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Memories’ Migrations in a Mindscape

For the last few years, I have been working with a material consisting of tape recorded life histories from 132 retired citizens of my home town of Visby, on the island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea. Several of you have heard me talking about different aspects of this material more than once.

Many of these life histories bear witness of the narrators’ experiences of physical or social migration: A substantial number of the interviewed persons were not born in Visby, but had moved there, either from the Gotlandic countryside, from the Swedish mainland or from abroad. Quite a few had had experiences of social mobility inside the existing class hierarchy. Every one of them had made the biological and psychological journey from childhood over adolescence and adulthood into old age. And everybody had also experienced the emotional travels a human life invites us to make or forces us to endure. In some of my cases one or two of these aspects become more obvious, but I would argue that all of them are present to a higher or lower degree in all the examples I am going to give you. In my discussion, I will be using two analytical concepts, positioning and figure of thought.

The concept positioning that was suggested by the American linguist and narrative analyst Michael Bamberg helps us to focus upon how people use narratives to orientate themselves in relation to the world around them. The term positioning offers us as scholars the opportunity of situating narratives on a gliding scale at the same time as it emphasizes that in our life narratives we seldom express simple choices “for” or “against” (Bamberg 2007b, 172). Narrated life histories are seldom argumentative.

What we position ourselves in relation to I like to understand by using a term coined by the Finnish-Swedish sociologist Johan Asplund, figure of thought (Asplund 1979, 150-169; 1991, 38ff). In my discussion today, I want to use the concept figure of thought to designate a society’s collective agreements about local circumstances. Figures of thought may encompass material objects, persons and environments, relations like kinship, friendship, enmity and hierarchies, but also historical events, as well as comments to and evaluations of all these. Several of these figures of thought are so well known that people feel prompted to position their life histories in relation to them. Typically, these figures of thought exist only as generally established cultural patterns that only partially, if at all have been verbalized. But together they constitute the mindscape, the cognitive universes, the imagined communities in which people live and through which human beings understand the world.

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1 Paper read at the Fifth International Symposium of the Finnish Oral History Network, 26 November 2014
Germanophobia
Among Gotlanders you are likely to encounter a sometimes fairly outspoken Russophobia. This attitude may be grounded in memories of two Russian invasions on the island, one in the beginning of the 18th century, and the other one a hundred years later. At least during the first years of the Second World War open expressions of solidarity with the German side were commonplace, and after the war the general opinion had it that the socialist Soviet Union constituted a military threat towards Gotland. When I prepared this paper a month ago, the Swedish marine had just performed a week-long hunt to detect Russian underwater activities in the archipelago outside Stockholm and debaters demanded a military rearmament on Gotland.

The woman in my following quotation, Barbro, was born on the Swedish mainland and spent the war years in her childhood village, where a substantial part of the population were workers at the iron mill and most of them were communists. The village women sat together and knitted woolen mittens and socks to send as gifts to the children of the Soviet Union and when their own children were naughty they threatened them that the Germans would come and take them away. In 1995, when this woman was interviewed in Visby she was very aware that her narrative did not fit into the Gotlandic pattern of thinking, so she felt obliged to comment upon the disagreement. Her knowledge of the Gotlandic Russophobia did not cause her to change her story, however, but it was so strong that she had to relate to it.

My mom was active in several organizational activities during the war. I don’t understand where they found the time to do all they did, plus that they knitted clothes to Russian children. In that little community everybody was a communist, you see. It was caps and mittens and socks that they sent in huge packages to Russia’s children. All holidays and the whole winters they sat knitting. We had no television at that time.

When the Germans invaded Norway, that was in forty or forty-one, I remember that the women were sitting at our place. We had a small apartment and a glass veranda where we would eat in summers. In wintertime it was frost on the window panes. Anyway, two of my aunts and my mother and two other women sat there weeping when I came home from school. They told me that now all our men will be drafted, for now the Germans have taken Norway. And they wept and wept and wept.

[...]
There they didn’t say that the Russians were coming as they say here on Gotland, but there they said that the Germans are coming to take us. That was what we were afraid about when we listened to the radio and it was a black-out.
One figure of thought exemplified in this narrative is of course xenophobia, directed toward Germans or Russians. Another one is the idea of unreflected solidarity; in an extreme situation you offer your help to those that need it.

Two things classify Barbro’s story as a challenge to the established figures of thought on Gotland. The first one is that it pointed out the Soviet Union as a victim. Barbro herself was aware that her story changed the conventional set of roles so that villains became victims. She understood that when being told on Gotland her narrative demanded an explanation, which she found by pointing at her origin and that is the second deviating trait. In her native village most inhabitants were communists, which was not the case on Gotland.

**Man against Nature**

Arvid was one of the oldest informants in my study. When he was interviewed he was over 90 years old. At two instances during his long life history he returned to when he, at the age of 27 built a house for his family. Both times he gave most attention to when he dug a well by hand in the ground of solid granite, with a sledge hammer, a chisel and dynamite.

I lived in Bromma and I built a small house. But there was no water in those damned mountains up there. It was only granite everywhere. But I started to hammer. I dug about five meters straight down into the mountain, but there was hardly any water. So I dug another four meters straight down. You had to start down there at the bottom and drill sloping holes around the sides and one hole in the middle. Then you had to shoot them with dynamite one by one until it opened up in the middle. It was a devilish work! You have to be careful and blow only small loads of dynamite at a time so the whole damned thing won’t collapse. But finally I loaded as much as I had, seven or eight kilos, and when that exploded, the whole house almost went and the foundation too. But then I got water. That load must have blown a hole in some invisible crack in the mountain. Then I had water so all the neighbors came and fetched water from my well.

One the one hand, Arvid’s story is a powerful hero narrative which has an almost Biblical ring to it. Destiny forced the lone man to challenge a harsh nature to achieve the glorious goal of getting fresh water for his wife and his two little children. The task seems to be superhuman. It should not be possible for a human being to dig through nine meters of solid granite using only manual power – even with the help of dynamite. But Arvid proved to be equal to his heroic task. With manly courage, youthful energy and brutal force he conquered the mountain. It would be easy to point out intertextual references to how heroic epics usually sound, but on the other hand Arvid's story also illustrates the ideas of folk health and functionalistic homes advocated by the early Social Democratic governments in the 1930s and 1940s. At that time, citizens were offered favorable bank loans, standard house models were designed and building lots were planned by the government. Arvid’s story connects the classic epic motive of the lone hero struggling against a hostile nature with the building of the Swedish welfare society. For more than sixty years, this memory has traveled with him.
through time and from another part of Sweden. With his narrative Arvid positions himself inside the group of Swedes who actively took part in the – very concrete – building of the welfare society.

A Lazy Life in Spain
Gunnar and Elsa had met when they were in their fifties and both had lost their former spouses. Gunnar had been a businessman, but had become bankrupt twice. According to his own story he had been unusually successful, and when he and Elsa had decided that they wanted to retire, he had sold his business and his huge house in Sweden and bought a fashionable villa in Spain. They spent fourteen years there, participating in a lively social life together with other prosperous pensioners. When he was interviewed, they had sold the Spanish house and settled in Visby. This is part of Gunnar’s story:

Our Spanish adventure, if I may use such an expression, was fourteen happy years. We really enjoyed our staying there. In seventy-eight we had sold our villa and then we were able to move to Spain. We got a wonderful home on a steep cape on the Spanish Mediterranean coast. It was a marvelously beautiful landscape. We had a serpentine road down to the port with a fishing harbor and a yacht harbor. The city was a mile further inland. It was ancient. Just like Visby, once it had had a city wall. I use to say that there is not one single place like it on the entire Costa Blanca, as that coast is called.

We made so many international friends, so it was quite marvelous. Here you can see a postcard from a Dutch couple, who are among our closest friends. He is a retired bank manager. So that is only one small piece of evidence. We miss them a lot and obviously they miss us too. Several friends have visited us here in Visby. Yes, that is wonderful when you leave a place, a country, to feel that people have appreciated your company.

Gunnar’s story addresses a well-known Swedish figure of thought about successful businessmen, who settle abroad when they retire to avoid the high Swedish taxes and to enjoy low prices, a pleasant climate and the company of their equals. In the quotation above, however, there is one small detail that arouses our suspicions: why does he have to present a piece of evidence to the interviewer to prove that he really had rich and influential friends?

Part of the answer is provided by his wife Elsa, who was also interviewed in the project. According to her the fourteen years in Spain were a bitter failure. She was the one who had dreamt about a small, quiet place somewhere in the sun where she could live a life of her own, at least for some months every year. Only reluctantly had she accepted that she and Gunnar bought a huge and boastful house together. In his story, Gunnar never mentioned that he could speak no other languages than Swedish, and that both his sight and his hearing deteriorated more and more so that soon he became unable to drive a car. More and more responsibility came to rest upon Elsa, who had to be able to drive on the dangerous serpentine roads, who
had to make all the shopping and cooking and take care of all contacts with the authorities, with craftsmen, car mechanics, barbers, dentists, and doctors. Gunnar developed heavy alcohol dependence and the other members of the foreign colony gradually stopped inviting them for social occasions.

Gunnar and Else narrate memories from a period of their life together, but their memories are largely contradictory. Elsa’s narrative evokes figures of thought concerning a dissolving marriage, lack of contact between spouses and a sick person’s self-deception and refusal to see and accept his own situation. Gunnar’s narrative paints the colorful image of the successful businessman leading a lazy life under the sun in the friendly company of his international equals. Their respective memories traveled with them from Costa Blanca in Spain to their nice and tidy home in Visby where they were interviewed at the same time in two different rooms by two different students.

**Austria Liberated**

One of the interviewed Visby citizens was Hilde who was born and raised in Germany. Fifty years after the war when she, now a Swedish citizen, talked about her youth, she demonstrated over and over again that she was well aware of the established Swedish narrative and that her own life history in certain important parts deviated from it. This is how she recounted Germany’s annexation of Austria from the perspective of the young girl, at the same time interspersed with the mature woman’s clear references to the collective Swedish figure of thought about the Second World War:

I was what you call a Nazi. We were so indoctrinated. When you have such men as Hitler, in those days I found him fabulously attractive. When I see the same film cuttings today, I say to myself: – How could we? And Goebbels and the small Minister of Propaganda and all that! But they were so powerful. I can still remember how interesting it was, when I was twelve, no I was fourteen, in 1936 when Austria was annexed. Anschluss was the term. Of course it was annexed by Germany, but at the same time many people there became very happy, because there were Nazis there and German soldiers and so on.

I remember that I was sitting by the table in our living room doing my homework and the radio was on and we heard this. The Führer was in Vienna! This ecstatic account that finally Austria was liberated from its yoke and finally they were united with their motherland and finally and now and now! I was weeping with emotion and I was thinking: – My God, these happy people, finally!

Well, that’s the way it happens, but it’s a mass psychosis. Anyway, it is something.

One dominant figure of thought in the 1930s’ Germany was that the peace treaty after World War One had been unfair to Germany and that Hitler and the Nazi party now were struggling
to restore the country’s status to where it should justly be. In Hilde’s account this figure of thought collides with the dominating Swedish one that Germany during the Second World War led an expansionist politics and committed crimes against humanity. When she recounts her memory half a century later in another country and in a totally different political context, Hilde did not attempt to change the memory as such, but she felt obliged to embed her account of it within a parenthesis of disclaimers that demonstrates that she was aware of the collision between the two figures of thought.

What Hilde had in common with several of the other narrators in my material is her generation affiliation. When the war started, she was young, naïve and lacked life experience. Like many of the persons of her age, she found the war exciting, she wanted to see more of it and she had no idea that she might get hurt although she was living in a country that was being bombed.

Adolescents Enjoy the War
When talking about the war years, several informants recalled playful jokes, freedom from responsibility, joy, happiness and erotic escapades instead of what I had expected: solemn epic accounts, fraught with gravity about a united nation patiently and bravely enduring the hardships of the war years.

Among the female narrators many recalled how nice it was to attend the Saturday night dances, where there often were ten boys in smart uniforms to every girl. They noticed the advantages with the black-outs, when you could hug and kiss without anybody being able to watch. Younger children used to sneak along the park paths with flashlights and reveal loving couples fondling on the park benches.

The male narrators liked to describe the pleasant outdoor life in the countryside camps when on guard-duty. To a large extent the mobilized soldiers were farmer’s sons. They were used to spending a lot of time outdoors. They knew how to cut fire-wood, how to make a cooking fire, they enjoyed sleeping in a tent, bicycling, going for a swim, picking mushrooms and wild berries in the forest. Their narratives reflected excitement, but not fear. To them, the war was a thrilling adventure, but it never became threatening or dangerous.

How is it possible to tell such stories in spite of the extraordinary war time conditions that must have deeply affected everybody’s everyday life? I can think of a number of plausible explanations. One is that the war time reality was not only as black as coal. As a matter of fact, Sweden, thanks to a careful foreign policy (some call it cowardly), managed to stay outside the war. Compared to the situation in our Nordic neighboring countries, very few Swedes today have any particularly dramatic war experiences to relate.

From a narratological point of view, however, I can observe how the depression of the interwar period and the war time hardships are often used to constitute a dramaturgical contrast to the successful realization of the welfare society of the 1950s and ‘60s.
Consequently, the darker the earlier epochs are painted the more efficient the image of the emerging welfare state will appear.

Nonetheless, the most important explanation to the positive attitudes taken by the interviewed persons is, I am convinced, their age. Most of them were born in the 1920s and 30s, meaning that they were teenagers or adolescents during the war. They had no families or children to provide for. When they received their draft cards they could regard the draft as a compulsory but also pleasant vacation from their ordinary duties. From their life-stories I can hear that their years of struggle came after the war. At that time they were supposed to enter the labor market, start a family, raise children and provide for them, find an apartment or plead for a bank loan to build a house, thus entering the constant struggle to make ends meet. To many of them the advantages of the welfare society did not become apparent until one or two decades later.

Certainly these narrators were aware of the discrepancies between their narrated memories and the official figure of thought that is established today. As a matter of fact, several of them actually stated that already during the war they were rebuked by their parents for not taking the war as seriously as one ought to. Some of them commented on their juvenile lack of judgment and were eager to emphasize that as grown-up, mature citizens they now agree with the collectively accepted figure of thought. Their war narratives represent the experiences of one specific generation, but still they fall well inside the limits of normality. Adolescents are generally allowed a greater degree of irresponsibility, spontaneity and short-sightedness, as long as they agree to leave this immature state, grow up and accept to conform to the established values of the society.

Some of the figures of thought that became visible in my examples were: Russophobia, solidarity with those in need, the Lone Hero Struggling against Nature, a lazy life in Spain, Nazi Crimes, wartime hardships, and the welfare society. Concepts like these are way too far-reaching and too multifaceted to fit into one single life narrative. But they are helpful to relate to and to use as references that defines where the individual narrative is located on the maps of collective mindscapes. Individual narrators position themselves in relation to the collective figures of thought by marking their belonging to them or alienating themselves from them.

Several common figures of thought together build up a world of imagined communities, like the ones the Irish-American anthropologist Benedict Anderson described in his investigation of the emergence of the nation, nationality and nationalism. What Anderson in his study disregards, we as folkloristics can fill in, namely how the imagination that brings forward such communities travels in the form of narratives and how citizens of a society by narrating to each other position themselves in relation to these communities that are imagined by being narrated.

Thus, several individual narratives together construct common mindscapes and thus individuals with the help of their narratives orientate themselves in relation to these
mindscapes. With narratives we imagine communities and with narratives we position ourselves inside such imagined communities.