Memories, shared and narrated, or
The Arson in the Tannery

In my paper today, I want to share with you some thoughts about the connections between narrated personal memories and local, national and international history.

According to my English dictionary, memory is “the sum of everything retained by the mind”. Consequentially, very few elements of our ordinary human communication are not closely related to memories or at least to a high degree dependent on our mind’s “ability to store and recall past sensations, thoughts, and knowledge”, which is another of the definitions of memory given by the dictionary (Collins 1995).

From the point of view of narrative analysis, there is no evidence that the rendering in narrative form of the mentally stored goods that we call memories would follow other compositional rules than the retelling of any other experiences whatsoever for which we have other scientific terms. The explanation is simply that no experience can be conveyed in narrative form until after it has happened.

However, we are all aware of the existence of the emic genre that could be called retold memories or simply memories, meaning the verbal account of a certain recollection. Observe that we as folklorists are dealing with a cultural genre, not a biochemical or psychological phenomenon, perhaps not even a narrative one, but that still remains to be seen. Classifying a personal experience narrative as a memory is a keying in Erving Goffman’s sense (Goffman 1986, 43 ff) that allows the narrator to make use of certain possibilities and informs the audience of how to interpret the performance in question. Well known keying formulae are: “I can remember…”, “I have a strong memory of…”, “As far as I remember…” This keying bestows that which is remembered first with a distinct quality of something that is selected and thus important, simply by not belonging to the sad category of forgotten experiences. And as we all know there is a constant process of exchange between the two groups: we forget what we once remembered and we come to remember what had been forgotten (cf Ricoeur 2005, 109, 190). Memories presuppose the existence of forgotten experiences.

Second, memories are very personal. We are often astonished of how differently our minds operate, when comparing what we remember of a certain event with other persons’ remembrances of the same situation. Since we all are aware of this phenomenon, every memory narrator can allow herself or himself to be extremely personal and subjective, when deciding what to tell and how to present it.

For analytical reasons, I find it meaningful to distinguish between memories and narrated memories. Memories as such may exist in non-verbal form. We may for instance have memories of the creaking sound of our childhood staircase, the smell of the Paris metro, or the feeling of holding a kitten in our hands. When we want to share acoustic, olfactory, or tactile memories with each other we, normally, have to verbalize them and, typically, these kinds of memories are best expressed in less epic forms, be it lyrical, metaphorical or as simile. As

1 Paper read at the ISFNR Interim Conference, Santa Rosa, Argentina September 22, 2007.
folklorists we know that epic narratives are good at reproducing outside action, movement, and change. Narratives are good at representing reality as ordered, consistent and logical. But narratives are also likely to reduce complicated processes into simple chains of cause and effect.

Maybe such narrative structures are internalized in our minds to a degree that they even influence the conscious or unconscious mechanisms that determine what experiences it is easy and natural for us to remember.

To suggest a preliminary and somewhat imprecise definition we could regard retold personal memories as a subgenre of personal experience narratives that have a unique quality because somebody for special reasons has chosen to remember them; they are often intimate and subjective, and they are strongly connected to the teller.

The personal quality of the memories actualizes the phenomenon of private ownership to certain stories. Especially personal experience narratives, but also quite a few narratives belonging to collective traditions, can become strongly associated with a certain narrator. There are cultural agreements regulating how close to an experience you have to be to be allowed to claim ownership to the narrative about the event. Just as in legal language, in everyday conversations we separate between eyewitness reports and hearsay. We are not supposed to retell other persons’ experiences and this is especially evident concerning those intimate stories keyed as memories. We all have an exclusive privilege to tell our own memories.

However, we are all aware of the existence of collective, shared memories and grand narratives about real or imagined collective experiences.

Collectively shared memories may include recollections from all kinds of events, where more than one person is physically present, from two children sharing an ice-cream cone to a huge rock concert audience listening to their favorite band performing. In our era of technology and globalization, it is probably sensible to argue that huge groups of people share collective memories also of telecast events, where they have not been physically present. We might think of the televised images of the attack on the World Trade Center, the explosion of the Challenger space shuttle, or major international sports events. It is most certainly true that narratives about these kinds of events are collectively owned and distributed worldwide through different forms of oral and technological transmission. In creating and distributing news stories, modern mass media play a central role, while the collective folk humor often uses irony, satire, and parody to contradict the official stories, or, in a carnivalesque manner turn them upside-down. If you like, we could think of intertextual comments or competing discursive fields.

Speaking in terms of folkloristic genres, I am not certain whether there is any point in making a difference between narrated collective memories and grand narratives. Perhaps it could be argued that the term narrated collective memories emphasizes the factual background of the story, while terms like grand narratives or master narratives underline the fictitious quality of the stories. Just as retold personal memories, these collective stories may be strongly connected to issues of limited and conditional possession and identity production, but in relation to large groups, nations, continents, or entire political, economical, or ideological systems.
Kalle’s life history
Kalle is a retired telegraph service worker. He has been employed by the government owned Swedish telephone company most of his adult life. He was born in 1915 and died in 1990. I met him in August 1988 and tape-recorded his life history. Kalle grew up with two brothers and one sister, all older than he. His mother was an entrepreneur, who ran a café and rented out rooms both to long term tenants and to travelers and short time lodgers. His father was an unskilled worker, who often worked as a lumberjack. The family had a couple of cows, a household pig, chickens and a vegetable garden.

Kalle started to work as a twelve-year-old at the neighbor’s farm. After two years he was employed to wash hides in a tannery, where he spent three years. At eighteen he started to work for the telephone company, where he remained until he got his pension at 65.

He became a widower at 37, remarried and when he was 59 his brother-in-law committed suicide, and Kalle and his second wife Asta took over the house and the farm that had once been Asta’s childhood home. The farm land was let out on lease, but Kalle was interested in forestry and soon learnt how to mind the wood.

Together with some other men in the village, Kalle managed to bring about street lamps along the village road, to prepare a bathing beach by the lake, to put up an ice hockey rink, and to build a log cabin at the fishing lake.

During his personal narrative, the world outside Kalle’s private life became especially visible at seven occasions. When I start from the end of Kalle’s narration, I find three examples of how Sweden’s national economy and development influenced his life.

National economy
   1. There was a tremendous depression in 1933.
   2. There was a strong development of telephone technology.
   3. The use of producer-gas units helped Swedish economy by diminishing the need to import fuel.)

When Kalle told me about the great depression of the 1930’s, it was in a neutral, didactic school teacher’s voice, although his words were compassionate. I will return to this in a little while.

During World War II, Kalle drove a company car fuelled by producer-gas. He was poisoned by the gas and found himself becoming irritated, ill-tempered, and tired. In his narrative this episode is related almost with astonishment (“I had no idea that the gas was poisonous”) and with a reference to national economy as a part in the endeavors to use domestic fuels and avoid import.

During his last years with the telephone company, Kalle experienced the arrival of semiconductor technology and digital transmission techniques, and he learnt to operate the local radio and television transmitter station.

Earlier in his life story, I found two examples of circumstances in the local community influencing Kalle’s life.

The local community
Kalle was very active in the labor union and to some degree in the Social Democratic Party. At a few points during his life history he laid strong emphasis on his identity as a worker, in spite of the fact that during his last 25 professional years he worked as an engineer in different white-collar positions. At twelve, working as a farm-hand in the neighbor’s farm, he was strongly offended when it became clear to him that, in the Sweden of the 1920’s, you had to be rich to be elected to a public commission of trust. Later in his life he took active part in a strike, and during his narration he related several instances of conflict with superiors, bosses, and employers. When he mentioned the lack of social security system in the 1930’s, his examples were so personal that you could almost get the impression that the most serious disadvantage was that Kalle had to dig cable ditches in stony ground when it was raining.

Kalle’s childhood family

Concerning his childhood family, Kalle remarked that “we were never hungry nor cold”. He was eager to underline that the living conditions of his family were just the same as everybody else’s. My estimation, however, is that their situation was comparable to fairly well-to-be farmers, that is much under the local factory owners, but much over crofters and farm-hands.

During his professional career, Kalle seems to have experienced no periods of unemployment. His private economy was strong enough to allow him to build a new house for himself and his second wife, and when his brother-in-law died, Kalle and Asta inherited his farm including quite a large area of valuable wood land. I get the impression that Kalle in his professional career as a telegraph worker, a technical engineer, and a forester was quite successful. I already mentioned that, economically, his childhood family occupied a position somewhat over the local average. Actually, Kalle’s life course contains a sufficient number of successful events to have allowed him to compose a quite plausible rags-to-riches story. This would have been in concordance with the Social Democratic grand narrative of how the organized working class came into power and built the Swedish welfare state. However, this is not what Kalle did. Maybe we have encountered an example of the competing discursive fields I mentioned earlier.

As a starting point for a discussion, let me take one short narrative from the earlier part of Kalle’s life history. During the last three of his teenage years, Kalle worked in a tannery. The reason that he stopped working there was that the factory was burnt down. This is Kalle’s story about the “The Arson in the Tannery” in edited form:

KS: The last year I worked in the tannery was during the winter of 1933. Business was going downhill for the tanner, and he had started to drink.

In those days, we had a band of arsonists around. The name of the boss was Edblad and he took up orders for arsons, and he had a companion that executed them.
I remember especially that day, the tanner went away during the afternoon, and he instructed me not to leave the factory before the hours of work were over, or around five o’clock.

–Certainly not, I answered.

Next morning when I arrived to work, there was no tannery! Of course we were exposed to the detectives and we were interrogated. It was arson, but nobody knew that before the investigation.

There were several fires in those days. There was a huge trial and all of them were sentenced to four or five years in prison. There were three of them, two brothers Edblad and one called Karlsson and he was the one that set fire.

Even here in Bergom a farmstead with cattle and all was set on fire. It was up here by Engblom’s. That was also a deed by this gang.

UP: Was that a method to get hold of insurance money?

KS: Exactly! There was a tremendous depression and huge unemployment, you see, and poverty was terrible. And then I left for Härnösand.

At first glance we could classify this as a story of one man’s, the tanner’s, personal failure leading to a desperate action. Furthermore, we are introduced to one out of several deeds committed by a band of out-laws of whom we know nothing but their names, and all is seen through the eyes of a young man. Like many stories, this one has a victim (although maybe a dishonest one), a band of villains, and a neutral outside observer. The contents are dramatic with ingredients like arson, insurance fraud, alcoholism, police investigations, trials, and long prison sentences. The elements of this narrative are certainly sufficient to produce an elaborated local legend. It would be easy to image a tendentious story arguing that all tanners are fraudulent, or another one aiming to prove that everybody from a certain neighborhood is likely to become an arsonist, or a third one stating a political example of the impact of international capital policy on local matters.

But Kalle does nothing of this. The style is realistic, the contents appear to be plausible, and the stance of the narrator is consciously neutral. Kalle is careful to morally blame neither the alcoholic tanner nor the criminal band of arsonists.

Let us see if a closer analysis can deepen our understanding of this narrative. To be able to scrutinize the formal composition of the story in detail I have made an ethnopoetic transcription of it (hand-out).

Kalle starts his story (line 3) with the words “the last year that I was there at the tannery”, indicating that structurally, inside his entire life history, this episode will be used as a springboard to transport the young Kalle from his home village to his future position with the national telephone company. After he has positioned the narrated Kalle in time, there follows five lines of hesitation (lines 7—11), during which the narrating Kalle probably considers in what mode to relate the dramatic story. In line 12 he has made up his mind and he starts telling the story from the tanner’s point of view. In three lines (13—15) he introduces the first complication (in Labov’s 1972 sense) of the story: the tanner’s business is going down and
the tanner himself has taken to drinking. Immediately after that follows the second complication: there is a band of arsonists operating in the local community (lines 19—24). Normally, this would have been an extraordinary, almost sensational piece of information, but in Kalle’s rendering it is reported in a neutral, indifferent form, like you would mention any ordinary local business company.

These orientations give us as listeners the necessary knowledge about when the episode took place and who its protagonists are. At the same time they also have the function of describing the initial situation and introducing two complications. With the phrase “I remember especially that day” (line 25), Kalle brings us into the taleworld (Young 1987) of his narrative. The wording also makes it a keying. Now we are invited to listen to a personal memory.

The complication of this part of the narrative may be the tanner’s mysterious request that Kalle should not leave early that specific day (lines 28—35). Did the tanner know that the arsonists were coming later that day? Did he need Kalle as a witness to certify that he was not there when the fire started? The composition of the narrative suggests that there is a causal connection between the existence of the arsonist band, the strange statement of the tanner and the disappearance of the factory. These ingredients could have been used to sharpen the dramatic tension of the story, but Kalle refrains from doing so. Instead, he reports about his private irritation over the police investigations (lines 40—44), about the outcome of the trial (47—58), and then introduces another amazing recollection that could easily have been made extremely dramatic and emotional: the same band of arsonists burnt down a farm in the very village where we are having our conversation, only a few hundred meters from where we are sitting (lines 72—85). But Kalle’s purpose here was obviously not to capture my attention by sensational revelations.

As already suggested, in another connection Kalle’s entire life history might very well have been a contribution to the Swedish success story about the construction of the welfare state by the Social Democrats or to a grand narrative about the great depression during the interwar period.

But there is no such tendency in Kalle’s narrative. His intention is not to prove one or another thesis, rather, in his narration, he needs the arson-in-the-tannery-episode to explain a change of direction in his life span. Directly after this story is finished, there follows the passive construction (lines 95—96) stating that he had to move to Härnösand, 80 kilometers to the south.

My question in line 88 (“Was this a method to get hold of insurance money?”) pushes Kalle out of his role as a subjective narrator of his own memories into an analytical position, where he feels forced to connect the local interplay of the tanner and the arsonists with the international financial situation. If you relate a personal memory concerning an economic failure that took place in 1933, maybe it is impossible not to relate it to the collective memories of the Wall Street crash of 1929, and the bankruptcy and suicide of the Swedish financial magnate Ivar Kreuger in March of 1932. Just as we are not unconditionally allowed to retell somebody else’s personal memories, there are cultural agreements directing in what form it is possible to render collective memories. The 1930’s must be retold inside its proper narrative form.
As human beings, we are all involved in a multitude of complicated social networks. We are constantly exposed to cultural processes and social forces emanating from different sources at different levels in the so called macro society. These influences from our local, national and international communities are continuously, if unconsciously, present in our lives like the air we breathe. Most of the time, we may not feel it necessary to lift our eyes over the narrow horizon of our everyday existence, but if somebody would ask us about how our individual course of life linked into larger history, it is not unlikely that we, just like Kalle did, would find a fast and stereotypical, although not at all implausible answer.

References
Transcript of the Arson in the Tannery Episode

Connecting particles
1 KS: oh yes
2 eh

Orientation (time)/Situation A
3 the last year eh that eh ... I was there at the tannery eh
4 that was eh
5 nineteen thirty three

Orientation (season)/Situation A
6 and it must have been in the winter then
7 [...] 
8 eh
9 [...] 
10 well it it

11 [...] 

Orientation (person)/Situation A
12 because this here tanner now

Complication 1/Change
13 it started to go a little bit eh ... downhill for him
14 he started to drink too much
15 and it started to go downhill so

16 UP: aha

Orientation 2/Complication 2
17 KS: but then we had a band of arsonists
18 and and

Orientation 2 (persons)
19 the boss of that his name was Edblad
20 he took up orders

21 for for arsons
22 UP: what are you SAYING [chuckling] ?
23 KS: so that and
24 and then well he had a companion that executed them

Orientation 3 (time)
25 I remember especially that day
26 he was going away
27 in the afternoon

Complication 2 (?) 
28 so that he told me to eh
29 UP: the tanner that is?
30 KS: yes the tanner

31 not to eh leave the factory before
32 the hours of work
33 were over
34 at five o’clock or so
35 well yes of course I won’t do that I said

Resolution 1/Situation B
36 and in the morning when I arrived
37 there was no tannery
38 UP: whoops
39 KS: mmm

Resolution 2
40 so I was exposed

41 then a lot to those them eh
42 detectives eh
43 and eh interrogations
44 and eh
45 UP: there had been a fire quite simply?

Evaluation
46 KS: oh yes it had yes
47 it was arson you se
48 UP: oh
49 dear
50 me
51 KS: but nobody knew that then
52 until this was revealed eh
53 eh there were several fires then
Resolution 3
54 there was a huge trial of that
55 UP: yes of course

Resolution 4
56 KS: oh yes and they were sentenced the whole bunch of them
57 to eh
58 four or five years in prison all of them
59 UP: it eh was it eh eh big company [chuckles] this gang?
60 KS: well eh

Orientation 4 (retrospective)
61 I think it consisted of three persons
62 two brothers Edblad and
63 and one by the name of Karlsson
64 it was Karlsson was the one that eh
65 eh eh

66 set
67 was responsible
68 and eh
69 set fire to them
70 UP: aha

71 KS: mm mm
Orientation 5 (place)
72 even here in Bergom eh
73 eh sso
74 it happened even here and
75 UP: really?

76 KS: oh yes
77 it was a big eh building
78 up here eh
79 by eh
80 Engblom’s that

Complication 2/change
81 burnt
82 that they set fire to
83 with cattle …
Resolution/change
and the whole shit went
84 UP: so it was a farmstead?
85 KS: it was a farmstead yes it was

86 mm mm
Resolution
87 so well that was a deed by them these
88 UP: the thing was eh eh … eh it was a a method to get hold of insurance money?

89 KS: yes exACTly
90 you know

Evaluation
91 there was a tremendous depression and huge unemployment you see
92 and poverty was terrible
93 UP: mmm
94 KS: oh yes
Change
95 and well then it was to leave

96 down to Härnösand so