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"Family" and "Collective" Memory
(Ways of Ethnic Identity Construction)

I would like to get straight down to the topic of this conference, i.e. to the 'biographical method'. I would like to show how biographical narrative, when regarded as a self-presentation, as in a certain performance on the stage (Goffman's metaphor), reveals various exciting ways of constructing ethnic identities.

My report is based on the data of the joint research project "Forming of Ethnic Communities in St. Petersburg and Berlin" carried out in 1993-1996 at the Centre for Independent Social Research, co-ordinated by Ingrid Oswald and Viktor Voronkov. Research was supported by the Volkswagen Foundation. I did research on the German Community in St. Petersburg. In the course of my research, 22 biographical, problem-oriented interviews were conducted. It must be noted that along with the interviews (as far as it was possible), analysis of context was carried out. Analysing only verbal practices is not enough to understand respondents' "reality". Participant observation of everyday life is essential for research. I participated in the public activities of the German Community and in the 'closed', family festivities. The highest degree of confidence that a researcher can enjoy is to be invited to such holidays. It is also a compliment, being identified as one of 'them'. *You must have something of a German origin. You look like a German. These clever, intelligent eyes behind the glasses.*

Each biographical narrative brings together the past and the future, it is a self-presentation, explanation and justification of today's identity of the narrator. Each biographical interview as an act of communication between the sociologist and the informant is a special kind of public speech practice, a show, a certain kind of demonstration. *I am this and that.* There is no difference whether the informant is speaking of real events and telling the truth - it is *his/her* truth, *his/her* reality. What is really important is what he/she is demonstrating, what the others and the sociologist, in particular, see to see in the performance. For the sociologist who uses this method, it is important to see and to interpret adequately how such self-presentation is formed. By his/her behaviour a person accomplishes the statement: *I am what I appear to be.* The sociologist's task is to decode such a 'statement'. Below I give an example of the importance of the analysis of biographical interviews as a performance on the base of my research.

How can we explain the growing interest in ethnic identity, which seemed to have disappeared during the Soviet period? Total disidentification and a 'certain crucial struggle for existence' in today's Russian reality, according to Leonid Lomov, are reasons that ascriptive characteristics become more important, ethnicity being one of these characteristics (Lomov: 249). Ethnic identity lost by previous generations suddenly becomes urgent, and serves as a basis for building up life-strategies.

Ethnicity is a social construction as it is shown by the research. However, according to the myths drifting around in the society, ethnicity is inherited and therefore family biography and family legends are constitutive signs of such an identity. The search for roots is the basis of its

different and separated worlds, was now reorganized as experience of living in a historically connected sphere of one (European) World which was separated for 50 years.

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construction. This explains the growing interest towards genealogy which is very common today.

Genealogy, whose primordial task was establishing and registering official class privileges, gives birth to the myth of the origin of nobleness and of its direct inheritance. So, all the achievements of previous generations and their former status are automatically transmitted to the happy heir of distinguished ancestors. The most important thing is to find the right one.

The following statements of one of the informants (member of the St Petersburg German Society, 67 years old, retired) is rather common, but the most expressive one and leaves no doubt that the only feeling such a "weight of past" gives him is pleasure: *All my ancestors descend from Germans, but not from monkeys. We can cite as well some published autobiographies: All those Jews not remembering their kindred invented a saying that suits them very well. A man is not responsible for his father. Well, it's up to them. Personally I prefer another saying: Like father like son. I am the son of my father, the grandson (...) of the true German intellectuals who have inhabited normally the great national culture (My duty...33). So, the son and grandson of the true German intellectuals transfers this quality of a true German intellectual to himself and becomes also a bearer of the great German culture. At the same time, the idea of family is transformed to include the distant past and is extended until the moment when one can say that one's great-great-grandfather was German. If we simply ask the informant about his family, he answers like this: *In May of 1944* etc. There is a separate German section in the St. Petersburg Genealogy Society.*

The majority of my informants have started to construct their ethnic identity only recently. Until then, it was important only in the 'bureaucratic' space. But when ethnicity becomes a useful resource, namely an alternative to the lost identities gone with the collapse of the Soviet Union, people are likely to "recall" that one of their ancestors was German. United under a common ethnonym, 'the Germans' 'ascibe' themselves to various referents, form various codes of 'their people' and choose various life strategies. The differences in organization of the biographical narrative demonstrate different ways of identity construction. It is what the chosen referent is related to that turns out to be fundamental. I distinguish two types of identities based on different contexts of referentiality. So, these are: (1) identity constructed on the basis of what is called 'family memory', which exists within the frame of family ideology and family values, (2) identity built on the basis of 'collective', shared memory. In the latter case, the ideology and values are shared by the group. It's clear that such a division is rather relative because any attempt to structure and 'put in order' is undoubtedly a simplification and impoverishment of narration. Below I define what is meant by the terms of family and collective memory.

Family memory is concentrated on reproducing the family traditions and legends connected to some concrete persons, relatives whose lives and actions are mythologized. Collective memory is not simply personified collective recollections filtered through personal experience, but a collective perception and collective evaluations significant to the present behavior. A mass image of past events is created and a collective biography is constructed. By means of such a biography, the ideology of this group is formulated. Each family story being told is reproduced within the frames of this ideology. It is tied to the main events of the group history, all involvement episodes are omitted and a selection of topics is held. In the collective memory about the common history there are two points which are significant: arrival of the German ancestors to Russia (as a starting-point of the existence of the group) and the repression (as the reason for special status today). Every family story is anchored to these two main events. In the family memory, these points can be completely absent — in this case, the events connected to the family values, such as honesty, education, etc. become of major significance.

Organization of these narratives is different. It is the place where the interview had been carried out which proved to be important. I'd like to remind the reader once more that interviews usually didn't take place right after the first meeting with the future narrator. First, there is a certain period of getting used to each other, when the informant understands that I am rather harmless and we both start to feel if not an affection for each other, then at least a friendly liking. When possible, the informants chose the place for the interview, an environment where their self-presentation would be appropriate. It is known that the space itself (the space literally) structures the behavior. Surrounding symbols are the scenery of the performance. It could be the territory of the German Society with the German Library, the Grimm Brothers' portrait and the map of Germany on the wall, or the house, a private space with a home library and pies, which were presented to me as typically German.

In order to confirm their stories, in the first case, informants would show me some documents of social significance like certificates of rehabilitation, court verdicts and passports with the nationality column filled. In the case, when identity was constructed on the basis of family memory, informants used another sort of confirmation of their truthfulness. I was shown documents about their grandfather's education, grandchildren's handicraft items, family photographs with such comments as *I look at this noble bearing, this refinement of appearance, this intellect in the eyes, etc.*

Genres of these narratives are also different. While the family legends are something like exciting, amusing and funny family stories, the biographical narrations inscribed into the collective ideology are like heroic epic literature. Here all the events give the feeling of acute tension. This tension is relieved by psychological reasoning or rhetorical questions and exclamations. First of all, it is a chronicle of humiliation and offense, an executive not *do* as, but *in spite of* something. For example, a story about a professional career is, first and foremost, an advancement in spite of the nationality column in a passport, in spite of a *bad humiliation I had to go through because of my origins. As a result of all this I've got a feeling similar to the one black people had in America when racism was at its worst...* (this is followed by a detailed story about this humiliation, My det... 32-33).

And in a child's consciousness (speaking about fights at school because of being called "Nazi" or "fascist") I could... in no way find the explanation, why and what for I was blamed? We felt guilty in every fibre of our being, in our skin. What were we guilty of? It is guilt of being German, of living in this country. ... It seems that there are different ethnicities on the Earth and if nature wanted to have only one ethnicity, only one species, could you imagine what it would be? There would be only larch-trees or oak-trees or just slender birches. But besides the slender birches there are dwarf birches, larches and there is some variety carried by the wind. That means nature needs it all, that means all the ethnicities on the globe are needed for some reason. That means it's necessary that people speak more than one language. That means it's necessary for existence! (from the interview with the principal of the German kindergarten, a member of the Board of the St. Petersburg German Society, 44 years old). I heard the same genre and intonation during the informant's speech at the meeting of the German Society.

The main difference between these narratives and identity presentations is the fact that they are constructed in different discourses. The story of the identity, built on the basis of a shared collective memory, exists first of all in the discourse of the social justice. I quote... we should give a hand to those who were unfairly considered and defamed, punished from their native land and their own hearts, we should relieve the feeling of discomfort that terrifies until today, we should give them hope, because in the end it's not generosity, but our duty towards our fellow-citizens! (My det... 60). Injustice is a key-word in this text. In this case, the

Leningrad Jews: Ethnicity and Context

In this paper we seek to highlight the changes in the construction of the Jewish ethnic identity within the Soviet society. Construction of collective identity is viewed from the perspective of the specific relationship between Soviet public and private spheres. This paper is based on an analysis of 50 in-depth biographical interviews carried out with Jews - residents of St Petersburg and Berlin in 1997-1998.¹⁹

We have analysed the interviews, focusing our attention on the development of ethnic identity in Jewish families under the conditions of changes in the social context. By context here, we understand the historical context (events that had an impact upon identity transformation), and second, specific changes in the configuration of private and public spheres within Soviet society. Ethnicity in our understanding is a social construction which is forming and transforming within a changing context.

Our interpretation of private and public spheres needs clarification, as the contents of these concepts in Russian-Soviet society are different from those common in Western discourse. Here we would like to refer to political analyst Oleg Vitz²⁰, who uses the concepts of *written law and customary law* to show the essential difference between Soviet and Western societies. In each society one finds the boundary between written and customary law. However O Vitz argues that Soviet society can be characterized by the specific legitimacy of both written law (regulating relations in the public sphere) and customary law (regulating relations in the private sphere). The bifurcation of public and private spheres was legitimate also. The private sphere, which in its turn can be analytically divided into *private sphere proper* and *private-public sphere*, was a niche for social action and was relatively out of state-party control. Everything was submitted for discussion in this sphere. This sphere was regulated by the customary law. Conversely, it was strictly taboored in the public sphere to discuss events occurring in the sphere not regulated by written law, that is, in real life. As the most part of social processes was regulated by the customary law, the public discourse was consensuated. This public/private division of the Soviet society is shown on the drawing below.



Such a configuration of private/public spheres explains *social schizophrenia* as a norm for Soviet personality. It appeared that everyone embodied two personalities, and nobody mixed up the two spaces in his/her domus - it was always clear which one of these two personalities lived in the public, and which one - in the private space (and if somebody mixed the two, this could lead to grave consequences).

¹⁹ The Project "Formation of Ethnic Communities in Former-Petersburg and Berlin" supported by Volkswagen Foundation, coordinators: Ingrid Oroskoff and Viktor Voronkov.

²⁰ Oleg Vitz, *Law and Custom: The Role of Customary Law in Soviet Society* (Moscow: Nauka, 1988), p. 10.

referent is described in terms of life nation. The idea of belonging to the group which lost something rather significant in the past (like social status that has been lowered) and the struggle to restore the *justice of history* gives birth to the kind of solidarity different from the family one. It applies to those Germans who form social networks based on the ethnicity in public sphere. We can say that an ethnic group is striving to become a political association and is fighting for its rights. In this case, the collective identity became functional for the citizen's role. A group tries to fill a certain niche in social hierarchy because the very idea of social justice presumes vertical classification of the world (Lomin: 233-235). As J. Habermas argued, justice presumes national consciousness acquired nationalism grow out from inherited ethnicity (Habermas 1996). In this sense, the ascriptive status (inherited ethnicity) transforms into achieved status, whilst formulated in the terms of citizenship.

Identity built on the basis of the family memory develops in another discourse where the key word is *prestige*. In this case, ethnic difference acquires the quality of *personal value* and doesn't come out into political space. The identity doesn't become a collective one, it is not laid down as a basis for life strategies, but exists only as an alternative to the other positions in the social space. Here the ethnic identity is presented as non-functional, it has no certain status position. It is the self-value of a personality that is affirmed by means of such identity construction.

The integrative analysis of the autobiographical narrative, its context and the organization of the whole performance has shown that under a common name there exist completely different referents and the ethnicity therefore acquires a different *character and meaning*. The role of a German oriented towards various referents presumes different life strategies.

The reported research reveal two types of ethnic identity construction: identity built on the basis of family memory and identity based on what I call collective memory. This statement was confirmed by the differences in the biographical narrations themselves.

This paper is an illustration of the thesis that every biographical narrative is valuable and interpretation is possible only when it is combined with the context analysis, that is, a *chronology of the performance*. Public dramatization, that is, the communication between a sociologist and an informant, is the selling of one's own image. Research in techniques and methods of this dramatization helps to understand the way a person maintains or changes his/her identity, in order to understand his/her world. Combining biographical analysis and participant observation method expands opportunities for understanding.

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