

# AUTO-BIOGRAPHICAL METHODS – CASE STUDY – AUSTRALIAN SLOVENES<sup>1</sup>

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COBISS 1.01

In order to learn about people's life-styles autobiographies, life stories, life narratives are a frequently used source in Slovene ethnology. Their use in Slovene research work is not a novelty; what is new, however, is the recent interest of the younger generation of Slovene ethnologists in methodological concepts which render possible a multi-layered use of autobiographical material to gain insight into people's past and present within a given historical process. Since the main actor of each life story is its narrator, his or her life story is, in a certain sense, also connected with the identity of an individual. An autobiography cannot exist apart from its author's awareness of him- or herself in time and space. Unless we view autobiography and identity in a purely static manner it is impossible to separate one from the other, which proved true also in the course of research of everyday life of Slovene immigrants in Australia. Since autobiography has not been sufficiently explained in Slovene ethnological theory<sup>2</sup>, I am going to try and fill this gap by analyzing the results of my research work among Australian Slovenes.

The paper will thus examine the life of immigrants only from the viewpoint of methodology defined by the analysis of their autobiographies. Since these autobiographies have already been published<sup>3</sup> I do not cite them again in the text.

## 1. AUTOBIOGRAPHY

### a) The Case of Australian Slovenes

Initially it was my idea to organize my research of the first post-war generation of Slovenes who had emigrated to Australia on the basis of the data from available sources and literature, as well as field research work among them. I had planned my field work sojourn (1980-1981) according to selected questions from material, social

<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the International Conference *Qualitative Research – New Trends in The Development and Use of Qualitative Methods*, (Bled: Inštitut za družbene vede FDV, Ljubljana; Inštitut za slovensko narodopisje ZRC SAZU, Ljubljana, 6.-7. November 2000)

<sup>2</sup> See: Breda Čebulj Sajko, *Etnologija in izseljenstvo*, Knjižnica Glasnika Slovenskega etnološkega društva 29, Ljubljana: Slovensko etnološko društvo, 1999, pp. 142-150

<sup>3</sup> See: Breda Čebulj Sajko, *Med srečo in svobodo*, Ljubljana: published by the author, 1992, pp. 87-231

and spiritual cultures encompassed in ethnological questionnaires entitled *Etnološka topografija slovenskega etničnega ozemlja* (*Ethnological Topography of Slovene Ethnic Territory*). In that phase I had not yet thought about possible autobiographies of immigrants as a source for disclosing their everyday life in a foreign country.

In the course of my first visit among Slovene immigrants (between 1981 and 1982 in Sydney, Wollongong, Melbourne and Canberra) even the first, spontaneous, initially informative (for the researcher and the interviewed alike) interviews revealed different aspects of their everyday lives which due to specific influences of Australian environment and society had been hard to predict beforehand. These first interviews therefore made it clear that ethnic appurtenance of Australian Slovenes is not manifested merely through visible symbols linking both the »old« and the »new,« but is also revealed in the way they perceived their past in Slovenia and their present in Australia; this was interpreted in as many different ways as there were informants. Paraphrasing Niedermüller's interpretation of autobiographies<sup>4</sup> one could say that in the field I had encountered the »hidden« levels of people's lives which enabled me to gain an »insight from within« into the socio-historic processes of a given period of time: emigration from Slovenia, immigration to Australia and immigrants' integration into Australian society after 1945.

Since these topics proved to be more or less emotionally charged for »my« informants in my further in-depth interviews I let them decide whether they chose to speak about them or not. It was in this manner that the narratives about their own lives started to take shape. Some immigrants needed additional initiative provided by my questions, others did not. Initial autobiographies were thus formed, as Velčič<sup>5</sup> and Oring<sup>6</sup> would put it, »through dialogue« between immigrants and myself. In the course of time they gradually turned into monologues by the interviewed, evolving into spontaneous narratives told by individuals. This, according to Dégh<sup>7</sup>, is one of the forms of autobiographies, while Huseby-Darvas<sup>8</sup> has named them »oral reflexive autobiographies.« Their contents also fulfill the criteria for autobiographies by Kirshenblatt-Gimblett<sup>9</sup>, according to which authors of life stories have to speak in the first-person singular.

Since by speaking with »my« informants I realized that it would be their narratives which formed an illustration of the way of life of Australian Slovenes I therefore »handed my microphone over« to them. During subsequent interviews they were des-

<sup>4</sup> Péter Niedermüller, From the Stories of Life to the Life History: Historic Context, Social Processes and the Biographical Method, *Life History as Cultural Construction/Performance* (ed. by Tamas Hofer, Péter Niedermüller), Budapest 1988, pp. 451-473

<sup>5</sup> Mirjana Velčič, *Odtisak priče*, Zagreb 1991, pp. 38-39

<sup>6</sup> Elliot Oring, Generating Lives, *Life History...*, pp. 179-211

<sup>7</sup> Linda Dégh, Beauty, Wealth and Power: Career Choices for Women in Folktales, Fairytales and Modern Media, *Life History...*, pp. 13-19

<sup>8</sup> Éva V. Huseby-Darvas, Migrating Inward and Out: Validating Life Course Transitions Through Oral Autobiography, *Life History...*, pp. 379-408

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Authoring Life, *Life History...*, pp. 133-178

cribing the events of their lives which seemed important to them (but, at the same time, also appropriate for the listener's ears). This is why, according to Apte<sup>10</sup>, these life stories can be termed creative work.

Immigrants' life stories, which had originated in this manner, share at least two characteristic features:

They gaze into the past, with each informant interpreting it in their own manner. This depended upon their past experience in which they sought the reason for their »present« life lived in a foreign country. Niedermüller would say that they permeated their past experience with the present meaning, thus establishing a dialectic relation between the past and the present in which, according to Velčić, they »supply« and transform each other. In order for this to take place narrators first had to reconstruct the course of their lives. Despite the »conventional« process of emigration, immigration and integration into their new environment the choice of the past reality or the »individual taking from the possession of reality,« as Niedermüller would put it, differed from individual to individual. This was therefore a highly diversified process. The choice of events and actions based on individual judgement of each informant, and from the way they connected these events and actions together according to their own logic, »subjectively reflected wholes« were being formed. These reveal the scope of knowledge of narrators about their emigrant as well as immigrant society, expressed in their own words. The knowledge of both social systems consists of an individual's knowledge about concrete social changes of the post-war period, and his or her personal views regarding the given period. As Dégh has already mentioned, from this point of view autobiographies (of Australian Slovenes as well) present a »source to research the background of objective reality,« therefore the one immigrants had left behind as well as the one they immigrated into. In order to clearly understand their contents in my research I, like Apte, placed them within the cultural environment (in our case Australian) in which their life stories took place.

This autobiographical approach to the research of Slovene immigrants on the fifth continent was supplemented by my own observation of everyday life-style of Slovene immigrants in the course of several months I had spent living with them (beside 1982 also in 1984-85, 1990) and by verifying my field research results also by matching them against sources and literature, which is practiced by other researchers of autobiographic material (i.e. M. Piotrowski<sup>11</sup>). All of this enabled me to directly re-experience the consequences of social and historical events due to which Slovenes had left Slovenia after 1945. These consequences marked their way of life abroad which in their narratives is revealed by their memories, their nostalgia for their original homeland, their descriptions of difficulties during their integration into the new environment, their concern for further development of their Slovene culture abroad,

<sup>10</sup> Mahadev L. Apte, *Unsung Heroines: Cultural Models of Gender Roles and Selfhood in Marathi Autobiographies, Life History ...*, pp. 50-57

<sup>11</sup> Marcin Piotrowski, *Autobiographical Material and Possibilities of Its Use in Ethnography*, Etnološka stičišča 1, *Razprave Filozofske fakultete*, Ljubljana 1988, pp. 129-133

etc. In view of all this I agree with the opinion of Inta Carpenter<sup>12</sup> who, in the course of her research of immigrants from Lithuania, came to the conclusion that their autobiographies would undoubtedly have been much less burdened by the questions of ethnic identity had these immigrants stayed in their native country.

Since in the case of Australian Slovenes this burden is strongly present in their narratives, I consider it to be the second characteristic feature immigrants' selected autobiographies have in common. It represents the basis for their split between the »old« and the »new.«

## b) The Case of Some Nowadays Theories of Slovene Researchers

After brief presentation of my experiences with autobiographic method I'll try to present some modern statements of my colleagues. Some of them are sociologists, historians, anthropologists, literary historians, but most of them are ethnologists. We were talking about the autobiographical method on the round table two years ago (1999). Here are some short conclusions of our discussion<sup>13</sup>:

Even though Slovene researchers have been collecting autobiographic stories for quite some time systematic work in this direction, together with its theoretical foundation, has begun only recently. It is very difficult to define an autobiography: is it each and every word an informant utters or writes down (»partial autobiography«), or a condensed story about some events in the life of an individual – the narrator? Are these letters or diaries? Are questions and instructions of the interviewers important, or should the interviewer leave the construction of the life story to the narrator? If the answer to the second question is positive, the informant is an active creator of the story and thus also co-author of the research. What should be done with autobiographic material? It needs to be critically evaluated, compared to other available sources and placed within the historical context of the story.

Where does this autobiographical data fit into research? The decision depends upon each researcher and his or her research construction and the subsequent selection of autobiographic material. Is this the correct procedure, or does it »harm« the autobiographic document? An exemplary use of autobiographic material is approximately as follows: the entire life story is published, and after analyzing its contents a researcher explains the role of an individual, his/her community and the milieu he/she lives in, in connection with the given time period and its historical context.

An informant's life story needs to contain a logical sequence of events in the life of the narrator. Does the story contain all of the events? It is at this point that the narrator becomes the selector of his or her life. He/she recounts the facts which seem

<sup>12</sup> Inta Carpenter, Exile as Life Career Model, *Life History ...*, pp. 329-344

<sup>13</sup> About this see also: Avtobiografska metoda – pogovor o njeni uporabnosti v različnih znanstvenih disciplinah in tematskih sklopih, in: *Bulletin of the Slovene Ethnological Society* 39/3,4 1999 (ed. by Breda Čebulj Sajko), pp. 62-75

important to him/her. There is always a possibility of adding certain facts, of keeping them from the interviewer, of embellishing and exaggerating them according to the narrator's judgement. In such a case the interviewer is interested in the cause of such behaviour. An autobiographic story thus becomes a selective biography selected by the informant and the researcher alike.

How true to life and authentic are really autobiographic stories? Participants of the discussion were of the opinion that the basic principle in solving this problem is defining the objective, »historic« truth which serves as a skeleton for all other, subjective truths of an autobiographical story. These are therefore viewed as personal truths which supplement or reject the given, generally acknowledged objectivity and simultaneously enable a »view from within« of a given culture. In the course of this the relativity of the objective, which ultimately turns out to be just as subjective – situated in a given time period and social events – is revealed. It is therefore pointless to seek the absolute truth in life stories; they reveal only the narrator's individual view of the world. The diversity and variety of these views of the researcher's object of research are ultimately illuminated by given moment in history. This is why objective sources need to be verified by subjective once as well.

Since during this process of recognizing oneself the researcher as well as the narrator recognize others, autobiographies function as the language of a given culture. Or vice versa. A life story is therefore a story about the self and about the others. It is a process during which an identity is constructed (of an individual, a group, an ethnos, a country, a culture...) – the identity which, among other things, is in the center of those researching emigration and immigration.

When talking about the manner of recording autobiographies problems become obvious. They disappear if a researcher records the narrator's story through visual means (with a movie or video camera). Other participants of the discussion – with the exception of historians and literary historians – are faced with a dilemma: should audio material be transcribed in dialect or in literary language, should the text be published literally or selectively, should »delicate«, »intimate«, confidential parts be avoided or not? This leads to the problem of manipulating with such material and personal ethics of the researcher who has to decide how to use the information for the benefit of his or her research, but without hurting the narrator's feelings. The opinion prevails that it is necessary to tell the narrator the object of the research beforehand so as to obtain his trust and consent. In view of all this, is further authorization of the interview's transcription still necessary? If so, how original is still the life story which has been »altered« by its author? As we have said before, recording such stories on film avoids these problems altogether.

Finally: how is such (personal) material preserved here in Slovenia? Part of the material concerning the past is kept in corresponding state institutions and by individuals. As far as the latter are concerned, there is the problem of availability of this material to the public; another problem concerns destruction of already recorded autobiographies. What originates directly in the field is still predominantly unsystema-

tic material collected by individual researchers, especially those whose research is centered on emigration and immigration. The situation is gradually improving, however.

At the end of the discussion we shared the opinion that there seemed to be no firm rules regarding the origin and the forming of the life stories – just as there is no one and only answer to the question of what are autobiographies and what is an autobiographic method. And if we consider this problem in the detail this can also turn out to be an advantage for all of us who have been occupied with it: looking for an answer we have to be creative, while we are solving these problems we are on the part of progress. Different subjective views of our objective reality namely enable scientific disciplines to direct their gaze from within – into themselves.

Slovene ethnology has recently executed a big step forward in recognizing itself in relation to autobiographic research.

*(Translated by Nives Sulič)*

## POVZETEK

### AVTO-BIOGRAFSKA METODA – »CASE STUDY« – AVSTRALSKI SLOVENCİ

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*Slovenski etnologi pri svojem raziskovanju življenja posameznikov in različnih družbenih skupin zelo pogosto uporabljajo avtobiografske zgodbe kot enega izmed osnovnih virov za prikazovanje vsakdana ljudi. V zadnjem desetletju je ravno na tem področju v stroki običajen interes za zbiranje tovrstnih pripovedi prerasel v poglobljenejšo analizo avtobiografij s teoretičnega zornega kota. V članku so le-te prikazane na osnovi izkušenj avtorice na terenskem delu med avstralskimi Slovenci ter na osnovi nekaterih teoretičnih predpostavk, uveljavljenih med svetovnimi raziskovalci življenjskih zgodb. Iz vseh je razvidna povezava med potekom vsebine pripovedi in identiteto posameznika. Brez zavedanja samega sebe avtobiografija ni mogoča. Zato je vsaka izpoved, pripoved, zgodba ... izključno le posameznikova interpretacija določenega časa in okolja, brez katere ni t.im. objektivne resnice.*

*Zaključek nam ponuja spoznanja – po stroki zelo različnih – slovenskih raziskovalcev in zbiralcev življenjskih zgodb, ki še danes iščejo odgovor na vprašanje: kaj je avtobiografija?*