

Transmission and preservation of memory in ethnic minority context

Traditions, oral history and cultural memory
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Introduction

I have been researching Hungarian ethnic minorities for more than ten years. I have begun with religiosity of orthodox Jews, continuing on the Slovaks' survival strategies and being myself and ethnic German of origin at last I have chosen the Hungarian Germans, or as they call themselves, the Swabians. I have researched their double identity, including their Swabian ethnic and Hungarian national identity, assimilation, and dissimilation. First of all I summarise the theory and praxis of the oral history. Following the sample two chapters deal with the history forms defined written and created vs. oral and endured. On the basis of my latest researches among the Hungarian Germans I shall introduce how the individual remembers the past, how the collective memory works, how the process of transmission and preservation of ethnic culture can be influenced by the group

Oral history: theory and praxis

What is oral history at all? In the context of investigating minorities it is a way of research methods with the help of which anthropologists, or historians can obtain an insight in the memories into the interviewed ethnic subject. The picture of history coming to light by remembering is called "everyday history" or "history from bottom view" (Assmann 1999: 52).

Oral history interviews are special sources of information. "This special nature derives from the fact that they are unwritten sources couched in a form suitable for oral transmission, and that their preservation depends on the powers of memory of successive generations of human being" (Vansina, 1965: 1). Anthropologists, social-psychologists, historians, or folklorists developed an interest in the narratives of informants representing an ethnic group since they can be regarded as bearers of traditions and vehicles of the traditional heritage.¹ However, there are anthropologists who are sceptical about the reliability of oral history and oral traditions. There are serious controversies about usefulness of this methodology, such as oral traditions are never reliable vs. they may contain a certain amount of truth, etc. Some anthropologists think that oral history and "oral traditions are trustworthy sources", but others, "maintain that it is impossible to decide whether a tradition is trustworthy or not". Others anthropologists consider, that "traditions convey some information about past events, even if the kernel of historical truth is enveloped in fictitious material" (Vansina, 1965: 8-10).

Oral history: tradition and collective memory

The oral history interview focuses on the memories of the ethnic subject. He or she as individual is at the same time member of his or her ethnic group. The individual remembers his own life history, the history of his own family, or other events of the past from his own subjective point of view. Halbwachs (1992) argues, however, that remembering the past is a social construction and is determined by the group the individual belongs to. This determination implies the memory of the group, as Halbwachs calls it, the collective memory. According to him there are two kinds of collective memories: a cultural one and a communicative one. The communicative memory relates to the present, the cultural one includes the traditions, that is, to the past. The breeding ground of memory is the tradition, which is elaborated by the collective memory and as such is one of the most important stabilisers of the existence of the ethnic group (Bindorffer 1997). Traditions are collective product of the group and may develop and appear differently in the memory of the diverse generations, since it is highly probable that they may have different historical experiences. Experiences and observations of others may, however, infiltrate into the mind of the individual of any generation, but they appear as the most personal happenings during the interview.

The cultural memory binds the individual to his group. On the level of the individual it appears in the oral history, on the level of the group, however, in collective representations: in ceremonials and rites. The cultural memory watches the group from inside and is highly subjective even on the level of the group. It strives to reconstruct the present so that members of the group should recognise and identify themselves, consequently prefers the steadiness, the similarity. These configurations of the memory are models, examples and doctrines at the same time. (cf. Assmann, 1999)

Oral history is not only determined by the society, it is at the same time a cultural construction. It characterises the given ethnic group which is in strong connection with the common historical fate of the group members. That way oral history has strong connections to the identification of group and person altogether.

Oral history: life history and group history

In my opinion, as anthropologist, gathering life histories, core of which is tradition, is, however, a useful means of raising very important personal data which researchers otherwise could not obtain. In an anthropological research of minorities, so the Hungarian Germans as well, the oral histories are of unique importance, since they allow an insight into the deepest spheres of the

¹ This only one aspect of the life history. It can be traced via manuscripts, other literary products, or photographs.

feeling, memories, personal opinion of the ethnic subjects. They play an important role in the identity research, as well (Erikson, 1968, 1975). So, my basic approach concentrated on collection of detailed life- and family histories in order to get answers to the specific questions listed above.

Life histories including history of the family are culturally constructed narratives, texts, orally told stories, which as cultural performances or representations serve as basis for the oral history. Life histories are reconstruction of the past and the self in the history. The development of these procedures is not independent of the private experiences in the history and that of the given group. The core point of the history, as Halbwachs would say, of the tradition² in ethnic minority context is primarily the shared historical destiny. The cultural memory tries to select the stable point of the past: these are the historical memories about origin, migration, settlement. These elements are all constituents of a symbolic pattern and serve as component the myth (cf. Conner-ton 1991 and Halbwachs 1992; Assmann 1999, Bindorffer, 2000.). Then we must not forget about further cultural manifestations such as habits, norms, and customs, folklore, religion, as well as consistency, conservation or handing down of the cultural heritage to the following generations, and its adaptability and change, which are all included in the traditions or cultural memory.

Why is important remembering the past?

The past is the extract of the present (Connerton 1991), consequently understanding the present correlates to the context of the events of the past. Image of the past which comes to light during the oral history interviews legitimates the present order. The memory of the single person is not independent of the collective memory of the group. The core point of the culture of remembrance is the social obligations; why, when and how to remember? What should we bare in mind? What should we forget? Answering these questions, however, would govern us to the sphere of politics, so we stop here.

By the oral history of the ethnic subjects the process of maintaining, handing down, or changing of the traditions can be traced successfully. The reason for gathering life histories is, that individuals, as eyewitnesses of the events of a society and proceedings in the history of a small ethnic group “can indirectly furnish valuable information on things otherwise not easily available to an outsider” (Dégh, 1988: 13). Informants, during talking about their own life or that of the community, frame the events with their subjective evaluations, commentaries.

² According to Halbwachs (1992) there is a difference between tradition and history. Tradition was analysed above. History is just its contrary. History emphasises the changes and is interested in the differences and discontinuities.

Coming back to the query of the anthropologists mentioned above, Fentress and Wickham ask the same question: can the memory be taken as a faithful bearer of knowledge? “The present self is embedded in our past” (Fentress and Wickham, 1992: 201), but the past is created from the perspective of the present situation (Krappman, 1980) along the intersections of the instantaneous situation of the self, which weave the subject into the system of the social interactions of the group (Sarbin and Scheibe, 1983). Consequently there are two important issues within oral history we have to face: the reliability and verifiability of oral witness testimony (Middleton and Edwards, 1990). Thelen (1989) adds that “in a study of memory the important question is not how accurately a recollection fitted some piece of a past reality, but why historical actors constructed their memories in a particular way at a particular time”. “Disregarding validity, representativeness³ of oral histories, as products of the “popular memory” (Johnson et al., 1982),⁴ disregarding their symbolic character, and its contents of truth can be questioned” (Nieder-müller, 1988: 453), there is no other methods and possibilities than oral history interviews to gain in-depth information by which for example researchers can receive an answer also to Thelen’s suggestions.

The sample

Up to now more than 150 in-depth interviews have been made in several German villages around Budapest (Dunabogdány), and in counties Baranya (Somberek, Véménd, Nagynyárád, Feked), and Tolna (Gyöng), where the most Germans live and in county Komárom-Esztergom (Csolnok). I have tried to select interviewees from different generations, social and educational strata. For analyses three generational categories have been made.⁵ Age of the members of the first generation ranges from approx. 60 to 80. Their most important collective experiences are the internment to Russia and resettlement to Germany after the Second World War. In the memory of the eldest people expulsion of the Germans out of the homeland, Hungary, and the repressive years following the war are the most vivid sad experiences. Members of this generation were the last whose ethnic socialisation was more or less continuous. The most important and decisive experience of the second generation, which members are between approx. 40-60, is the dissolution of the ethnic community traditions and norms, socialisation on Hungarian language and not on the mother tongue, as well as the increased possibility for mobility. In the life of this

³ When using oral histories, composing a representative sample is very difficult or nearly impossible, since minorities are not officially registered in Hungary (cf. Kovács-Eröss, 1988).

⁴ The notion of “popular memory” is just I talk about: mental representations to be found in the oral accounts people give of past events, traditions, customs and other minority group practices (cf. Middleton and Edwards 1990).

⁵ Researchers dealing with bilingualism generally divide the respondents in three generational categories (Gal, 1979; Manherz, 1977).

generation repression after the Second World War resulted in a interruption in the continuity of handing down the language, habits, ethnic norms and customs.

The basic experience of the third generation approx. 20-40 years of age is the total spiritualization of the ethnic borders and as a consequence of their education, Hungarian language became definitely their mother tongue. For members of the second and third generation traditions of their forefathers became extern and they had to learn them in dance groups, music schools, or in folk-song choirs. Members of the second generation, however, continued on with cultivate their vineyards and making their own red wine, so in their spare time they work in the. This may be the only internal habit which has survived.

If it was possible within a family, I have interviewed representatives of all generations to follow up the development and changes of attitudes as well as behavioural patterns playing role in the formation of the identity construction as well as what they have preserved in their memory about the traditions of their forefathers. The overall tendency is the decreasing role of the original ancient mother tongue, and on the contrary, there is an increasing desire to maintain and handing down their traditional cultural habits, norms and customs. The revival of cultural traditions gains more and more interest in the oral histories, as well.

In the praxis performances of rites represent the traditions and as such they are the main stabilizers of the group culture, and constitute important survival strategies of minorities.

Two kinds of history: written and created

According to the written history the first immigrants from German speaking territories arrived during the reign of Stephen I around 1000 A. D. to Hungary. Immigration of settlers from all part of Germany and Austria lasted up to the end of the nineteenth century. As a consequence of this long immigration period and different places of origin, the German minority does not form a homogenous ethnic unit with a common language, history and culture.

There is no collective memory of the different groups of the Hungarian Germans either, since they migrated to Hungary in different historical times and from different parts of the Holy German-Roman Empire. After the colonisation (*Schwabenzug*) in the 18th century Hungarian majority and German minority had the same historical fate within the border of the Hapsburg monarchy. When the idea of the nation had arisen the Germans lived already in Hungary. In the middle of the 19th century Müller-Guttenbrunn (1904) wrote that colonists who left Germany had neither national pride nor image of belonging together. Image of the German Empire was too wide to locate the place of origin. Their fate was determined by creating a new existence and feeling of familiarity and intimacy in Hungary. The shared history in the “Fatherland” had been forgotten,

and the myths, legends, historical epics meant a shortage in their previous past. Most of the Germans have been living since the 18th century in this country have no memories about the time before the migration to Hungary. According to their oral histories, they have no global corporate memory which could be shared with the Germans living in Germany. After leaving Germany the ties to the fatherland had torn away and the collective memory did not save those of origin, which should have drawn the frames of their existence in space and time. So, all the happenings in their life, in their history bind them to the host country and to Hungarian co-inhabitants.

Those whom I have interviewed told that beyond representation of ethnic identity they have accepted the memories, sentiments and attitudes of the Hungarian majority. They shared the experiences and history of the Hungarian people. In addition to keeping some of their cultural traditions alive individually they were incorporated into common cultural life with Hungarian people, spoke the same language, went to the same school, worked at the same workplace, went out to the same pub and learnt the same German lessons. Actually the present situation can be characterised as an example of bi-culturalism and double identity.

Smith (1986) points out that principle of the sense of history is the time sequence of different events from the beginning up to the present. Marking the point of beginning the national existence in time is the key-question of the category of history. The time of migration is followed by the golden age which is stored in the collective memory of the community.

The communities under research, however, had no nostalgia towards an earlier golden age, 'which has irretrievably lost' (Smith 1986: 175). Their ethnicity missed the common place of origin and the concept of the historical continuity. The great majority knew only the approximate territory from where his or her ancestors came to Hungary but they had no imagination about the past before the immigration.

The written as well as the oral history for most of the Hungarian Germans begin after their settlement to Hungary. Early the 18th century is the beginning point of their history without having images about the statehood, nation Point of beginning of history dates back only to the time of the settlement in Hungary. Since they had no remembered history before, they created one. With the acceptance of the cult of Saint Stephen, the first Hungarian king and honouring the Hungarian crown they symbolically extended the time. This created history basis partly on the written history of Hungary, partly on the feeling of shortage in their image of an own statehood.

The need of having a past and I think beyond ethnicity the need of a national existence, resulted in the first signs of accepting the historical memories, honoured persons and symbols of the majority. Being Catholics, it was easy to accept and to honour St. Stephen, the first king of Hungary. They honour the Sacred Crown of St. Stephen, too, as the symbol of the Hungarian

state. There is a monument in Dunabogdány commemorating all heroes of the village who died in different fights and wars for the Hungarian freedom. This monument is decorated on the top by the copy of the Sacred Crown. They have the cult of the Blessed Virgin, too, who is held by the Hungarian believers as *Patrona Hungarica*. The concept of a common history or origin was missing from their ethnic identity, and with the help of the religion they found one, which, shared with the majority, became a basis of national feelings.

The Swabians have not separated their history in Hungary from that of the majority. They said that they always shared the common historical fate with Hungarian people, experienced the failures the same way. Their opinion in connection with the historical events of Hungary was practically conforming to that of the Hungarians. As to historical persons, they knew the figures of the Hungarian history better. They did not know too much about the German history either, their knowledge was limited to what they learnt at school. For example Kossuth⁶ was much more known and honoured than Bismarck.⁷

Beyond the necessity of creating a national history in order to fulfil the gap between the beginning of the history of the majority and the German minority which was based on written sources, this creating process was highly the impact socialisation in Hungarian milieu. Creating a history was a collective work of the Hungarian Germans to make integration into the society easier, which supported the assimilation and the formation of the Hungarian nationhood as well.

Two kinds of history: oral and endured

From the point of view of the image of continuity and the development of the group identity myths, legends about the shared historical past play the same role as autobiographies in the development of the personal identity (Jacobson-Widding 1983; Anderson 1991; Renan 1996). Oral narratives and universe of meanings created in the course of the construction of the history are indispensable components of the group identity.

The oral history of the Germans includes their personal life history, family history, interwoven by stories about the local community. All those are strongly connected to the ethnic culture and traditions, as well as to their group history in Hungary, the homeland. It turned out from the oral history interviews with Germans that in spite of the shared history of the Hungarians, there is an explicit separating line between the history of majority and minority, and this is the repression against the Hungarian Germans after the Second World War. These affairs which constitute the ethnic dimension of their history, are very important events in the life of German individuals and

⁶ Leader of the revolution and war of independence in 1848/49. After defeating the war he lived and died in exile.

⁷ Counsellor of Prussia, who united the small German states and duchies (*Fürstentum*) and founded the modern Germany in 1871.

also in that of the group. Internment to Russia to work in prison camps (“malenkij robot” – a little work) and the resettlement, or as they say the “expelling out of the homeland” to Germany⁸ are still alive in the collective memory. According to the group norms sufferings of the Germans must not be forgotten. There are, however, differences among the generations how to judge the events happened after 1945. They are vivid events among the members of the first generation, became local and family myths for the second one, but for the third age group, however, they are only stories, which already should be forgotten. The controlling force of the group cannot evolve its impact any more. The transmission and preservation of these events in the collective memory come slowly to an end.

Let us see some example. The oral histories of the first generation concentrate on the direct events involving the own family and relatives.

An old woman remembers the internment that way: “The Russian had just arrived, but the internment immediately begun. I remember very well. We were in the church and after the mess when the crowd came out; it was surrounded by the Hungarian police together with Russian soldiers. We could not go home and we were driven away as cattle. Nobody asked who you were, what did you do. Those who were on that mess had to go by foot into the next town. Imagine in winter, we had to walk at least 15 kilometres. Those who went in the first row had to carry a table with the following inscription: We have destroyed the country; we have to build it up! In Szentendre we were divided into different groups and transported away. Nobody new at home where we are, we could not write them, they could not write us. I had luck; I was not transported to Russia.”

There are very long and very sad stories about the internment to Russia. Only a short report from a mother and her daughter:

“All people, men and women between 18 and 65 had to gather in the big pub. We were told that we had to help for two weeks in harvesting. I had a 2 years old baby at home. I thought two weeks is not so much, I can leave her with my mother. We were crushed into a wagon and were transported away. It was curious that the wagon did not want to stop. And when it stopped we were in Russia. I worked 5 years long in a coal-mine. It was a terrible hard work with very poor provision. A lot of young men and women died in this punishment camp. From our village more than 50 percent did not come home” – so the mother. And the daughter: “I do not remember what happened. I did not miss my mother since I did not know her. My father died somewhere in Russia still during the war. I had only my grandparents. What I remember is that my grandmother cried a lot. My grandparents have lost their property, their son, and did not know where my

⁸ The events after the Second World War have their own written history of course, but the personal feelings and

mother was. The family of grandpa was resettled. I was already 7 when my mother came home. She was totally foreign for me. It was a real shock for both of us.”

There are a lot of written sources about this terrible period of life of the Hungarian Germans but on the basis of the sad personal experiences they have created their oral versions. Written and oral history not always covers each other. At the beginning of the research early 1990 Hungarian Germans still did not want to speak about the *Volksbund* membership, dissimilation trends, Pan-Germanism, *Volksgruppentheorie* (theory on ethnic groups), participation in the SS-army.⁹ Later on Germans became more and more overt and from middle of the 1990 there were less and less taboos not to talk on. Members of the first generation, who participated in the *Volksbund* and were ready to speak about it, stressed its advantages. Men told that they were promised lands in Ukraine. “What a Hungarian German wants at most? Land and more land, to cultivate and to work” – said an old man. Women reported about singing and dancing together when they met in the *Volksbund*. – “We did not do anything harmful to Hungary. People who were really guilty escaped together with the German troop still in 1944.” “*Volksbund* membership was advantageous, children were taken to have holiday. We worked so much without resting even for a moment. We did not even understand the word: holiday” – said a man from the second generation.

A short detail from another oral history: “We were always diligent citizens of the Hungarian state. Our men fought for Hungary against the Hapsburgs in 1848, fought in the Hungarian army in the First World War, and do not forget that not every Hungarians German were SS-Soldiers. Many of them went voluntarily into the Hungarian Army, because they did not want to fight on the side of the Germans” – remembered a woman. According to other interviewees everybody who could do it, escaped not to be forced to the SS or others deserted. Horthy, governor of Hungary sold the Germans, said others, since he had agreed with the German military generals to recruit the young Hungarian German boys into the SS-army, consequently they could not be said responsible. There were, however, people who told: “The Germans came to recruit soldiers to the SS and promised a lot of money. My brother joined the SS. He did not want to kill Jews or something like that; this was only for the money. And as far as I remember and this was forgotten after the war that Hungary and Germany were allies and fought together against the Russians. I cannot understand why should not have gone our youngsters to the German army?”

The cause of the resettlement was the involvement of the Hungarian Germans in the Second World War events. Not taking into consideration, whether a family really participated in the *Volksbund* or not, was SS soldier or not, those who have some property, beautiful big house, had

experiences could not be trace by any other way.

⁹ SS: abbreviation for Schutzstaffel (defending troops)

to leave their houses and homeland. “My father was member in the movement ‘Faith to the Homeland’ which was just against the *Volksbund*, nevertheless my parents and my sister were banished. I was 4 years old and stayed with my grandma in other village that time, so I was left here. My mother cried and wanted me to join, but there was not time to bring me back. My family tried to come back several times. At the Hungarian border they were caught and sent back. It was terrible. At last they could evade the vigilance of the soldiers at the border. Arriving home they had nothing. Our house was given to people who came from Bukovina. Our furniture, animals, land, everything what my parents created was given away. At last my mother and father came to my grandmother’s small house. 6 persons in one room! And we were happy to have roof above our head.”

There is a general opinion among the Hungarian Germans, should they be old or young: this ethnic groups is not responsible for the happening during the Second World War, they are not guilty, but if yes, the Hungarians are also guilty. The politics needed a scapegoat and they were just at hand.

A very deep-rooted and unforgettable experience is also the settlement of Hungarian people from Bukovina (today Serbia) and from Slovakia into the German villages who were given the houses of the Germans resettled and the houses of Germans, who were simply driven out of their own houses.

“First we were allowed to stay in the stable but the Seklers, the inhabitants from Bukovina who received our house, have driven us away. My father did not want to let the animals. It was terrible. The new owner has driven away us with an axe. But my father went back and saw that the Seklers do not feed the animals. He went in and gave food to the pigs, the horse, the cattle, you know, we had everything. When the Sekler discovered my father he wanted to kill him. There were serious attacks between Germans and Sekler and some people were killed. My father could run away but promised to kill this man. These people did not want to work and when they sold everything and emptied our house offered us to buy it back! My father did” – remembers a man from the second generation.

An other story from the second generation: “When the settlers from Slovakia arrived into the village they received the house what they just wanted. If they liked a house, the owner could move away. And the settler did not allow carrying away even a needle. We had to see that foreigners close the door of our own house and we were not allowed to enter any more. We became day-labourer on our own land. We planted potato for our household but could gather it for the settlers. It was forbidden to take away even a piece, which did it, was punished very hard.

The resettlement to Germany was a more tragic event. The Hungarian Germans could carry only a 50 kg heavy parcel with them. A young man from the third generation talks: “I know everything from my grandparent. Of course everybody wanted to stay at home. The Germans tried to get exemption, tried to verify that they did not join the *Volksbund*, others offered all their money to be allowed to stay in Hungary. I am so sorry. It is so sad. And the Hungarian Germans did not get any compensation!”

Members of the second generation were more or less small children that time, or were born just after the war. Only a few have personal experiences but family histories are so vivid that even younger members of this generations speak about these event as if they had been directly involved. “My mother talked a lot about that time. My grandfather had to leave his house, one of the biggest and richest in our village. They were not allowed even to speak their mother tongue. If the policeman heard somebody to speak Swabian on the street, he or she was imprisoned. We, children were forbidden to speak our mother tongue at school.”

For members of the third generation all these events around the Second World War is a historical lesson, sometimes an irrelevant part of the family legends. “Those who were resettled to Germany had much better life than we here in Hungary. They were free, but we were poor and were imprisoned into this country.” Another opinion: “Yes, I know who lives in whose house, but I am not interested in it any more. I cannot hate the grandchild of this or that Hungarian from Slovakia or Bukovina. Why should I? We went to the same school, played football in the same troop. Our children play together. I argued so much with my mother. They cannot apologise.”

Not only the events of the resettlement cannot be kept alive, cultural habits, customs and norms as parts of their ethnic history disappear day by day. Only a few cultural traditions – music, songs, dances – survived help remembering and symbolically representing the past and even in those cases, when Swabian villagers have not counted themselves part of the ethnic community any more, and held themselves Hungarian, they could not get rid of the feeling of the common origin and of their deep-rooted traditional values.

Summary

In spite of all repressions after the Second World War the Hungarian Germans consider Hungary unanimously as their “Vaterland” (fatherland). Country and homeland form a unit in their mind and boundaries of the homeland coincide with that of the Hungarian state. The past and history of their groups have manifested within this frame. All themes in connections with nation had relevance only from 'Hungarian' point of view. Binding to Germany as to homeland through German mother tongue or German national culture was quite alien theme for them and were ab-

sent in their identity. Since literary German as well as German national culture has developed after these groups had already left the territory of their previous homeland, these very important factors could not have been internalised. The sense of nation and homeland has divided from German as mother tongue and national culture. They have no sense of any specific 'ethnic-homeland', which could have been marked by the place of birth of the ancestors. Their remembered ancestors were born and are buried in Hungary. They never wanted to go away and the re-settlement back to Germany after the Second World War affected them tragically. They could not understand why they were forced to leave their homeland. They argued that they were always faithful citizens of this country sharing its failures and taking part in the historical fate of the country. There are quite a lot of old Swabians who come home from Germany, if possible, buy their original houses, because they want to die and to be buried in the their native village. The Swabians are aware of the fact that they did a lot for this country with their diligent work, with their more modern agriculture than the Hungarian one because, as was said, this country is their country, too. All the more so they feel at home in Hungary because according to their own words they were always much more involved in interactions with Hungarian people than with members of other Swabian speaking groups in the country or with Germany itself.

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