

Studia Historica 58

Red Memoirs from a 'Black Time' in Finland – Radical Working Class Reminiscences of the 1920s and 30s*

Ulla-Maija Peltonen

273

The source materials for this article reflect their narrators' folk interpretations of history regarding the Civil War in 1918 as well as the 1920s and 30s. The recollected narration examined here includes many categories of narrative folklore. It is worth remembering that genre classification (historical legend, belief legend, memoir, etc.) is an aid in examination and understanding meanings in folklore. Ultimately these concepts are the tools of the researcher – sometimes also the product of the analysis – by which one can view the material in more detail than would be possible without them.

Alan Dundes has criticized genre analysis from the perspective of folk modes of thought, claiming that the language used by folklorists lacks those precise terms which would characterize individual and

* An earlier version of this article have been published in "To Work, to Life or to Death". *Studies in working class lore*. Ed. by Flemming Hemmersam 1996: Society for Research in the History of the Labour Movement in Denmark. Publication series no 37. Copenhagen.

collective concepts dealing with human nature, the world, and life. His own proposed term for such a concept is *folk idea*. After some sifting, it is possible to obtain a sufficient (representative) number of shared, representative folk ideas which prevail in the cultural sphere under examination.¹

Oral history as information concerning the past, as recollected narration and as an interpretation of one's own past, has hardly received any serious consideration from researchers, who have long approached oral history with suspicion, and have not been ready to believe that chronological distance might lose some of its relevance when weighed against personal participation and involvement. According to Alessandro Portelli, oral history (and historical folklore) in fact tell us more about what people believe they had to do in a certain historical situation and what they thought at the moment of the narration, than they actually did. Portelli emphasizes that what people believe is a historical fact in the same way that an actual event is. What is valuable in both oral history and historical folklore is the events and phenomena brought up by the narrator as well as their interpretation.² There are always *we* and *the others* (or *they*) in narration.

It is possible to analyse the People's Archive memoirs telling of the 1920s and 30s by theme and to find repetitive contentual features. The majority of the memoirs deal with forms of power and resistance. Common themes in the memoirs are demonstrations, strikes, court trials and political imprisonment. Photographs and objects made during political imprisonment also contain memories and act as communication. There are some legends giving hints to objects. One example is a pipe which is not an ordinary one, but the pipe named *Torpedo* made in prison in 1939 as an anniversary gift to Otto Wille Kuusinen. The name *Torpedo* refers to a poem by him (1919). This object is full of grotesque humour. The bowl of the pipe is like a pig's head (the name of the president in Finland 1939 was Svinhufvud, transl. Pig's head) with a small Bible in his mouth. This pipe was made in secret by skilled workmen and it survived many cell searches according to the memoirs.

1 Alan Dundes, Folkideas as Units of Worldview, in Américo Paredes & Richard Bauman (eds.): *Toward New Perspectives in Folklore*. American Folklore Society. (Austin & London: University of Texas Press, 1972) pp. 93-103; W.T. Jones, World Views: Their Nature and Their Function, *Current Anthropology* vol. 13:1 February 1972 pp. 79-91.

2 Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories. Form and Meaning in Oral History*. (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press. Suny Series in Oral and Public History, 1991).

Some memoirs also tell of various persons, for example the writer Elvi Sinervo, the elocutionist Elli Tompuri, the writer-editor Jarno Penanen, the judge Eino Pekkala and his wife Mary Pekkala, who were active in aid organizations for political prisoners, or the seamstress Martta Koskinen, who was charged with crimes against the state and was executed in the autumn of 1944.³ There are references in the memoirs, for example, to Toivo Antikainen, one of the founding members of the Finnish Communist Party whose authority was based in his activities in Soviet Karelia. Antikainen died in an accident in 1941 and his life was recounted in Soviet Karelia both as a modern epic based on the oral Kalevala metre epic and as a cherished written tradition.⁴

In clarifying the culture of contestation in the memoirs, I examine manifestations of power and resistance which appear in memoirs depicting the 1920s and 30s. The themes of these memoirs are 1) narratives from childhood, experiences of 1918, motives for participation in the labour movement; 2) narratives of open resistance, that is, descriptions of public demonstrations on May Day, Red Day or Anti-War Day (August 1), on the Three L's Day (Lenin, Luxemburg, Liebknecht), of demonstrations against the death penalty as well as other public demonstrations, on International Youth Day and Women's Day, for example. Public resistance is also reflected in stories of job strikes and prison strikes organized by political prisoners, the singing of labour songs as well as the display of the colour red or Red symbolism; 3) narratives of covert resistance, circumvention of the law or opposition to it, which were expressed in descriptions of May Day or other labour movement holiday celebrations in Hämeenlinna and Tammissaari prisons, the holding of illegal meetings during such general celebrations as name days, birthdays, weddings and engagement parties, the distribution of banned literature or flyers, jokes and humour as well as the humming or whistling of labour songs; 4) narratives of power which are found in descriptions of the working climate, of unemployment, of the black lists kept by employers, and of violence and house searches carried out by the police.

In the narrative memoirs concerning the 1920s and 30s what is central is the motives for involvement in the labour movement. These

3 A book has been written about Martta Koskinen, see Olle Leino, *Martta Koskisen tapaus*. (Helsinki: Tammi, 1976).

4 See Esa Alin, 'Hihti armas Antikainen'. Neuvosto-Karjalan uusaiheisesta epiikasta, in Irma-Riitta Järvinen & Jyrki Pöysä & Sinikka Vakimo (eds.): *Monikasvoinen folklore*. (Helsinki: University of Helsinki Department of Folklore. Publications no. 8, 1988) pp. 49-63; See Uljas Vikström, *Toiska. Kertomus Toivo Antikaisen elämästä* (Helsinki: Kansankulttuuri, 1975).

come to the fore in stories of childhood, experiences of 1918, difficulties in making a living, unemployment and looking for work, and in principles and ideals. The memoirs reveal clear conceptions of what it is to be a good worker.

In many cases the narrator's motives for involvement in the illegal communist party are traceable to childhood experiences. For example:

As far back as I can remember, I was aware of the class boundaries which prevailed in my home village and of the inequality which reigned. Our family belonged to the under-class of the village, my mother had been just an ordinary maid and my father a farmhand, whose destinies came together, and as a result my life began. (Male born 1911.)

The activities were also based on the principle of obligation, as in the following:

276

When I joined the Finnish Communist Party in the spring of 1928, it was not a decision made on the spur of the moment but the culmination of the upbringing I had already received as a child. My father was a cottager and a socialist and together with a neighbour subscribed to three daily people's newspapers for his family to read. Even before the moment I made my decision the idea had already had time to engrave itself so firmly and clearly in my mind that there was no need for a 'Garden of Gethsemane' struggle – the answer was already clear. (Male born 1901.)

The year 1918 usually comes up in the memoirs directly, but sometimes it appears indirectly as well. The narrators often absorbed political influences from outside the home sphere, from those at work who had been former Red Guards or from the labour movement's older generation:

I fell in with a group of so-called Red Guards from the time of my youth and gradually this labour movement issue, its principles and what it was all about, became clearer and clearer. (Male born 1905.)

In a large number of memoirs the ideological influences of the childhood home and the experiences of 1918 are explained as motives for political involvement.

The self-image which arises from the memoirs, in other words the ideal of the good worker, is interesting here. A good worker is also a communist, whose characteristics are industriousness, honesty, civility, diligence in studies, courage, perseverance, modesty, prudence, atheism, as well loyalty to the party and to one's comrades. Heikki Luostarinen has compared descriptions of Finnish qualities to those of Russians which appeared in the Finnish right-wing press between 1941 and 1944, and has claimed that at their most extreme, the differences between the depictions of Finns and Russians form sets of dichotomies: slavery/independence, lack of culture/civilization. In descriptions of the Russians' uncultured nature, they are immoral, uncivilized, apathetic, dirty, drunkards, etc. These characterizations were also used in White propaganda against the Finnish Reds in 1918.⁵ What is interesting with regard to perceived Finnish, Finnish Communist and Russian characteristics is that Finnish and Finnish Communists defined themselves in much the same way. The only and apparently decisive difference was atheism. Central to the propaganda of the Whites in Civil War 1918 as well as in the 1920s and 30s was the identification of the Finnish Reds and later Communists with the Russians and thus with lawlessness, revolution, socialism, internationalism and atheism.⁶ What was at issue was the construction of a negative stereotype.

The self-characterizations of Finnish Reds and Communists were quite similar with respect to bourgeoisie ideals. There is no information concerning how Finnish Communists viewed the Russians. It is possible to gather only a few examples from the memoirs, but even these have been influenced more by impressions of the Soviet Union of that period than by views of the Russian people. The narrators' impressions are quite positive, stressing the superiority of the Socialist system over that of Finland.

Those two years (1933-35) in Moscow were the best time of my life, it was amazing that one could eat as much food as one was able. (Female born 1907.)

5 See Heikki Luostarinen, *Perivihollinen. Suomen oikeistolehdistön Neuvostoliittoa koskeva viholliskuva sodassa 1941-44: tausta ja sisältö*. (Tampere: Vastapaino, 1988) pp. 388-401. This phenomenon also involves fear, linked to prejudice. According to Michel Foucault, we can see in the fear felt toward the 'folk', who were labelled as criminals and revolutionaries at the beginning of the 19th century, the myth of a barbarian, immoral, and outlawed social class. According to this myth, crime was characteristic of this particular social class. See Michel Foucault, *Tarkkailta ja rangaista* (Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison). (Helsinki: Otava, 1980) p. 311.

6 See Luostarinen, p. 419.

The party sent me to a course in the Autumn of 1932 ... We went to Moscow via Leningrad. I still remember the house where we lived and studied. It was quite an interesting time. We went to concerts, the opera and to the ballet, got to know many museums and went to the movies quite often. On this trip we also saw Lenin's mausoleum ... We also watched the wonderful May Day parade in the Red Square, in which the Red Army marched together with the workers. The parade lasted many hours. That May Day made an impression on us. (Male born 1907.)

The significance of food, artistic experiences and collective occasions for the narrators is clear from the examples. They were ordinary young working-class people from Finland where their collective activities were considered illegal, during the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The memoirs crystallized people's various personal characteristics in phrases or metaphors which come close to being similes.⁷ For example, in describing a trustworthy person, the narrator could characterize her as 'the girl was all principles' or in describing idealism, one could say 'he/she never let the fire in the kindling go out'. The concept of trust is often repeated in the memoirs. The trustworthiness of a comrade is seen to be an important fundamental. In the next example the narrator describes a learning experience from her childhood:

278

With each other we learned to be friends whom we could trust. We were able to say again and again to anyone who tried to break that trust: 'ottaja, antaja, kananpaskan kantaja (taker, giver, one who carries chicken shit).' (Female born 1916.)

In the memoirs there are numerous narratives concerning dishonest persons. They have a basis in reality since, particularly in the 1930s, the police paid informants to infiltrate the working-class youth groups.⁸

7 Donald Davidson has discussed the difference between metaphor and simile as well as their significance in an interesting manner, see Donald Davidson, *Mitä metaforat merkitsevät*, in Arto Haapala & Markus Lammenranta (eds.): *Kauneudesta kauhuun. Kirjoituksia taidefilosofiasta*. (Helsinki: Gaudeamus, 1993) pp. 197-218.

8 Jukka Rislakki, *Maan alla. Vakoilua, vastarintaa ja urkintaa Suomessa 1941-1944*. (Helsinki: Love-kirjat, 1985) p. 165; Kimmo Rentola, *Kenen joukoissa seisot? Suomalainen kommunismi ja sota 1937-1945*. (Juva: WSOY, 1994) pp. 374-422, 514-516, 531-535.

KUVA 16.

279

Annunciation Day (March 24) was celebrated by working-class youth as a day for education and agitation as well as an anti-religion day in the 1920s and early 1930s. After the criminalization of communist activities it was celebrated as Youth Day and Anti-War Day. Pictured here are members of the young workers' study groups on their way to celebrate Annunciation Day in the Toivo workers' hall in South Pirkkala in 1928. (People's Archives, Helsinki)

The narrators were forced to ponder the concept of honesty when they chose to be a member of an illegal party. The matter is recounted in the memoirs as for example as follows:

I remember how, as I lay in the bunk of my prison cell, I contemplated how Vuoksi from the Secret Police had stressed the concept of honesty. What is honesty, really? I had promised to the Finnish Communist Party when I joined, that they could trust me. I had promised never to inform on any of my comrades, I had promised not to speak of my own or others' activities. If I was now to be honest in the way that the Secret Police wanted, then I would in fact be a traitor. And while I pondered the matter, I decided that there are two kinds of honesty: honesty to the party and the working-class, which I

had to uphold, and the honesty of the bourgeoisie and Secret Police, which meant betraying the party, as well as my own and my comrades' activities. (Female born 1907.)

The inner features of these memoirs presented above are just some examples fundamental to the central theme of the memoirs, power and resistance.

Because considerable limits were placed on civil freedoms, in other words, the freedom of assembly, freedom to form unions, freedom of speech and personal freedoms, a need for covert resistance arose. E.P. Thompson and James C. Scott calls this *everyday forms of resistance*. It is associated with the 'little' cultural tradition, with folk culture, which refers to the individual features of popular world view. The term 'great' tradition, that is, the opposite of the 'little' tradition, refers on the other hand to learned high culture, to the culture of the larger society. The great and little traditions are in a dialectic relationship with one another.⁹ At issue is a culture of contestation, in which one's own tradition takes centre stage. Its purpose is to combat the dominant culture. At the symbolic level, folklore says much more than the dominant elite will admit, or give it credit for.¹⁰ Eric Hobsbawm has in fact pointed out that the elite's refusal to understand is one form of class struggle.¹¹

280

Narrators

I have examined memoirs connected to the 1920s and 30s from 113 narrators: 50 women and 63 men. The narrators wrote in response to a questionnaire from the Finnish Communist Party's (SKP) historical committee, a fact which also structured their narratives. The memoirs can be classified as a tradition organized by the labour movement.

9 See Robert Redfield, *Peasant and Culture. An Anthropological Approach to Civilization*. (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1956) pp. 76-104; James Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance. Hidden Transcripts*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Seppo Knuutila, *Kansanhuumorin mieli. Kaskut maailmankuvan aineksena*. (Finnish Literature Society: Helsinki, 1992) pp. 69-70. Compare also Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms. The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980) pp. xviii-xix, 50-51, 126.

10 Luigi Lombardi-Satriani, "Folklore as Culture of Contestation", *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, 1-2/1974 vol. XI pp 100-118; Scott, p. 198.

11 ¹¹ Eric Hobsbawm, "Peasants and Politics", *Journal of Peasants Studies* I (1):13/1973 p. 13.

Many of the questionnaire's respondents recounted only what was asked of them and what they were expected to recount. But there are also exceptions to this:

I have not even tried to base my memoirs on particular facts or dates. I have picked out those things which I have experienced myself or participated in, just as they have been preserved in my memory and have come to mind. A vignette of that period, at which time in our country:

‘There was no justice,
or they possessed justice
whose wallets were full of gold.
Accursed land, where the poor belonged
nowhere but in prison.’
Santeri Mäkelä, from the poem ‘Jaakko Ilkka’.
(Male born 1911.)

All the narrators were involved in labour organization activities, and there is a strong sense of unity and collective strength in the memoirs. Albrecht Lehmann has in fact interpreted this type of narrative as one which meets a need for group solidarity, in which such solidarity is not only repeatedly mentioned, but actually created through this repetition.¹² The focus on partisan group activity in the memoirs can be explained by the nature of the questionnaire, its purpose being to gather material for a history of the party. The narrators felt a need to emphasize a difficult but brilliant past. It has been claimed that in places where the labour movement has no hope of changing the social order, there is no need to glorify the past.¹³ The greater part of the research material was gathered in the 1960s when the labour movement was at its strongest. From the nature of the collection it is understandable that aspects of private life are almost completely obscured, this including personal matters and problems, sexuality or

281

12 Albrecht Lehmann, “Erzählen eigener Erlebnisse im Alltag. Tatbestände, Situationen, Funktionen”, *Zeitschrift für Volkskunde* II 1978 pp. 198-215; see also David Middleton & Derek Edwards (eds.), *Collective Remembering*. (London: Routledge, 1990).

13 Marianne Debouzy 1986: In search of working-class memory: some questions and a tentative assessment, p. 272, cites Marc Vuilleumier's footnotes from “Organisations ouvrières et mémoire populaire”, *Colloque du Creusot*, mimeographed paper p. 3. See also Tauno Saarela, *Suomalaisen kommunismin synty 1918-1923*. (Helsinki: KSL, 1996) pp. 9-10.

the use of alcohol.¹⁴ Nonetheless it is possible to find emotional expression in the memoirs.

I have compared the professional differences between the narrators and the situation they describe for themselves in the 1930s and their situation when the memoirs were collected in 1969 in order to obtain a clear idea of the changes in their social status. Ninety percent mentioned the nature of their work or profession during the period covered by the memoirs. The fact that they changed jobs made determining of the nature of their work more difficult, since the narrator often listed many different workplaces in the course of his/her recollections. Nonetheless I have concluded that over half (57%) were factory or construction workers in their youth, the next most common group being shop assistants or domestic help (21%). During the memoir collection period in the 1960s, 49% of the narrators were involved in factory and construction work. Office workers and organization officials made up 23% of the narrators in the 1960s, a category of narrators which had not even existed in the 1920s and 30s. These numbers allow us to conclude that the social position of some of the narrators rose when they transferred from traditional working-class jobs to office work, for example, as party officials. The positions of the narrators have an effect on what they tell and what they do not.

282

Ninety-five (84%) of the narrators were members of the illegal SKP during the 1920s and 30s. Sixteen of them joined the party after the Second World War and two of them did not belong at all, or at least their membership was not evident from the memoirs. Besides membership of an illegal party most of the narrators had personal experience of collective public activities in the 1920s and 30s.

The membership and position of the narrators in the SKP during the collection period of the 1960s is interesting in that it forms a basis for determining whether they belonged to the leadership of the labour movement or to its rank and file membership. Of the narrators, 112 (98%) stated that they belonged to the SKP in the 1960s. The majority of these (92) were ordinary rank and file members. Nineteen were members of the party active as organization officials and members of Parliament. Of these, women's participation was one percentage point higher than that of men. With respect to the material, then, we can speak of the memoirs as those of rank and file labour movement members.

14 This is a characteristic feature of workers' memoirs, see Debouzy, p. 267.

The age distribution of the narrators is interesting because the narrator's age in the Civil War of 1918 reveals his/her proximity to the events of that year. Eighty-eight were over ten years of age in the Civil War, and over half were under twenty. Twenty-five were under ten years of age in 1918. All came from a 'red' background, that is, the narrator him/herself, mother, father, grandparents or some other relative took part in the activities of the Reds in the Civil War.

Over half of the narrators (56%) were 20-29 years of age in 1930, so that the majority describe the period of their youth. In 1928 over 85% of those sentenced for crimes against the state or government were between 18 and 39 years of age.¹⁵ The range comes close to the age distribution of the narrators discussed above.

In the People's Archives material, nearly half of the narrators were 65 to 75 years old, only eleven being under retirement age. Memoirs relating to the 1920s and 30s focus on the southern provinces of Finland. In 1928 the Communist party had contacts in approximately 200 parishes. The busiest illegal activity was in the environs of industrial cities. In the countryside activity was concentrated in parishes situated along railways.¹⁶ The geographical distribution of the narrators in the 1960s was concentrated within the same regions, which indicates that the collection questionnaire distributed through the district organizations reached those persons actively involved in political activity in the southern part of the country. The concentration of the narrators in the south can be explained in part on the basis of the 1918 front lines. Their place of residence or work meant that narrators often had personal experiences connected to the locations of events and memorials, not only in the Civil War but also in the 1920s and 30s.

The socio-historical context of the memoirs

The political situation in Finland at the end of the 1920s and 30s was, difficult in many respects from the point of view the workers. Their activities were under official surveillance and restricted by various sanctions.¹⁷ Memoirs of working-class life and culture in the 1920s and

15 Ilkka Hakalehto, *Suomen kommunistinen puolue ja sen vaikutus poliittiseen ja ammatilliseen työväenliikkeeseen 1918-1928*. (Porvoo: WSOY, 1966) p. 141.

16 Hakalehto, pp. 128-129.

17 See Juha Siltala, *Lapuanliike ja kyyditykset 1930*. (Helsinki: Otava, 1985); Pauli Kettunen, *Poliittinen liike ja sosiaalinen kollektiivisuus. Tutkimus sosialidemokratiasta ja ammattiyhdistysliikkeestä Suomessa 1918-1930*.

30s are especially important because the contribution of personal source materials is largely silent in the history of this period, with only glimmers here and there. This is due to the fact that it was common practice for politically active persons to destroy their own letters and other personal documents for fear that their homes would be searched.

Workers' memoirs after the Civil War in 1918 reveal a strong spirit of opposition toward the dominant social order. I have already observed that workers constructed their own tradition in which criticism was directed toward those in authority, particularly priests, police and teachers. Narratives in which the legal system, educational system and Church are criticized and in which their values are called into question are frequent. These memoirs express the social attitudes of the workers toward official authority and violence.¹⁸

On a large scale, society can be roughly divided into the rulers and the ruled, where the rulers use power and the ruled may or may not resist. The resistance represented in the memoirs is bound up with power, in that its nature is defined by the nature of the power it opposes.

In the workers' memoirs which deal with the 1920s and 30s, the central themes are legal and illegal organization activities as well as prison experiences. The use of physical force affected workers above all through work, their only means of subsistence. The pressure of the right-wing Lapua movement at workplaces was manifested in the so-called 'industrial peace laws', which guaranteed legal protection to the strike-breaking organizations of employers.¹⁹ Memoirs describing endless job-hunting, unemployment and employers' black lists demonstrate how discrimination was implemented on a daily basis. Workers were encouraged to join the Civil Guard, and joining often allowed them to avoid unemployment for at least a short time:

The Lapua movement was active in our parish and the engineer, Kuuskoski, among others, was in charge. Joining the Civil Guard or the Women's Auxiliary Services was a prerequisite for

Zusammenfassung: Politische Bewegung and soziale Kollektivität. Eine Untersuchung über die Sozialdemokratien und die Gewerkschaftsbewegung in Finnland 1918-1930. (Jyväskylä: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1986); See also Saarela 1996.

18 Ulla-Maija Peltonen, *Punakapinan muistot. Tutkimus työväen muistelukerronnan muotoutumisesta vuoden 1918 jälkeen*. Summary: Memories of the Civil War. A study of the formation of the Finnish working-class narrative tradition after 1918. (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 1996).

19 See Jorma Kalela, *Työttömyys 1900-luvun suomalaisessa yhteiskuntapolitiikassa*. (Helsinki: Valtion painatuskeskus, 1989) p. 95; see also Kettunen 1986.

getting a job; even older workers were pressured, or more accurately, ordered, to join. A few joined purely out of fear. (Female born 1906.)

The issue nonetheless brought conflicts: many refused to join the Civil Guard for reasons of principle and thus lost their wage-earning capacity altogether at the start of the 1930s. The following typical example reveals not only discrimination but active job-hunting across the country. According to the memoir, at the end of the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s people frequently had to move from one locale to another in search of work.

Memoirs describing situations in which politically active workers lose their employment opportunities altogether at the start of the 1930s are numerous. According to the memoirs a good worker was one who was patriotic, but not a Civil Guard, as the employers demanded, since the Civil Guard was interpreted in the memoirs as a betrayal of the common cause of the working-class.

Violence against workers who were demonstrating or who had been imprisoned for political reasons can be seen in many memoirs:

In 1921 the International Youth Day was held at the Workers' Hall. We were supposed to have a parade, too, and then the mounted police rode into the mass of people who had gathered in front of the Hall and in its yard, scattering them. The galloping riders ran people down. It was the first powerful experience after the National War, in which the authorities launched an attack on the left-wing workers' movements. My mother, too, was present on that occasion. (Female born 1903.)

285

Conscious harassment by police and official authorities is revealed in many memoirs and in contributions to labour newspapers, in which workers are encouraged to demonstrate in the streets, prohibitions notwithstanding.

In the memoirs the forms taken by the ideological use of power are house searches, censorship, court trials and interrogations. The memoirs tell how, especially in the 1930s, the police conducting house searches were looking for marxist literature, for example Karl Kautsky's *Marxin taloudelliset opit* (Economic Doctrines of Marx, translated into the Finnish in 1910), Kautsky's *Sosialismin historiaa I-II* (The history of socialism, translated 1922) and Bukharin's and Preobrazhensky's *Kommunismin aapinen* (The ABC of Communism, translated 1921), *Vankina valkoisen vallan* (A prisoner of White power,

1922) or Alex Halonen's *Suomen luokkasota* (Finnish class war, 1928) printed in the U.S., and naturally, forbidden Communist party leaflets. To counterbalance the threat of book seizure, people put political texts inside false covers. For example, Pastor Johannes Uoti's *Kotiopas terveydenhoidossa* (Home manual of health care, 1912) might contain Bukharin's and Preobrazhensky's *Kommunismien aapinen* (The ABC of Communism), or *Raamatun tutkielmia* (Studies from the Bible) might include writings from Marx, Engels or Lenin.²⁰

Public and covert resistance

Workers' resistance was manifested both in public and covert, or everyday forms. Public forms of resistance in the area of material power were demonstrations as well as strikes and boycotts organized within trade union movement circles. One case of public resistance which attracted attention was the Finnish Trade Organization's attempt at a general strike, whose purpose was to give support to the hunger-striking political prisoners in the enforced labour institution at Tammissaari. Although the strike failed, it received publicity.

286

Forms of public resistance in the realm of ideological power were for example painting slogans and distributing hand-written flyers by putting them on poles, street lamps, paling fences, trees, house walls, rock faces, stones, or sometimes leaving a whole pile of flyers in some obvious place so that passers-by could take copies. (Male born 1896 and male born 1907). Distributing flyers could also be done in the following way:

At the beginning of August, 1931 - I remember it was Red Day, and the party organized a demonstration at Hakaniemi square. Our group also prepared flyers for distribution. Two large firework rockets were purchased and a bundle of flyers was attached to the ends of the rockets. Eino's and Väinö's job was to fire the rockets, one from the southern end of the square and another from a building to the rear. There was a third, except it didn't ignite. At 19 hours precisely, both rockets lit up the sky and when the rockets exploded, the flyers spread all over the place. The Secret Police didn't catch even a single rocket shooter. (Male born 1900.)

²⁰ There are a number of books with false covers in the People's Archives museum collection.

Forms of public resistance in the realm of ideological power included demonstrations which propagandized the ideology of the international labour movement. The labour movement tried to establish its own holidays, frequently mentioned in the memoirs.²¹ The Red Orphan celebration began to be celebrated in 1921, on July 1. Aside from collecting material aid for the Red orphans and their families, the purpose of the holiday was to strengthen the Reds' sense of solidarity ideologically. Every January starting in the early 1920s there was an attempt made to observe a memorial day for martyrs, which was also known as the 2 Ls or 3 Ls (Lenin, Luxemburg, Liebknecht) Day. Demonstrations were organized for International Women's Day, an anti-religion day and the Anniversary of the Paris Commune in March, an anti-war or Red Day in August, International Youth Day in September and the Anniversary of the Revolution in October. On labour movement holidays people also visited the graves of Reds in defiance of a prohibition. Demonstrations were also organized on Independence Day, as well as against the Lapua laws in 1930 and against the Death Penalty in 1935.²²

The singing or whistling of labour songs²³ such as the *Internationale*, *Barrikaadimarssi* (March of the Barricades), *Vapaa Venäjä* (Free Russia), *Varshavjanka*, *Punakaartilaisten marssi* (March of the Red Guards) was one form of resistance. Open resistance was also expressed in young Communist song groups, which were most popular in the winter of 1929-30.²⁴

287

Although accused myself, I acted as the defence lawyer. The young people of Kurikka had performed an anti-religious song at their social evening, 'Greetings from Hell', published in a

21 Of the culture of international labour festivals, see Wolfgang Jacobeit, *Volkskunde und arbeiterkultur*, in Helmut Fielhauer & Olaf Bockhorn (Hrsg.): *Die andere Kultur. Volkskunde, Sozialwissenschaften und Arbeiterkultur. Ein Tagungsbericht.* (Wien: Europaverlag, 1982) pp. 21-23.

22 See Tauno Saarela, *Työväen juhlapäivät* (Labour festivals), *a memo 1993 in People's Archives*; Saarela 1996, pp. 246-248.

23 Numerous working-class song booklets were printed in the 1920s with names like 'Revolutionary songs', 'The proletarian song book', 'Songs of the struggle', etc. In the 'Red song book' published in 1928, for example, the songs are grouped under the titles Songs of the Finnish revolution, Flag songs, Songs of the Russian revolution, Working-class songs on different subjects, Youth organization songs, Funeral songs, Prison songs, and Russian folk songs.

24 See for example Vesa Kurkela, *Taistojen tiellä soiteltiin - ja soiton tahdissa tanssittiin. Varkautelaiset työväeniltamat ja niiden musiikki työväen osakulttuurin kaudeksi.* (Helsinki: Työväenmusiikki-instituutti, 1983) pp. 265-272.

Finnish-American workers' song book. This provoked fury among the Pietists in Ostrobothnia and the young people were charged with blasphemy. I was asked to be the legal advisor and I tried to do my best. I began my defence speech by pointing out that the song was in fact sung just as it had been printed in a book which had been legally printed and distributed in Finland, in fact, so that there did not seem to be anything illegal about it. I had only got this far when the judge slammed his fist on the table and roared: 'Long speeches will not help here!' It was clear that the young people would be convicted for their performance. (Male born 1903.)

The Secret Police considered the songs of the youth groups a very serious matter, for example, in 1935 the Vaasa Secret Police confiscated, among other things, the songs *Pikimusta hakaristi* (Pitch-black swastika) and *Kladiaattorien marssi* (March of the Gladiators), which made reference to the Civil War: 'I compose this little song/about the revolutionary years/when many men fell/before the red flags:/They stood fearlessly against the oppressor/When the armed guards, those White mad dogs/started the war's horror.'²⁵

288

The international 'Red Day' publicized by Comintern for August 1, 1929 attracted attention. Although the Minister of the Interior definitively forbade the observance of Red Day that year, hundreds of people celebrated it around Finland. The following is an example of how it was observed in Helsinki:

Red Day on the first Sunday of August was an anti-war day. On this day anti-war events and street demonstrations were organized. I remember Red Day in 1929. Illegal leaflets invited the masses to the anti-war demonstrations at Siltasaari, on Hakaniemi. Siltasaari street and Hakaniemi were swarming with people. The speakers and choir groups were ready. Songs resounded from various parts. The Secret Police and police departments had also prepared for Red Day. The mounted police attacked the crowds with truncheons. People were struck with the truncheons, and the horses, rearing on their hind legs, were also used to scare the people. The mounted police attacked in the direction of the young singing groups, but the youths stopped singing and moved to another spot from where the song 'The despoilers crack their whips on our backs' could once again be heard ... When the police again launched their

25 The material confiscated by the Detective Central Police, People's Archives.

attack in the direction of the voices, the group was already somewhere else. Everybody walking in the street, not only just the demonstrators, fell victim to the police truncheons. (Female born 1907.)

During the period between the wars, that day was regarded by the authorities as a dangerous situation of unrest promoted by the left.²⁶

Laughter is an obvious form of both overt and covert resistance, and in the memoirs it is quite often directed at power and the judicial system.²⁷ Humorous situations are often described in the memoirs, and in these situations absurdity is born of the perception of contradiction. In the following memoir youths are accused of criminal activities against the state:

When all of us had been questioned, we were called up to the highest room, to the judges' bench and the sentences were read out. The boys who had been arrested in the provinces had made a pact to sing Internationale when the sentence pronounced, and so they began to sing the Internationale in a loud voice. It was a terrible situation - the judges leapt to their feet and remained standing during the whole song, just as one is supposed to, and then there was also an old grey-haired guard who ran back and forth shushing everyone to keep quiet ... More guards were called to the scene and they forced us out of the chamber. It was certainly a miracle that we didn't receive an additional punishment for singing. (Female born 1903.)

289

Narrators often mention having had many a good laugh when recalling certain events. Laughter is tied to power in a complex way. It can be adjusted according to socio-cultural norms, since it is often clearly associated with deprecatory and negative allusions.²⁸ The memoirs tell how, for instance, laughing in prison could result in punishment. Laughter can erase fear and respect for power and it is an essential part of the construction of fearlessness, without which a realistic understanding of the world would be impossible.²⁹

26 See Tuija Hietaniemi, *Lain vartiossa. Poliisi Suomen politiikassa 1917-1948*. (Helsinki: Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1992) p. 139.

27 See Knuuttila, who has pointed out that folk humour and folk laughter express particular attitudes, and as functional forms they are linked in complex ways to the culture of contestation.

28 Knuuttila, pp. 100-101; Mikhail Bakhtin, *Kirjallisuuden ja estetiikan ongelmia*. (Moskova: Progress, 1979) p. 486.

29 See Bakhtin, p. 485.

According to the memoirs a common motto was that ‘the deed should be seen but not the doers’. Covert resistance comes to the fore clearly in memoirs of political imprisonment.³⁰ Between 1929 and 1933, the police kept people’s activities under close surveillance, through house searches among other things. Workers, however, arranged secret meetings in the woods, on islands, in out-buildings, barns, cellars or disguised them as part of somebody’s name day or birthday, engagement party or wedding. On these occasions they discussed the political situation or opportunities for action, or held a celebration in honour of the release of a political prisoner. It was also easy to meet on Christmas or New Year.

Covert resistance in the area of material power is especially manifested in circumvention of the law. According to the memoirs political prisoners came to an agreement among themselves concerning work norms, which represented resistance to the prison’s strictly proscribed arrangement.

I interpret such resistance, which is manifested in the use of symbols as well as forms of humour and parody, as relating to ideological power. Hate and aggression as well as symbolic carnivalism are also forms of covert resistance. Finnish workers’ humour, which can be either open or hidden, is especially apparent in narrative:

Between 1919 and 1920 a fight for freedom of religion was proclaimed and people refused to go to church and hear the service. The result of this was a conditional punishment for everyone ... The priest tried to circumvent the law by organizing religious ‘performances’ but the prisoners caught such a severe fit of coughing and all sorts of other commotion during these performance occasions that the priest thought it wiser to end his ‘performances’. It is amusing to remember how the priest urged the guards to maintain order, and the truncheons did their best, but the prisoners were poorly clothed and it was spring and the air was damp, so there was nothing

30 Ulla-Maija Peltonen (ed.), *Naisia turvasäilössä. Poliittisena naisvankina Suomessa 1930-1944* (Female political prisoners in Finland 1930-1944). (Helsinki: Art House, 1989); Kirsti Salmi-Niklander, “‘Siskoni kohtasin varjossa yön’”. Alistamisen ja vastarinnan keinot poliittisten naisvankien muistitiedon valossa”, *Näistutkimus*, 1/1989. Salmi-Niklander has examined methods of subordination and resistance within the prison community in the light of female political prisoners’ memoirs.

that could be done for the 'cough', when about 400 men were stricken by an attack of it at the same time. (Male born 1897.)

The colour red has a strong symbolic charge and it acquires a special significance in the memoirs. Red is obviously associated with the flag of the labour movement. The symbolism of the red flag consists of both power, strength, and freedom, and attention-getting, warning and mobilization. At least at the end of the 19th century it was an emblem of struggle and often the symbol of the new order for the workers.³¹ The colour red in clothing tended to scandalize, both in the Civil War 1918 and in 1930, as those who wore it have also attested:

We came to Kotka and there I met our Lahti comrades who had been imprisoned, including Martta Koskinen. Because Martta was tall, her height attracted attention. ... in addition, she wore those Red Guard pants and a red wool coat ... people took offence at the coat and those pants, Red Guard pants. The ladies of the gentry took pleasure in coming to look at us hungry prisoners, and Martta walked around like a flag with her red wool coat on. (Female born 1901.)

On May Day morning my mother woke me, crying, and called me to the yard, pointing out Viipuri castle. The red flag had been torn from the tower and some White was sitting there. First I cried with mother but then I ran into the house and changed into a red dress and went with my mother to bring the children home. (Female born 1902.)

291

A red piece of clothing, shirt, tie, or head-covering was viewed by the authorities as a dangerous symbol of solidarity and resistance.

Legislation followed the situation immediately, for example, on the eve of May Day (April 27, 1934) the so-called flag decree was handed down, in which 'a flag, which by presentation of an image or on account of its colour or any other reason, breaks the law, offends against good manners or disrupts the general order, is not to be displayed.' The decree was nonetheless circumvented; for example, in Jyväskylä people marched without flags, carrying only the flag poles. A common view in the memoirs was that justice was class justice; in other words

31 See for example Pirjo Kaihovaara, Työväen lippukulttuurin symboleista, in Ulla-Majja Peltonen & Kirsti Stenvall (eds.): *Myytit ja symbolit. Kirjoituksia suomalaisista kulttuuritulkinnosta*. (Myths and Symbols). Väki Voimakas 5. (Tampere: Työväen historian ja perinteen tutkimuksen seura, 1991) pp. 47-58.

it was biased. Despite the prohibition, red scarves, flags or insignia were reserved for the forbidden demonstrations. According to the memoirs red flags were secretly hung in visible places, particularly for May Day. Preparations for May Day in 1932 took place in Kotka in the following manner:

It was decided to attach a red flag to the smokestack of Enso Gutzeit's factory. The women bought thin white linen for the flag, which was then dyed red. One did not dare buy red cloth, because the Secret Police would then have had an easy time tracking it down by asking the cloth shops who had bought it and how much. Small red banners were also made which were attached to one end of a string, and the other end was attached to a stone which was thrown over the telephone wires so that it swayed in the wind. Flyers were mimeographed and taken to places of work and other spots. The flag was taken to Enso Gutzeit's or Norska's smokestack in the early morning hours ... The flag could be seen from the whole of Kotka and quite a bit farther as well, and it was especially admired by the dock workers and sailors. (Male born 1900.)

292

Another example in which red had a strong symbolic charge relates to the collective tradition which all women prisoners were familiar with. The setting in the memoirs was the Hämeenlinna women's prison:

As I recall, in 1930 we had prepared ourselves for May Day by, among other things, getting washed and doing our hair so that it was very attractive. It was decided that each of us would wear our scarves on our shoulders in the same way and tie our aprons in the same way in front. When we went out the situation was completely different from normal, when we usually made a commotion and the guard had to order us ... not to speak. But now the guard didn't give any orders, we walked in pairs - Mirkku Hänninen had her little daughter in prison with her and relatives had brought the girl everything in red: socks, slippers, overcoat, gloves and hat. The girl was dressed up like a firecracker. Then Katri Järvinen put the girl on her shoulder and walked in front just as if she had been carrying a flag. The guard couldn't do anything. ... The guard naturally got the point right away. Nobody uttered a sound and the spacing between us remained even (Female born 1900.)

The experience made an indelible impression on the participants and it was remembered collectively. Finally, an author inspired by the

KUVA 17.

293

Living quarters were cramped, but there was enough room for all. High spirits arose from being together and trusting in a better tomorrow. Members of young workers' study groups celebrating Christmas in the workers' hall in Kotka at four o'clock on Christmas Day morning, 1926, according to the donor of the photograph. (People's Archives, Helsinki)

story, Taisto Summanen, wrote a poem in 1963 entitled *Tarina punaisesta lipusta* (The story of the red flag). The poem has ten stanzas, three of which refer to the story of the May Day procession at Hämeenlinna prison:³²

³² The poem was published in 1963 in the collection *Lipunkantaja* (Flagbearer). (Helsinki: Kansankulttuuri, 1980) pp. 134-135.

With their heads erect,
they marched as in a parade
and a flag overhead
one woman steadfastly carried
a sweet little girl in her hands.

The girl's coat and hat
and socks, too, were red
and her cheeks had a fiery glow
like roses of crimson:

The rigid guards glared silently
Indeed, old boy, what can you do
when the masters did not think to prevent
this sort of thing with their rules.

The poem is also an example of the mutual influence of the oral and the written upon each other, here the oral has evidently influenced the written. Red and its association with labour ideals also shows up in literature.³³

294

The red tradition - labour movement folklore

Recounting childhood experience is normal in workers' memoirs just as it is in life histories. Without exception, these experiences in workers' memoirs involved feelings of humiliation and helplessness, which were caused by being Red and being poor. As far as workers' memoirs are concerned, we can speak of a community of memory, since for example the narratives of the illegal period had an obvious function in the activities of members of the Communist party and in the People's Democratic movement. Following the war, communist veterans recounted their experiences on various occasions, published their memoirs or wrote of their experiences in newspapers and

33 For example Alpo Ruuth, *Kämppä* (a novel). (Helsinki: Tammi, 1981 (1969)) pp. 253-54. When the teacher, Mr. Lumme, notices how Pena is dressed and says it would be proper to change his clothes, the boys Pena and Pera have the following conversation: I'm not going to change. I'm going to tell mother. Kalle has talked quite enough, but now he's gone too far. These are perfectly new threads, I haven't worn this red terry shirt but four or five times, it's a kind of holiday shirt, you see ... – You're wearing Commie colors. A red shirt and green dungarees. Did you have to choose green?

journals.³⁴ The lore which tells of the 1920s and 30s is in fact in a dialectic relationship with both oral and written tradition.

Worker's memoirs of the 1920s and 30s refer to real-life experiences which are in a reciprocal relationship with so-called objective reality. Alessandro Portelli has researched the memoirs gathered from interviews with Italian communist veterans in the 1970s. Central to these narratives is the 'dream of a different kind of life or history'. The narrators tell of a history which should have been different to what it was in the Italy of the 1970s. The memoirs do not tell what happened in reality, but what the narrators wished to happen. Portelli's analysis is that the central theme of Italian workers' memoirs is a lost past, which, if it had succeeded, would have enabled a different kind of history.³⁵ One can find the same nuances in the narratives of Finnish workers who were involved in union work. The memoirs tell of experiences in the 1920s and 30s from a youthful point of view. The period of youth was a time of high ideals. Nothing seemed impossible in the world of the memoirs, and this possibility was relived at the moment that the narratives were recounted in the 1960s.

The idea of justice is also central to those memoirs which tell of the 1920s and 30s. The law is commonly interpreted as the law of those in power which did not necessarily affect workers. Justice is seen as class justice, which from the workers' point of view was not right. In the narrators' minds, working to advance the workers' cause within the party was lawful, even though it was, in fact, officially prohibited. The narrators say, for example, that:

We knew we were doing work necessary to the labour movement ..., we had the feeling we were in the right ..., many workers who were not involved protected the sacred cause of the party and working class. (Female born 1909, female born 1903, male born 1907.)

The types of folk concepts of justice which come up in the memoirs are reminiscent of the model defined in E.P.Thompson's *moral economy*. Thompson has made a study of hunger protests in 18th century England and has explained the moral economy of the crowd as a form

³⁴ According to Morten Thing, narration has a significant role in the Communist working-class culture of Denmark, see Morten Thing, 'At fortælle historier. Nogle spredte bemærkninger i stedet for et oplæg'. *Seminarappret vid tredje nordiske arbetarkulturseminariet* i Tammerfors Finland 4.-6.9.1989.

³⁵ See Portelli and Knuutila, p. 263.

of peasant mentality in which communal rights are more important than anonymous economic principles, since the hunger revolts of the peasantry forced speculators and hoarders to observe fair pricing. The moral economy of the crowd was fundamentally involved with the deep-seated emotions of the impoverished, who experienced speculation as taking advantage of the plight of the poor's and thus as a gross insult.³⁶

Birgitta Skarin Frykman has further developed Thompson's model of the moral economy of the crowd in her study of workers in Gothenburg in the 1890s. In her view, this was also an important factor in the collective movements at the end of the 19th century. She sees a resemblance here to the concept of solidarity, to its significance as a spontaneous and collective activity, which was not necessarily linked to economic aims.³⁷

In the memoirs of Finnish radical working-class youth which describe the 1920s and 30s, moral demands such as justice, the right of workers to employment, housing and a dignified life were presented using various forms of resistance. Luisa Passerini, who has researched the memoirs of Italian workers concerning the period of fascism in the 1920s and 30s has characterized the memoir as an active product of meaning and interpretation. It is a verbalized reflection of individual truth and social reality. Passerini states that the background of the memoir may be an ideological dilemma linked to the narrator's past, the present socio-economic situation, or political conditions.³⁸ It is interesting that Passerini sees an opposition and power struggle

36 See E.P. Thompson, *Herremakt och folklig kultur. Socialhistoriska uppsatser*. (Stockholm: Författarförlaget, 1983) pp. 67, 72, 84, 108, 113, 117, 133-134. The phenomenon of resistance has its roots in a broader peasant culture. For example Alun Howkins and Linda Merricks have pointed out that one of the functions of the 'The Plough Play' tradition has been to call into question the general values set up by the elite; Alun Howkins & Linda Merricks, "The Ploughboy and the Plough Play", *Folk Music Journal* 2/1991 pp. 187-206.

37 Birgitta Skarin Frykman, 'Den ekonomiska moralen', in Katia Båsk & Antti Metsänkylä & Katarina Koskiranta (eds.), *Arbetarklassen i samhällets vardag. Papers on Labour History III*. (Tampere: Työväen historian ja perinteen tutkimuksen seura, 1991) pp. 109-126. Birgitta Skarin Frykman has made a study of the picture constructed by the press of workers at the end of the 19th century and concludes by saying that the negative stereotype of workers (lazy and shiftless, drunkards, with criminal tendencies, simple and in all ways ill-behaved) was an important tool and power strategy for the bourgeoisie. Frykman develops the idea of "överhetens moraliska ekonomin (the moral economy of authority) as a counterpoint to Thompson's moral economy of the crowd, representing the basis for the overarching machinery of power and subtle social morality.

38 See Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory. The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987) p. 87..

between the colours red and black in the Italian workers' narratives. In both Italy and Finland there has been a time when a colour, flag, or some other symbol was legislatively forbidden. Resistance appears in the Italian workers' memoirs in such small details as jokes, witticisms, graffiti, wearing of a red tie or the whistling of an old labour song. According to Passerini, fascism appears repeatedly in the Italian narratives as a symbiosis of laughter and violence, somewhere between Fascism and the comic.³⁹ An examination of resistance in the memoirs shows the forms of covert resistance found in Finnish and Italian workers' memoirs to be quite similar. Patrick Hutton, who has researched memoirs describing the French Revolution, sees the preservation of memory and its interpretation as bound up in practice with conflict, with the dialogue between the political and the cultural.⁴⁰

The workers' memoirs examined here which tell of the 1920s and 30s are closely linked to political activity. They tell of collective occasions and of displays of strength. They can also be interpreted as organized memoirs at the level of the party and here they had a clear aim, being linked to the party's historical agenda. Nearly all of the narrators were also party members. Some researchers have made the interesting claim that institutionalized memoirs do not help to structure collective memory, rather, they create it.⁴¹ Nonetheless an organized recollection cannot be interpreted mechanically, for it can reveal interesting concepts, both individual and collective. I have characterized the memoirs of the 1920s and 30s as a specialized branch of Red lore, since it diverges from the tradition which describes authority, in that it emphasizes the perspective of the labour movement, and the narrators are its members.

297

39 Passerini, p. 69.

40 Patrick Hutton, "The Role of Memory in the French Revolution", *History and Theory*, 1/1990 pp. 56-59.

41 See Debouzy, p. 271, cites Y. Lequin and J. Metral op. cit. *Annales*, Jan.-Feb. 1980, p. 155. Y. Lequin: "La memoire a traves le documente oral". *Conference sur les problemes de methode en historie orale, Table Ronde*, Institut d'Historie du Temps Present, June 20, 1980, p. 46

Archive Sources

People's Archives: Memoir collection & Personal collection. Narrators: Liisa Aho born 1909, Lydia Arppe born 1903, Laina Dahl born 1903, Ellen Enne born 1901, Salli Haataja born 1906, Antti Honkanen born 1900, Elina Hämäläinen born 1900, Kaisa Junttila born 1907, Emil Kulju born 1898, Arvi Laakso born 1903, Markku Lehtelä born 1901, Emmi Lehtonen born 1901, Anna-Liisa Lehtoranta born 1916, Jaakko Lehtoranta born 1911, Kerttu Matilainen born 1902, Väinö Niilo-Rämä born 1907, Arthur Rönqvist born 1897, Viljo Saastamoinen born 1900, Vilho Smolander born 1905, Reino Vaskuri born 1907, Niilo Väre born 1902.