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## **Ethnic diversity in the construction of life stories in Latvia**

In this paper we would like to introduce some questions and initial findings of the research project “Ethnic and narrative diversity in life story constructions in Latvia” (2013–2016) realised by the National Oral History (NOH) researchers’ group at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, University of Latvia. The aim of the project was to understand the significance of ethnic, gender and geographic belonging and its role in the creation of narratives and identity. To cover these issues we chose to focus on two ethnic groups residing in Latvia – Romany and Russian – these groups have different social, historical and cultural experiences, thereby allowing them to be contrasted and compared. In this article we consider how in Romany and Russian life stories the narrators’ relationships to their ethnicity is expressed and whether their tensions in society today are based on ethnicity.

The studied samples reveal narration techniques, cultural references, their layout and imagery. The main feature that will be looked at in this article is self-positioning

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within the general course of history and in the history of the defined territory. Biographical interviews facilitate the juxtaposition and comparative interpretation of cultural values, ways of belonging and the articulation of collective memory in different ethnic groups.

We provide a venue in which the nature of the dialogue between tradition and commitment can be examined and in which we can begin to identify the cultural determinants of both. This approach is based on Paul Thompson's view that "oral history is a history built around people". We also follow his suggestion that "the relationship between history and the community should not be one-sided in either direction, but rather a series of exchanges, a dialectic, between information and interpretation" (Thompson, 1989, pp. 20–21).

### **Theoretical sources of the life story approach**

Latvian society is ethnically diverse and has the largest proportion of ethnic minorities of the three Baltic States. According to the 2011 census, ethnic minorities accounted for 37.9% of the total population of Latvia (the comparable figure for Estonia is 30.3% [2015] and 15.9% for Lithuania). Russian speakers are the dominant minority, accounting for 37.2% of the population. A part of the Romany population in Latvia (particularly in Daugavpils) also speaks Russian.

Since 1992, when the NOH archive was established, the group of researchers have paid particular attention to the experiences of various ethnic groups. During fieldwork in Latvian regions, the researchers have interviewed members of various ethnic minority groups, for example, Lithuanians, Poles, Ukrainians, Jews, Russians, and Romany.

The experience we have gained in interviewing members of other ethnic groups provided the background for studying ethnic diversity and its reflection in the Latvian social landscape. At present, the NOH archive has more than 4,000 life story interviews and, as a result of our current research project, 120 focused interviews – 80 Russian and 40 Romany life history interviews – were added to the archive.

The main criterion for choosing locations was population density and dispersion (Malkki, 1992). It is assumed that research data obtained in larger centres of Romany population (Kuldīga and Talsi) may differ from the information obtained in places where only a few members of this community live (Tome, Tūja, Dundaga). For methodological purposes, Russians and Latvians living in these same locations were also interviewed, thereby preserving equivalent contextual, as well as regional, conditions.

The research sources – life stories – are considered socially constructed texts born of a dialogue between the researcher and participants of the study in a specific social

and cultural context. The life story interview principle prescribes that the interviewer proposes the narrative and maintains the biographical perspective in the construction of the narrative, but the interviewee is given full freedom in his or her choice of topic and arrangement of the narrative. This approach to an interview results in a life story that reflects the narrator's individual and collective ideas about what a life story comprises and what historical aspects it should include.

Following the acknowledgement of narration as one of the essential forms of social life, there was a turn in the 1990s in the social sciences not only towards the biographical but also the narrative approach (Czarniawska, 2000; Riessman, 2008). Researchers became interested in how people create and structure the history of their lives and how they mobilise their memories when creating a personally and socially significant version of history (Portelli, 2006; Tonkin, 1992). The linguistic and social conditions that structure the creation of narratives also became of interest. This approach allows the content and structure of the narrative as well as the relationship between the narrator and interviewer to be analysed from a synthesising perspective (thematic, textual and interpersonal levels) (Riessman, 2008). It is very important to emphasise who produces the narrative and by what means as well as the mechanisms by which they are consumed and how narratives are silenced, contested or accepted. All of these inquiries can help to describe, understand and explain important aspects of ethnic diversity and social structures in Latvia.

Life stories are considered narrative constructions whose relationship between life and its rendition in a narrative are influenced and formed by means of memory, consciousness, language, mode of communication, rules of communication, experience with other stories and knowledge of the social processes in the community. On the whole, the theoretical perspective of the study is based on the awareness that a story is not considered as just simple information about the past, but that the very framework of the story (content, form, modes of expression, etc.) contains information about the culture and society in which the narrator lives. The telling of a life story should be viewed as a symbolic border crossing between experience and language, which is a rather difficult and challenging task because, as stated by Edward Bruner: "There is a difference between life as lived, life as experienced and life as told" (Bruner, 1986, p. 6).

Among the interviews recorded during the project are some that correspond to the life story criteria as set forth by Charlotte Linde:

The first criterion for the inclusion of a story in the life story is that its evaluative point primarily be to show something about the kind of person the speaker is, rather than to demonstrate something about the way the world is. This distinction arises from how the story is constructed, not from the particular type of events narrated (Linde, 1993, pp. 21–22).

However, an evaluation of stories obtained during interviews with Romany and Russians reveals that they are very different in form and content, and not all of the interviews can be classified as life stories. But each does contain a narrative that confirms the narrator's sense of ethnic belonging.

### **Narratives and ethnic identity**

Ethnic identity through life stories can be studied in both a vertical and horizontal dimension. The horizontal dimension describes the narrator's relationship with the social environment – his or her community, other ethnic groups and other individuals. The vertical dimension refers to the relationship between generations and the transmission of memories to younger generations.

Biographical interviews concentrate on events an individual has personally experienced and that reveal to the researcher both the narrator's identity and world view as well as the manner involved in the structuring of social representation. Nira Yuval-Davis has pointed out that: "Identities are narratives, stories people tell themselves and others about who they are (and who they are not)." She continues: "Identity is fluid, always producing itself through the combined processes of being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong. This duality is often reflected in narratives of identity" (Yuval-Davis, 2011, p. 201).

When we pursue questions of personal meaning – why is it important – the connection between meaning and action is made, what individuals do in the world (behaviour) is linked to the meanings events and experiences have for them. The case-based methods are no less valid a form of inquiry than population-based, variable-centred approaches. The case-based methods grant individuals "unity and coherence through time, respecting them as subjects with both histories and intentions" (Mishler, 1996, p. 80).

The telling of and listening to life stories can serve as an impulse for understanding a culture by allowing both the differences as well as similarities to be seen. The narrator not only recounts actual events but also provides a broader cultural, social and personal context. The very structure of the story – the chosen composition, form, form of expression and use of language – also carries information about the culture and society in which the narrator lives. For example, in the summer of 2013, as we were listening to Romany life stories in Kuldīga, we often came across a choice in viewpoint between the personal "I" and the collective "we". The "we" format was used to show something different or something similar with Latvians, while "I" was sometimes used if the narrators wished to emphasise their difference from other Romany.

## **Preparation for interviews with members of another cultural and language background**

The oral history study is oriented towards becoming acquainted with members from diverse groups within the community, which is only possible with broad support from and the participation of individual volunteers. Therefore the following preparatory work was anticipated: 1) drafting of guidelines for biographical interviews; and 2) training the members of the corresponding communities in interview techniques in order to involve Romany and Russians in the interview process.

The storytelling engages an audience in the experience of the narrator. Narratives invite us as listeners, readers and viewers to enter the perspective of the narrator. Narrative analysis can examine how a skilled storyteller pulls the reader/listener into the story world – and moves the reader/listener emotionally through imaginative identification (Riessman, 2008, p. 9).

Training seminars were organised for preparing interviewers-volunteers from diverse ethnic backgrounds. In the preparatory stage, we discussed the framing of interviews. If we ordinarily used only a few suggestive questions to initiate life-story telling, we met with great rejection. In many cases, Russian and Romany people do not wish to share their memories. Many Russians do not feel themselves as belonging to the Latvian nation, and their reaction to the invitation to participate in the research was wary. The political climate and ethnic decentralisation at the state level from the one side, and the separate fields of information from the other side do not support collaboration. Ordinary Russian people feel excluded from the larger society, and life history research has been a good way to overcome the injuries felt by the Russian-speaking population in Latvia.

The majority of the interviews were conducted in Russian to include representation of Russians who do not speak Latvian. Attempts to record in the Romany language were not successful because we received only “correct” stories, as well as life stories that interwove considerable Latvian and Russian words. The situation of the Romany language in Latvia unfortunately has not been recently studied.

Romany people have little experience of articulating their life histories, although as Kirsten Martin-Heuss has pointed out, “Romany culture has traditionally been passed down orally” (Martin-Heuss, 1989, p. 193). The Romany face wide-ranging social and economic problems, and many are tired out by the cares of everyday life.

Many factors are linked to each other in a person’s story about his or her life, and these factors also mutually structure the resulting story: the language in which the story is told, consciousness and memory, cultural traditions, models of communication, understanding of the world and the person, and so on.

It is assumed in Latvia that official history has greatly influenced the memories of both the Latvian and Russian communities, whereas its influence on the Romany may be considerably smaller or even non-existent due to the average lower level of education and literacy of this community (Tertats, Kraukle, Liepiņa & Zaķe, 2011).

## **What individual life stories reveal**

Narrators use cultural resources for creating their life stories, which outline both individual abilities and skills and also interpersonal communication networks, social relations and smaller or wider social environments.

Nevertheless, we must remember that each interpretation reveals, first of all, what the researcher sees through his or her professional and personal experiences, and the memories are presented through the research lens. Just as each individual's story is subjective, so is the positioning of the research themes as well as what is presented and highlighted (or not) by the researcher. Turning to specific characteristics of the life story, it is worth noting that each life story can be considered from different angles, from different researchers' perspectives, themes and problems.

In this study we sought to identify the following through life stories:

- the individual characteristics of the interviewee;
- cultural identity and the influence of societal and location context;
- how group identity and collective memory shaped the stories;
- national identity characteristics that unite all inhabitants.

Stories about life reveal diverse emotional and creative performances, while similarities in themes and story structures are found within ethnic borderlines. In Romany and Russian memory narratives, there are marked individual and generational differences that are not connected to ethnic identity, but reflect the current socio-cultural situation in general. Local or group-community identity is revealed through a sense of belonging to a specific place once inhabited, experience of migration, or social connections among the members of a community.

Norwegian professor of social anthropology Thomas Hylland Eriksen reminds us that:

individual identity develops through social interaction, while collective, or group, identity can be compared to a reverse refrigerator – with a warm interior and cold exterior. In addition, collective identity becomes messed up when it is based on prejudice and hate towards others or when it stops in its historical development.

Eriksen also reminds us that:

identity is changeable and that the way we perceive identity depends on our point of view and whether we see the world through a macroscopic or telescopic lens. If our internal self-satisfaction and hate towards outsiders culminates, an explosive situation

develops with ethnic conflict, as can be seen in recent events worldwide. And this is a situation we definitely do not want. There exists tension between the liberal accent on individual rights and freedoms on the one hand and the right to security on the other (Ēriksens, 2010, p. 6).

We note individual and group reflections of self-understanding, internally within the group, and externally, in relationship to other communities and society as a whole.

### The Romany life story

The issue of Romany self-understanding was mentioned both when responding to a direct question by the interviewer and also spontaneously by the narrator. However, this issue of self-understanding was not stressed during the interview itself and was revealed only when analysing the narrative structure and the narrator's choice of words and sentence construction.

The Romany life story narrators are:

- closely connected to their ethnic group and in general live in poverty and are a social-services target group;
- middle-income individuals who have completed their education and work for the benefit of their ethnic group;
- Intellectuals or entrepreneurs who have considerable professional success but do not distance themselves from their ethnic background (also includes bi-cultural marriages).

One of the questions both the researchers and the narrators wanted to clarify was “who is a *real* Romany?” It must be noted that the word *real* (referred to as both *īsts* and *riktīgs* in Latvian) was an adjective chosen by the Romany themselves. Already at the beginning of her interview, Ausma (born in 1958) from Kuldīga said curtly: *There aren't any more real Romany like there used to be.* We surmise from her interview that it was still possible to meet *real* Romany during the interwar period (1920s–1930s), when the Romany men still owned horses and their wives dressed in full skirts and blouses and told fortunes.

The adjective “real” is applied not only to Romany clothing or professions; it is also used to describe the Romany lifestyle. There are particularly vivid memories of summertime, when the Romany “roamed about”. Zelma (born in 1956), a Romany woman from Talsi, remembers: *But I still managed to experience the Romany life. My father had a white mare. A whole bunch of us Romany rode [in the wagon] with him. We met others [Romany]; in the evenings we were all around the campfires, the men in groups and the women in groups. It was very beautiful.* Ausma from Kuldīga agrees with Zelma. She also remembers when, during her childhood, her family and other Romany headed out of the towns every summer.

Karolis (born in 1950) remembers a particularly vivid summer that he spent with his grandfather in Lithuania. Now Karolis lives in the village of Tome, in the heart of Latvia, in a forested region on the shores of the Daugava. He remembers how his grandfather first took stock of his grandson: *Now and then, when I visited him, grandfather would say, "Nothing will come of this one. He is a Latvian boy. He doesn't understand horses and such." But I learned.*

This personal experience of Karolis is something that has passed by those who were born later. He recognises this:

*The gypsy camp – as I remember it, it stays in my memory like a museum. That was '59. I was taken to my grandfather's, my mother's father. Latvia didn't have them anymore, but in Lithuania the gypsy camps still travelled around. So, whoever had the largest campfire, that's where the old men gathered. Those old men smoked their pipes and kept a whip at hand. Then all the men sat together and talked. Women, of course, by their kids. In this way, each by his shack. Cleaning, cooking and washing, there. And then in the morning packing their bags, cards, and going around begging door to door. Women laid out cards and such. They told stories. And we as children sat and listened. But I was not at the campfire much. We boys spent more time with the horses. Vot, sat by the horses, looking at the horses and herding them. If not, then you got the whip. I got the whip twice from my grandfather.*

The camp fostered natural socialisation, taught the foundational principles of a good community from a young age, and accentuated a sense of belonging to an ethnic community that today is only a memory for Karolis and members of the Romany community:

*I liked it. Everyone got along, everyone was friendly, helped one another. If someone's horse disappeared or died, then everyone threw in some money, and then they bought him another horse, so he doesn't have to pull the wagon himself....If it was a good horse, then all the pillows were put on the wagon. That was wealth. Not everyone had an apartment, so that when summer ended, fall is coming, everyone goes his own way. Some went to stay in the country, on a farm. Some tried to get into a sauna. So my grandfather had his own house in a small town. From the arrival of spring until the late fall, we rode around. And so in the fall, when we arrived home, it was in the beginning of '59, and in '60 gypsies were banned from travelling around. So then, whoever had their own place, they lived there, and who didn't, they were given one. And so we started living in that way.*

This heading out of town and the summers spent working and relaxing by campfires were very important in establishing communication and building relationships. As Ziedonis (born in 1952) explains: *At one time the Romany were united; they lived together, they travelled together, they roamed the forests together. Now it's everyone for themselves.* Other interviewees also mentioned that relationships and the feeling of unity with other Romany has changed over the years. There are various



reasons for this: firstly, changes in lifestyle and employment; secondly, differences in social status.

The Romany community was and still is distinctly patriarchal; the man was the head of the family, or, as Austra explained: where *the husband goes, the wife must follow!* But Brigita (born in 1959), being a self-confident woman, always took exception with not only her own husband but also with other traditionally minded Romany. On the one hand, she feels good because, despite her husband's protests, she has managed to secure a good education for her daughter and therefore a better life for them. But on the other hand, her voice betrays a certain disappointment: [Other Romany in Kuldīga] *don't see me as a real Romany anymore. But I was born a Romany and still am one. It's just that my thinking has changed – I don't need to accept it, I simply don't need to accept what others want to impose on me.*

Brigita did not want to differ from the other children, and so, despite her father's strict opposition, she secretly joined the “Young Pioneers”. But Brigita's opinions about Romany identity are best described by her conclusion that: *You're a Romany, but first of all you're a human.* When reflecting on Romany relationships, Brigita returns to the issue of *real* Romany. One of the reasons she feels alienated from other Romany is her world view and system of values.

At the same time, we can conclude that Brigita could be the subject of a study about conflicting identity. Her story is full of contradictions and contemplation, sometimes even within a single sentence:

*Much has been accomplished [in life], but also many things have failed. The Romany traditions are gone; the [traditions] that were once so strict haven't been passed down. My grandchildren don't even know those things because their grandmother [Brigita herself] doesn't teach them at all anymore; it's not needed.*

As a result, at the beginning of the interview Brigita talks about herself from a Romany woman's point of view, but by the end of the interview she comes to the realisation that she is not at all like other Romany because she has become *Latvianised*. This is heightened by a feeling of alienation, because there are very few Romany who keep up with the times, and so she feels completely alone in her opinions.

Independence from others – being on your own – is said to be a trait acquired from the Latvians, which in turn leads researchers to examine so-called conflicting identities, especially in the context of change. In addition, there is no consensus among the Romany regarding this issue. Namely, even members of one family may differ in their opinions about what constitutes a *real* Romany or whether and how Romany traditions should be kept.

Drosma (born in 1951) has completed an advanced degree, and she runs a café in the centre of Dundaga. She does not shy away from her Romany roots, even though she grew up in a Latvian home environment:

*He [her father, Romany] generally spoke Latvian at home. Because I remember that the Romany did not really want those Latvians. And then they would laugh at us at school, that we just spoke Latvian. At home my father most often spoke in Latvian with my mother...*

Drosma has also become involved in the politics of the independent state. Still, she has a measured sense of her ability to influence politics:

*I am also in the "Unity" Party, but I wouldn't say that I have a significant role, that I am fighting for [a party position]. I would like to live out my life in my country – that I would really like to do... I do my job. I am active in social life, for example, I go to a meeting or seminar, and I see that I am wasting my time...and I leave. I am an active person, and to just talk because I want to talk, that's not me.*

Drosma is an entrepreneur with a vivid imagination and a distinct sense of responsibility about her land.

The Romany stories emphasise their sense of identity compared to Latvians; they are also vivid testimonies of a group identity that is rooted in romantic conceptualisations of nomadic life. The last narrative describes the pervasiveness of ethnic identity, while maintaining a great sense of responsibility toward the country in which the narrator lives.

## Russian life stories

The Russian community in Latvia has a long history, and it has become rooted in Latvian culture and language. However, due to conflicting politics of memory, relationships between the communities in the society are ambiguous.

The Russian-speaking life story narrators are:

- inhabitants with a long, multi-generational ancestry in Latvia;
- those who arrived during the Second World War and those drafted for work after the Second World War;
- members of a significant part of society that lost its status after the reestablishment of Latvian independence;
- socially active individuals who defend the rights of their group;
- representatives of bi-cultural marriages.

Their life stories describe family life (also the loss of family) and moving to live in Latvia. In the post-war years, many did not identify Latvia as a separate country with its own history. The narrators were brought to Latvia because of destroyed homes, military service, work, family ties and marriage. Various geographic points in the former Soviet Union – from neighbouring Pskov district, Belarus and Ukraine to Siberia – are mentioned in these Russian life stories. A large part of the post-war population moved to Latvia from these places. For the older generation, memories of the Second World

War are particularly dramatic. *I remember my grandmother's words in the post-war years. She said: "Every day I thank the Lord, our God, that we all survived. That we didn't lose anybody in this war,"* remembers Tatjana (born in 1943 in Riga), framing her story not only using her grandmother's, but also her own religious beliefs.

Almost every family suffered during the Second World War and from repressions; some of the narrators were orphaned. Jekaterina (born in 1934 in Vitebsk district) sought refuge in Latvia after their homes near the border were burned down. Their personal memories were amplified by the Soviet discourse once seen in films and literature. She remembers:

*I had a little brother, about three years old. My little brother and I experienced the whole war. When our mother died, I took my brother, Viktors, and we left. We walked for a long time, hungry and cold, and we joined a homeless commune. Maybe you've seen gangs like that in films – I was in one like that, too.*

While Nazi violence has been articulated in a certain story that has been supplemented with details from personal experiences, the Soviet repressions do not come to the fore in the memories. Wartime experiences, in turn, divert attention from the repressions carried out by the Soviet regime. Soviet collective memory also lacks an officially acknowledged discourse regarding the repressions. When remembering her childhood in Khabarovsk, Olga (name has been changed) mentions, as if in passing, that her grandfather and grandmother were deported from Belarus because they had opposed collectivisation. Olga learned about this only much later, from her cousins:

*They had moved there during the collectivisation period. My grandfather was sent to Siberia for refusing to give livestock to the kolkhoz. People had to give a cow, a horse. As he used to say, they took away his horse anyway, but he wouldn't give them the cow, because he had nine children to feed.*

The grandmother had lost two sons in the war – she did not speak about the deportations.

Not all Russian memory stories conform to Soviet discourse. Independently of one another, two former employees of the Tūja brickyard speak positively of Germans, who were Russia's enemy in the Second World War. They tell of incidents in which individual Germans acted in a sensitive and careful manner while evacuating residents of Pskov and Novgorod districts.

Memories told by members of the older generation with little education, similarly to those of Romany people, are notable for the wisdom and independent opinions they express. Jevgēņija, who was born in Latvia, remembers that her grandmother, who moved to Latvia from Pskov district, did not know how to read or write but could tell memorable stories and fairy tales.

The Soviet collective memory discourse is also reflected in the articulation of everyday routines in the story. Sergejs (born in 1948 in Riga) remembers that there were two tracks at the Riga Polytechnical Institute, Russian and Latvian: *The Russian*

language was used within the department, but documents meant for external use were prepared in both Russian and Latvian.

For the Latvian population this order meant the threat of *Russification*, but Sergejs did not feel this threat, as he recalled administrative procedures. As he told this story, Sergejs' tone reveals that he, as someone who did not speak Latvian, did not consider this aspect then or now. He joined the Communist Party while working in a factory – the quotas for new party members were higher among workers:

*While I worked at VEF, my mother urged me to join the party – she thought it would be too late afterwards. Meaning, that I would finish my studies in the Philosophy Department and wouldn't be able to get a job as a philosophy teacher, because a job like that was directly linked with the “ideological front”. I was accepted into the Communist Party as a member in 1975, as a machinist-assembler. I did not object – if that's what was needed, so be it.*

After Latvia regained its independence, neither party membership nor a job in the scientific communism department ensured a person status; on the contrary, it was considered a breach in one's biography. It is noteworthy that Sergejs uses more neutral terms than those that were in actual use during the Soviet period. For example, instead of calling it the “scientific communism department” Sergejs says “social sciences department”.

He continues:

*I left the institute of my own will in 1993. And it's a good thing I did. A year later there were no more social sciences departments [scientific communism departments]. When the new winds of change began to blow, my career and my beloved job became a thing of the past. Oh, the places I've worked since 1993 in order to bring at least a bit of money to the family: I've washed cars along the riverfront, I've worked at Hoetika, which is a big garbage disposal company. After that, I worked as a loader in a private furniture store, then stoking furnaces, then cleaning streets. Those last few years before retirement I worked as a guard at the VEF bank. Fate brought me back to the place where I had once worked on the party committee. But I'm not complaining – in each case I made my own decisions. And no one else ever made them in my place.*

The restoration of Latvian independence in 1991 brought big changes to the narrators' lives. At first, this event was linked with hope and a feeling of solidarity, but also with fears of losing their identity. The people experienced a change in status, the loss of stability and problems with citizenship and language.

Social problems have influenced the sense of community. Consolation has been sought and found in returning to family roots and to religion. Even a young person's feeling of self has been touched by social exclusion, and an attempt to compensate has been found in a sense of belonging to one's local neighbourhood and to Riga. The heritage of Russian culture in Riga has helped people establish contact between Russian, Latvian and Western culture and values.

In an autobiographical narrative, the story of a life is broadened to include far-reaching reflection about how the person came to be the person he or she is today

(Smith & Watson, 2010). As with Romany life stories, Russians also speak about their identity in contemporary Latvia.

Anna (born in 1965 in Riga) talks about her search for identity:

*For a time, I was very preoccupied by the issue of how to identify myself. I like the word *latvijiete* [a derivation of “a resident of Latvia”]. For me, a sense of belonging to Riga is important; to Latvia perhaps less. I could even say that my ethnic identity is “Rigan”. Today, if I need to fill out documents that ask for my nationalité in English or French, I have no problem writing *Lettonie*.*

The life stories reflect about what is not spoken about publicly; in the stories we notice hints that are meant “for our own people” but also statements that are addressed to a wider audience.

*It’s quite possible that I, too, feel like I’m an emigré in some way, a white emigré, probably. We are here because of certain circumstances. In our thoughts we are Russian, but we live here. But I don’t really want to return to Russia, and at the same time I do not want to lose my national identity. [...] Actually, everything – including books I’ve read – places some kind of stamp on things. For me, it’s important that I’m a Russian, that I have this specific history and culture. And I don’t want to assimilate or lose this awareness. I perceive the Russian world as broader than just the Russia of today. Rather, it’s a Russia “in depth” – the history, Russian culture as a whole (Vladislavs, born in 1974 in Riga).*

An active search for identity takes place in the life stories of younger Russians. Parents often realise that their children’s behaviour differs from the principles of their own family as well as the declared principles of national consolidation. The influence of social groups and the divided information space is reflected in their children. Memories do somersaults, history repeats itself, but in a different way, when parents hear their children expressing opinions about the self-sufficiency of the Russian language.

*I now see this in my children – their language of communication is only Russian. From the child care centre to school. They are taught [the language], and we are fighting against them, so to say, in the name of the Latvian language. I don’t know why – maybe we’ve soaked it up from the *socium* [society]? It’s very difficult. Even though we talk about it at home that one should learn the Latvian language. But our son is already saying that he doesn’t really want to. He doesn’t need to be told how important it is. He says, “I’d rather learn English...” Where does he get that from? We’ve never talked like that in our family. Maybe simply from those around him? Sometimes they just remark, “Why do I need that Latvian language anyway?” We tell him, “But you live in Latvia.” But he somehow half associates himself with Russia. Maybe because we watch those television programmes? So much information comes in the Russian language (Vladislavs, born in 1974 in Riga).*

Identity is sometimes expressed as opposition to the status of Latvian as the official language and the strict criteria for receiving Latvian citizenship, as described by Ludmila (born in 1947 in Kolka):

*Why do I not become a citizen? I'm a person of a different nationality, and there is aggression in Latvia as well as in Russia. I love Latvia, but I believe that a backup door should be left open, because a person needs to defend herself: that's a woman's sacred duty, to defend herself and her descendants.*

The language in which a story is told and the communication models used, biographical and collective memory and the cultural tradition are all intertwined in a memory story and provide structure for one another. In certain contexts, a life story becomes a research source for ethnic as well as family, generational and local identity.

Multietnic identities can be found in many life stories. People of different ethnic heritages marry; their children and grandchildren grow up in a Latvian environment. Valentīna (born in 1936 in Pskov district) moved to Latvia after the Second World War; her brother, who is 11 years younger, was born in Latvia. She recounts:

*To me, he's a Latvian, one could say. And his wife is Latvian, and so are their two children. But I'm nevertheless different. You must understand, I am a Russian. And the place of my birth is in Russia. But this is my home. In my soul. When I go visit there [Russia] – we've been there several times – I feel somehow... light, effortless. Among the fields there, among the trees there. When I'm there, I'm always looking around and thinking to myself that suddenly someone might show up – an acquaintance, maybe my father.*

Several of the narrators come from Russian families that have lived in Latvia for many generations; the younger narrators were born in Latvia and grew up there.

*The Russian language, the old language, has been here for a long time – it's described as the stararusskij. That means those Russians who lived in Latvia before 1940. And I belong to this group, because my parents lived here. My mother was born in Latvia. I am a citizen, and I'm not the first generation [to be a citizen]. One of my grandfathers was born in Poland, in Zielona Góra, because my great-grandfather was a railwayman at the time, and that was a part of Tsarist Russia. They lived in Latvia after Latvia gained its independence (Dmitrijs, his life story is recorded in the Latvian language).*

Tatjana is also aware of her family's deep roots in Latvia, stretching back to the time when the Kuznetsovs' porcelain factory began and this area was still a part of Tsarist Russia:

*My grandfather was the main kiln operator for the Kuznetsovs. My mother and her older sisters told me that he knew how to judge the firing process by the colour of the smoke coming out of the kiln. It's too bad that this factory no longer exists, although Riga porcelain was the pride of the city during the Soviet era. It was a Riga brand. That's the kind of environment we were raised in.*

At the centre of Russian life stories is a reflection on today's Latvia and the changing historical context. Even among the youngest generation of Russians we can hear the influence of their Latvian surroundings, but at the same time the influence of globalisation has resulted in opposition to the acceptance of important components of Latvian identity, such as the Latvian language.

## Conclusions

Ethnic differences are marked in life stories by events in a person's life, how these events link to the broader social and historical narrative, narrative techniques, cultural references in the construction and presentation of the life story, imagery and the positioning of the self in history as well as a specific geographical space. At the same time, ethnic cultures are searching for strategies to live in modern times that nevertheless correspond to their own experience and traditions. Both Russian and Romany groups keep to themselves and do not willingly share their memories. In both groups, we find not only ethnic overlap but also the overlapping of various other identities (religious, local, generational, educational, professional, social status), which characterise the population of contemporary Latvia.

The breakdown of social, political, economic and cultural life after occupation resulted in biographical disruption for the majority of the Latvian populace. Vieda Skultans has explored the traumatic experience of everyday life in Latvia, paying particular attention to “conceptual structures derived from history and literature in order to rearrange disrupted lives into a meaningful pattern” in Latvian life stories (Skultans, 1998, p. 21). We explored the complex web of ethnic memories, taking into account Skultans' ideas regarding the combination of textual and personal memories and the strong relationship with oral (in the case of the Romany) or written and audio (through mass media in the case of the Russians) intertextuality.



Figure 1. Vieda Skultans' interview with Gypsy women in Kuldīga, 2013. Photo by Ieva Garda-Rozenberga

Life stories of Romany and Russians as constructed texts emerge in specific historical and cultural contexts. These stories are given shape and colour not only by individual lived experience, although this clearly plays an important, indeed inalienable, role, but also by the available cultural resources and requirements of official histories. There is thus an ongoing interchange or conversation between what a narrator remembers of his or her past and the cultural tools on offer for making sense of that past, in short, for understanding.

Ethnic diversity can be considered one of the ambiguous benefits of Latvia's cultural identity, because it provides the opportunity not only to become acquainted with the characteristics and uniqueness of each culture but also to establish which traits unite these cultures, thereby creating a harmonious space that can accommodate cultural diversity. At the same time it is assumed that narration is a universal skill and that there is no culture in the world in which people do not tell each other various stories (Myerhoff, 1980; Riessman, 2008). Despite this assumption, however, a single universal type of narration – much less a single model for life story – that is not influenced by national, ethnic, religious, professional or other cultural and social factors does not exist.

The current literature would suggest that “Latvian” and “Russian” discourses in Latvia are diametrically opposed to one another (Kattago, 2009, p. 383; Zelče & Muižnieks, 2009). However, Cheskin recently argued that Russian-speaking discourse is notable for many remarkable successes in integrating into Latvian narratives and discourses. There is still a long way to go in order to overcome ethnic, historical and political tensions, and we cannot be sure what the future may hold (Cheskin, 2016).

Considering these life story cases, we find that it is not so much ethnicity that is at the core of contemporary conflicts, but rather unequal power relations (in the case of the Romany) and the fall in status of the Russian language and ethnic Russian social positions in the general social hierarchy.

The study not only reveals an overview of social memory in Latvia; it also indicates aspects of ethnic culture that interact and develop together and that should be studied in the future. To exchange life stories means to exchange cultural experience, which is a precondition for mutual understanding in society.

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Figure 2. Ieva Garda Rozenberga and Maija Krumina at the Archives of National Oral History. Photo by Mara Brasmane

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## **Ethnic diversity in the construction of life stories in Latvia**

### **Abstract**

Latvian society is ethnically diverse and has the largest proportion of ethnic minorities of the three Baltic States. The article draws upon life-story research with respondents from Russian and Romany communities in Latvia. These communities have different social, historical and cultural experiences, thereby allowing them to be contrasted and compared. Ethnic diversity can be considered one of the benefits of Latvia's cultural identity because it provides the opportunity not only to become acquainted with the characteristics and uniqueness of each culture but also to establish which traits unite these cultures, thereby creating a harmonious space which can accommodate cultural diversity. Biographical interviews facilitate the juxtaposition and comparative interpretation of cultural values, ways of belonging, and the articulation of collective memory in different ethnic groups.

The article expands the analytical part of the sources: how the personal life stories are connected with the broader (general) social and historical narratives. A few samples are used to characterise narration techniques, cultural references in the construction of life stories and its layout, as well as imagery. The main feature studied in the article is self-positioning in the general course of history and in the history of the defined geographical space – Latvia.

**Keywords:** ethnicity; oral history; life stories; social memory; identity

## **Zróżnicowanie etniczne w konstruowaniu historii życia na Łotwie**

### **Streszczenie**

Społeczeństwo łotewskie jest zróżnicowane etnicznie i spośród trzech państw bałtyckich ma największy odsetek mniejszości etnicznych. Artykuł opiera się na badaniach nad historią życia respondentów pochodzących z zamieszkujących Łotwę mniejszości rosyjskiej i romskiej. Mają one odmienne doświadczenia społeczne, historyczne i kulturowe, dzięki czemu można je zestawiać i porównywać. Zróżnicowanie etniczne może być uważane za jedną z zalet tożsamości kulturowej Łotwy, ponieważ stwarza możliwość nie tylko poznania cech i unikatowości każdej z kultur, lecz także pozwala ustalić, które cechy spajają te kultury, tym samym stwarzając harmonijną przestrzeń, w której jest miejsce na różnorodność etniczną. Wywiady

biograficzne ułatwiają wzajemne przeciwstawienie i porównawcze interpretacje wartości kulturowych, sposobu przynależenia, jak też artykułowania pamięci zbiorowej u różnych grup etnicznych.

Artykuł poszerza część analityczną źródeł w kwestii, jak osobista historia życia łączy się z szerszymi, ogólnymi narracjami społecznymi i historycznymi. Na kilku przykładach scharakteryzowano zarówno techniki narracji, odniesienia kulturowe w budowaniu historii życia i ich układów, jak też obrazowania. Zasadniczą cechą badaną w tym artykule jest autosytuowanie siebie w ogólnym przebiegu historii i w historii określonej przestrzeni geograficznej na Łotwie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** etniczność; historia oralna; historie życia; pamięć społeczna; tożsamość

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