

ESTONIAN DIASPORA IN SWEDEN: AN ANALYSIS OF THE COLLECTION “LIFE DESTINIES” AT THE SWEDISH NORDIC MUSEUM

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Abstract: History is of importance to society and for the individual, yet from different angles as is shown in the article. History matters, but whose history is told by the public archives and history museums? This article presents an analysis of the collection “Life Destinies – Estonian diaspora in Sweden”, which is preserved at the Swedish Nordic Museum. The interviews with Estonians in Sweden were conducted at the beginning of the 1980s. The Swedish self-perception of an inclusive multicultural society is dominating the interview project, and, before interviewing, Estonians were categorised as a well-integrated and well-educated group of migrants. However, the investigation of the transcribed interviews shows that Estonians tried to negotiate their own identity by telling about Estonian history as a way of anchoring their identity within an Estonian context, but the interviewers were not interested in this kind of storytelling because it was not “personal”. In this case the history of Estonia was not a part of “our” history, and, contrary to the aim of the project, it was unconsciously set apart from the latter by the interviewers. According to the guidelines of the project, Estonian refugees should be included within the museum’s collection as a part of “our” Swedish history. The interviewers defined the Estonian homes as typically Swedish ones. Negotiating their identity, Estonians tried to distance themselves from other groups of immigrants for different purposes. The Estonian self-image was marked by independence and good behaviour. A general opinion among the Balts was that migrants from the countries outside Europe received more caring support and benefits from the Swedish welfare state than the Baltic refugees.

Keywords: integration, multicultural society, national self-perception, reconstructing of history

How we understand, use, and reproduce history is an important issue for society at large. Historian Jörn Rüsen claims that “our” history knowledge is embodied in what professional historians and historical institutions such as archives and museums tell us. What they say represents “our” knowledge of the past, even though we do not participate in their research ourselves (Rüsen 2005). The “making of history” contributes to the shaping of identities and belonging. Therefore, it is important to explore how archives and memory institutions collect and preserve “our” past experience, “our” common cultural heritage and identity. In the ongoing project “Narratives as cultural heritage” Swedish researchers Jesper Johansson and Malin Thor Tureby study the Nordic Museum’s collections and selections of immigrant narratives. They conclude that the Swedish self-image has been “transformed from the self-image of a homogeneous country to a self-perception of a multicultural society” (Johansson & Thor Tureby 2016: 321). By not asking questions about racism and discrimination in the questionnaires, the Nordic Museum confirms the including perspective and Swedish self-perception as a multicultural nation. Johansson & Thor Tureby (ibid.) claim that the museum has an outspoken objective to incorporate the immigrants’ stories about migration to “our” (the majority’s) Swedish history and “our” cultural heritage. Scholars in ethnology have emphasized that the folklore collections and questionnaires at the museum, dating from the first half of the twentieth century, reaffirmed Sweden as a monoethnic nation. They conclude that the archived collections tell us more about the culture of the time than life stories and interviews without archival context (Lilja 1996; Johansson et al. 2017). Drawing on this, the article investigates how the collection “Life Destinies” at the Swedish Nordic Museum creates narratives about Estonians in Sweden and their adaptation to the Swedish society. The aim is twofold: firstly, I explore how and by whom the collection is compiled. I also investigate if the collection (questionnaires and compilations) contains a tacit narrative about Sweden and Swedes and Estonians in Sweden. Secondly, I focus on the interviews, on how Estonians in Sweden reproduce, manage, and negotiate their lived experiences of forced migration, and the meaning of identity being negotiated and reflected in interviews. The material used in my research is comprised of the preserved written documents and transcribed interviews from the collection “Life Destinies” (interviews with Estonians in Sweden), conducted in 1983–1986 by the ethnologists working at the Swedish Nordic Museum.

ESTONIAN LIFE STORIES: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

In the early 1970s through to early 1980s research about migration and oral history was quite uncommon in Sweden, and this also reflected in the interviews carried out by ethnologists during the period. In the three Baltic countries oral history has been a growing research field since 1991, when the Baltic states regained their independence. Important contributions to the oral history research on Baltic refugees in Sweden have been made, among others, by Aili Aareleid-Tart (2002, 2012), Anu Mai Kõll (2015) and Triinu Ojamaa (Ojamaa & Labi & Kronberg 2012; Ojamaa 2019). By studying the differences between the lives lived and the lives remembered, Aili Aareleid-Tart (2002) has identified two types of factual imperfections in the narratives of Estonians. The first type involves the overestimation of the hardships Estonians faced when they arrived in Sweden and the mystifying of the reasons why they left their homeland. The second one relates to various white lies to show that their lives had been worse in the new country of residence than they really were. With this example Aili Aareleid-Tart wanted to emphasise the hermeneutic interplay between the subjective perception of reality by the informants and the existing objective social structure. Triinu Ojamaa has shown in several articles that the Estonian refugees preferred integration, choosing both the preservation of their culture of origin, and adaptation to the Swedish society. In her article in 2019 she also explained the concepts of *integration* (immigrants are interested in both maintaining their culture of origin and engaging in interactions with other groups) and *marginalization* (immigrants have little interest in cultural maintenance as well as in having relations with other groups). Kõll (2015) in her research focuses on the Swedish state and on how the state acted when receiving refugees from its neighbouring countries, including the Baltic states, during World War II. There is a common assumption among scholars that the Balts are one of the most integrated migrant groups in Sweden, which succeeded in integrating successfully into Swedish society as well as maintaining their own cultural identity (Kõll 2015; Ojamaa 2019). This statement is still unquestioned. So, do we really need more research, life stories, and narratives on how Estonians experienced Swedish society? I am not sure, but my aim in this article is to reflect on this topic from the Swedish perspective and explore, on the basis of the collected interviews, how the Swedes perceived Estonians. A quote from one of the interview reports illustrates the somewhat ambivalent relationship between the perceptions of Swedishness and Estonianness. It is the interviewer who reflects on the typical Swedish home:

It was important for him [Lembit] to anchor his own narratives in a historical context, which he saw as an explanation for everything that had happened. Lembit spoke very good Swedish and he had no problems to understand the implication in question. ... It was a typical Swedish home and when I indicated it to Lembit he laughed and said: "It is not such a big difference. We have Christmas trees in Estonia, too." (NM D 382: 36)

The comment on the typical Swedish home can be perceived as somewhat trivial but it was an important part of the interviewers' assignment to report back to the project, which also underlines the scholarly discourse about the well-integrated Baltic refugees. The Estonians were Europeans similar in appearance to the Swedes, and their homes looked like typical Swedish homes, so why shouldn't Estonians be well-integrated? The question is rhetorical, but it can still be asked.

THE COLLECTION "LIFE DESTINIES" AT THE NORDIC MUSEUM

The study has used two basic sets of data. The first set consists of project descriptions, data of the collecting processes, and interview materials such as questionnaires and reports. The second set consists of transcribed interviews. By studying the creation of what has been considered national traits, such as profession, home, and cooking in relation to Swedishness and the assumed inclusion in or exclusion from the Swedish society, I strive to provide meanings of social practices and explain how imagined national notions were formulated in language and agency. How has the Estonian diaspora been understood and mediated through collections and in life stories?

Different agents both consciously and unconsciously produce and reproduce discourses when positioning themselves in particular fields and in societal contexts through their rhetorical statements (Metzger 2005: 47). In the project "Life Destinies" the positioning was expressed already in the aims of the project and its outlines. The researchers wanted to "distinguish different patterns and lifestyles through interviews; show how individual experiences, events, and values have contributed to the interpretation of contemporary history".¹ The project coordinator was a professor of history, who also initiated the scientific oral history research on migrants. The aim was to study the development of the relationship between Estonians in Sweden and the Swedish society during the postwar period until 1984. The guidelines explained: "Regarding immigrant memories, our method has a special task: the attitudes and the daily behaviour

of immigrants cannot be understood without in-depth knowledge of their background where their life course constitutes a central concept.”² The phrase “in-depth knowledge of their background” is of special interest, because it can be interpreted on two different levels: first, on the personal or individual level of the interviewee and second, on the official, historical level. One can see that these two levels are reflected in the interviewer’s reports.

As a part of the prevailing discourse on Baltic diaspora as a well-integrated group in Swedish society the project pointed to the “changes and attitudes of Estonian minority culture (counter-culture) to today’s integration into Swedish society”.³ A special focus was put on “the Estonian educational community – the high ideals of education for three generations and their importance to Estonians’ adaptation and success as an individual and ethnic group”.⁴ Special key persons, such as artists, writers, and journalists had to be interviewed. They were supposed to be chosen to show “if possible, what information an interview with an extraordinary sensitive respondent/interviewee can provide”.⁵ The guidelines for the researchers within the project were very strict and the project management had made a list of Estonians to be interviewed. The Estonian informants had received a letter from the management where the purpose of the project was defined before the researchers visited them. The subjects for the interview concerned childhood, leisure, education, marriage, escape, family and relatives in Estonia and contacts with Estonia, work, and financial situation. The guidelines for the researchers also contained instructions on how to reflect on the informant, for example: “How is it to be an Estonian; expectations about Estonians by other Estonians; the awareness and growth of the Estonian identity; positive and negative differences towards Swedishness; do you have double loyalties”.⁶ The interviewed Estonians were also asked to reflect on their self-perception, as for example: “What constitutes a typical Estonian; Estonian characteristics; rigidity; power/authoritativeness; diligence; frugality”.⁷ This framework of pre-understanding of the Baltic diaspora reinforces the discourse about them as one of the most integrated immigrant groups in Sweden, especially within the context of the 1970s social migrants to Sweden from different parts of Africa. It also includes, as Johansson and Thor Tureby (2016) have stressed in their research, a Swedish self-image of inclusiveness and Swedish welfare of a high standard, where it is easy for well-educated people to fit in and be included in the Swedish community. To conclude, the researchers within the project reproduced – consciously or unconsciously – the discourse of integration, inclusion, and welfare in Sweden for the Estonian refugees *before* interviewing them.

Cultural similarities, education, and good social conditions were the concepts used by the Swedish newspapers as reasons for the acceptance and inclusion of

immigrants. In his dissertation, Mikael Byström has studied the perceptions and ideas about foreigners, refugees, and refugee politics in the Swedish public debate in 1942–1947. He argues that the Estonian Swedes were embraced as unproblematic,⁸ whereas the Baltic refugees were discussed in other terms, especially among the left-wing parties (Byström 2006: 105). As an example, the Swedish communists considered the Balts as fascists or Nazi-sympathizers and made campaigns against them in newspapers and elsewhere. The parties in the government generally adhered to the Nordic prerogative, but used different interpretations of the concept of Nordicness, which included Finns who had a similar experience and history as the Balts. However, the Balts were excluded from this brotherhood concept of Nordicness (Byström 2006: 79–80).

It is clear that there existed a tacit narrative on the Baltic refugees as fascists or Nazi-sympathizers, but the project “Life Destinies” from the 1980s did not mention it at all, even if the Estonian informants talked about it. This was a stigmatizing remark that many Estonian and Latvian refugees experienced in Sweden (Runcis 2012: 61). In one of the interviews from the collection “Life Destinies” an elderly Estonian told about his arrival to Örnsköldsvik in Sweden in 1944:

Some of the refugees were moved to Ulricehamn, because it was said that in the northern part there were too many who were “red”, communists in different industries, ... We were, for some reasons, I do not know, branded as Nazi-sympathizers. (NM D 382: 43)

INTERACTION BETWEEN THE SWEDISH INTERVIEWERS AND THE ESTONIAN INTERVIEWEES

To sum up, my main sources in this study are the revised reports and transcripts from the interviews. All the interviews used in my research were conducted in 1983 and at the beginning of 1984. I have chosen the first ten records from the collection of interviews. The records mainly contain interviews with men but in some cases other family members also participated. The main impression from these ten interviews is that the Estonian informants were very proud of having been chosen for the interview and having contributed to a scientific project. Some of the informants reported to the project management that they did not fit in as “well-educated” informants, because they were uneducated, just workers, and they thought they were not of interest for the project. All interviews were made at the informants’ homes, except for one, which was conducted at

the informant's office. Meeting the informants at their home included also the whole family, mostly husband or wife and in some cases even the children. In the following I present some glimpses from the interviews and of how the Estonians were positioned by the Swedish researchers. In the first case it was a middle-aged Estonian man with a Swedish-sounding first name – Gunnar. He was born in Harju County, and left Estonia in 1944, when he was 19 years old. Gunnar had no higher education but he was trained at his workplace as an “oil inspector” in Sweden. The interview was conducted at Gunnar's home, in a residential district outside Stockholm. The interview lasted 13 hours and finished after midnight. It is obvious from the transcript that Gunnar liked to tell about his life in Estonia and in Sweden. But in the preserved report, the interviewer positioned Gunnar in a slightly contemptuous way:

Gunnar wanted to meet me at the parking lot that was on the edge of the district. It was totally unnecessary as I could have managed to find the way myself. Later on, I understood that from his position it was a very polite gesture. It was mannerly to do so. He bid me welcome and the white shirt and the dark tie shone as a signal under the muffler... We walked slowly through the residential area where the houses were surrounded by high fences. ... To live like this was important for Gunnar and he told me with anger in his voice how it had been to live in Brandbergen on the outskirts. It was not fit for human beings and finally he had sold his summer cottage to move. In this residential area “real people” lived and the children were not as the children in Brandbergen. ... Gunnar seemed to be proud to have been chosen for the interview and he made his best to present himself in the most appropriate way. A conservative party badge was inserted in his jacket collar and even if it was there only for the moment, it gave me a symbolic hint, which was completely conscious. After about 20 minutes, when this getting to know each other, and the silent recognition of our personal statuses was completed, the interview could start. (NM D 382: 45)

The interviewer noted that the home looked very Swedish and he could not detect anything that could tell him about a different cultural origin. Gunnar's wife served them coffee and buns, but the interviewer did not reflect on the buns – whether they were Swedish or Estonian. The wife did not take part in the interview. However, the report contains plenty of remarks of division between the Swedish-design life style of modernity and inclusiveness, opposite to the old-fashioned style (politeness) of the Estonian worker, who strives for a higher living standard, away from the poor area on the outskirts; and of course – the

right-wing button signals exclusiveness opposing the Swedish mainstream equality discourse. The report clearly reveals that Gunnar distances himself from the poor outskirts and its inhabitants.

According to the questionnaire and the remark on self-perception, Gunnar had difficulties to describe himself as a person: "I absolutely do not want to be better than I am, at the same time not worse either. I think I'm pretty meticulous but not pedantic. Things should be in order" (NM D 384: 45). In his life story Gunnar tells about how he came to Sweden, alone, 19 years old, without any relatives or close relations. He talks about his loneliness in Sweden and his memory of Estonia "as a picture frame without an image" (ibid.) and this is the reason why he collects historical articles about Estonia to fill the frame. He has no trust in Swedish newspapers or in politics. After his arrival in Sweden he did not have any contact with his mother, who did not know if he was still alive. In 1950, after five years in Sweden, he wrote a letter to his mother, but he was scared to address it directly to her home address. He sent the letter to a fake person who did not exist, but to the same district where his mother lived, and he hoped that someone would recognise his handwriting and give the letter to his mother. He was scared to hurt his mother or to put her in danger, and he was afraid because he did not really know what would happen next. After a year he got an answer from his mother who wrote in a coded style, and Gunnar shows one example, reading: "Your uncle has gone on a long-distance journey," (ibid.) which, according to Gunnar, meant that the uncle was deported to Siberia. The mass deportation of kulaks was executed in 1949, on 25 March, the same day in all the three Soviet Baltic republics, but no one outside the Soviet republics knew about it. Sometimes Gunnar had difficulties in decoding the letters and he discussed them with his Estonian friends in Sweden. Gunnar still emphasises in his life story that he was not bitter at all, and his life in Sweden has been very good, although sometimes poor and hard, but he has managed. Finally, he confirmed his position as a successful well-integrated Swedish Estonian, but throughout the whole narrative he expressed great aversion to and fear of the Soviet communist regime. This experience was hard for him to share within the Swedish community during the 1980s. However, the right-wing badge on his jacket marked his new Estonian-Swedish identity.

HISTORY MATTERS

As Gunnar's life story has shown, he wanted to fill an empty frame with Estonian history, not only to learn more about Estonia, but also to position himself in a cultural context. The importance for Estonian refugees to tell about Estonian

history and make their voices heard can partly be seen within the Swedish context from the late 1970s and through the 1980s, when knowledge of history was not at the forefront. The Baltic refugees were annoyed and frustrated by the fact that there was hardly any knowledge of history of the Baltic states among the inhabitants of Sweden. Many Latvian and Estonian life stories narrated in Sweden testify to the fact that they “educated” their interviewers in the history of their overseas neighbouring countries (Runcis 2012: 64). This became obvious in the interview with an Estonian man called Harald (NM D 382: 44). The Swedish interviewer wrote in his report that he himself was a bit anxious, he thought it would be difficult with personal things, because he did not know, or he lacked the conception of what was off limits (taboo). In his report he gave one example from Harald’s wife: “The wife reacted when I called them immigrants. She argued that they should be called refugees” (ibid.) But according to the report, the interview went well and Harald was very proud to be interviewed and he wanted a photograph of him and the interviewer in his family album. During the interview they had coffee, cognac, and *piroshky* (pies) and they continued with homemade apple wine. Harald talked about his activities in the Estonian community in Sweden and that he had been a member of the Estonian choir for more than thirty years. According to the interview report, Harald gave the interviewer plenty of printed information to read about Estonia, because the interviewer did not have enough knowledge of the country. However, the interviewer found that he was “not very interested in this kind of information because it was not a personal life story” (NM D 382: 44). Yet for Harald, Estonian history was part of his identity and it belonged to him, it was personal. This narrative remarks the ambivalence between the two levels of the background story which were stressed in the guidelines – the private and the official history as identity markers. An interpretation according to Jörn Rüsen (2005) could be that Estonian history was not a part of “our” history, and it was unconsciously set apart from “ours” by the interviewer, contrary to the project aims. But a simpler reflection is that the interviewer was not interested in history in general; he wanted to know more about personal things. When the interview was finished, the Swedish interviewer was still unsatisfied; he felt that the interview had gone well, but he also felt as if he had stolen something. But Harald welcomed him back another time. “He is worth it,” the interviewer finished his report (NM D 382: 44).

When Harald talked about his life in Sweden, he described it as completely devoid of Swedishness. He had worked as a bookkeeper in different Estonian and Swedish companies. His children worked with Estonians at the Estonian school in Stockholm. The whole family, children and grandchildren, spoke Estonian, they were all active within the Swedish Estonian community, in education,

and leisure. Harald acquired Swedish citizenship in the middle of the 1950s, but this was something he needed only for practical reasons, such as to buy a house and to travel. It was not a turning point in his life, he remarked in the interview. His professional life, family life, culture, and leisure time were shaped by the Estonian community, and according to the interview, without any connection to the Swedish community. His life story seems to be an isolated Estonian island in Sweden. In Harald's case the concept of marginalization seems useful – little interest in Swedish cultural maintenance and few relations with the Swedish community.

It is obvious from this interview that Estonians worked hard to keep their Estonian identity and culture. By negotiating their identity, they tried to distance themselves from the other groups of immigrants for different purposes. The interview showed that Harald and his wife wanted to stress that they did not leave their home country on their own free will; they were forced to leave; secondly, in the 1970s and 1980s the concept of immigrant was related to the social and political migrants, who came from different parts of Africa as well as Latin America. Harald's narrative remarks diversity in relation to migrants from other parts of the world, from outside of Europe, who were considered as receiving more caring support and benefits from the Swedish welfare state than the Baltic refugees.

The last example in this article is from the interview with Ulo, who was described as an “uncomplicated human of companionable kind” (NM D 382: 33). Ulo lived in a big house and the living room where the interview took place was also described in the interviewer's report: “It had a bookshelf with books in Estonian, Russian, and Swedish; a national doll and some photographs of relatives; somewhat sparsely furnished but cosy. Above all, Estonian art on the walls” (ibid.).

As a 19-year-old youth, Ulo was an inductee in Wehrmacht, and when Germans surrendered in 1944, he stayed in Latvia. He did not want to go back to Estonia and therefore he fled to Sweden. In 1958 Ulo became a Swedish citizen, and he considered it an important step in his life. “I was happy that I chose this way,” Ulo witnessed in his life-story (ibid.). He knew that he could not return to Estonia. “You have to make your decisions. You can't sit ten or fifteen years on our bags and wait,” he said (ibid.). Ulo worked at a big Swiss healthcare company, where he met a number of multicultural employees. He summed up his own identity, saying, “I am Swedish at work, but Estonian at home”, as a “typical well-integrated Estonian” (NM D 382: 33). To conclude, Ulo both maintained his culture of origin and interacted within the Swedish community at work.

A common feature in the ten analysed interviews is that Estonian men left Estonia when they were young adults. Some of them served both in the German and the Finnish army before they left for Sweden. Estonians talked about Germans and Russians as bad guys with bad behaviour. They stressed that Estonians did not enjoy their company. All the ten interviewees were educated in Sweden, either at their working place or at high school. Only one of them confirmed in the interview the state of being well-integrated, which does not mean that the others were not. From the above examples we can conclude that, if possible, Estonians would have preferred their community of origin both at work and in leisure activities.

CONCLUSION

The Estonians' life stories show a high level of similarity regarding the content of their life experiences and the accounts of their escape to Sweden. The collection of interviews is well structured, with standardized questions and descriptions of the interview situation. The reports and transcripts show Estonian characteristics as almost invisible because they are described as immigrants who blend well into the Swedish context. The phrase "Estonians are like us", and the expressions of Estonianness and Estonian culture became indistinct in the narratives. The interviewees tried to negotiate their identity as Estonians by using official history as an identity marker, but the negotiations became slightly limited as a result of the expectations set by the research project and the pre-understanding of the well-integrated and well-educated Baltic diaspora. The informants' responses to these notions made them to some extent invisible as migrants, with their own language and culture. They did their best to demonstrate politeness and good manners, which could be interpreted as a part of their Estonianness.

Within the framework of the project the researchers did not ask questions about discrimination, exclusion, and difficulties in managing in the Swedish language on the labour market, salary discrimination, or other kinds of inequality due to their background. The Baltic experiences with Nazi Germans during World War II and the Swedish prejudices against the Baltic refugees sometimes considered as fascists were not explicit in the interview reports. By not asking inconvenient questions, the Swedish self-perception as a multicultural nation could be strengthened. And finally, it is important to emphasize that the collection "Life Destinies" can be interpreted as telling more about the cultural notions of the time than separate life stories or interviews.

NOTES

- ¹ The Nordic Museum, research project “Life Destinies”. NM document draft paper “The scientific aim of the project” (undated).
- ² The Nordic Museum, research project “Life Destinies”. NM document draft paper “The scientific aim of the project” (undated).
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ The Nordic Museum, research project “Life Destinies”. NM document draft paper 1983-08-23.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ The Nordic Museum, research project “Life Destinies”. NM document draft paper “Frågelista basintervju 1” (question-list basic interview 1).
- ⁷ The Nordic Museum, research project “Life Destinies”. NM document, frågelista etapp II (question-list stage II).
- ⁸ The Estonian Swedes were considered as a Swedish responsibility and repatriated to Sweden in 1938.

ARCHIVAL SOURCES

NM – Nordiska museet, Forskningsprojektet Levnadsöden. Ester i Sverige (Nordic Museum. Research project on life stories).

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