

Life Stories as Cultural Heritage: the Latvian Diaspora

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Life stories are a significant part of the cultural heritage of the Baltic diaspora. Life stories tell about historical events of the diaspora from a subjective, personal viewpoint. Furthermore – life stories are important not only as testimonies of history, but they themselves play an important role in the diaspora communities, particularly in the preservation and transmission of national identity.

The paper focuses on the collection and research of life stories of Latvia within the National Oral History (LNOH) project, with particular emphasis on the collections and research of Latvian diaspora narratives.

Latvia's National Oral History (LNOH) Project

The movement for the restoration of Latvian independence in the late 1980s was largely based on the historical memory of the period of Latvian independence in the 1920s-1940s and of the crimes committed against the people of Latvia by the totalitarian regime (Tisenkopfs 1993). Life stories occupied an important place in the nation's social life after the actual restoration of Latvian independence in 1991, both as a new resource for the formation of identity and as a source of information about historically significant events that had been documented very little and researched even less, for example deportations, resistance movements and dissidents. Likewise, for the first time after the Soviet occupation, people were now able to freely form opinions about life in Latvia during the 1920s and 1930s and also talk about the experiences of Latvians in exile. Taking into account the intensive circulation of life stories in the social environment and the necessity to shape an interpretation of recent history that would be attuned to people's experience of those events, the National Oral History (NOH) project was established within the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology in Latvia in 1992 and has been financed by the Science Council of Latvia (2005-2009 also by state research programme Letonika) (Bela 2009, 2010).

The primary goal of the LNOH project is to document as many accounts and testimonies of everyday life of the inhabitants of Latvia during the complex and contradictory 20th century as possible by recording events from the point of view of the participants themselves.

The secondary goal of the project is to preserve life stories as a cultural heritage, and to preserve testimonies of oral history as a source for study by researchers of various disciplines which will also be available in the future. The project's goal is also to perform life story research. The main themes of this research are forbidden experience and opinions presented as objects for sociological research – repressions, exile, and political resistance as well as daily life and cultural aspects such as ethnic, national and religious identity, gender perspectives, changing values in a shifting social environment, and the inheritance of tradition (Zirnite 2006). One of the essential tasks assigned to the LNOH project is the integration of the nation, thereby facilitating the unification of the experience of the Latvian nation which was divided by World War II and the Soviet occupation (Bela 2009, 2010). There is a lack of precise numbers, but the estimated number of refugees to West during 1944-1945 is about 200 000 inhabitants of Latvia, mainly Latvians (Gāle-Kārpentere 1994, Hinkle 2006).

At present, the LNOH collection contains approximately 3000 audio-recorded life stories, several written memoirs and video recordings. The collection includes life stories from various places in Latvia as well as from the Latvian diaspora. The LNOH collection includes approximately 570 audio-recorded Latvian life stories from the USA, Canada, Great Britain, Norway, Sweden, Germany and Brazil. The significance of the collection grows as generations age, as the archive contains unique individual testimonies whose themes and contents cannot be found in any traditional documentary source. As the generations pass on, their specific experiences will no longer be available.

The development of Latvian diaspora collections

In the development of the LNOH collection of life stories, there is great importance of historical context, time and place, networks of researchers and volunteers, and community support. As noted before, after the re-establishment of Latvia's independence, the contacts between homeland and exiled Latvians started to develop intensively. Maija Hinkle did research on Latvian–American return migration and observed that in the broad societal context it very soon became clear that life under such different circumstances had resulted in two very different lifestyles, expectations, practices and worldviews. The first euphoria turned into mutual disappointment and in some cases even into rejection (Hinkle, 2006).

But – the field of life story research was one of few exceptions where the bridge of understanding between the divided communities of homeland and exiled Latvians was built successfully (Zirnite 2006). International research experience has been incorporated into the development of the National Oral History collection and into its methodology. Many Latvian specialists from the West invested their knowledge, experience and work in seminars and fieldwork expeditions in Latvia, and helped in organizing expeditions abroad. Secondly, there was the financial support for the development of the LNOH Collection from many organisations of exiled Latvians (the American Latvian Association, *Daugavas Vanagi* etc.) and there was individual involvement in participating in the fieldwork as volunteers in Latvia or in local communities abroad. The sharing of personal experience in the life story interviews was important in creating mutual understanding between individuals of the Latvian nation, divided by war and occupation. The work of volunteer interviewers is especially important in America (and has now begun to develop in Australia as well). The cooperation and responsiveness from organisations and researchers in Latvia is also of great importance. The recordings from Latvians in Brazil are for example from an expedition organised by the Society of Friends of Brazilian Latvians (historian Brigita Tamuža).

LNOH interviews with Latvians in the World:	Life stories
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Latvians in Munster, Germany: 2005 (M.Zirnite et.al.)	23
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The research of life stories

Biography offers a unique societal perspective which incorporates both individual emotional experience and appeal as well as descriptions of real time and place. The LNOH research analyses long-term social and cultural change as seen through the lens of a participant's

individual perspective, and places the individual's view in the context of wider social interaction and cultural change (Bela 2006). At the end of the 1990s, some research was done on life stories from Norway by the former participant of LNOH Arta Savdona (Savdona 2001). In recent years, the head of the Latvian-American Oral History project Maija Hinkle performed an analysis of Latvian-Americans' biographical narratives (Hinkle 2006). Brigita Tamuža has publications about contradictions between oral and written sources in the history of Brazil's Latvian community (Tamuža 2007).

The LNOH researchers are working with life stories of the Latvian diaspora in Sweden, mainly concentrating on something that no longer exists but still shapes the biographies of thousands of Latvians – the state of exile (Beitnere 2008, Bela 2008, Garda Rozenberga 2008, Šūpulis 2008, Zirnīte 2008). The main themes of this research are: identity, community, the role of the life stories in the preservation and transmission of identity and adaptation. Māra Zirnīte explores the fieldwork in Norway and Sweden, where approximately 60 life stories revealing the characteristic features and changes in cultural identity are recorded. Particular attention is paid to oral history methodology and process, as well as to narrators and their experiences (Zirnīte 2008). We can say, that the diaspora consists of many communities – groups of people smaller than the diaspora, made up from socially active people who interact and thus formulate common values, common goals and a common understanding of what is significant and meaningful. Edmunds Šūpulis investigated the shaping and sustainability of community life, focusing on how community life and social activities are represented in life stories (Šūpulis 2008). The author of this paper explored identity as a construct which is formed under certain historic conditions and which consists of the totality of specific elements. It was noted that the feeling of Latvian identity is flexible, diverse and changing, constructed around a common system of symbols (e.g., origin, language, culture, ideology, history) and constructed through everyday life and complicated networks of organisations and activities. However, the manner and extent to which Latvian identity is incorporated varies from person to person (Bela 2008). The LNOH research team is multidisciplinary. Ieva Garda-Rozenberga is a PhD student of folklore, and she observed the relationships between exile and folklore, paying close attention to immigration folklore – narratives about the first years in Sweden. Through these narratives, we can see the adaptation and integration to a new socio-cultural environment from an insider's perspective; the hardships, miscomprehensions and success of the new life (Garda-Rozenberga 2008).

In conclusion

The archives are the meeting place of past and present. The life stories deposited in the LNOH archives are part of a social memory of still active but radically changing diaspora communities. We cannot preserve the fading experiences through the recording of life stories, but through the research of these narratives we can breathe new life into them.

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