

# FAMILY STORIES UNTOLD

## Doing Family through Practices of Silence

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Family history can be seen to be comprised of both told and untold stories and sentiments related to them, all of which affect family members. Drawing on interviews conducted with immigrants from the former Soviet Union living in Finland and their family members living in the country of origin (in Russian Karelia and Estonia), this article<sup>1</sup> explores the silenced aspects of family storytelling and analyses how the absence of narration can serve as a protector and maintainer of family as a set of relationships, or an enabler of “normal” family life. The focus of the article is on family past, and the continuum from tellable to silenced experiences will be analysed. However, the methodological side of studying unsaid or unsayable things is also touched upon.

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### Family Storytelling

Family stories, which are told as a part of common reminiscing about the sayings and doings of family members<sup>2</sup> in different times, have been one of my central research interests for years. Family stories rely on the experiences of one or several family members and through storytelling these experiences can become a shared past for the whole family. However, as Kristin Langellier and Eric Peterson have argued, family storytelling is a way of “doing things with words” rather than a collection of stories. Storytelling is one of the daily practices in which families are performed and produced. Within this performative perspective, families are narrative formations and imagined communities. The bits and pieces of family storytelling emerge within mundane activities of *doing family*, and are often invisible to family members as well as others (Langellier & Peterson 2004: 33–39). From this point of view, family is a set

of relationships created, reconfigured and sustained through narrating and other practices.

Family storytelling concentrates on themes important for a particular family in a concrete situation. Family stories are not only about remarkable events, but tellability is also related to mundane meanings storytelling entails for participants (Langellier & Peterson 2004: 42). Stories are not always told as a whole; people may refer only to the main points or phrases of the stories they already are familiar with. Some of the family stories thus have the same characteristics as “small stories”: they do not have to be long and coherent narratives to fulfil their function. Stories may be of shared (known) events, and include allusions to previous tellings, deferrals of tellings and refusal to tell (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008). Entertainment is not the main function or value of family stories. In ways large and small, they matter to family members (Stone 1989: 5).

Family stories are a form of conversational storytelling (see Norrick 2007; Yerkovich 1983): stories are often told in turns and are negotiated. The situations of family storytelling are different depending on whether they deal with positive or negative memories and incidents. Positive stories, which make people laugh and feel good, can be told during bigger family gatherings and also to friends and acquaintances outside the family. Building and reinforcing the feeling of togetherness, these stories produce familyhood most explicitly. In terms of doing family, it is important to stress that people are selective while creating and recreating bonds with certain relatives. People may stress feeling close to some relatives, while saying nothing or telling negative stories about other relatives. Indeed, the interactional work of doing family can involve excluding some individuals from the set of valued relationships. Doing family involves construction and achievement rather than the enactment of a naturally existing set of relations (Naples 2001). For example, in the case of re-migration to Finland, it is more important to talk about the Finnish branch of the multi-ethnic family instead of concentrating on Russian relatives; this can actually be an important part of representing oneself as a proper return migrant (cf. Davydova 2004: 194). This article mainly deals with these kinds of descendant narratives: stories related to the (ethnic and religious) background of the family.

The storytelling situations of negative or sad stories are often slightly different. Negative stories are not repeated as often and can typically be told only in certain contexts, mostly confidentially, and one to one. There are also stories that are told only once; family members are aware of them, and later on they are only hinted at. Some family stories belong to the family circle only, and these are typically negative, sad or traumatic stories, or stories representing family (members) in a negative light. These stories include elements that are considered to be harmful in one way or another. They are the “family’s own secrets”, which are not meant to be understood by others. In addition, and the focus of this article, there are stories that are not repeated even in the family circle or not told at all.

This article concentrates on family past, and especially on untold stories, on the continuum from tellable to silenced experiences. Silence is a social process, involving different actions and agencies. It is not equal to forgetting, but rather refers to the absence of narration (Korjonen-Kuusipuro & Kuusisto-Arponen 2012: 113). In studying communication, people mostly pay attention to the communication process, and noncommunication is often perceived as a failure of communication rather than a functional and meaningful phenomenon (Vesala et al. 2002: 13). Not communicating something under certain conditions can also be intentional and purposeful. In introducing the concept of noncommunication, Gregory Bateson has stressed that in some cases communication is undesirable, because it somehow alters the nature of ideas (Bateson & Bateson [1987]2005: 80). More attention could thus be paid to situations in which noncommunication becomes meaningful (cf. also Tuija Hovi in this issue). Furthermore, as Seppo Knuutila has stated, noncommunication can be seen as a method, a search pattern or a paradigm for studying things that are not explicitly stated (Knuutila 2002: 119). In examining the practices through which family is performed and produced, the aim of this article is to pay close attention to silences and the absence of narration, and their role in doing family.

### Research Context and Materials

The research material that this article is based on is comprised of field diaries and forty relatively open interviews conducted during the years 2001–2004.<sup>3</sup> Interviews were conducted among people who had moved to Finland from the former Soviet Union. Most of the interviewees who lived in Finland had come from Baltic countries and Russian Karelia. Only a few individuals originated from other parts of Russia, mostly from bigger towns. Further interviews were conducted with relatives who had stayed in the country of origin: in Estonia or Russian Karelia. If possible, I interviewed more than one person in the same family.<sup>4</sup> Interviewees were able to choose whether they spoke in Finnish, in Estonian or in Russian. During many of the interviews, two languages were used interchangeably.

People from Russia, Estonia or other parts of the (former) Soviet Union currently constitute almost 40 percent of all the immigrants in Finland.<sup>5</sup> The number of newcomers increased sharply during the 1990s, when former Soviet citizens of Finnish background – mostly persons of Ingrian descent – were able to apply for the status of returning migrant and for permission to move to Finland with their families.<sup>6</sup>

Return migrants from the former Soviet Union generally have Ingrian Finnish roots: they are descendants of people who migrated from the territory of present-day Finland to the easternmost part of the Swedish Empire starting in the seventeenth century. Today, this area lies in north-west Russia, in the district of Saint Petersburg. Due to wars, deportations and persecutions during the twentieth century, many people with Ingrian Finnish backgrounds ended up living in Estonia and in Russian Karelia.<sup>7</sup> Other groups of Finnish origin in the former Soviet Union are descendants of Finns who moved there between the years 1918 and 1939 and after World War II. Finns who moved to the Soviet Union before World War II were either “Red” emigrants, who escaped from Finland after the failed revolution of 1918, or people who relocated illegally at the time when there was a major depression in Finland. In addition, Finns from the United States and Canada resettled in the 1930s by invitation of the Soviet government. During the Soviet period, maintaining the Finnish identity and language was not easy, and in fact many of these families were multilingual and had mixed ethnic backgrounds.

Many of the people I interviewed moved to Finland in the 1990s or early 2000s and their families had at least partly (Ingrian-)Finnish backgrounds. However, often interviewees had multiple reasons for moving. Thus, the categories of – for example – student, worker, family member and return migrant may overlap.

In the case of migration, not all family members are equally mobile: some of them stay in the country of origin. Families thus become transnational through spatial separation (Huttunen 2010: 240), living some or most of the time separated from each

other, yet holding together and creating something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely “familyhood”, even across national borders (Bryceson & Vuorela 2002: 3). In studying transnational families, I was interested in the ways people did family: how family was negotiated, symbolically generated, and affirmed through everyday practices (see Körber & Merkel 2012). Narration and sometimes also its absence can help people to adjust to the challenges and changes they meet, and transnational families thus form an interesting entrance point for studying both doing family and cultural practices of silencing.

### **Silenced Themes during the Interviews**

The interview situation can be regarded as a specific context for telling, with its own restrictions. Some experiences are difficult to put into words, or they are not presented to the researcher during the interview because of their intimate nature. Additionally, some stories do not fit into the picture people would like to present of themselves and their families to an outsider. For example, sometimes members of migrant families have stressed the close relationships between relatives in their extended families (in and by means of stories they have told about themselves), partly due to the wish to distinguish themselves from the families representing the majority of Finnish society, who in their view are more individualistic and nuclear family-centred (cf. Siim 2007).

As my material consists of field notes and recorded interviews with different family members, I can try to understand all that has not been said only by carefully studying that which has been said (see Klein 2006: 21–22). I have looked at the material and themes discussed during the interviews, paying attention to what has and presumably has not been talked about: which themes have been silenced or avoided during the interviews. This approach naturally has its limitations, and I do not claim to have knowledge of all silenced topics. However, it is clear that some of the themes related to present-day life were explicitly excluded. For instance, some interviewees did not want to talk about a spouse who had recently passed away, or about a spouse's serious

illness. They also often did not want to talk about their difficulties in Finland (including difficulties in the workplace) or unsuccessful migration (see Siim 2014). My position as a researcher representing the majority may also have had an effect on how people decided to describe their integration into a new society. However, there were exceptions, and some interviewees told me quite openly about the difficulties they or their family members had faced. For example, 50-year-old Irina described the troubles her daughters had had in Finland after the relocation; in the second interview, she acknowledged that it may have been a mistake for her to come to Finland in the first place. “My life is really simple, and this is a sore issue for me. [...] I think my life in Russia was better” (H25: 30<sup>8</sup>).

People are also inclined to keep silent about problems in their marriages or other complicated family relations, especially when it comes to recent and ongoing matters. As one male interviewee stated when asked about his family and the meaning of family for him: “I’m not ready for this kind of question [...] when it comes to family, I don’t want to answer those questions. I’m telling you frankly. At the moment there are relatively complicated problems, and this is why I would like to skip these questions” (H12B: 10). Also a woman in her thirties said to me directly that she did not feel comfortable talking about a taxing period of her life. She told me about her husband’s serious illness, which changed their lives in many ways. At the time her husband fell ill, she was expecting their third child, and not only did she not feel comfortable talking about it, but indeed she did not remember the following year at all:

[...] and after that he got ill. When I was pregnant with our third child. As my time neared, it was a tough spot. I cannot remember that year at all. It’s like a “black hole” (P: it has disappeared). It has disappeared. I can’t remember my daughter being a baby. I guess I did everything automatically, but I cannot remember it like I remember the other kids: how I enjoyed it (P: yes). I cannot remember much. And my husband was not there at the birth; for the other two children he was

there, at their birth (P: yes) [small pause]. This kind of bad thing [the situation in the family] we have now; I wouldn’t really like to talk about it (P: yes); it makes me feel bad [laughing a bit]. (H21: 35. Woman, moved to Finland from the Republic of Karelia<sup>9</sup>)

These two interviewees were exceptional in stating directly that they did not want to talk about certain themes. More often people simply avoided talking about themes they felt uncomfortable with or themes that were too emotional. Sometimes I realised people had been avoiding certain themes on the basis of interviews done with other family members. The emotions the topics under discussion may evoke could not always be anticipated and they may have taken interviewees by surprise. Some of the interviewees were wiping tears from their eyes during the interviews, and these situations caught me by surprise. Since the strong emotions questions may produce in the interviewees cannot often be anticipated, one responsibility of the interviewer is to help interviewees to narrate through these situations. A researcher can turn the discussion to other themes, for example by talking about how the interviewee has made it through the difficult times (Rosenthal 2003: 920). One should also keep in mind that the therapeutic impact of narration or interviews cannot be taken for granted (cf. Strandén-Backa 2013: 85–89). The skill of listening to the silence related to fraught experiences and memories can be useful (cf. Peltonen 2003: 18). While analysing the life-history interviews she conducted in the 1990s with Ingrian Finns in northern Ingria (in the current Saint Petersburg district), Armi Pekkala noted that she reacted with silence to strong emotional expressions of anxiety, stress or grief in order to give interviewees time to compose their thoughts, either to continue with the same topic or to change it (Pekkala 2007: 184).

When it comes to problems, people usually talk about them only when some time has passed or the problems have been resolved. For example, one may be ready to talk about the problems with a spouse only after a divorce. Interviewees are rather keen

to talk about how they have made it through tough times. One function of these kinds of survival stories (see Benmayor et al. 1987; Zeitlin, Kotkin & Cutting Baker 1982: 46) is to encourage the younger generation(s) to successfully make it through difficult times in a new, foreign society. It is also possible to laugh at difficult things afterwards in the family circle: these stories include a kind of self-irony and can increase the feeling of togetherness among family members.

In the following, I explore the dynamics of talking about and the silencing of experiences and themes that seemed for various reasons to be sensitive among the families I studied. I begin by analysing stories that were transmitted among family members, despite the fact that they touched on somewhat difficult topics, and then I move on to untold stories.

### Stories about Persecution and Survival

The family histories of the descendants of Finns I interviewed often included repeated relocations, deportations, persecutions and fear. Families with other ethnic backgrounds also experienced persecutions, especially during the Stalin regime. Sometimes stories about these incidents were passed along to later generations, particularly stressing the survival and endurance of family members.

Alma, a 34-year-old woman, stated that her grandparents talked about the past “quite a lot, about the war times and, although we were little, very little, they still talked about everything” (H21: 50). She mentioned, for example, stories about her great-grandfather going to Saint Petersburg to do construction work, about her grandfather being imprisoned by Russians and forced to help rebuild an airport, even while it was being bombed, about her grandmother driven away from home, and the relationships of ordinary people, that is Ingrians, to Russian and German soldiers (H21: 51–54). Alma introduced the background of the storytelling in the following way: “it bothered [my grandfather], and that is why he told us. About what it was like, what happened (P: mm). I guess he thought that we children should also know” (H21: 52).

In my experience, the stories that are told about

difficult times are of an informative nature, concerning the different phases in the lives of family members. They do not dwell on unpleasant details, in spite of being quite specific at times. Nevertheless, emotional and troubling experiences or descriptions seemed to stick more strongly in the minds of listeners. This seems to also be the case with the following detailed description that Alma offered about her father’s childhood experience during World War II, when Germans occupied the southern and western parts of Ingria. The story had been told by Alma’s grandmother. While talking about the most difficult themes in their lives, people often describe them through narratives conveying the experiences of others, for example their children (cf. Miettinen 2004: 429; Siim 2007: 238). For Alma’s grandmother, it may have been easier to talk about the war time and fears related to it through the actions of her son.

Pihla: Has someone told you about what your grandparents or parents were like when they were little? Alma: Yes, my grandmother told me about my father, when he was two years old. The Germans came to the village, chased the family into the cellar, and took up residence in the house. [...] I can’t recall how long they had to stay there in the cellar, but granny said they didn’t have the courage to go up and ask for anything. The children were very hungry, and so my two-year-old father [nicknamed “Kostja”] jumped up from his mother’s lap and ran up the stairs from the cellar. Grandma said she was terribly afraid that they would kill the boy and went to watch through a chink in the door what they would do. The Germans were sitting around the table; they had a big, round loaf of bread on the table, and granny’s jam jars. [...] [she] said Kostja went to the table and pulled on one German’s trouser leg. [...] My grandma said her heart was about to stop, she was so afraid for the boy, but she was too frightened to go and get him. [...] The German looked at the boy, took the bread and cut a big slice with a big knife [...] and put a lot of jam on it, and gave it to him. When Kostja came back, [granny] tried to take the slice away from him, because he hadn’t

eaten anything for a long time and might get a stomach-ache. But he started to scream, made so much noise, that she gave it back [laughing]. She thought that otherwise the Germans might come down and start shooting because of the noise they were making [laughing]. And the boy ate the whole piece of bread. (H21: 59. Woman, moved to Finland from the Republic of Karelia)

Some interviewees stressed that children, while growing up after World War II, were aware of the roots of the family and of the family history, including sufferings, deportations and other war-time experiences. However, it seems that these kinds of stories were not often repeated. Sometimes the younger generation may explicitly ask older members of the family to tell them about the past in more detail, but these inquiries were not always fruitful. It can also be difficult for a family member to ask about these emotionally very loaded experiences. As one interviewee with an Ingrian Finnish background stated: "My mother always cried if you asked her something. Those years were so tough" (H31C: 9). By this she was referring to difficult phases in her mother's life, including displacement. If stories stir up difficult memories and negative feelings, people may avoid telling them. They may be afraid that the listener will not understand their experiences in the way they would like them to be understood (cf. Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2003). Talking about nightmarish experiences and suffering may sometimes feel like minimising the experiences (Miettinen 2004: 71, 428). The authenticity of experiences can thus be protected through silence (cf. Knuuttila 2002: 121).

Some interviewees mentioned that as adults they turned to different archives and authorities to find out more about their families. Lempi, a woman in her sixties, had a long-time dream of compiling a family tree or a family history. At the time of the interview, she knew a little about the past of her family, but she had had to push hard to find out about it. Her parents were both born in Finland, at the beginning of the twentieth century, but ended up living in the Soviet Union. In the repressions of the 1930s, tens of thousands of Finns, considered to be politically

unreliable, were deported to as far away as Central Asia, Lempi's father being one of them. Her mother is not eager to talk about her father's fate. Apparently, Lempi's mother lived for a long time without knowing exactly what had happened to her husband. The same was true for many families: people were not sure about the fate of their family members.

Lempi: My grandfather and grandmother were an ordinary Finnish couple. Grandpa participated in the activities of the Social-Democratic movement here in Finland. In the 1930s when there was high unemployment here, a crisis, remember [...] they went to Russia. My mother was 14 at that time, she was born here [in southern Finland] [...] Father was born in Karelia [...] in a place that became part of the Russian territory after the war. As a young man he moved to America, in the 1930s, looking for a job, and then moved on to Canada. Then there was a campaign; they were told that in Russia there was work available, and that you'd receive housing, everything. And he moved to Russia as a young man. So both of my parents were born in Finland, but met there in Russia. And got married. I was born in 1936, before the war. During the war, or rather in 1937, they started repressions against Finns in Russia. My father was deported to Central Asia [...] We didn't know about that. I got to know about it quite recently, when they opened the archives. [...] He was in Central Asia, and then, when World War II started, he was first taken into the Red Army. So the archive documents revealed. I think he was there for two months, and then he was kicked out of the army and sent to [a labour camp in the Urals] because he was a Finn. He was there the whole wartime and died in 1944. In the beginning, after the war, my mother made inquiries about him through archives and [...] found out that he allegedly died of tuberculosis. Maybe because the living conditions there were worse than in prison. That kind of fate was suffered by many Finns, even my acquaintances; many fathers were repressed that way [...] I also have documents saying he suffered repression. Well, my father is dead, and my mother is

alive; she returned to Finland after 60 years [...]

Pihla: Do you know this history well, and talk about it a lot at home?

Lempi: No, my mother does not like to recall it. It's simply that when they started to open the archives in Russia, I started to look for my dad's roots. My mother didn't know anything about him, after the arrest. And, only after leaving for Finland [from the Republic of Karelia], I received notification from the archives. About the fate of my father. But until then we didn't know what happened to him, where and when; we knew nothing. (H12A: 21–22. Woman, moved to Finland from the Republic of Karelia)

Here Lempi stated that her mother was not aware of the events taking place after the arrest of her husband. Later in the interview, Lempi talked in more detail about her wish to collect her mother's stories for future generations and about her mother's unwillingness to narrate. All she managed to get were small pieces of recollections, mainly about her mother's childhood and youth.

It can be claimed that sad and in some way undesirable or inappropriate family experiences can be erased from memory and it can be difficult to differentiate between intentional silencing and unintentional forgetting. Some stories, however, which at first glance may be categorised as untellable, can be transmitted after all, thanks to a changed societal context or because of the function these stories of persistence and strength of family members have in encouraging other family members to cope. Additionally, difficult personal experiences can be described by projecting emotions related to them onto others (cf. Lawless 2000: 76–77). In studying exiled Estonians, Jürgenson (2009: 137) has noted that some traumatic events are retold as if they are holy stories requiring utmost respect from both the teller and the listener. "Holiness", with its emotional charge, can also mean that one cannot talk about the incidents, but has to remain silent (cf. Bateson & Bateson [1987]2005; Tuija Hovi in this issue). Next, I will analyse the experiences and topics people have kept silent about, as well as the functions of these silences.

## Protective Silence

Concealing their ethnic or religious background from people outside the family was important for Finns living in the Soviet Union – especially under the Stalin regime – as was the case with many other ethnic and religious groups. There were certain themes that the authorities also wanted people to keep silent about. Talking about ethnic or religious affiliations or relatives living abroad could cause problems or unpleasant reactions, which is one of the reasons why Finns internalised a "culture of silence" during the Soviet time, stressing that keeping silent could not hurt you (cf. Miettinen 2004; Raudalainen 2014: 386). Many interviewees recalled how they had been advised to conceal their family's ethnic background: "my grandmother on my father's side also said not to tell anyone you were Ingrian" (H36B: 70). Also religiousness was to be kept hidden: "My brother and I were baptised. When we were little. But we were not to talk about it at school, or we would have been expelled" (H21: 58). Several interviewees also mentioned that they did not speak the Finnish language, sometimes not even at home: "We were afraid to speak it" (H36B: 72). "My mother knew Finnish very well. But at home we never spoke Finnish. [...] If they spoke it in some families it was a secret; no-one should know" (H12A: 27). People were afraid to keep in contact with (Finnish) relatives living abroad, for example answering their letters or meeting them while they were visiting the Soviet Union.

Depending on the conditions at hand, silence and secrets could contribute to family survival as surely as telling family stories (Langellier & Peterson 2004: 51). Keeping some things hidden from outsiders under a totalitarian regime may not be that surprising, but it is intriguing that some things were hidden even from family members. In this case, there is no clear difference between public and private sharing of family memories. For example Anni, a 30-year-old woman I interviewed in Russia, told me that she became aware of the ethnic background of her family at school: it had not been talked about at home. After being "accused" of being a Finn at school, she first was upset and wanted to deny it; calling someone a Finn was a term of abuse, as far as she knew.

Anni's parents had not directly talked about the ethnic background of the family at home (or its importance was not stressed; cf. also Elo-Hanna Seljamaa in this issue) and she was not aware of it, in spite of having heard her grandparents speaking Finnish.

Pihla: What was the position of Finns in general in the Soviet Union?

Anni: I don't know; our [relatives] lived [near Petrozavodsk] [...] and in school they were praised because they were so determined and knew the Russian language even better than Russians. The teacher always noted that Finns could sit still, and write without mistakes. Also when I studied at school, generally it was normal, and there were no such ethnic problems. Only once at school, it was necessary to mark your nationality everywhere; there was this grouping, and maybe it was a necessity in that system. [It was then] I for the first time found out that I was a Finn. From childhood I had heard my grandfather and grandmother, and all the people around them speaking Finnish. When I came to Petrozavodsk, everything was in Russian, and for me there were no problems. Whether there were Russian or any other people. There was just this incident at school, before classes. On the table there was a teacher's book with some information written down [about the pupils], like where the parents worked, their nationality, and the nationality of the child. I remember the children also said "Huttunen, she's a Finn." I was so upset, calling me that [laughing]. "It is not true." I just didn't understand what they were talking about; it was said in such a tone of voice. I think they also didn't understand, seven–eight years old. My only friend was also an Ingrian Finn. We didn't have problems and still don't. (H33: 43. Woman, living in the Republic of Karelia)

Ethnic background was sometimes deliberately concealed even from one's own spouse, as Salme, a woman in her fifties, said. The motivation to hide things from those close to you may be a desire to protect family members, and to keep the family together. While interviewing Salme and her husband

Tarmo (with Ingrian Finnish and Estonian backgrounds, respectively), we talked about reasons for remembering and not remembering the family past. Tarmo claimed that women were more inclined to remember family-related things, since "men worked more in Estonia." He also noted that their families were cut off from their "roots" after moving to town. Salme, on the other hand, stated that the main reason for the rupture experienced inside the family was her Ingrian Finnish background:

Salme: And for me it was cut off because I had an Ingrian-Finnish background; on my mother's side many relatives had died in Siberia [...] they were dispersed.

Pihla: We talked about that a bit, yes, that people were afraid to talk.

Salme: Yes, people were afraid to say that they were Ingrian Finns and my mother didn't have the courage to tell my father, and he was offended by that and maybe it was also one reason for their divorce. My father felt wounded that she hadn't dared to talk to him [...] didn't trust him in that sense. But life... I have started to think that no matter what kind of secret, it can come out somewhere, by accident; it doesn't need to be intentional. That it is really good to keep that kind of big secret to yourself.

Tarmo: But well, surely your parents felt tension, since your mother was still, in 1994 and 1995, when there was independence, she was still afraid to tell everything; there was still a kind of fear, anxiety [...] [The fear] kind of went inside, maybe it's still there.

Salme: Yes, people were too afraid to say [aloud] even that God existed (P: mm). Before her death, my grandmother said that God did exist. But otherwise people kept those things to themselves.

Tarmo: Well I said that we also had cantors [in our family], but no-one talked about that.

(H36A & B: 69. A couple, moved to Finland from Estonia)

People justified not communicating certain things by referring to the protective effect of unawareness:



things that you knew nothing about could not harm you. Silence in this case was intentional: stories fallen into the wrong hands would entail the alteration of the intended message (cf. Bateson & Bateson [1987]2005: 80). Thus, the motivation for not telling stories was often to save the kids or other relatives from unpredictable consequences. There seems to have existed also a more general wish to protect children from negative memories or feelings, a desire to stress positive stories (cf. also Raudalainien 2014: 386). As told by a 28-year-old woman, who has a partly Ingrian and a partly Karelian family background, neither of her parents were very keen on talking about negative things:

Iloona: Stories, I didn't hear them. I don't know why my parents didn't tell us anything. Or was it just hard to talk about these things. Because there were a lot of bad [things], and for sure all parents don't want to tell all the bad things to their own children. [...] Once I asked [my father] and he said that the reason why older people didn't tell us anything was that maybe if something bad happened to a person and he had all of this in his soul, when he calmed down, he wouldn't want to talk about it any more, because it was difficult, difficult for him, and he wouldn't want this evil to touch others, especially his own kids. He wants to [...] spare his children from all the negative sides. But, well I was interested in all these things because I was interested in history, and I started to ask all these little things. [...] And then he started to tell me, but usually [parents] don't say too much. (H29: 7, 80. Woman, living in the Republic of Karelia)

Sometimes silenced and repressed stories are brought to the surface due to a societal or personal change of situation. This can be illustrated by the story of the 45-year-old Oksana, talking about the past of her family. She only came to know about the deportation of her family after finishing her university studies. That is when her parents thought it was ineluctable to inform her about this part of her family history, since she had been offered a job in the KGB (the foreign intelligence and domestic security

agency of the Soviet Union). Being aware of her family history made her think that she, too, needed to be ready for anything that could happen in life. Recognising this made her stronger: she said that she was not afraid of anything anymore.

Oksana: [...] my grandfather was murdered when Stalin rose to power. [...] And my grandmother was sent to Kazakhstan with five children [...] I was born in Kazakhstan but after that I came back. When my grandmother received a document saying that my grandfather was innocent, she was able to return. But she had a difficult period in Kazakhstan: no food, no medicine, nothing. And five children [...]

Pihla: When you think about your oldest son, have you told him or has your grandmother told him, for example, about this period in Kazakhstan? Does he know?

Oksana: Yes, well I was told about this happening to us when I graduated from university. Because I was offered a good job in the KGB and when I told my mother [about that], she said "You better not go there." That is how I know my own history. But when the new era began and perestroika and everything, and everything was open, I frankly told the boys what happened. [...] And it was funny since I knew what happened to our family. Then I decided I had to be able to do everything I could. I study, I knit, and I can do anything, milk the cow, or work in a shop. I think my grandmother had such big problems because she was rich and we had a house, our own house [...] she was well off. So she was not ready. And I think I had to know everything in life. I didn't want people to come and send me to Siberia, for example. It is interesting, and now I can do everything. I'm not afraid of anything. (H3: 9, 33. Woman, moved to Finland from Russia)

As Helena Miettinen (2004: 429) has noted, Russian Finns are not very keen to talk about their relationship to Soviet ideology. This narrative silence took a slightly different form in a family where the grandfather, 81-year-old Viktor, besides being Ingrian also

had a communist background, which he did not hide – quite the opposite. However, his family members that I interviewed claimed that generally they did not talk very much about the past in the family circle. But if the grandfather talked – to the grandchildren while they spent time at the summer cottage or during parties when he may have had a little too much to drink – then the topic was the war time, and memories of childhood. Even though he had managed to avoid the most hideous fate during the war, there were painful aspects of his life history he deliberately avoided. It seemed that the destiny of other Ingrians had left a mark on him. He talked about deportations in quite a laconic tone of voice: “It was quite a hard time, in the 40s and 50s. All the Ingrians were sent to Siberia. Had to move away from Tallinn, so I went to Leningrad. In the Tallinn railway station there was a long train full of Ingrians. It headed towards Siberia. I went to Leningrad” (H28: 31). When discussing the stories related to the past, his daughter said that many things were hidden from her. Viktor himself stated that he had talked about “necessary things”, but additionally he implied that under the new social order there was no need to know about the old one (H28: 71). According to his granddaughters: “there are a lot of stories he could still not talk about some time ago. [...] Since he has a communist past [...] he is not used to talking freely [...] he is always a bit on edge” (H26A & B: 22). He himself also claimed that the position he had held during the Soviet time set certain restrictions on him: he had to refrain from talking about his past and his job, and avoid contacts with relatives living abroad. In a way this seemed to have affected the practices of later generations: they were not very interested in the past, but rather lived in the current moment.

As these examples show, there was reluctance to talk about certain themes among the families interviewed. When the narratives contained information that could cause problems if spread outside the family, silence was protective. Telling can have damaging effects and silence can be protective in certain societal or political contexts, which makes not communicating meaningful under these circumstances (see Bateson & Bateson [1987]2005: 89; Knuutila 2002:

120). However, there is not necessarily a consensus among family members regarding the untellability of particular stories, especially in changing societal situations.

### **(Un)told Stories and Sentiments Related to Them**

Societal changes or the “new era” do not always change the practice of keeping silent about some aspects of family history. At least certain aspects of the past were still regarded as taboo during the time of the interviews and people preferred to avoid those topics, concentrating instead on living in the present, coping with everyday routines, and being oriented towards the future. Lilia, in her twenties, described her husband’s family, which has an Ingrian-Finnish background, still avoiding talking about the past:

My grandmother told quite a few stories [...] but [in my husband’s] family they don’t usually talk about this at all, because in the Soviet time, and especially in Stalin’s time, a lot of relatives were sent to Siberia and executed. [...] a lot of relatives died during Stalin’s time. And in their childhood, no one ever talked about this; it was forbidden. Because if someone said something, he could be arrested the next day and sent to Siberia. That’s why I think this [habit] remained, from bygone times, the tradition not to talk about things. (H7: 53. Woman, moved to Finland from Lithuania)

According to Lilia, her own family likewise preferred to talk about recent events. When I asked what kinds of stories they told when she visited her parents in Lithuania, she said that they concentrated on present-day incidents:

Well, of course I prefer to hear what is going on now rather than about the past. Because it seems to me that all who were born in the Soviet Union, who were influenced by Stalinism and all the negative phenomena in Soviet Union, there was already this habit of avoiding the past, refraining from talking about what happened many years

ago, you know. [...] However, now people have probably started to think about it more. Although, I don't know; my parents don't think about it. I don't know why it doesn't bother them; maybe they would be happy to know about the past, about family secrets and all sorts of things, but I don't know why they don't want to; there's no real desire. They live more in the present and the future than in the past. [...] When the Soviet Union fell apart, a new time began; people changed rather quickly and forgot about all that had happened in the past. For Lithuanians, it is painful. What happened during the Soviet time is often a big taboo. [...] What happened during the Stalinist times, people don't want to talk about. (H7: 64. Woman, moved to Finland from Lithuania)

Sometimes the past, for example the experience of childhood, is not considered worth talking about or remembering. People may also belittle the value of their own life story, thinking it's just typical, and that there's nothing special in it, or experiences are just too depressing to be repeated. For example, when I asked Lempi, a woman in her sixties, if she had told her children about her childhood, she answered:

They do know a little, because when the [Second World] war started, my mother was a student at the university. [The university] was then evacuated to Komi. [...] I ended up in an orphanage. [...] And it basically happened that we – that I went missing. Only after the war did my grandfather find me. All of the war time I spent in an orphanage, and after the war was brought to [my home-town]. And I lived together with my mum for several, long years, just the two of us (P: yes) [pause]. Well that is what my childhood was like: hungry, cold, without parents [pause]. Of course my children are aware of the main points. (H12A: 24. Woman, moved to Finland from the Republic of Karelia)

Ulla-Maija Peltonen, who has studied remembering and forgetting the 1918 Civil War in Finland, has stated that the desire to keep silent and to forget is

common. People are reluctant to go through traumatic events again. Of the people she studied, some had not told their relatives or children what happened to their loved ones in 1918. Silence was a way to keep incidents out of daily routines, making daily life easier (Peltonen 1996: 28–29). Silence could thus be seen as an enabler of “normal” family life, making it easier to concentrate on present-day challenges. Nevertheless, information and emotional attitudes can also be passed on through silence (Jürgenson 2009: 141). Concentrating on positive aspects and trying to ignore negative ones is thus not always enough to forget unpleasant things. There may be fears or other strong emotions that are linked to these stories, despite their apparent remoteness (cf. Miettinen 2004: 205). In many cases it seems that the images, associations and fears related to stories have been transmitted from one generation to another, although sometimes in slightly different forms. These emotions sort of run in the family, regardless of the fact that realistically there should not be many reasons for anxiety any more, in the changed societal situation. However, my interviewees talked about their recent fears, which, in a way, were related to the family history they were aware of. For example, in one group interview with siblings of Ingrian Finnish background and their spouses in Russian Karelia, one couple in their late fifties reflected on their feelings related to the recent relocation of their children, expressing the fear that the border between Finland and Russia may close.

Terttu: [...] In the beginning it was terrible, to be honest [...] because we knew what happened to our parents. [...] All of a sudden they could close the border: such fears we had. [...]

Arvi: The fear still remained from our parents, at least for our generation. The way they were treated – that is why they passed on the fear to us. (H31A & D: 34. Group interview in the Republic of Karelia)

Being aware of family history made interviewees think that something similar may happen to them or to their loved ones. This is also discernible in the

interview with Oksana (cited earlier): she wanted to be ready for everything, to be able to cope in any situation which she could possibly face.

Some fears were also carried over to the interview context. A few interviewees in Russia were afraid of potential consequences from the interviews for their relatives living in Finland, or of how their relatives would react when they heard about the interviews. For example, one 81-year-old man I interviewed in Russian Karelia insisted that I should not give the interview material to the folklore archives in Finland. He was afraid that his relatives living there would suffer if the recordings ended up in the hands of the “enemy” (Field diary, April 2003). This fear seemed irrational to me; he also commented after the interview that he had not talked negatively about Finland. Looking at his request through the prism of his life history, I respected his wish not to archive the material.

Family history can thus be seen to be comprised of both told and untold stories and sentiments related to them, all affecting family members. There are family traditions or experiences that are rarely verbalised but the ideas and feelings related to them nevertheless affect the thoughts and actions of family members. Additionally, as Aivar Jürgenson has noted, if a person starts to talk about an event only after years of silence, the previous silence can acquire a dimension full of information. Keeping silent about certain incidents can thus be far more expressive than actually talking about them. Silence passes on feelings, convictions, desires and judgments (Jürgenson 2009: 138–141).

## Conclusion

Storytelling is one of the practices through which families and identities are created and maintained. People are selective about what kind of events and people they talk about, and to whom. When talking about the negative experiences of a family, focus in the stories is usually on the survival and persistence of family members. Emotionally difficult themes are often depicted through the experiences of other family members, for example from a child’s viewpoint. Storytelling situations involving negative experi-

ences are typically quite different from more cheerful remembering, and these painful stories may be kept strictly within the family circle. This poses methodological challenges for a folklorist interested in communication inside families, both shared and silenced experiences of family members.

The interactional work of doing family can involve excluding some relationships or experiences, and stressing others, depending on the situation. The absence of narration is also part of doing family. In this article, I have drawn attention to noncommunication as a protector, maintainer and enabler (cf. Ketola et al. 2002: 9). The interviewees are members of transnational families whose history goes back to the Soviet Union, and the families’ past often includes persecution. For families with Ingrian Finnish backgrounds, it has been vitally important to keep silent about certain things, including ethnic and religious background. Sometimes these themes have not been discussed even within the family circle. Silenced stories can sometimes emerge abruptly, when the (societal) situation changes, but certain themes may remain taboo, the habit of keeping silent about certain things is persistent.

When experiences are silenced because of fear, it is possible to talk about forced noncommunication. Reasons for keeping silent about certain experiences can include a need to protect others by keeping them in the dark. Additionally, people may not want to burden their loved ones with negative feelings, may think their stories are not worth telling, or prefer to forget about negative experiences. However, silence cannot be assumed to be a space for forgetting: cultural silences do not necessarily mean that the events are forgotten. Rather, silences may illustrate that there is something there, but the words to convey it are lacking (see Korjonen-Kuusipuro & Kuusisto-Arponen 2012: 121–122). Some experiences and emotions are also difficult or even impossible to verbalise and the authenticity of experience is protected through silence.

A family’s past is comprised of both told and untold stories, and emotions related to them, all affecting family members. There are family experiences that have rarely or never been verbalised,

but the knowledge and feelings connected to them are nevertheless transmitted to other family members and affect their lives. In studying storytelling in families, we should thus try to find ways to also investigate silences and emotions, which are often strongly intertwined.

## Notes

- 1 This research was supported by the Estonian Research Council (grant no. 9271 and Institutional Research Project IUT2-43), and the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory).
- 2 By “family” I am not referring only to the nuclear family, but also to the set of people a certain individual consider to be family. While studying the family under conditions of increased mobility, the characterisation of a nuclear family by settledness and geographical proximity becomes questionable (Körber & Merkel 2012: 5–6).
- 3 I have collected this material for my Ph.D. dissertation on narrative practices of transnational families. For more detailed information about the interviews, please see the “Interviews” section.
- 4 In ten families I interviewed two or more family members. In addition, I interviewed six individuals (no other interviewees from the same family). Not all family members were willing to be interviewed. Some said they felt everything had already been said by their spouses, for example, and in the case of post-divorce families I did not contact the ex-spouses.
- 5 According to Statistics Finland, in 2014 40.5 percent of foreign nationals permanently living in Finland had Russian or Estonian citizenship and 37.3 percent were Russian- or Estonian-speaking. Of foreign-born inhabitants, 34 percent were born in Estonia, Russia or the former Soviet Union (Statistics Finland 2015).
- 6 For the moment, the right to apply for the status of returning migrant has ceased. The system of return migration for Ingrian Finns will be abolished after a transition period, with some exceptions (Act on the amendment of the Aliens Act 57/2011, confirmed on March 25, 2011 [Laki ulkomaalaislain 48 §:n muuttamisesta 57/2011]). The relative proportion of labour migration from Estonia to the old EU member states, including Finland, increased significantly after Estonia’s EU accession in 2004 and the global economic crisis that started in 2008.
- 7 Ingria was a multicultural area: in addition to Ingrians, also Votian, Izhorian, Russian, German and Estonian people lived there. At the end of the nineteenth century, Ingrian Finns were the largest Finnish-speaking

group in the Saint Petersburg area. During the first half of the twentieth century, Ingrian Finns experienced serious political, social and economic changes. When the Civil War started in 1917, thousands of Ingrians fled, mainly to Finland. During the years 1928–1936 approximately 40,000–50,000 Finns, considered a politically unreliable segment of the population, were deported from Ingria to as far away as Central Asia. At the same time, Finnish-language schools and media were abolished, and Lutheran churches were closed. During World War II, Leningrad and the northern part of Ingria were controlled by Russians, and approximately 20,000–30,000 Ingrians were deported to Siberia. Germans occupied the southern and western parts of Ingria and the siege of Leningrad lasted over two years. Approximately 63,000 Finnish-speaking people were evacuated to Finland in 1943–1944. After the armistice, Finland returned most of these people to the Soviet Union. However, they were not allowed to return to their home district, and were scattered instead to different parts of the Soviet Union. After the war and again in the 1950s, some of them moved back to Ingria, Karelia and Estonia. Karelia and Estonia were appealing locations, because of their kindred languages and their closeness to Ingria (Anepaio 1999; Hakamies 2004; Miettinen 2004; Nevalainen 1991).

- 8 I use pseudonyms when referring to the interviewees. In the text, the combination of the letter H and a number refers to a certain numbered interview and the number after the colon to a certain part of this interview.
- 9 The Republic of Karelia is a federal subject of Russia, located in the north-west Russia.

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### *Interviews*

The research material consists of field diaries and forty relatively open interviews conducted in 2001–2004. Eight of the interviews were group interviews in which at least two of the family members were present. In total 31 women and 14 men were interviewed, 6 of the women repeatedly. 15 of the interviewees were under 30 years old, 12 were 30–49 years old and 18 were over 50 years old at the time of the interview. The interview material and field diaries are in the possession of the author. Interviewees cited in this article (reason for moving to Finland or current place of residence mentioned):

- |      |   |
|------|---|
| H3   | Woman, 40–49 years old, from Russia. Marriage.                          |
| H7   | Woman, 20–29 years old, from Lithuania. Studies/marriage.               |
| H12A | Woman, over 60 years old, from the Republic of Karelia. Return migrant. |
| H12B | Man, 30–49 years old, from the Republic of Karelia. Return migrant.     |

- H21 Woman, 30–39 years old, from the Republic of Karelia. Studies/marriage, Ingrian background.
- H25 Woman, 50–59 years old, from the Republic of Karelia. Return migrant.
- H26A Woman, under 20 years old, from the Republic of Karelia. Return migrant.
- H26B Woman, 20–29 years old, lives in the Republic of Karelia. Ingrian background.
- H28 Man, over 50 years old, lives in the Republic of Karelia. Ingrian background.
- H29 Woman, 20–29 years old, lives in the Republic of Karelia. Ingrian background.
- H31A Woman, 50–59 years old, lives in the Republic of Karelia. Ingrian background.
- H31C Woman, 50–59 years old, lives in the Republic of Karelia. Ingrian background.
- H31D Man, over 50 years old, lives in the Republic of Karelia. Ingrian background.
- H33 Woman, 30–39 years old, lives in the Republic of Karelia. Ingrian background.
- H36A Man, over 50 years old, from Estonia. Return migrant.
- H36B Woman, 50–59 years old, from Estonia. Return migrant.
- H39 Woman, over 60 years old, lives in the Baltic States.
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