

## „The Right to Happiness“ – Echoes of Soviet Ideology in Biographical Narratives

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“The Soviet time – of course, unaccustomed in the beginning, but as the time moved on, the more homely it felt and finally became really own. When looking back, there was nothing wrong with my life under these conditions. I had my beloved work I was good at, had my home – our castle. I’ve not suffered from an empty stomach, not being forced to tramp about, not persecuted, don’t know of having any enemies.”

(female, b. 1923, written in 2001, KV 984: 33)

### Introduction

The establishment of Soviet power in Estonia, in June 1940, was of pivotal nature for the majority of the Estonian population, bringing about for many people dramatic events such as repression, leaving the homeland, and disruption of life trajectories. During the course of time, however, people learned to adjust themselves to the changes taking place in every aspect of life. They developed practices and strategies, necessary to cope with a totalitarian political system that became habitualised over time.

The existent normative order of society collapsed again with the re-establishment of the independent Republic of Estonia, the re-creation of democratic institutions and the transition to a market economy at the beginning of the 1990s. The reform strategy selected in Estonia was that of rapid change. The discourse of rapid and radical social changes was therefore dominant in the public sphere, with an emphasis on individual values. Once again, it was necessary to re-learn and to adjust the current everyday practices to the mechanism of the new individualistic normative system.

As an ethnologist, I analyse the Soviet period through the experience of individuals. The aim of this article is to observe how the Soviet period is being reflected in the post-Soviet biographical narratives. How are the Soviet ideology of that period and the Soviet discourse of the official public sphere being reflected in narratives that focus on personal experience? What is the assessment of the Soviet era in the retrospective narratives? What types of themes tell us about adaptation? I also make an attempt to assess how the public discourse of the 1990s and of the beginning of the 21st century, with regard to Soviet power, is being reflected in these biographical texts. I also examine the perspective of two different generations.

When studying everyday life in Soviet Estonia, it is necessary to differentiate between the periods in which the narrated experiences took place. The pivotal and tragic events of the 1940s and 1950s, the years of war and of repression comprise a separate period. In

Estonia, it is possible to conditionally regard the year 1956 as a critical turn from the “era of chaos” to a “more stable arrangement of life”. This is when the repressed began to return home from Siberia.<sup>1</sup> In biographical stories, the time from the 1960s until the 1980s is considered as a peaceful and stable period.

One of the reasons of focusing on the everyday level of the 1960s-to-1980s period in biographical narratives is the uncertainty of today, i.e. of the moment when Soviet time everyday life is narrated. Thanks to post-war economic development and the decrease of direct repression, the everyday life of the majority of people proceeded in a peaceful and stable manner since the 1960s. Several anthropologists have come to the conclusion that due to the uncertainty prevailing in post-socialist society and the changes in the society’s value system people, when thinking of their future prospects, proceed from their socialist past, longing for the stability and clarity of the dominant practices at the time (Pine 1998; Dečeva 2005).

### 1. Sources and the biographical perspective

The base for the observations in this article is comprised by biographical interviews and written thematic narratives that describe everyday life in Soviet Estonia. The meaning of a biographical narrative for the individual lies in the fact that the narrator or writer is offered an opportunity to tell about those experiences of his/her life which are of significance for him/her or create his/her identity (Lieblich et al. 1998; Chaitin 2004).

The biographical perspective in cultural studies primarily mediates the actual experience of the individuals. It is intrinsic to biographical narratives of diverse nature – be they interviews, written thematic narratives, life stories – that the image of the past is given retrospectively, proceeding from the present experience of the individual. When researching Soviet everyday life, the relevant experience of the present is the end of the Soviet State and the assertion of new ideologies in public discourse, the learning of new practices in everyday life, and the adaptation of the old ones in order to cope with post-socialist social forces. Thus, when trying to provide an analysis of Soviet everyday life, we simultaneously describe the experiences from the perspective of post-Soviet everyday life.

The narrator, when telling his or her story, is having a dialogue with his/her conversation partner in the interview situation or, when sending a written narrative to museums, with the wider public. The dialogue exists between the public and the private also in a wider sense which determines the choice of topics by the narrators. Although such a dialogue is not directly

revealed in these stories, it is the task of the researcher to connect the facts presented in biographical narratives with the era and the context in which the story is being narrated:

“The authors are not themselves necessarily aware of the context or able to present it explicitly; this is the work of the analyst/reader, who also ‘creates’ (constructs) the context.” (Roos 2003: 32.)

The analysed biographical narratives enable to trace the voice of the public sphere for a number of periods. This voice can be the ideology of the Soviet party-state, the national narrative from the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s (“the singing revolution”), and the contemporary pragmatic-nostalgic narrative of the Soviet time.

The dominant discourse prevailing in Estonian society from 1989 up until the second half of the 1990s was undoubtedly that of independence and nationalism. Thus, stories about the Soviet period collected between 1989 and 1998 dealt primarily with resistance and repression.<sup>2</sup> Recent years, though, have witnessed a change in the attitude towards the Soviet period in Estonia. One of the ruptures in the public discourse can be seen in the presidential elections of 2001 when Arnold Rüütel, who had belonged to the top nomenclatura of Soviet Estonia, was elected president. The “legitimisation” of the Soviet era in discussions by the public media is also noticeable in biographical texts. National discourse and stories of resistance are receding in biographies, while everyday experiences come to the forefront. Quite a number of stories reveal also “a remarkable level of autonomy and indifference to the Soviet system’s values” (Lauristin 2004: 181). On the other hand, there are narratives which convey the officially expressed values of the Soviet system. I will make an attempt to exemplify such a contradictory attitude toward Soviet times in biographies.

My article is based on biographical sources collected by way of methods such as interviews and written thematic narratives. Biographical interviews have been conducted during 2001–4.<sup>3</sup> The main theme of these 40 interviews has been the narrators’ experience of the Soviet time, both through the aspect of work as well as social relationships. The second type of experiential narratives which I use are the answers to questionnaires “Life during the Soviet time” (2000), “Work and working in Soviet Estonia” (2001) and “Changes in Estonian society during the Soviet time” (2003). The interviews were conducted with people who have mainly worked and are still working in an urban environment doing clerical work and having secondary education as a minimum. Amongst the interviewees, there are individuals who have worked in trade and the educational system. Thus, the common denominator for them is the fact that they have been officials and/or administrative employees not engaged in productive labour. In the case of the written thematic narratives, I have used the same selection criteria. With regard to their profession, these people represent a large and relevant group in Soviet

society as the share of officials in Soviet society permanently increased in connection with urbanisation and general modernisation. In addition, the growth of bureaucracy (in connection with the double bureaucracy of the party and the state) was on the one hand intrinsic to Soviet society while, on the other hand, there was also a process of “privatisation of bureaucracy” (Srubar 1991). More than half of the interviewees (27) were born after World War II, thus being raised and socialised in Soviet society. The other interviews and written experiential narratives that I have used were conducted with people born in the 1920s and 1930s.

## 2. Multiplicity of perspectives: “Communists”, “Party people”, and the “Russian language”

Biographical narratives from different generations enable us to observe the learning of new practices and their habitualisation in Soviet society. People born in the 1920s grew up in an independent state<sup>4</sup> and in the context of nationalist campaigns by the authoritarian Estonian regime of the 1930s. This generation is considered the carrier of the nation’s cultural memory, as they had a specific role during the national movement of the 1980s and in the rhetoric of the re-establishment of the state in the 1990s (Kõresaar 2004a: 17–8). The Soviet occupation effected changes for the entire generation. The choice whether to live in Soviet society or not could only be made by way of leaving the country. The majority of the people stayed and had to acquire new practices for their everyday life in the Estonian SSR and to adapt themselves to the new conditions. This is also the generation that found itself on both sides of the front line during World War II. This generation was therefore very painfully hit by the dramatic years 1939–1949. It is for this reason that the biographies are of very diverse nature because it is also this generation from which the first ideological workers, heads of kolkhozes and other representatives of the Soviet-Estonian nomenclatura emerged.

For people who were born and raised in the Soviet period, everyday life in Soviet Estonia represented normality. This generation had acquired the necessary norms by way of the socialisation process and for them, in turn, the radical change occurred with independence. Thus, different generations are anticipated to have different attitudes towards everyday life in Soviet Estonia. However, it is natural that every person’s individual narrative is, besides societal factors, also dependent on other factors affecting his/her biography.

The stories about the role of the Communist Party and the command of the Russian language can be considered the themes reflecting the process of adaptation and learning the new practices. In the narratives of older Estonians, joining the Komsomol and the Party have a particular place describing the refusal and evasive reluctance to do so, or also the belonging therein (see also Siemer 2002). For the younger generation, Party and Komsomol organisations were already part of daily life and their daily practices which they had already acquired through the socialisation process. For

them, Party life existed as a natural part of the official public sphere (but not necessarily of their personal life).

The frequently conscious choice of the older generation who had survived repression and times of horror was to keep the new generation away from conflicts by leaving the topics of the past “to where they belong”. The “hidden” themes consisted of repression, the participation of the older generation in the War of Independence (1918–20) as well as in Nazi formations during World War II. Floreida<sup>5</sup>, born in 1933, writes:

“Those who had a reason to hide their past, well, they would not (despite the ‘thaw’) tell anything before the new Estonian government was securely in place. There were also some long-term acquaintances who found out only at the funeral [January 2004] that my husband was not a son of a Russian<sup>6</sup> high-ranking aviation officer, born in Volgograd, but instead a kulak’s son born in Viljandi County who had become an orphan in Siberia.” (Female, b. 1933, teacher, non-party member, KV 1037: 19.)

People born into Soviet society describe Soviet society by means of a double structure, indicating the existence of two different worlds – that of Party members and of non-Party people. Non-Party members, in general, deny their personal and everyday life connections with Party life or party decisions. They usually answer to questions regarding the role of the Party in their work and particularly of the partorg (party organiser) at their workplace that they were ignorant of their activities. Helju, born in 1947, is a case in point as she recalls the rumours about Party members and underlines their keeping together. She also emphasises the role of trade unions in work life as a place where decisions concerning the allocation of several goods in short supply were made, and this was of greater relevance in the everyday life of the Estonian SSR in the 1970s–1980s than decisions of the Party:

“Ah, there was all kind of rumours going around about them [party members]. The partorg, there was so little to do with this, don’t know much about it. They were more like between themselves.” (Female, b. 1947, technician, interview 30 November 2002.)

As mentioned in her story, people like Helju who were born after World War Two, as a rule, did not have serious collisions with the Party. Several interviewees shared the opinion that they, as officials and persons with higher education, were not the most desired Party members as this was primarily a workers’ and peasants’ party. In other instances, it was a conscious career-related choice to join the Party and, reflecting on their profession, people also substantiate this choice. Today, we can see the process of de-ideologisation of the past in the case of the party members and employees of the

younger generation. They do indeed point out the unpleasant fulfilment of duties in the form of ritual events but they describe their former work in the context of the contemporary market economy by naming themselves managers, organisers, etc. The ideological secretary of the ECP (Estonian Communist Party) city committee in one of the largest towns of Estonia for example claims, regarding her work duties, that “Co-ordination was the most important thing” (female, b. 1949, Komsomol and party worker, currently a rural municipality mayor, interview 17.01.2003).

The narratives of the older generation primarily reveal themes connected with adaptation: in which way were the new necessary practices acquired, and how did the adaptation to new rules take place during the initial years of Soviet power? In biographical stories, they actively discuss their attitude towards the role of the Communist Party in their work life. Many of the members of this generation already during their years as students had to make up their mind whether to join the Party or not. The decision, in quite a number of instances, determined their future career. Georg, e.g., a non-Party member, who graduated from Tartu University as a lawyer in 1951, describes the commencement of his work life:

“What happened next was very simple, as long as you weren’t a communist, Komsomol or a Party member, then you... you were called to the personnel department and then festively, then was this damn commission, the commission of communists, this personnel department, the partorg and komsorg and they then decided.” (Male, b. 1929, lawyer, interview 15 October 2001.)

As a matter of fact, Georg at first did not succeed in finding a job as a lawyer in Tartu. Thanks to his social network he got a job as a teacher and journalist in a small town for the first couple of years. The wish not to join the party determined also the work career for Heino, born in Tallinn and a graduate from a higher education institution. Heino decided to go to work in Tartu in order not to join the Party.

“It was just before this [invitation to become a Party member] when I came here, to Tartu, and one of the reasons why I came here was the fact that they so forcefully wanted to make me the chief engineer, and for this, join the Party. Well, I would have become a chief engineer, but everyone who wanted to accomplish more, become head of a firm, it was obligatory for them to join the Party.” (Male, b. 1938, engineer, interview 16 February 2002.)

The older generation justifies becoming a member of the Estonian Communist Party with the fear of losing the job (the situation of this man was complicated by the fact that his wife, whom he had married in 1960, had been deported to Siberia;<sup>7</sup> KV 993: 208–20).

“[D]uring the years 1952–60 I was in Komso-  
mol and during 1964–90, in the Communist  
Party. Joining the latter ‘association’ was to-  
tally contrary to my convictions. As I had had  
my ‘twigs’ while working in the editor’s office,  
there was nothing left for me but to succumb  
to the pressure of constant ‘explanatory  
work’. It was not easy at all at the time to find  
suitable jobs in the locality.” (Male, b. 1952,  
book-keeper, journalist, head of a small-size  
printing company, KV 991: 526–34.)

The use of language and changes therein also serve as a good example as to how newly learned practices were being habitualised in the course of time and became natural parts of everyday life. Here, again, we can observe differences between the generations: the younger ones, as a rule, do not characterise anyone as being a “communist” preferring, instead, the more neutral expression “Party member”, whereas in the narratives of the older generation the adversaries are always the communists. One of the interesting observations, not solely from a linguistics point of view, is the style used by party members born in the 1920s when talking about their work life. They operate in these situations as dispassionate characters, describing themselves as actors who were moved here and there like chess figures:

“And then I was made<sup>a</sup> the head of the glass industry, I was there for a whole year. Then I was taken away again. The Party always directed me somewhere and then I was made the director of Volga. [...] then I was directed further to the Jõgeva Party Committee, I was there, worked as an instructor. From there, I was again directed to a Party school.” (Male, b. 1921, Party member, veteran in the Red Army, employee in commerce, interview 6 September 2001.)

In the interviews, an important practice indicating adaptation is the discussion of the command of Russian. For the older generation, this was one of the new skills to be acquired, necessary for orientation in work life. The contact of Estonians born in the 1920s with the Russian language had been rudimentary, and they began to use and often only learn it only once they began working. This is how Meeta, who worked as an accountant in a large factory, describes her language studies: during the initial years on her job, she had difficulties in filling in Russian-language documents and for this purpose she had to ask her colleagues for help:

“Luckily, in our shop-floor, there was a quantity surveyor who worked together with me who then translated all this, but when you went to the planning department to ask how to do this or what was the thing demanded there, then [they would say] to do it yourself according to your own intelligence.” (Female, b. 1924, accountant, interview 14 August 2001.)

For her, conflicts on the everyday level in her job arising from language and nationality-related problems were the reason why she retired “at a day’s notice”. Those who went to school during the inter-war period and were later deported to Siberia retrospectively assess their decision not to learn Russian at school as one they had to regret in the course of their changed fate during their life.

To sum up this point: a large part of the older generation selects the national discourse from among several possible narrating perspectives, using it also to describe Soviet everyday life. The “Soviet” generation, on the other hand, narrates from the point of view of the everyday discourse. They focus more on everyday life during the Soviet period and the interaction of the individual with his/her daily world. When talking about their job(s), they rarely touch upon language and nationality issues. For them, learning of Russian belonged to the compulsory school programme and was therefore an “inevitable” part of their childhood. These differences between generations are related to the changes in the practices of everyday life as well as to the nature of Soviet power, a process that can be described as “normalisation”. The older generation talks more than the younger one about conflicts and threats immanent to the beginning years of Soviet authority. The description of the relationship between individual and society also reflects the present-day attitude of these two different generations towards the ideological aspects of Soviet power.

### 3. Changing discourses

Estonian researchers using the biographical method concede that in the life stories written and collected during the period of 1989–98, the everyday life disappears or “the daily personal life of the Soviet period” is described “in relatively scarce words” (Siemer 2002).<sup>9</sup> For those biographical stories which were gathered at the beginning of the 21st century, though, the contrary process can be noted. People attempt to find support in their experience of stable Soviet-time personal life for the current unstable situation. From the societal point of view, the upheavals of the post-socialist reforms and the re-arrangement of the basic structures of society have come to an end, and as a result individuals focus more on their everyday life. The emergence of the nostalgia industry<sup>10</sup> and the purposeful collection of memories from the Soviet period, of course, also have their impact.

Accounts of personal experience, in the centre of which is everyday life in Soviet Estonia, lay out a world of diverse possibilities and experiences. Despite the attempt of Soviet ideology to decrease the differences between urban and rural areas, for example, life-stories of people from town and countryside are still clearly distinctive. My article is based on the experience of individuals from towns and urban settlements in Estonia, while I use stories from people with kolkhoz and state farm (sovkhoz) experience solely for comparative purpose. A second major difference can be seen in class,

despite Soviet ideology's emphasis on the obliteration of classes. When analysing individual memories of the Soviet period, status distinctions become extremely clear and are, for example, expressed in differences between "ordinary" people, "us", and "them" (the nomenclatura, enterprise directors, mid-level party workers) – differences that were very real. These differences are revealed in the treatment of everyday problems, such as remuneration for work, access to benefits and services. The narrators themselves, when giving their assessments, stress the aspect of equality in Soviet society. However, this evaluation is made from the perspective of contemporary economic differences and the rapid social stratification of society, which is intrinsic to states in transformation (see Humphrey 2002).

The main topic in biographies focusing on everyday life is related to coping with life, i.e. stories describing those practices that were necessary in order to get along in Soviet society. One of the central practices often described is the use of social relations. The importance of social networks in socialist everyday life has already been shown for the Soviet Union, most notably by Alena Ledeneva's discussion of *blat* as a quintessential phenomenon of Soviet society (Ledeneva 1998). Analyses from other socialist countries have come to similar conclusions (e.g. Milena Benovska's study of the role of social relationships and clientelism in work in socialist Bulgaria; Benovska 2004). I therefore want to mention some reasons for the importance of social relationships in socialist Estonian as revealed by biographical narratives. The first one was the existence of sufficient spare time on the job in contrast to today, and the general importance of social networks. Social networks in everyday life were actually used by people tried to get hold of goods in short supply. Furthermore, in the work place, people built solidarity against the common enemy – the boss, the partorg. It was important to form a trustful group, among whom it was possible to discuss the topics and issues "not recommended" to be mentioned in public. Activities by all kinds of hobby-related groups were another significant means to foster social relations. Here we can also note that the connection between leisure and work place in socialist societies was closer than in Western type societies (see Lönke 2003: 212).

Today's social uncertainty has definitely an influence on why the topic of social relationships figures so prominently in life-stories. The transition to market relations brought along new behavioural strategies, adaptation to which was not always painless. It was also typical for Soviet society that people worked at one place for decades which facilitated the creation of long-term social relationships. Today, some people are significantly more mobile and change their job more frequently. In addition, financial differences also have a certain impact on social relations and sometimes led to their rupture. In their narratives, people often stress things to which there is no access anymore, be it due to age, unemployment, or the changed nature of work. The past is being assessed proceeding from one's current economic situation, by equalising Soviet-time ideological constraints with today's economic ones: if the individual's financial situation during Soviet time

was remarkably better than today, he/she sees no difference between life in the USSR and independent Estonia, saying that "I couldn't travel then and can't do this now either". Similarly, one should not underestimate the impact of the ruling collective ideology on people's daily behaviour. The half-a-century-long accentuation of collective values in ideology and socialisation by educational institutions shaped the behavioural strategies of the new generations, both with regard to work as well as to leisure time practices.

Although the main topics in biographical sources are the "ordinary themes" – social relations, stories about acquiring a flat or other items, obtaining education, economic difficulties, showing one's own competence in overcoming difficulties – there are also certain themes and representations where we can identify traces of the official discourse.

### 3.1 Stories on adaptation and personal happiness

The aim of Soviet ideology was to reshape the entire society and create a new human being. The goals and ideas of this new society were communicated to the ordinary citizens in a corresponding language.<sup>11</sup> The ideological use of language mainly occurred within the framework of the "official public sphere" (Garcelon 1997: 321–2). One characteristic feature of Soviet ideology was the opposition made between 'we' and 'they', where 'we' was always connected with positive meaning and 'they' with negative ones – both in official ideology as well as in everyday discourse. We see the we-they dichotomy both within society, where people made a distinction between 'them' – the nomenclatura, the bosses, etc. – and 'us' – we, the ordinary people –, as well as in the Soviet state's opposition to Western countries. The experience obtained by way of the official public sphere undoubtedly had its impact on individual behaviour and mental patterns at the everyday level as well as on the strategies used in the private sphere, in family life, and in the "informal public area" (Zdravomyslova, Voronkov 2002).

It is not difficult for the narrators to talk about topics connected with the private and informal public sphere. However, the issue is different when they touch upon the formal public side. In the following, I analyse how different public discourses are present in retrospective narratives. I try to follow the occurrences of two public discourses, the Soviet one and the assertion of the newly independent public discourse with regard to the Soviet time. In general, it is possible to highlight two different trajectories: in the case of individuals who were active in the Party or the Komsomol or who were employed by institutions "servicing" the official ideology, the dialogue with the official public discourse exists in a more explicit manner. In stories by others, the description of the ideology is of a more concealed nature.

A vivid example showing the attitude towards the Soviet period prevalent in the public discourse is a sentence uttered by a high government official and diplomat during a biographical interview in winter 2000:

“there was no life during the Soviet time” – this was his answer to the question why everyday life “disappears” in life histories. In my opinion, this phrase summarises the public discourse of the 1990s, where dealing with the “right”, i.e. national history was dominant. As indicated above, this attitude has changed. Naturally, the change in the public discourse has not taken place over night, and the interviews until now still reveal an ambivalent approach towards Soviet society and Soviet everyday life. Irja, born in 1942, who was interviewed in 2002, repeatedly gave assessments of life during the Soviet period in the course of the interview.<sup>12</sup> At the beginning of her interview, she noted:

“We did sports, very often went to competitions, were able to travel around very much. So that in this sense, I remember my school-time as something good, although let’s say, this ... this was ... My uncle came back from Siberia. There were all sorts of problems like that, but this still didn’t prevent us from being young, active and sort of ... as we all were, from being happy in a way.” (Female, b. 1942, technologist, interview 22 November 2002.)

On the one hand, this quote reflects a central theme of narratives describing everyday life – “the right” to personal happiness in any society, even in a totalitarian one. On the other hand, the theme of participating in sufferings caused by Soviet power – “my uncle came back from Siberia” – was one of the main identity-creation strategies in newly independent Estonia. Irja, too, refers to this source of legitimisation. However, the individual’s own endeavour to live his/her life is a deeply rooted notion in this interview. She described the time of her coming of age, the society of the 1960s, as a more lenient and liberal one, as a time when life was not threatened by immediate terror.

The partner in the dialogue, to whom the story is presented, is also of significance. In this concrete case, the interviewer was a student born in 1982, whose experience of the Soviet time was limited to the memories of early childhood. The narrator’s assessment of the Soviet period is a mixture of the contemporary attitude towards the Soviet time as a period of occupation and as “a non-lived time”, and her own unique experience of her life. “I can hear myself that I’m talking somehow very positively.” When answering to the interviewer’s question why should she talk in a negative manner about the Soviet time, she made clear that, if we now talked about the Soviet period, she would not like to say that she had specifically valued this time, but it “was my life and my youth, I don’t even want to start thinking negative”. The key which opens everyday narratives of the Soviet time is therefore everyone’s right to happiness and to private life. Irja repeatedly refers to the “right to happiness” during her interview. Here, the overall modernisation of society during these decades seems to correspond to the forward-looking focus of Soviet ideology and its myth of the free and happy Soviet person that was the essence of the new man and the new type of society.

Representatives of the Soviet state, when discussed in retrospective stories, are not only portrayed in terms of conflict but, instead, are measured accord-

ing to their humanity. In the next example, the head of a financial department in the city of N. described how the chairman of the Executive Committee reacted to a complaint which said that the informant had “publicly” celebrated Christmas (she had put a decorated Christmas tree near the window of her flat, which could therefore be seen from the street).

“I thought what’s up, what has happened [having received the invitation to come to the office of the Executive Committee’s chairman]. And there he says, Maripuu, put thick curtains in front of your windows so that your Christmas tree wouldn’t bother other people [laughs]. And then people would say that they are big communists and all that. Well, they weren’t really big communists after all.” (Female, b. 1928, book-keeper, head of financial department, interview 3 January 2004.)

The stigmatisation of members of the Estonian Communist Party and especially of party activists was part of the public discourse of the new independent Estonian state.<sup>13</sup> But the informant of the above mentioned example repudiated the image of the communist as someone who persecuted people and represented the ideology of the party. Whereas during the Soviet period and at the beginning of the 1990s the party nomenclatura clearly belonged to “them”, now it is possible to see this borderline shifting. Maybe they will eventually even fall within the “us” category? On the other hand, we can view such convergences as part of the strategies of daily discourses. Reminiscences deal of human matters and are connected with one’s personal life. The unexpectedly humane behaviour of former representatives of the power is particularly highlighted also in other narratives. Evi, who had been working as a secretary and a book-keeper, for example, stressed the number of foreign guests that the Estonian Communist Party allowed to participate in the anniversary celebration of the Russian Orthodox convent:

“Kuremäe Convent, this convent had some kind of an important anniversary, all those religious figures came together from all over the world, but to get into the Soviet Union say from Jerusalem and Greece, this wasn’t easy at all, but anyway, then the chairman of the Executive Committee, this party boss, they did everything they could so that the people could really come here from these countries and they did arrive and they were received in the Executive Committee in a very genteel and festive way, only that everyone had to write down what the others [quests] had said.” (Female, b. 1955, official, bookkeeper, department head, interview 22 August 2001.)

This interview touches upon the theme of religious life that was a particularly sensitive subject during the Soviet time. Religious life and religious people were part of a domain of special interest for the authorities, and the quoted episode also confirms this.

What aspects and essential myths of Soviet ideology can be found in post-Soviet narratives? The

ideology of collectivism was of extreme importance for the Soviet regime, which emphasised collective values. However, the official ideology of collectivism gradually lost its significance in Soviet society, following the end of the Stalinist terror (Shlapentokh 1989). Soviet citizens, then, valued above all their own and their family's wellbeing. At the same time, people willingly participated in all kinds of collective undertakings. These are one of the focal subjects in life-story narratives. Similarly to the idealistic and nostalgic image of the rural family, which in the life histories of Estonians of the older generation symbolised national integrity in the 1920s and 1930s, we can find an exhilarating picture of one's work-place or leisure collective in biographies reflecting Soviet everyday life.

The ideological aim of the regime was to achieve control over its citizens in every field of life. The control of everyday life had to be performed at an individual level, which meant that it was not exerted only by the repressive apparatus of the state, but each colleague was expected to check his/her work-mates (Kharkhordin 1999). In order to be aware of the views of one's colleagues, it was good to know what they did in their private lives. I do not attempt to claim that people in work collectives consciously checked each other, but the according ideological inclination definitely had an impact. In post-Soviet narratives, this is being revealed by the discourse of mutual care and assistance. In the example below, Hilja indeed underlines how such behaviour was typical "of the time":

Q: "Did you know all of them [29 subordinates] by face?"

A: "Oh, of course! And not only by face but their life in general, because this was very important at that time. Once you saw that the person has a big problem, she cannot cope with her tasks. Well, you didn't go to berate with her but you went to help her and ask how could we help you." (Female, b. 1928, bookkeeper, head of financial department, interview 3 January 2004.)

The discourse of mutual help is alluded to in the description of several practices, such as the network used for goods in short supply. In order not to admit the usage of a system of exchanges of services, this practice was rationalised as "mutual assistance" or by the rhetoric of friendship (cf. Ledeneva 1998: 60 *passim*).

### 3.2 Ideological discourses of enhancing and furthering of life

"Then they could again further their life."  
(Male, b. 1921, party member, employee in commerce.)

The last discourse to which I want to draw attention to is the occurrence of ideology in the analysed biographical stories. Aside from the national discourse and stories about adaptation, the studied narratives also contain the Soviet ideological discourse. The treatment of this theme is complicated, particularly in the case of written thematic narratives. Being a researcher from

the younger generation, it is difficult to understand certain instances of language use and style: is it a sincerely stated opinion or an ironical linguistic pun? Biographical interviews, though, provide an opportunity for immediate specification and queries.

As researchers, we are also affected by our world and cannot get rid of our own subjectivity. When I started to do research on Soviet everyday life by analysing biographical sources, I myself was definitely affected by the national discourse, prevalent in society during my socialisation. I therefore felt surprise when I realized that in a number of narratives Soviet everyday life was reflected positively.

When discussing the adaptation trope, I pointed to the focus on personal happiness. But also the myths of "enhancing" and "furthering Soviet life" are present in the biographies. To be directed towards the future was one of the essential elements of official propaganda. We do find this myth, and the belief in it, in the narratives of the 1920s generation, although their main story line is nationalism and resistance. Albert, born in 1921, retells his work biography through the slogan of enhancing society and furthering life. Socialist competition, bonuses, working abroad, the idea of trade unions and also private topics such as getting married are presented in the context of the furthering of life and the education of the people. In Albert's story, the focus lies on the control that Soviet citizens exerted over each other, but he presents this in his narrative in form of education and instruction:

"Life was about education all the time, and I don't know whether it's still the same now, but then we really had a lot of trouble in educating them [the subordinates]." (Male, b. 1921, employee in commerce, Red Army veteran, party worker, trade union activist, 6 September 2001.)

On the other hand, Albert's contemporaries regard "acquired helplessness" as one of the challenges of today's society. People did not get used to decision-making and let themselves being directed. This makes it now difficult for them to adapt to the new normative environment.

The depiction of good and efficient Estonians, whose hard-working nature made state farms and kolkhozes stand on their feet is another widespread motif in biographies. Nevertheless, the creation of collective farms is usually depicted as a tragic disruption of the previous lifestyle. But there are also different viewpoints:

"This was a big job, but people's characters were quite difficult. They didn't want to work in the kolkhoz or state farm, they preferred to work on their own. Well, but they weren't allowed to. Well, they did to some extent, took a garden, I don't know, these gardens were taken away and the kitchen gardens, in order to reduce dawdling." (Male, b. 1921, employee in commerce, party worker, trade union activist, interview 6 September 2001.)

The mentioned privately used land plots – the maximum size was 0.6 hectares – were essential sources of additional income for many people, and also had significance in the sense of working for oneself. For those in power – and Albert counts himself as one of them – farming on small personal plots served as an “inhibitor of labour productivity” (see Alanen 2001). People who previously held positions of power understand the inner logic of the system better than those who lived on the other side of the “double structure”. They, for example, clearly see the reasons why they ran into certain problems, as the next example of a party-activist who was removed from ideological work illustrates:

“If my brother hadn’t been in the German army, then I would have definitely studied further [in the party school, 1950–1], but well, why this party worker was not wanted –he was politically tied because of his brother, which was such a danger that further education was not enabled. This time, it was Käbin in the Party Committee or this major figure of the party committee, well, he called me to his office – ‘we can’t use you any more, can’t allow you to study, we can’t use you in the future and therefore send you to the economy’.” (Ibid.)

Nevertheless, the ideological discourse is not predominant; people in power positions do admit that it was not possible to direct people only with ideological calls but rather with economic incentives. This can primarily exemplified by the attitudes towards the role of socialist competition. Although this was, on the one hand, part of ideological education, additional remuneration, on the other hand, is admitted to have had an impact on the participation in competitions and thus the accomplishment of ideological goals (also in KV 900: 69–92; KV 999: 11–9). When analysing the ideological discourse, it is therefore necessary to take into account that the narrators themselves often do not acknowledge the game in which they had a central role to fulfil (Lauristin 2004: 182). Here, I pointed only to a few clearly apparent cases but the subject itself is significantly more diverse and complicated.

### Summary

The depiction of the Soviet period in biographical narratives of Estonians collected at the beginning of the 21st century is played out on several different levels. The dominant one is certainly the discourse on everyday life, which describes practices and strategies of how people organised their life in Soviet society. The goal of the life histories is also to assure that the individual has lived a “good life”. Aside from this discourse, I also pointed to two other, less obvious discourses in the written life stories and oral interviews: the adaptation trope and occurrences of the former ideological discourses.

It can be said that, with growing distance from the Soviet period, the tolerance towards this period increases. But there is still no consensus in society as to how to treat the Soviet period. Until now, it was rather seen as “bad” times, which is also revealed in narratives as they show an ambivalent approach toward the Soviet period (see also Kõresaar 2004: 107–9, for female life-stories). It is interesting to observe how, on the one hand, those who were part of the official Soviet authorities try to de-ideologise their actions at that time; on the other hand, we can still sense the impact of Soviet public discourse and ideological rituals in post-Soviet narratives. Post-Soviet biographies contain, for example, the Soviet “discourse of humanity” which also conveys legitimacy to the authorities. The generation of the 1920s, for their part, can be seen as the carrier of different memories but since these people were put in the centre of dramatic events only by virtue of their age, it is obvious that some of them chose to play the Soviet game.

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- <sup>3</sup> The interviews are at the Chair of Ethnology, University of Tartu and in the possession of the author.
- <sup>4</sup> The Republic of Estonia was independent from 1918 to 1940.
- <sup>5</sup> All names have been altered by me.
- <sup>6</sup> Here, "Russian" means Soviet; in Estonian biographical narratives and also in the use of everyday language, the term "the Russian time" refers often to the Soviet period.
- <sup>7</sup> According to the law, all citizens of the Soviet Union were guaranteed with employment, but some of those who returned from Siberia, experienced difficulties in finding a job. For example, Marta, who was born in 1917 and spent the period 1946–57 in Siberia, was unemployed after her return to Estonia until the year 1965. Even in one of her later work places, her boss hints that "she knew who I was and acted correspondingly" (KV 990: 92–103)
- <sup>8</sup> The underlined type for emphasis is done by me, whereas the capital letters express the accentuation by the source person.
- <sup>9</sup> Estonian life history researcher Ene Kõresaar has written "[More] than 50 years of active life is described in less detail and length than life in the 1920s–1940s and the 1990s" (Kõresaar 2001:45)
- <sup>10</sup> Similar nostalgia industries also operate in other post-socialist countries. A lot of attention has been paid to the "ostalgia" processes. In my viewpoint, there is a difference in comparison with the DDR nostalgia – as Estonia was occupied, such nostalgia is revealed in a much more modest manner, whereas the ideology of an independent state was stronger.
- <sup>11</sup> Studies conducted in Estonia show that the new official language was introduced in the public sphere immediately after the "June coup" in 1940 (Ventsel 2005).
- <sup>12</sup> It is a separate subject to provide a general assessment with regard to the entire Soviet period as a whole. I have earlier written on the criticism of the system, using the example of the officials belonging within the nomenclatura agencies (Jõesalu 2003:84).
- <sup>13</sup> The election slogan of the election coalition "Isamaa" (Pro Patria) who took power in 1992, was "Clean the place!" – this meant the coming of the new elite and the pushing aside of the old Soviet-time elite.

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In February of 1956 the 20th congress of Communist Party took place in Moscow, where Khrushchev denounces Stalin's cult of personality, which marks the beginning of the "thaw period". Also 1956 marked the more massive release from prisons and exile commenced, juveniles were already allowed to come home in 1954. During the 1954–60 period, 27, 835 persons returned from camps and exile (Rahi 2004: online). In addition, the hopes for the intervention of the Western states and their aid decreased, in connection with the 1956 events in Hungary.

<sup>2</sup> The collection of life histories in the Cultural Historical Archives of the Estonian Literary Museum commenced in 1989, when appeals were published in newspapers to write biographies (Hinrikus, Kõresaar 2004: 21). Several collections have been issued on the bases of life stories. A more comprehensive publication, "Eesti rahva elulood.