*. Well then we came. We weren't brought *home*. No one was brought *home*. All were taken to Russia, this [Ingria] was full of Russians instead. Everyone got mixed up.

The narrative continues: Sara's family gets split up and all are sent to different places. She finally ends up in a place called Valdai and is taken with another girl to a collective farm outside the town:

Sara: We put all our suitcases in [the room] and we were so exhausted, we just sat and *wept*. We *howled* and *howled*, both of us. The word got round in the village that two young girls had arrived, so all the boys and girls came to have a look. The farmer's wife said: "Go away, can't you hear them *crying*. Go away and come back tomorrow. Let them *cry*."

Annikki: So she understood how you felt?

Sara: Yes she understood, that farmer's wife did. We *cried* so much, why did we have to come here? What on earth is there for us here?

The key word at the beginning of the narrative is "home", which symbolises the subject's constant homesickness and longing for the home country. At the end the longing, pain and torment make the narrator burst into tears, as emphasised by the frequent use of the verbs for "to cry". We may ask how the tears affect the narrator. They are

signs of the vivid nature of a painful memory, yet at the same time it can be cathartic and liberating. The narrator has had a chance to share the experience with another. Not much research has been reported into the cultural meanings of and differences in crying. In Finland, for example, it has been the custom to try to refrain from weeping and lamenting. On the other hand, some have spoken of the weeping and wailing traditions of Russian country women (Rotkirch 2002: 70). It would, however, be oversimplifying to see in this an explanation for the sudden outbursts of tears. We need to analyse both weeping and laughter more closely.

The end of Sara's narrative is interesting in that it speaks of despair: the girls did not have any choice, yet they nevertheless question the meaning of the events. If anything they blame themselves rather than the course of events or the authorities' decisions. As a rule my interviewees did not criticise, but quite a few of them wept. There was, by contrast, no room for tears in Lena's narrative, and she poured out the pain of her experiences by totally immersing herself in them. This was her way of processing them.

The third factor I wish to mention is silence and reticence. There were among the women I interviewed both brilliant narrators and very reticent reporters about their lives. Some quite obviously hoped I would interview them, while others were uncommunicative or talked as if they had forgotten everything. In retrospect I have thought about the therapeutic effect of speaking, forgetting and remaining silent. They are personal, narrator-specific and often instinctive solutions. It has been found that victims of the Holocaust, for example, may be loath to tell of their experiences because they fear for the torment their memories cause them (Kirmayer 1996: 174). One of the silent ones was Kaarina, who described the evacuation to Finland with almost no visible emotion. The following fragment of her very short story reveals her tragic state:

In autumn forty-three our mother died and father had got caught in Leningrad in the war and never came back. Then we travelled. One of my sisters was older than me and I had two younger brothers. We travelled to Finland, and everyone from our village travelled together. So we were at Rauma [a small town in Finland] to begin with.

Kaarina and her three siblings had just been orphaned, and the brief mention of her father, who "had got caught in Leningrad and never came back," tells of one man's tragic fate, but one which was shared by many. Kaarina's laconic style did not grip my attention. We could ask how we analyse silence and those experiences and feelings that are not represented verbally (Mills 1991: 20–21). But it is also necessary to ask if scholars are allowed to reveal experiences that are difficult for the interviewee. I "discovered" Kaarina much later on, reading between the lines of her short narrative and realising what a girl of 15 had already had to experience. Having to leave home, village and all that was familiar and depart for an unknown destination was a fate shared by many. Recently, on reading that during the first winter of the war some 6,000 people in Ingria died of hunger, I took another look at Kaarina's brief narrative, which she started like this:

It wasn't good in any way. They were difficult years like, and there wasn't any bread, and then in autumn forty-one and forty-two we had enough potatoes and in forty-three there was grain, and. It had been sown. So then we had bread, too.

When she says in the next sentence that her mother died in autumn 1943, I cannot help

wondering whether there was any connection. Kaarina could remember exactly what they had to eat in different years; she knew from experience the importance of potatoes and grain when hunger threatened. But could I have asked her how she mentally coped with the loss of both parents and the series of forced moves beginning at the same time? Could I have asked why she wanted to talk about these things, even though it may not have been easy? There are some questions that cannot be asked, any more than the interviewer can “fish” for details of another’s grim memories. It is nevertheless interesting to examine the things on which narrators remain silent, or the events they begin to describe more broadly having previously glossed over them in just a few words. Does the interviewer trigger the narrative with her questions, or are there some emotional memories that cannot be passed over? What did talking about them mean to Kaarina? Sharing the memory must undoubtedly have been painful, but was it also liberating? I couldn’t possibly even begin to ask her this.

PROCESSING AN EXPERIENCE BY TALKING ABOUT IT

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 made field research in the areas formerly inhabited by Finns possible again. It also meant that researchers could once again talk to people – mostly elderly folk – who could speak Finnish, their own mother tongue, in addition to Russian. Ingrian Finns had usually been wary of speaking their own language because it revealed even to strangers that they belonged to a minority. In extreme cases this wariness meant that people avoided speaking their own language even in close circles, such as at home. One narrator said:

But to this very day “us folk” [in her own language: *meijän meikäläisiä*] have been hated. If ever there was an argument at work, say, someone would immediately say the word *tuhna* [which is a derogatory name].

She spoke Russian at home with her husband, even though he had never really learnt to speak the language of the majority. Since 1991, Ingrian Finns have been emboldened to speak Finnish among themselves, although it may sound to the Russians as if they are purposely speaking a secret language. The year 1991 also meant that people spoke of relatives lost without a trace but details of whose execution have only now come to light. The honour of these people had officially been restored, and their descendents now received minor compensation in the form of, say, lower electricity rates or reductions on public transport. Some kind of healing process was quite definitely going on. But people were also worried and I quote my interviewee:

We all think it can’t go on like this. They’ll [those in power] think up, come up with something again.

People were not only afraid that there would be a new period of ethnic persecution; they also had concrete worries about their daily subsistence. They were worried by the rising price of food, the desire of the Russian *nouveaux riches* to build summer cottages (*dachas*) in the regions inhabited of old by Ingrian Finns, and the rise in stealing and vandalism. The talk of the present day, loneliness and want caused the narrators to grow serious.

I have begun to wonder what happens to the stories in the minds of the narrators

and listeners outside our conversations. When people recall various earlier periods in life, they may in retrospect begin to see patterns where once they saw only chaos. An interview is an opportunity to organise and edit one's concept of oneself. Hectic speech, tears and silence all reveal in their own way how the narrative touches the interviewee. The same applies to laughter, but my interviewees virtually never laughed. These extra-textual expressions were part of the narrators' interpretation of events, but a very challenging part for the researcher. If, in the course of an interview, a narrator realised that she was in fact a survivor, then this was the best outcome of the interview. The narratives of the women I interviewed have been touching us for years, but the narrators have been able to continue and supplement their stories after our meetings. The experience has left an indelible mark on them, and they will continue to process it in their minds. I can go back to stories as I listen to my interviews, but I can no longer conduct more fieldwork and modify my interpretations accordingly.

Talking to me was a form of interaction giving the narrators a chance to analyse their lives, while their narratives provided me with an insight into events and fates half a century back in time. The stories of these women I once met had a great effect on me.

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NOTES

1 *Kulak* was a prosperous landed peasant whose property was collectivised.

2 Pseudonyms are used in the article in order to protect the privacy of my informants.