

# Biography and Society

**BIOGRAPHY AND SOCIETY**  
**RESEARCH COMMITTEE 38 OF THE ISA**

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NEWSLETTER / DECEMBER 2006

## LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT DECEMBER 2006

Dear Members,

This newsletter is dedicated to reports about the activities and experiences in Durban at the ISA World Congress in July 2006. You will find reflections on the world congress by colleagues from five different countries. Florence Akiiki Assimewe (Uganda/South Africa) writes about her experiences as a newcomer to our Research Committee. We hope that we will have more members from African countries, and that it will be possible for them to join us again at our next conferences. Anne Juhasz (Switzerland) tells about her subjective view on this conference that took place in South Africa. Looking back at the conference, Tazuko Kobayashi (Japan) reflects the situation of biographical research in Japan, which looks to be a very vibrant one. Again, I would like to express our hope that in the future we will have more colleagues also from the Far East in our research committee and I am sure, Tazuko and also Heeyoung Yi from Korea as members of our newly elected board, will help us to achieve this goal. Vasintha Veeran (South Africa/Ireland) also refers to the importance of having had this conference in South Africa and expresses her confidence that the experiences of the delegates in Durban will have implications on „their future teaching, practice and research“. Gerhard Riemann (Germany) already gives us some ideas how to organize the next world congress with sessions which will create a stronger link with the city, country and the continent where they will be taking place.

The newsletter furthermore includes the papers given in the method session, that has become an institution in our program at the World Congress: „Different ways of analyzing biographical case studies“.

First of all let me express my sincere thanks to all the colleagues who participated in our sessions in Durban, to the speakers for their inspiring papers and the interesting discussions, and many thanks to all the colleagues who organized and chaired a session. At our business meeting I was reelected as the president of our RC. I am very grateful for the trust you put in me and I hope I will not disappoint you in the next years. Brian Roberts was reelected as vice-president and Michaela Koettig as the treasurer and secretary. I am very much looking forward to continue working with you during the next period. You have been very supportive and helpful the last four years. Michaela as the treasurer and secretary has really done a great job, especially in the production of our newsletter. I owe her my warmest thanks. I also would like to thank all the members of the board for their cooperation during the last four years. It has been a pleasure to working with you.

### **The lesson to learn from Durban**

Before I give you some information about the newly elected members of the board of the RC *Biography & Society* and about the discussions and decisions in our business meeting, let me say something about the situation on this congress in Durban, South Africa. It was a confer-

ence in a country where it was not possible to live in the idealization „it does not matter where the conference is taking place“ as Anne Juhasz is pointing out in her report (see below). The world outside, and also inside the conference confronted us every day with the place the conference was taking place. First of all, one could not avoid being informed about the security problems in Durban and South Africa. Just walking on the street could cause the police to stop you and to tell you that you have to take a taxi. Beside the warnings by the police, taxi drivers and the congress organizers talked about how to behave and ongoing one had been informed about attacks on conference delegates. From day to day I as the president of our RC felt more and more uncomfortable with my own ignorance about the place and in general the continent in respect of the organization of the sessions. In the period of planning I was very pleased that Jan Coetzee, a member of our RC from South Africa, wanted to organize a session on the topic „Narrating social suffering among the marginalized in South Africa“. Unfortunately the call for papers for this session was not successful and, furthermore, Jan could not manage to come to Durban. So I have to ask myself: Why did I not try harder to organize a session in this thematic field? Would it not have been possible to create a session on working with empirical material from South Africa and also from other countries of Africa south of the Sahara? Therefore, I am very pleased about the suggestion by Gerhard Riemann (see below) to organize, at the next world congress in Gothenburg/Sweden, a data session based on empirical data from Sweden. I strongly support this idea, but I must admit I feel very embarrassed that we did not start with this kind of session in Durban.

Another problem in this context was the dominance of Germans in Durban. We spoke about this problem at the business meeting and it was clear that we have to take more care for attracting especially non-Europeans to participate in our RC and also to candidate for the board. At the moment the majority of our members are from Europe (more than 60 %). We assume, the reason for the small number of members from non-European countries is the difficult financial situation at many universities. Therefore there has been also a discussion about the necessity to reduce the membership fees in different country categories (A, B, C countries) as well as for students. The formal decision was made through the email contact with the board members (see below).

### **Newly elected members of the Board**

I am delighted to introduce you the newly elected board members: Ursula Apitzsch, Thea Boldt, Roswitha Breckner, Kathy Davis, Lena Inowlocki, Heeyoung Yi, Matti Hyvärinen, Kaja Kazmierska, Tazuko Kobayashi, Michaela Koettig (secretary & treasurer), Feiwei Kupferberg Helma Lutz, Henning Salling Oelsen, Marilyn Porter, Gerhard Riemann, Brian Roberts (vice-president) Victoria Semenova, Julia Vajda and Vasintha Veeran. You already know most of them as members of our last board. I am happy that we are able to continue our work and I am looking forward to your contributions to our international community of biographical researchers.

Let me shortly introduce the newcomers. Thea Boldt is a researcher at the Department of Social Sciences at the University in Goettingen/Germany. You will find some of her work in the context of a research project about ethnic Germans from former Soviet Union in this

newsletter. Her PhD thesis is also in the field of migration; she is analyzing biographies of Polish migrants in Germany. Thea studied cultural sciences and audiovisual sciences in Poland. Heeyoung Yi is a Research Professor at the Center for Culture and Information Studies at Sungkonghoe University in Seoul, Korea. After her studies of Nutrition in Korea she studied Sociology in Germany and completed her PhD thesis on „Mirrored Utopia in a Divided State: a Biographic Reconstructive Study on the Political Socialisation in the 1980s in Korea“. Currently she is directing a research project on the everyday life of workers after the Korean War. Vasintha Veeran is a member of the Dept of Political Science and Sociology and the Director of the Masters in Social Work at the National University of Ireland, Galway. Vasintha was a Senior Lecturer and Researcher at the Centre for Social Work in the Dept of Psychology and Anthropology at the University of Natal (now University of Kwa-Zulu Natal) in South Africa. Her research interests include: young people and social inclusion/exclusion; children in unusually difficult circumstances such as street children, child labour and the sexual exploitation of children; social development and poverty eradication; and youth policy and advocacy.

A warm welcome to you, and I hope our activities in the Research Committee will inspire you and will find a forum for your activities in the field of biographical research. I am very much looking forward to working together with you and I am sure you will help us to build more bridges between our continents and countries.

### **Discussion about changes of the statutes**

There was a discussion at the business meeting about other changes in the status of the RC38 that are required by the ISA statutes. We decided that the newly elected president would undertake suggestions for the necessary changes. In September a formal decision about these was made via email contact with the board members. You will find the revised statutes on the website of the ISA ([http://www.ucm.es/info/isa/rcs/rc38\\_st.htm](http://www.ucm.es/info/isa/rcs/rc38_st.htm)).

### **Interim Conference**

The next **Interim Conference „Ethnicity, Belonging, Biography and Ethnography“** will be held 7<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup> of December 2007 at the University of Goettingen, Germany. The conference will be organized in cooperation with the TransCoop-Project (sponsored by the Humboldt Foundation) by Gabriele Rosenthal and Michaela Koettig with Julia Chaitin and John Linstroth from the Nova Southeastern University, Florida. After our experiences in Durban we will try to do our possible best to organize an international conference with papers from several parts of the world.

Let me emphasize we like to invite you to send us your suggestion and also ask you to encourage colleagues especially from Non-European countries to participate in the conference. In addition to the conference presentations we shall be holding workshops that focus on methods for collecting and analyzing data material relevant to ethnicity and socio-cultural belonging. So please feel free to bring in your empirical data or let us know your ideas concerning about which methodological topics you would like to be discussed or whom you want us to invite.

Since the conference in Durban many colleagues became members of our Research Committee. Our warm welcome to you and I hope the Research Committee will meet your expectations.

I am looking forward to hearing from you all and perhaps seeing you in Goettingen in December 2007.

I wish you a Happy New Year!

Gabriele Rosenthal  
President, Biography and Society, RC38

### **Further information:**

#### ➤ **Membership fees**

We agreed on the following membership fees for 38 covering a period of 4 years:

Regular members US\$ 40

Students and members from countries B and C  
(see ISA regulations) US\$ 20

#### ➤ **bank account**

**Michaela Koettig**  
**Sparda-Bank-Hessen, Germany**  
**bank code: 500 905 00**  
**account number: 101 548 312**

**For bank transfer of members from European countries**  
**IBAN: 13 500 905 000 101 548 312**  
**BIC: GEN ODE F1 S12**

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**CONFERENCE REPORT XVI WORLD CONGRESS OF SOCIOLOGY  
QUALITY OF SOCIAL EXISTENCE IN A GLOBALISING WORLD  
JULY 23-29, 2006, DURBAN, SOUTH AFRICA**

**My experiences on the XVI World Congress of Sociology**

I am Florence Akiki Asiimwe from Uganda. I hold a Bachelor of Arts Degree at Makerere University, Masters Degree at Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Hague, Netherlands, and a Diploma in Urban Management Planning from Institute of Housing Studies, Rotterdam, Netherlands. I am a Lecturer in Department of Sociology at Makerere University. I am currently on a PhD programme at University of Cape Town. Urban Sociology is my major field of specialization and hence most of my researches are looked at from the urban perspective.

I was privileged to attend the XVI World Congress of Sociology in which I attended various RC sessions. However, my attendance was more felt I think in the sessions of the RC 38 Biography and Society. I was interested in this RC because my PhD research entitled "Gender dynamics in homeownership" is purely qualitative and in collecting data I have mainly used life histories. I must admit that I had never used life stories as the main tool of data collection. Hence as a sociologist but inexperienced biographical researcher, I was eager to learn from people who have experience in using life histories/ life stories. When I saw the RC 38 'Biography and Society' as one of the main Research groups, my heart felt at ease.

In the sessions of this RC I was able to share experiences with experienced sociologists/ biographical researchers who have used life stories as a major tool to collect data for different study topics. What still puzzles me on life stories is the way to analyze and interpret them. There has been a lot of literature on analysis of qualitative data but I left the RC38 session before I could grasp how to analyze and interpret life story interviews. Sincerely, which way forward to analyze life histories? I would like to send you one life story, which I interpreted for the chapter "NAME ON THE TITLE DEED" to explain gender dynamics in homeownership. I theoretically interpreted the life story according to my supervisor's advice and kept the original life story recorded verbatim intact.

The use of biography to study society is very enriching and what I have found is that one can use one life story to explain different themes and hence write different articles. I think the use of biography should be re-introduced in all Universities because there is a lot of information that can be collected from people using life stories. I was impressed with a study that was presented on the housemaids. It gave me an idea that all categories of people in society have a story to tell and therefore it is upon us researchers to collect all these stories.

On this note, I would like to start an RC 38 session branch in Uganda where researchers, researcher students can be trained in the use of biography. Let people talk about their lives, so that we collect the rich data. After my Ph.D. I intend to introduce Biography in Sociology department, Makerere University Uganda. Oh how wonderful it can be to record all the stories of people! I hope the mother of RC 38 will support me in this endeavor.

I noted that the RC session was monopolized by the Germans, and wondered whether Biography is mainly used in Germany. I felt like going to live in Germany to learn more about biography.

Lastly, let me say that I enjoyed the RC 38 sessions and all the presentations on different themes. I hope to learn more about the biographical paradigms and hopefully in future, we shall continue networking in life story interviews. I thank Gabriele Rosenthal and Gerhard Riemann for the materials you sent me and directed me to in order to get an understanding of biography.

Florence Akiiki Asimwe (University of Cape Town; South Africa)

### **A subjective view on the Conference**

The following text is not a Conference report but rather a very subjective view on the Congress and the sessions of the RC 38 "Biography and Society". I will start with some general remarks and then turn to the Sessions of the RC 38.

First, there was a confusion because of the simultaneity of familiarity and strangeness. On the one hand, it was a meeting of colleagues and friends and therefore a well-known situation. It could have been anywhere, it was as if a well-known space that had been transferred and this environment was just scenery and not important for what happened inside the space. This feeling was reinforced by the fact that there were the well-known signs of Conferences: queuing, a lot of people, a huge program and the difficulty to decide in which session to go. On the other hand, there were signs that indicated clearly that the Conference took place on a particular ground, i.e. in South Africa and that context does matter. Probably aware of the "it does not matter where the Conference is taking place"-Syndrome and therefore in order to give a clear orientation about where we were, the Conference opened not only with several speeches but also with a "Cultural event", a "Zulu dance show" which was a very good example for doing ethnicity (and raised the question if the organizers on their part were not suffering from the "it does not matter who is the target group"-Syndrome). Then there was the "security problem" which influenced the atmosphere of the Conference. The number of attacks on participants was a regular topic of conversation and not only among those colleagues interested in statistics. A lot of participants I talked to felt constrained by the fact that we were not supposed to walk but should always take a taxi, even just for a very short distance. Nevertheless some participants did risk leaving the premises of the conference. And it was indeed worth visiting the city of Durban and the neighbourhood; very impressive was for me the visit of Shembes Church near Durban, where thousands of men and women were praying, singing and maybe waiting to have once in their life a look at Shembe, the current leader and successor of the founder of the Church. Being the only white persons, my two colleagues and me could not observe the ceremony without attracting attention. Finally, they let us pass through thousands of people to the current leader – a privilege for the visitors from Europe, but maybe also a welcomed opportunity to present the Church to foreigners.



Here I make a break, change the subject and come back to the Conference, that means in particular to the sessions of the RC 38, which were very interesting and fruitful for me. The session about "Different ways of Analyzing Biographical Case Studies" was informative and important precisely in this international context to discuss different understandings and ways of doing biographical research. Especially for researchers from countries where biographical research is not (yet) very established, it is very valuable to have this opportunity of an exchange on methodological and methodical questions. I also enjoyed very much the thematic sessions such as "Women, Men and Memory", "Transnational Biographies" and "Biographical processes and Collective Identity" and the fruitful discussions after the presentations. It was also a challenge to have joint sessions with other RCs and different perspectives taken together. The strategy, not to do "Session-hopping" but to participate in the Sessions of one RC, i.e. those of the RC 38, was from my point of view suggestive: in doing so, discussions which were resumed in different sessions could be followed. The fact that there were discussions resumed in the RC 38 sessions can be seen as a sign not only for the quality of the sessions themselves but also for a very constructive and friendly atmosphere in the RC 38 sessions which the organizers and the chairs of the sessions can take credit for. A last remark: It's a pity that there were not more researchers from more different countries participating at the sessions of the RC38. It would be good for a next time to have a more international participation and to get more insights into both the research practice and the social reality of other countries.

Anne Juhasz (University of Zurich, Switzerland)

### **Thinking of Biographical studies in Japan after Durban RC38**

Six sessions were held in RC38 at the XVI ISA World Congress of Sociology, which took place in Durban, South Africa from 23-29 July 2006. I presented a paper in Session 4: Biographical Processes and Collective Identities, chaired by Lena Inowlocki. My paper, under the title of "Pilgrimage" for Representing Collective Memory: Identity and Biographies of Japanese American's focused on the pilgrimage to Minidoka, one of ten internment camps during World War II, by the Japanese American community of Seattle in 2003. I presented and analyzed oral stories given by young organizers with no internment experience, whom I interviewed, and thought about their identities and the generational transmission of historical experience. I am very pleased to receive useful comments on my paper, and was also impressed by several other papers.

However, I was disappointed that there were so few participants in RC38 from Asian countries. In particular, I was the sole Japanese sociologist there. I remember that the same thing was true at the last conference in Brisbane. Why are there so few participants from Japan? I think this is an important question, because as a result of this lack of relations, biographical studies in Japan are poorly known outside Japan. Therefore, I would like to introduce the position of biographical studies in Japanese sociology and think of its background.

There are approximately 3,600 members of the Japanese Sociological Association, which is said to be the world's second largest next to that of the United States. Among young soci-

ologists, there has been a gradual increase in scholars focusing on qualitative sociological studies, and several research groups have been organized since 2000.

The Study Group for Life Story is an active group, composed of about 70 sociologists in their thirties and forties who are interested in the narrative approach, social constructionism, ethno-methodology, and historical or cultural sociology. They are doing research on various contemporary themes such as school truancy, the problem of social recluses, domestic violence, bulimia and anorexia, atomic bomb victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Korean residents in Japan, minority groups experiencing discrimination, the sterilization of intellectually disabled persons, the problem of AIDS caused by transfusions of HIV-tainted blood products, etc.

The Japan Oral history Association, which was established in 2003, has also become a forum for sociologists who want to discuss biographical studies. In the 4th conference of JOHA in September 2006, under the main theme of "Listening to Voices from the War and Colonial Periods" 26 individual papers and 5 poster sessions were presented.

The Life History Association, which was founded in 1981, is well known as one of the earliest groups of scholars doing qualitative research. It has 170 members, and four research meetings a year. Its 100 commemorative meeting was held in December 2006.

Why, then, do so few Japanese sociologists give international presentations despite this active situation? Two issues come to mind.

The first is that many Japanese sociologists are "domestically oriented". It is said that Japanese sociologists lack enthusiasm for giving international presentations not only in biographical studies but in other fields as well. In the background of this, one can cite the "lucky" circumstance that even though Japan is a non-English speaking country, a large number of sociologists can receive graduate education and find university posts based on a high-level sociological education given only in Japanese. I personally also studied sociology and received my doctorate from a Japanese university and did no graduate education outside Japan, though I have gone overseas many times to do fieldwork or to stay for periods of less than a year or so. Most sociologists I know were educated in Japan and lacked opportunities to develop their English-language speaking ability. This "lucky" circumstance brings about the ironical situation where we are being left behind in the globalization of sociology.

The second reason is the language barrier, which is important because most biographical studies involve words, and description plays a key role. When using a research method where experiences are told in words, and then textualized and interpreted, presenting the results in a language other than that in which the words were originally spoken brings the problem of interpretation and translation. We face the difficulty of expressing experiences and interactions in different languages. However, the same problem happens in other languages as well as Japanese. Considering that, I was impressed by the large number of German researchers who positively participated in RC38, and I would like to learn about their efforts to overcome this problem.

Tazuko Kobayashi (Japan Women's University, Japan)

## Looking back and looking ahead – a short comment

It was the first time that a sociological world congress took place in Africa. There were some papers in our research committee which dealt with African issues, but I missed a special session which created a stronger link with the (fascinating and troubled) place “out there” – the city, the region, the country and the continent – in which sociologists from all over the world met. There had been plans for a session on *“Narrating social suffering among the marginalized in South Africa”* which had been announced as follows: *“This session aims at bringing together people’s experiences of social suffering. The biographical accounts of people living on the margin of South African society will form the basis of papers. We will attempt to cover a variety of experiences of suffering – representing separate strands in the broad tapestry of poverty, underdevelopment, homelessness, ill-health, lack of education, inadequate access to political power, lack of social security, resorting to escapist solutions (such as alcohol and drugs), etc.”* It was really a pity that this session could not take place.

In reflecting about the Durban congress it comes to my mind that our Research Committee might do two things during future congresses (the next world congress will take place in Gothenburg, Sweden, in four years):

- The format of a “data session” which had been introduced at the Montréal congress eight years apparently functioned quite well again. Focusing on the same material and revealing different styles of doing biographical research met with a lot of interest. I had the impression that the audience was very concentrated and was “drawn into a common project”. If others agree I would suggest that a second “data session” should take place relating to the specific local, regional and national environment of the future congress. Of course such a session would require a long and careful preparation: It would be necessary to contact and “recruit” colleagues from the host country very early, to negotiate with them about the data which could be made available and which would need to be translated into English. The circle of contributors should not be restricted to sociologists from the host country since part of the game is the confrontation of perspectives of those people who claim a special familiarity with a subject matter on the one hand and those colleagues who are not familiar with it on the other hand. In other words: When the next world congress takes place in Gothenburg, there could be two data sessions. One of them could be based on Swedish data. This would create the chance to get into contact with local colleagues and students and to pull them into the international discourse of biography analysis.
- One “German” innovation in the field of qualitative research in the last ten years has been the emergence of nation wide research workshops (especially at the University of Magdeburg, but also at the Free University of Berlin). Doctoral students and other researchers present their data in special sessions (run by colleagues who represent a certain approach) and get feedbacks from the other participants of the session who had familiarized themselves with the data beforehand. I have the impression that there was a strong need among many members of the audience in our sessions in Durban to get some feedback to research problems which had developed in their projects, but it was only possible to talk about such issues during short breaks or at lunch. I know that international conferences like world congresses are rather anonymous events and that

there are strict regulations with regard to the format of sessions (selected papers which are to be presented in a hurry, the next one is waiting already). Would it be possible in the future to reserve some time for such workshops and for more or less spontaneous gatherings in which people share their research experiences and problems? This could contribute to overcoming the division between those who actively present papers and those who passively listen to them.

Gerhard Riemann

### **Biography and society, research committee 38 of the ISA**

The complexities of the modern world and society can never be captured in a singular event or entity, but each in its own way adds a wealth of knowledge and information or raises further questions to facilitate our interpretation and understanding of it. The XVI ISA Congress held in Durban from the 23-29 July 2006 was a mammoth attempt creating a space and context for intellectual inquiry by theorists, researchers and practitioners from various disciplines from all corners of the world on the common theme of "*The Quality of Social Existence in a Globalized World*". The conference was, no doubt like the world itself a plethora of interesting and complex topics and presenters. Making choices about which one to attend was a very difficult task as each session held the prospect of a healthy debate. My special interest was the sessions on Biography and Society, RC 38 of the ISA, which had a challenging agenda drawing from the micro level of using biographical analyses and processes to the macro level of understanding its application to national and transnational processes. Listening to these highly scientific and theoretical frameworks by presenters from across the globe, it was clear that irrespective of the diversities of the societies of the world, the unifying theme in this conference was the desperate desire to seek answers and a better understanding of some of these complex sociological processes and the way it impacts on society. At a time when social mobility is increasingly evident, and in the light of the "national identity crisis" which many western countries seem to be undergoing the theme of *the quality of social existence in a globalized world* was apt. Encapsulated in the many intellectual debates, the biographical approach offered the prospect of a critical methodology of significant investigative paradigms on all levels. I was especially intrigued by its application to the diverse range of topics such as *interviewing juveniles from disadvantaged communities, foundation for cross cultural counselling, inform curriculum of post graduate health professionals, workers experience and negotiations of welfare, communicating disease and strangeness in a family interview and travelling biographies of HIV*, to name but a few. The goals of scientific enquiry not only add to the intellectual construction and convergence of sociological ideas but challenges past ideologies to manifest contemporary trends. Biographical approaches for the most part while firmly established in sociology, has raised new interest in the way it is applied and as new forms of scientific inquiry. This has particular relevance for understanding the phenomenon of the globalized world in contemporary society, where biographies are impacted upon by the creation or lack of opportunities. The theme of *the quality of social existence in a globalized world* alludes to the existence of an evidently discriminate world

and the issues around universalistic principles of social justice and equality, a debate that is not too far from the minds of most of South Africans.

The timing and the context of the research was especially significant, in that it took place in a country, i.e. South Africa, twelve years into their democracy. Yet in many instances, the *quality of social existence* within its borders is still inextricably linked to the past and to the apartheid regime. Although great strides have been made in the *quality of social existence* by some, the majority still eagerly await the transformation in the *quality of social existence*. In many respects the social context of the South African society resonated with the global world order of social movements, where *quality of social existence* is a key concern, yet the specifics with regard to the actual acquisition of same remains obscure for the global community. The Congress had the opportunity of capitalizing on the nuance of the context and engaging in a discursive, reflexive analysis.

Maybe the Congress raised more questions than answers, but that being the essence of intellectual inquiry it is sure to spark of greater enthusiasm for more debates and exchanges. The conference was the epitome of the mixing of different worlds, the old and the new, the traditionalists and the radicals, western and eastern, north and south. With so many combinations the promise of good debate and good food for thought was no doubt guaranteed. I am sure that many delegates departed the conference having had the opportunity to engage in lengthy dialogues with learned colleagues from different parts of the world on the state of the globalized world and the implications this may have on their future teaching, practice and research.

A well organized conference such as this leaves the delegates with much to remember and to savour. I am sure those that stayed to enjoy the hospitality of the Durban after the intense and thought provoking programme, would agree that it was an apt conclusion to the Congress. As a city and citizens of South Africa we had much to share and gain by just by being the hosts, and we hope that the visitors felt the same way.

Vasintha Veeran (National University of Ireland, Galway)

**„DIFFERENT WAYS OF ANALYZING  
BIOGRAPHICAL CASE STUDIES“  
THE BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE INTERVIEW  
WITH JURIJ BAUMANN**

**Gabriele Rosenthal** (Georg-August-University of Goettingen, Germany): **Introduction**

The following articles are based on papers in the context of our session „Different ways of analyzing biographical case studies“ in July 2006 in Durban. This kind of session has become an established forum for discussions of methodological approaches and methods of analysis in our Research Committee since 1998. Participants from different methodological approaches have been asked to exemplify their way of biographical case study analysis using the same biographical-narrative interview provided by the session organizer. For the session in Durban I distributed the transcription and translation of an interview with Jurij Baumann (this name is a pseudonym) that was conducted by Thea Boldt and Viola Stephan in the context of our research project: „Three-generation families of ethnic Germans from the Soviet Union.“ Besides the translation of the transcript of the taped interview, the only information the speakers of the session received were: the title of the project, that Jurij Baumann belongs in our sample to the second generation of a four generations in a family that have been interviewed, and that he was born in 1952 in Kastanajew Region. We also informed the interpreters that his wife, his parents-in-law, his daughter Julia, his son Michael and one grandson were also interviewed. Marilyn Porter is discussing in her paper the problems in dealing with an interview „shorn of the kinds of contextual clues“ she would normally have available.“ Gerhard Riemann as well as Lena Inowlocki and Julia Bernstein show in their contributions how they are interpreting this transcript and in both papers the interaction with the interviewers is reflected. At the end of the session in Durban and also in this newsletter at the end of the papers, one of the interviewers, Thea Boldt gives some insight in the encounters with Jurij Baumann and his family.

The papers were very inspiring for my co-workers and me and I am sure they will be helpful for our further work (after a pilot phase our project got funding by another source for three more years). Thanks you so much!

I hope you all will enjoy reading the following papers.

**Marilyn Porter** (Memorial University, Newfoundland, Canada): **Who is “P”? The role of context in the reading, re-reading and un-reading an interview**

**Introduction**

This paper is a slightly revised version of one prepared for the RC38 meetings in Durban, July 2006. As has become customary at the meetings, one session was devoted to a number

of responses to and comments on a transcript of an interview, which we had been sent some months previously. When I was asked to be part of this session, I responded immediately as I had long admired the format and enjoyed these sessions. However, when I received the interview with "P" and read it, I found myself curiously without bearings. I needed to know so much more about both the narrator and the context of the interview. But the format of the session requires that participants are provided with the transcript of the interview and that the whole point was to see what we could make of it, 'cold' as it were. This paper, then, is my analysis not so much of the content of the interview, but to my own responses to a transcript shorn of the kinds of contextual clues I would normally have available in my own research.

I began by thinking **why** I felt so lost when I read the interview for the first time. Why did I need to know who "P" was, what his background was, why the research was carried out, who the interviewers were, why they asked the questions they did etc? Then I realised just how unusual this exercise is in human experience. We do not come 'cold' to interactions. We always know something about the people we talk to or listen to the conversations they hold. As human beings we are always in context and we have no way of understanding a situation out of context. In most human interaction we also have the clues provided both by the visual context (including body language, dress etc) and aural clues (intonation, accent etc). Gerhard Riemann had a similar, although more sophisticated response. He first described the detailed and thorough method he uses in his research classes and team meetings, based largely on the work of Strauss and Schuetze. What I found interesting about his account was the stress he lays on critiquing the interviewer's strategies and techniques, including the first contacts with the narrator (and his/her family) and the implicit or explicit 'bargain' struck between them before he allows structured analysis of the interview itself. In his response to the transcript with "P" he focusses primarily on this first step in his procedure. This is a more technical aspect of my own concerns. So, I want to make use of my space to think more broadly about how a researcher actually sets about deducing and making use of the 'context' of an interview in its broadest sense.

If I am correct in asserting that meaning is constructed within context, then how was I, as a sociologist, to understand this text? I began to realise that social interpretation (as opposed to linguistic interpretation) depends on context, and if that context is not available the researcher is forced to impose a context or expend considerable effort trying to extract it from the data in front of her. I started to examine my own thought processes as I read, and re-read, the interview with "P", and discovered that my sense making depended on various deductions I was making, based on the interview material, but also making use of assumptions and deductions that owed much more to my own prior knowledge of **the sorts of situations** I thought I recognised here.

### **Meaning and Context**

It is this process, of how I made meaning out of this interview by way of constructing the missing context that I want to examine here. I challenge narrative and biological sociologists not to do this. I think we all do it, all the time, but sometimes we fail to recognise it, especially if we have some sophisticated analytical tools to help us 'jump past' the lack of context.

Before I discuss the interview with "P", I should make some brief remarks about my concept of meaning within context, or rather, why I think context is so important in the construction of meaning.

When I checked some of the standard references on narrative or biographical methodology I was surprised to find so little discussion of context in the interpretation of biographical narratives. Indeed, innovators such as Lieblich et al are specifically trying to develop a method that is entirely enclosed in the text (Lieblich et al. 1998). Gubrium and Holstein (1995) contrast the 'old' and 'new' ethnographies, using the notion of 'interpretive practice' to re-direct us to the ways in which biographers 'use words'. Feminists, however, seem to have held onto the idea that while we certainly need to pay close attention to what is said and how the biographer interprets his/her life, we **also** need to understand both the life and what is said in the context of the social situation. This may be because of the need to recognise the specific (subordinate) situation that women occupy. In addition, the British preoccupation with the role of class and Black writers' attention to race seem to contribute to a desire to hang onto social context in their interpretations. In any event writers such as Stanley, Steadman and Scott all do pay attention to context and use it to extract meaning from their texts.

Eakin (1999) argues that autobiography is always relational. In other words, not only do we (the reader or listener) need the context to make sense of what the biographer is saying but the biographer constructs his or her narrative **necessarily** in the context of the family or other significant grouping, gradually creating his or her 'autobiographical memory'. 'From this perspective we can think of the child's sense of self as emerging within a crucible of family stories and cultural scripts.' (Eakin, 1999:117). Czarniawska is another writer, who, drawing on Bruner and his 'narrative way of knowing', argues that narrative is essential as a mode of communication but that the interpretation of the stories that are told has to be negotiated **in a social context**, (Czarniawska, 2004:11).

But aside from scholarly debate, all construction of meaning depends on a version of triangulation. Human beings operate in the world by triangulating all the information they have - their own experience, the words that are used, body language, intonation as well as the social context - to make sense of any social interaction. How can the academic process **not** reflect this common reality? Is it not over-vaunted 'science' to claim that we can dispense with the tools that everyone else uses?

This is a wider debate. But even if we accept the precept that we must understand the biographer in his/her own terms, we encounter problems in all texts, and certainly in this one. We are all familiar with the struggle to represent how the biographer **sounded**, hence the various conventions to represent pauses, emphasis, intonation etc. We all know and recognise that there are already several barriers between what the biographer said (or what s/he thought s/he was saying) and our reading of the text. But in this case, the original interview was in German (with small sections in Russian). The text we have before us, therefore, is **not** the text as it was spoken. As a monoglot I am particularly aware that words do **not** mean the same in another language; that even in English a word will have different connotations to different people, will resonate differently, and that may easily lead to misunderstanding (and misinterpretation). How much more is this likely to be the case when the text is translated. As an English speaker I cannot **know** that the word or sentence I read actually



represents the word or sentence in German that was spoken. I am most aware of this when the translation sounds odd or doesn't make sense, ('faith was drastically pursued...', 'this is higher in growth, I see'), but it underlies all my 'reading' of this text and makes me acutely aware of how much I depend on my knowledge of English and English/ Canadian society to interpret narratives told in English and accounts for my unease in reading this text, which was (and should be) in German.

I deal with the role of the interviewers later in these comments, but the transcriber has also added a level of 'interpretation' in the descriptions of intonation. 'Laughs' or 'questioning' are straightforward but what, exactly, are we to make of parenthesis that say 'excited' or 'angry' 'clears his throat two times', 'distant', 'higher', 'almost singing', 'swallows', 'grumbles a bit', 'frenzied'. It is not that we don't know what the words mean, but we don't understand the significance, or whether these intonations meant something to the biographer, or whether other indicators that the transcriber has missed were more significant (e.g. looks exchanged between participants). In any case, my point is that these **are themselves** interpretations and modifications of the text. Finally, as the original text was in German, I wonder whether the very exact rendering of pauses, hesitations, emphasis, umms and errs matters in translation. Some indication of the tenor of the original is helpful, but I doubt that '//hmm//' adds much to the text when it is already a translation. If anything it lends a spurious authenticity and diverts our attention from the fact that this is a **translated and mediated text**.

### **Who is "P" and who wants to know?**

In this brief account I will focus on just a few 'moments' in this interview to try to make my point. To begin at the beginning: which is, of course, not a beginning. This is an extract not only taken from "P's" life but also from this particular interaction. We do not know how (or why) the interview was set up; what "P" or his wife "F" knew about the project; what they knew (or assumed) about what kinds of things would be appropriate to tell the interviewers; how the initial exchanges went, before the tape recorder went on; what P and F made of the interviewers or what the interviewers' first impressions were; what the physical surroundings were like (one can learn a lot from what people keep on their mantelpieces), or even what the interviewers knew before they started the interview or if this interview was one of several conducted with "P" or members of his family. In that sense, it is quite arbitrary. It's more like suddenly getting a crossed line during a phone conversation, except that in this case, we only get what the punctuation can tell us about intonation and nothing about accent.

We also only know about the interviewee/narrator/participant. We do not know about the other parties in the conversation. We know (Mauthner and Doucet, A. 1998; Oakley, A. 1981) that interviews are constructed events, with both the interviewer and the narrator contributing, but in this case, we know nothing (except their names) about the interviewers. Would P and his wife have told very different things to interviewers of a different gender, age, ethnicity? Based on both the literature and recent experience in our own project<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Women's Experience of their Reproductive Lives: Pakistan, Indonesia and Canada, a cross cultural, narrative project.

(where we sent young graduate students to interview the youngest in our three generation families, finding it far more successful than when the older researchers tried to talk to teenagers about their reproductive health), we suspect so. But we don't **know**; we only know what we have in front of us. And this tempts us to speculate about who the interviewers were and what impact their presentation and identities had on what "P" was prepared to reveal. The names provided at the head of the interview tell us that there are two interviewers and we deduce from their names that they are both women, and we find out in the course of the interview that they are young, at least to "F" (p. 8:42) 'and you talk to the young ladies', but she laughs so maybe she just means they are younger than she is, or its a joke...see how distracted I am getting trying to figure this out?<sup>2</sup>

'The story of your life...everything you can think of...'. P sounds cautious. But then after the disclaimer "I am a quiet man" he reveals the major tragedy of his mother's death and his own genetic disorder. Obviously it is always with him 'like a time bomb', and maybe this is why he is so open about it. But he is still doubtful about what the interviewers want to know 'I don't know what is still interesting for you'. Shouldn't someone reassure him at this point? I know that the biographical-narrative method declares that the first account should be as uninterrupted as possible, (Wengraf, 2001) but what was going on the interviewers' faces at this point? 'Tell us everything..' could be a gentle reassurance or could sound like a police interrogation. We don't know, and we don't know how "P" heard it. In any event, he bursts forth with a relatively (for him) fluent (despite the pauses and hmms) account of his early life. I don't think this is the first time he has done this. I wonder how this narrator was selected. Has he been involved in previous research? Has he had the opportunity to 'tell his story' outside the family before? If the interviewers were not expecting this, they must have been restraining their excitement - such rich data, such a fluent narrator! But then it starts to go wrong.

At the point that "F" enters the conversation, I find - again - that I badly need information and visual clues. How old is she? What does her body language tell us about her relationship with her husband? Does the fact that she is the same gender as the interviewers (so there are three women and one man in the room, at least until the mysterious "O" and others arrive) make her more confident? I will come back to "F" in a moment.

The other crucial bit of information about the interviewers is what they thought they were going to accomplish in the interview. What did they want to know? I know that in principle, they wanted the unedited and undirected 'life story' but they (like us) are human. Some things would interest them more than others, and there must have been some reason why "P" was selected. In the event, they would have got a whole lot more out of "F" (or even "O" who appears unannounced on p. 8), so what was it about "P" that made them focus on him? There are a number of points, especially when "P" has finished his initial account and the interviewers are 'probing' when I would have gone in a different direction. I1 asks him to elaborate on being 'a quiet man' (p16:19) and "P", who by this time has revealed that he is not very articulate, does his best, but I would have preferred to get him to talk more explic-

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<sup>2</sup> More of this information, such as the identity of the interviewers, was made available at the session, but it was not available when I was carrying out my analysis.

itly about what he had to give up to become 'the mother' of his younger siblings; maybe a description of a typical day. Later (17:13) she continues this probe and "P" seems to try to get her to see that somehow it is tied up with the loss of his mother "ten years without a mother...". My reading of this is that this is his analysis of his 'quietness' and that he still experiences the death of his mother and its effects as traumatic. If I am right, we are not going to learn very much more by pressing for details about how she died (17:22). My own interests would make me explore issues of reproductive health, access to health services and issues around the family genetic blood disorder at this point, and, in fact a great deal of information about the health issues does come out a little later, although mostly related by "F" and "O".

On p.22 we move to the next major theme, which is "P"'s time in the army. I don't know whether this was a focus of the interview, but my mind was buzzing as I tried to 'fit' this account into the historical context. Stalin, right? 'Prisoners' = Concentration camps. Was he in the army to build concentration camps? To be a camp guard? Or am I leaping to conclusions? If so, did the interviewers know this ahead of time? And if they did not, why don't they pick up on it more explicitly? What is going on with the rhapsody about Lake Baikal - one of "P"'s few fluent moments. The interviewers seem to know that he was in the army because they explicitly ask him (22:48), but the account put together by "P", "F" and "O" while talking about his experience is less than explicit about the political context, although it is enlightening about ethnic diversity and relationships between ethnic groups. This does not appear to be a focus for the interviewers. Again, much of this might be because the interviewers were interested in other issues or it might be that they already know a great deal of background that I do not know.

### **"F"'s role in the interview and in "P"'s life**

If the object of this interview was to extract a biography from "P" it was a crashing failure. A friend to whom I showed this interview commented that it was the kind of situation in which she would have turned off the tape recorder, accepted a cup of tea and departed as soon as possible! "P" is essentially (in whatever language) inarticulate. There are a few times when he does become quite fluent - in the initial 'biography' and later when he talks about Lake Baikal and the sense of camaraderie (23:43, 26:30)). Sometimes it is often almost impossible to make sense of what he is saying. If "F" were not present to explain, gloss and/or interpret, it would be hard for the reader (especially in an English translation) to figure anything out at all. "P" has had an extremely difficult life, with limited education and skills. His wife, on the other hand, is highly educated and highly articulate (11:31). This drives both the interviewers and the transcribers crazy and they show their impatience in a number of ways, both in the interview (trying to restrain "F"; steering the interview back towards topics that "P" can contribute to) and in the transcription, where they simply don't bother to transcribe some sections that they (clearly) regard as dominated by "F", e.g. 'the following minutes were not transcribed, for the biographer on several occasions didn't manage to get a word in edge-wise (30:30).

But what is going on here? We know something about how the two of them got together ('our parents worked together, my mother and his father' (3:32)) although we don't know

the age difference between them, It is, from the internal evidence, a very unequal relationship in terms of their professional and social abilities, he a trucker with health problems; she a teacher and translator. Rather than being irritated by "F"'s constant interventions, I found them both useful and interesting. Useful because she supplies so much more information than "P" does, either to explain the background or simply to expand on his often stunted responses; interesting because (not having a vested interest in the biography as such) I found what she had to say more relevant to my concerns, more clearly articulated and more aware of the historical and social context. She does certainly dominate the conversation, and on occasions, such as when she offers tea or snacks just as the interviewer is trying to get "P" to speak (e.g.16:40; 17:48), she seems quite manipulative. However, I do 'read' her as being immensely supportive of her husband, to the point of being protective and defensive. She is obviously used to mediating between "P" and the world, and tries her best to present him in the best light. (e.g. when she praises his mechanical ability 12:41, or protects him when his experience was discounted when they moved to Germany 15:37) ) This may infuriate the interviewers and prevent "P" expressing himself, but it does seem to reflect a survival strategy the two have worked out together. At some point (15:43) it seems that he does not (or did not) speak much German, which must have posed even more difficulties when they moved to Germany, and may account for how inarticulate he seems in the interview.

### **Tentative conclusions**

These are mere comments and are not intended to be a full response to this fascinating text. I have not discussed what I thought I actually learned from the text either about "P" or "F" or their lives and what their history can tell us. I have simply tried to use the text to understand more about my own processes of 'making sense' of a narrative and to raise some questions about where our methodology is leading us. From time to time, I suggest, we need to step back from the intensity of developing ways of reflecting, and reflecting on what our biographers tell us to a more common sense position. We may be accomplished social scientists and students of biography - but we are also human beings, embedded in our own social contexts. Like everyone else we use everything we have in order to make sense of our world, and that 'everything' includes the context in which an interview takes place. This brief presentation is a suggestion that our methodology may have led us too far towards treating the text as a 'thing in itself', and that, as sociologists, we need to find ways of retaining an awareness and respect for the social context, at the same time as finding ways to 'listen' more accurately to what our biographers say.

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**Lena Inowlocki and Julia Bernstein** (both J.W.Goethe University of Frankfurt, Germany): **Perhaps you could tell me (1) more about the fact that you are a quiet man<sup>3</sup>: *Communicating disease and strangeness in a family interview***

To prepare our contribution to the congress session, we received the transcript of the interview with Jurij Baumann, in the original language of the interview – German, with some expressions in Russian – and an English translation from Gabriele Rosenthal, the session coordinator. As context information, we learned that the interview is part of a study of three-generation families of ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union (see also Rosenthal 2005).

In the following, we begin by a short description of what we understood of Jurij Baumann's life story from the interview with him and his family members. We then describe how we proceeded in interpreting the interview, especially our attempts to contextualize thematic content, ways of communication, interaction, and self-presentation. We consider his reluctance to be interviewed, the many interruptions by his wife and other family members and the seemingly disorderly, even chaotic interaction sequences during the interview. In fact, it took us repeated readings and discussions to go beyond our irritations with the different interview partners, especially Jurij's wife, and our disturbing impressions of the interaction during the interview situation to discover that this is really a very substantial interview, well worth the effort of interpreting.

The title we chose for our contribution refers to one of the repeated requests of the interviewees that Jurij should go into more narrative detail in his life story. As we interpret situations during the interview in which such requests arise, these requests seem to us paradoxical and rather methodically oriented than interactionally based. We conclude with what we learned from this interview and propose to use the concept of "working alliances" that relate to analyzing issues of consent, reciprocity, and interests in research and interview situations.

### **1. A short reconstruction of Jurij Baumann's life story**

Jurij Baumann was born in Kazakhstan in 1952. He was interviewed at his home in Germany by two young women researchers in the context of a project on the life experiences of three generations in families of late returnees (*Spätaussiedler*), immigrants from the former Soviet

<sup>3</sup> Contribution to RC 38, Session 6: Different ways of analyzing biographical case studies. ISA World Congress of Sociology, Durban, July 2006. Session coordinator: Gabriele Rosenthal, University of Goettingen.

This text is basically similar to our presentation in the session. We would like to thank Gabriele Rosenthal for providing us with the possibility to join in this interesting and enjoyable shared interpretation session. We also thank the other contributors and the audience for the lively discussion at the congress session.

Union of German descent who came to Germany in the late 1990s. Approximately one Million *Spätaussiedler* immigrated to Germany after the *perestroika*. They are recognized as "ethnic Germans" and entitled to citizenship upon arrival, in contrast to other immigrants.<sup>4</sup> In recent years, proof of German descent and language proficiency in German have become more demanding.

The interview took place in German, which Jurij expresses himself very well in. However, some of his reluctance to speak might also have to do with not feeling completely at ease in this language, since he is made to feel strange by native German speakers. The way Jurij speaks German is influenced by Russian language codes, which he often tries to translate. We attempted to contextualize his speech by re-translating it into Russian whenever we thought this might help us in our interpretation.

Our sense from the interview with Jurij Baumann is that he is a sensitive and gentle man who lives with the impact of a potentially fatal genetic disease (*Morbus Willebrand*, lacking blood coagulation); in his words, a "time bomb" ticking away (1.40-41). Immigrating to Germany with his family 6 years ago required high costs and much effort from him and his wife. Settling in Germany has turned out to be a devaluating and humiliating experience. He could not find employment in spite of his skills and experience as a car mechanic and his further professional qualification in Germany. He finds himself useless, "with empty hands" and rejected because of the way he speaks German. When he suffered potentially fatal health problems (nose bleeding in 2000 and stomach bleeding in 2002), he felt he was not treated well in the German health system, neither medically nor as a person. Recently, he had to go through the loss of close relatives. His younger brother, whom he felt closest to among his siblings, also suffered from *Morbus Willebrand* and died two months ago in a German hospital, shortly after immigrating; his bleeding could not be stopped. Jurij and his family had worked hard, also with the help of a lawyer to obtain immigration permits for his brother, who had not passed the German language test required for late returnees. Earlier in the year, his nephew had died of cancer, also in Germany.

We begin with a description of Jurij's life story (1.1), we go on to his self presentation (1.2), and then to core topics and to structural biographical processes (1.3).

### **1.1 Jurij's life story: a description**

Jurij grew up in the village of a collective farm, a *Sovchos*. When he was 10 years old, his mother died at the age of 32 from incessant bleeding during high pregnancy with her 5th child; the child also died. She suffered from *Morbus Willebrand* and started bleeding as a consequence of overexerting herself in high pregnancy, pressing a heavy bowl of clay to her stomach while working on the construction of their house. In this emergency situation, Jurij as a young boy had to run and find his father who was working in a different place. They

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<sup>4</sup> Late returnees are officially considered „ethnic Germans“ who left the Republic of the former Soviet Union, Estonia, Latvia, or Lithuania after 31 December 1992 as repatriates and permanently settled in Germany. "Late returnees" are repatriated under somewhat different conditions than "returnees", who have been repatriated in Germany since 1953.

then needed to find a car to bring his mother from the village to the hospital in the next town. By then, her bleeding could not be stopped, she and the baby died.

"Clay" in German means "Lehm", and Jurij repeatedly refers to the bowl of clay as "Leim", which is similarly pronounced and means "glue" in German. (One time he also refers to "Lärm", which is similarly pronounced and means "loud noise"). He and his wife narrate how he almost died from the same genetic disease when they still lived in Kazakhstan and how his wife saved him with medication that "glued" his blood together (p 21).

Jurij remains very close to the memory of his mother as a loving woman, who took care in every practical and emotional way of her family. In contrast, he and his wife describe his father and his paternal grandfather as hard, even harsh men. His father commanded silence and obedience. After his mother died, Jurij kept to himself, not expressing his thoughts, feelings and emotions, but going about as fast, efficient and silent as a clock (p 9).

He was determined to keep his three younger siblings at home together, against plans to distribute them in foster homes. He took over his mother's household functions and the upbringing of his two sisters and his brother, who was only a year and half old. He was also responsible for the farm work (milking the cow, feeding the pigs) and had to combine cooking, washing, and tidying up with caring for the children in addition to his school day and homework. He did not get much support or even appreciation from his father. During a period of four years after his mother's death, several women came to live with his father. Some had children of their own, which resulted in conflicts. Then, his father remarried a woman who did not have children of her own; 'that was then like a family' (p. 4) or, as his wife says, 'a completely normal family then later' (p. 5). At the age of 14, when Jurij finished school in the village, he felt free to leave home for the first time. He first stayed with his maternal grandparents in town and then joined the army. During the three years of his service he enjoyed a feeling of freedom, traveling widely throughout the Soviet Union and meeting peers for the first time.

While he was still in the army, he and his wife were married. His wife comes from the same village and remembers Jurij as a boy, as well as his mother and his grandmother. Their first child, their daughter Julia was born during the year that Jurij was still in the army and separated from his young family. During the interview, he asks his wife to show the family portrait that he drew during this time from a photograph, drawing them, so to speak, closer together. He and his wife show the drawing to express Jurij's sense of caring for his family; he also hints at his unfulfilled artistic aspirations.

After the army, Jurij worked as a truck driver. He tells how he traveled all over the SU, describing the beauty of many places, especially the Baikal Sea. He and his wife emphasize the quality of life, against deprecating reports on German television that underline backwardness and underdevelopment. But Jurij is also aware of the hard life conditions in the rural area where he grew up, comparing it to the conditions how they live now. He and his family members frequently compare life in the SU and how it changed to living in the West.

He retrained as a car mechanic after 12 years of truck driving when health problems arose. As his wife describes, he fixed all machines and motors in the *Sovchos*, taking them apart and repairing them with knowledge and feeling.

He and his wife, the children, grandchildren and his wife's mother came to Germany in 1999 as late returnees (*Spätaussiedler*). The immigration experience proved very stressful and humiliating to him and his wife. They did manage to enable immigration also for his younger brother (who recently died). But even though Jurij tried hard to find work and also further qualified himself professionally, he could not find employment. The somewhat "different" German he speaks was held against him.

## 1.2 Self presentation

Jurij is aware of the hard life conditions in the rural area where he grew up, in comparing it with the conditions how they live now and how he used to manage skillfully while now, he feels "useless". (We come back to this topic under Comparison between life in the SU and the West.) Most striking to us in his self presentation of how he managed are the *non-dichotomous gender aspects of identity*:

- He presents himself as a silent and quiet person. In his own description, he worked so hard and his responsibility was so great that he did not have any time for much talk ("I always stayed silent", p.5). According to him, his difficult duties formed his 'silent' character. Contrasting his silence in the past with his position in the present, his wife points out that "it is already a big step that he converses and talks a little...now he can actually have some fun and tell few jokes sometimes, when he's in a good mood and uh really now he can (speak, yes)" (p.5)
- His silent character and the 'female' functions he filled ("I had to cook I had to wash ugh I had to learn everything //really// ((laughs))" (p.5) are juxtaposed in the description with the 'male' image of his father and grandfather, who seem to represent Soviet rural patriarchal family relationships. He describes them as strict persons, whom they all had to obey (p.5). His father did not take on any 'female' function of caring after the death of his wife. The paternal grandfather had not relied on his son when he came out of prison after many years, terminally ill with cancer. Jurij's mother took care of him. Before he died, he said that he would take her with him into his grave; she actually died two months later.
- Throughout the interview one can follow his strong identification with his mother. He does not 'just' take over her duties but sympathizes with her and feels physically connected through their genetic disease. His identification goes even further to his dreams. He mentions that he was always a dreamer like his mother and then goes on to say that he wanted to become a painter. An inseparable connection to his mother could also be the self-accusation that as a young boy, he could not help in time to save her life.

We see a similar aspiration to encounter responsibility in Jurij's explanation of joining the army. As he (P) and his wife (F) explain to the interviewers,

P: (I am), unusual person ((P + F laugh/ 4 seconds)) on all sides ((P laughs / 2 seconds)) F: really he should not have gone to the army but he had ah- (1) he wanted to go himself there, at the time it was so if a man didn't do his military service then uhm (1) that was like a scandal  
 P: well, /what is ((questioning)) F: ((short laugh)) and he didn't want **any inferiority** complex=ah=to have these feelings, **he wanted to do everything like everyone else...** (p. 22)



As an "unusual person", he had a strong desire of wanting to do "everything like every one else...". Being "an unusual person" in Jurij's case already means a positive reformulation of the potential fatality and deep suffering in his life that is constantly endangered; of a life without childhood and proper youth; of losing his mother as a young boy, and close relatives because of the disease. Volunteering to go to the army, when there were medical reasons not to be drafted, can be interpreted to wanting to be as ordinary as everybody else.

- As his wife mentions, because of Jurij's genetic disease it would have been possible for him to be exempted from the draft. Possibly also as a member of the minority of German descent this would have made sense to avoid possible recriminations. Instead, he took the army as his chance to go out into the world, even to enjoy army duty as an adolescent experience of discovering his potentials. The distinctness with which he describes the "manly" feelings of army service, of working with military equipment and army life shows how new and special these feelings were for him. Jurij experienced feeling free in the army, making friends and developing his sense of individuality instead of feeling humiliated by army treatment, threatened and subdued. This paradoxical constellation contrastively shows the enormous responsibility and constant labor of being a "houseman" as a young boy, taking over the family responsibility and caring that his mother would have provided had she lived. Because of his enormous duties, Jurij actually had no childhood or adolescence socialization similar to his peer group. In comparison with his responsibilities and chores at home, army life seemed to be free of constraints and full of possibilities. In contrast to the usual transition during adolescence into 'hard' adult life with its responsibilities and duties, Jurij could experience adolescent peer group socialization only *after* his premature transition into adult responsibilities as a ten-year-old child.
- Moreover his decision seems to be connected to his desire of the 'male' self-realization, or conformism to the ideas about 'becoming a normal man' in the SU. It is important to remember the especially violent character of serving in the Soviet army and the *dedovshina* phenomenon; i.e. different forms of institutionalized humiliation of the new recruits by the older ones and a hierarchical construction, according to which the older soldiers (of the same rank) possess more rights and should be served by the new recruits. Instead of relating to knowledge about the Soviet army within the Russian speaking public discourse, Jurij, his wife (F) and her mother (O) present the company of his army comrades as an international family of brothers (p.24):

P: among us were (1) (everything good)

F: ((agreement))

P: ((agreement)), uh ((agreement)) (1) like brothers

F: we were Kazakhs Kyrgyz Turks Uzbeks, ah=ah Ukrainians, a:h (1) Koreans

ah=ah=wha-

O: ((louder)) Germans

F: from Georgia people, Azerbaijan ah=ah-

O: /everything

P: different people ((almost simultaneously))...

### 1.3 Core topics and structural biographical processes

In presenting it to the German 'outside', in retrospect and from the outside, Jurij and his family members reevaluate life in the Soviet Union positively, in contrast to the negative images of the Soviet Union in public discourse. They are affected by this discourse since they are seen as "Russians" who came to reap the benefits of the German economy and welfare system.

In a different perspective, they also act as "cultural translators" (in the terms of Everett Stonequist's (1935/1937) "marginal man"), in the sense of describing and explaining life worlds unknown in the country of immigration.

#### His dreams

His generally tragic story is contrasted with three different positive directions, his dreams that he presents nostalgically to the interviewers. All three dreams belong to their 'previous' life in the SU:

1. He wanted to become an artist, which was not possible. During the interview he shows a drawing of his young family after his daughter was born ('I wanted (1) my=it was (a) well a dreamer (1) like mother was (1) I always dreamed of (1) painting=lear=learning //mmm// (3) that was my real dream' (p.10))
2. Both Jurij and his wife are proud of his professionalism and his **art of being a car mechanic**, presenting this craft not just as necessary because of very limited replacement possibilities of motors and limited technical equipment in the SU, but as a craft for which one needs 'instinct', 'exact eye and good hearing', to be able to 'diagnose' the problem 'through the listening' of it. Such presentation stresses not only his vocation for this profession, but also awakes associations with a musician or a good doctor (by vocation):
 

F: (1) you see one **must have a good instinct for this**, one must be very technical  
 P: (you have to every millimeter, that it all-)  
 F: and also an **exact eye and good hearing**, here one uses a computer to determine what is wrong with the car=and=there with him-, you couldn't go through the streets with him, he had already heard every car that drove by.  
 P: until now I=I=I-  
 F: there it is not alright and there (1) this driver there=he isn't good, he doesn't take care of his car also there he neglected to do something and you see couldn't tell you **through listening what was wrong with the car** //mmm// (1) like a doctor //mmm// ((laughs))...' (p.12-13)
3. At several places in the interview, Soviet life is presented in a romantic way, of the 'good past', dreams about the Baikal Sea, Russian nature, collective support, self-realization, their contribution to society; these seem like counter images to life in Germany, and to the negative me-images they are confronted with.

## 2. Interpreting the interview

It was difficult to gain an understanding of this interview even after reading it several times. Our initial reactions were that this is not "an interview with Jurij", since he does not get to tell his story because his wife keeps him from talking and takes over, repeatedly making fun of his reluctance to talk towards the interviewers. Several other family members interfere as well, they and the interviewers socialize around the tea table until the interview situation becomes completely chaotic, escalating into the imitation of the cries of a "drunken chicken" by a young male family member; this finally leads to a somewhat hurried conclusion by the interviewers.

Then, after further readings, we had the impression that Jurij does not *want* to tell his story, possibly because he is in a difficult life situation, unemployed, feeling "useless" and rejected, mourning the loss of his younger brother and his nephew, and that he is just being polite, with his family members being both supportive to Jurij and hospitable to the interviewers. Our irritation with his wife's "interruptions" shifted and we felt that the interviewers should not have insisted on continuing the interview but rather responded to Jurij's objections by concluding it earlier on and taking part in the social setting created by the family.

In our individual readings of the interview, each of us proceeded somewhat differently, with Julia Bernstein (JB) oriented in a more topical way in a research tradition of cultural anthropology, and Lena Inowlocki (LI) looking at textual phenomena (such as thematic and temporal shifts, modes of presentation of experience and self-presentation, communicative and interactional aspects) in a research tradition of biographical analysis. In our dialogical interpretation, we went through the text sequentially in an open interpretation. We tried to contextualize as much as possible, thematically and linguistically. This included talking about what we know about the life worlds Jurij and his family members describe and refer to, also considering their language use<sup>5</sup>. We also included what we know from comparable and contrastive cases of immigrant families to Germany and from migration research more generally. We looked at textual phenomena (turn taking, especially between Jurij and his wife, thematic shifts, background constructions) in the German text and the English translation, sometimes „translating back" into Russian to understand how the family members expressed themselves in German.

Language use differs among the family members. Jurij sometimes searches for the right expression in German and inserts a few expressions in Russian. His wife speaks excellent German and in fact studied languages and worked as a teacher, translator and interpreter. In the interview situation, she acts as interpreter for Jurij (linguistically and interactionally) and for her mother, who speaks more of a dialect in German, which is sometimes hard to follow for the interviewers and in the transcription. F, Jurij's wife, clearly has vast experience of mediating between different worlds, just considering the rural background of her mother and her own educational qualifications.

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<sup>5</sup> JB is a native Russian speaker and left the Soviet Union in 1990. She is writing her PhD dissertation on "Food for Thought. Identity constitution of Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union in Israel and Germany through material culture: the example of food consumption".

We contextualized this interview with our different research experiences of interviews that took place in family settings. LI was especially reminded of situations when she had expected to do an autobiographical narrative interview with one person and then found herself with several members of the interviewee's family. Their interaction during the interview sometimes turned her into a participant observer. Understanding what was happening in these situations actually led to discovering that "generational work" was going on in how the family members made use of the interview situation. Their interaction meant support for each other, as well as a vivid interest in how "cultural continuity" would be represented, in the face of the destruction of the old life worlds, the persecution of the older family members in the *Shoah*, and the different ways of relating to traditionality in post-war west European Jewish communities<sup>6</sup>.

In our readings of the interview, we both looked for how it made sense what interviewees said and did not say, in terms of *practical solutions* to problems, conflicts, or challenges we did not yet understand or that did not fit our expectations of how they should be acting (Becker 1998). We tried to learn "the language" of our interview partners, letting them teach us their knowledge of the world (James Spradley 1979, 1980). We kept re-reading the text, sequentially looking for micro-phenomena that further refined or refuted our notions gained during the interpretation, also noting what remained ambivalent and what we could not follow (Strauss 1994).

In presenting our findings, we summarize central topics and construction principles of Jurij's life story:

- **Death as Normality in the Autobiography.** 'I am an unusual person on all sides...' (p.22). What seems to be a part of the normal immigrant experience (the change of context, language, norms, environment, social expectations) can appear as unfamiliar, even strange or irritating for a person without a migration background. Similarly, the everyday life of a person who suffers from an incurable disease differs from that of a healthy person, and so do their respective ideas about 'normality'. In our case, we are confronted with the double deviation from the 'normal' life course experience, on the one hand dealing with a biography of migration and, on the other hand, suffering from an incurable disease (*Willebrand-Syndrome*); being singled out by this disease, the migration experience takes on a different perspective. It becomes not only a question of relative gains and losses, of hardship, suffering and the experience of devaluation against possible achievements for oneself or at least one's children, but a part of the constant precariousness of life and the imminence of death. One of the striking characteristics of this interview with Juri is the fact that he permanently mentions the theme of death, which is 'normally' avoided in everyday speech and remains invisible 'as if it would not exist'. Juri, in contrary, not only presents death as a inseparable part of life

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<sup>6</sup> Grandmothers, mothers and daughters: women in formerly displaced families in three Jewish communities, in: Daniel Bertaux und Paul Thompson (Hrsg.): *Between Generations. Family Models, Myths and Memories*. International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories, nr 2, 1993 Oxford University Press; see also *Traditionality als reflexiver Prozeß: Großmütter, Mütter und Töchter in jüdischen Displaced-Persons-Familien. Eine biographieanalytische und wissenssoziologische Untersuchung*. Habilitationsschrift, Otto-von-Guericke-Universität Magdeburg, April 2001

and describes the permanent danger his life is in, but also mentions many times during the interview stories diseases and deaths of other people in his family, or of accidents of family members (just on pp 8-10 he mentions this theme at least 7 times). This leads from the first careful questions of the interviewers about his life to a 'normalization' of death in the presentation and to questions of the interviewers such as 'tell me more about the death of your mother', which is unthinkable in the other situations when people prefer to avoid the theme of 'death'.

- **Coping simultaneously with disease and migration or "...You are too expensive for a patient..."**

In his case migration is seen first of all through his incurable disease (Willebrand-Syndrome), which he calls a 'time bomb'. The accent is shifted from the crisis of migration as a long insecure stage to the double insecurity on the one hand of life itself, which can be over at any moment because of his disease. Jurij says, 'life is important', (1.46) and, on the other hand, he feels insecure by permanently having to cope with the new reality as a result of migration. These two aspects are closely connected with one other, since in his case to know one's way around, to be able to find the right medication in time or to explain himself in German in a comprehensible way can be crucial for his life.

The following passage demonstrates this special situation:

F...the worst for us is here, **here we don't know what to do, there we knew what we had to do** //hmm// we had ah=ah **special tablets** ah=ah you know medicine you see, and when nothing else worked anymore we then went to the doctor, a:nd here we have a:bsolutely nothing at home, and you don't run to the doctors be=cause of every little de=tail (1) a:nd also when you go=there then it isn't always- well there you are simply – you see there=**it isn't taken seriously** (1)

F tells about an emergency situation when Jurij was not treated for severe nose bleeding in a German hospital, even though they knew about his condition (19-20).

In his special situation the experience of not being granted proper medical treatment is painful, as well as his experience of unemployment.

P:...you are=are=**you are the most=most=expensive patient here** //hmm// (2) this, I didn't un=understand that, why it is so expensive here //hmm// F: oh=well, expensive, YES, but pf:, **they don't pay it from their own pocket of course, they didn't need to always rub his nose in it** //hmm// (3) oh in addition uh when a person is sick he then finds such remarks much worse, when it is said every time (1) ... (p18-19)

The nurse's repeated remark that he is a much too expensive patient is interpreted by Jurij and his wife as an accusation, coupled to an implicit request to be grateful to the country in general and to the nurse in particular (who acts as representative of this country). Her remarks create the feeling that immigrants do not have a right for material goods, they should first be willing to recognize that they come from a backward and underdeveloped society and they should be grateful for everything they receive (Schiffauer

2003). Otherwise they are perceived as pragmatic and as exploiting the receiving society.

- **Disqualification:** "that was the most difficult getting used to that one doesn't need our experiences our work here' (15)

Jurij and his wife articulate a comparison between two capitalistic worlds (the new post Soviet society and Germany, in which only high professional young people are needed, worlds to which it is hard for them to adjust and to get used to and in which they cannot find fulfillment and recognition through their skills.

F: "that was the most difficult getting used to that one doesn't need our experiences our work here

P: no need, yes //hmm// (2) yes when one job in= interviews always had, yes you have experience yes=then you know already at this moment you are already too old //mmm//

F: and if that was honestly said then it wouldn't be so insulting //hmm//

P: yes=well that hurt a lot

F: it hurts, but naturally not so, but when they sought such a sensitive excuse

P: EXCUSE yes=yes such an excuse

F: that was bad enough //hmm=hmm=hmm// (1) then they thought up okay, he can't speak German //hmm=hmm// he doesn't understand me //hmm// why can't he understand me when he speaks already starting as a child //hmm=hmm// (1) oh well it isn't the high German that //hmm// most speak //hmm// but also not so bad that he isn't to understand //hmm// (1) 'that was the worst' //hmm// ((beginning on page 15 line 15 O tells I2 something else)) (3)...""(p.15)

- **Comparing two different worlds:** Jurii and his wife reflect on the advantages of the socialist system, as for example with education and 'culture' for everybody, no unemployment and a feeling of stability, free medicine, collective support if you ran into difficulties. Their neighbors all donated money for special medication that Jurij needed, that had become expensive after the *perestroika*. (p.21)

Clearly, these are attempts to accent the good sides of life in the SU, to protect their memories, and to contradict and object to the negative image of the ex-SU. In the media, life in the ex-SU territories is shown as backwards and 'primitive' (p. 6-8). Jurij and his wife are annoyed about 'not objective' representations, judging in western terms and with criteria about wealth that ignore people's own understanding of their life.

But simultaneously, they are also hurt by the SU, which has 'completely forgotten them'. Actually one can argue that they feel to a certain degree in an in-between state ('...but **now it is almost the same as here,...**', p.15). With the fall of the SU everything got worse. (F: oh well that was the second half of the nineties ((swallows)) it was all destroyed //mmm//', p.14) One could interpret it also as a bad variation of the new capitalism. The words they use to describe the experience of suddenly finding yourself unemployed and 'on the street', without resources and not supported by any welfare, reminds the Soviet political slogans of the 'terrible capitalistic life in the West':

F: ...the kindergartens were shut //mmm// also the kindergartens where I worked last //mmm// uh the sowchose was entirely uh=uh you see it was- bank=bankrupt, and suddenly there was uh almost two thousand people immediately without work //mmm//

P: on the /streets ((laughs softly))

F: on the streets, yes (1) and there was no unemployment benefit, there was not even an unemployment agency like there is here, that was all first built //mmm// for (1) where we lived they didn't have that //hmm// there=wasn't=any //mmm// 'and therefore' it was so difficult, you see they have- that was the only mistake I think, that which they had built they then destroyed, and something they didn't have anything new //hmm//...', (p.13)

- ***Ethnic and cultural connections to Germany***

Although they are not recognized here professionally they try to create a connection with Germany to which they want to belong. They put an accent on the works of the classic German authors (p. 11), which they read a long time ago (in the SU), to prove the necessary connection to Germany against the blame in the German media that they are not 'really Germans'. They actually grew up primarily in Soviet rather than German culture.

### **3. What we learned about interaction in interviews**

First, we consider the interaction among Jurij's family members in the interview situation, then the interaction with the interviewers and conclude with some remarks on analyzing "working alliances".

#### **3.1 Interaction within Jurij's family**

##### ***Interventions of his wife:***

- His wife helps him to formulate his thoughts in German, which she speaks much better than he does. Often Russian words or his own wrong translations appear in his sentences, which according to her need to be explained. She constantly adds her reformulation of his sentences, interrupting him.

For example:

1. P: ((breathed out loudly)) there I uh uh=uh to towards (2) how do you say the uhm old rail- train- rail- railroad many done by the Stalin=regime F: train P: got to know, there were so many wired- uh how do you say

F: storage

P: storage

F: with uh barbed wire surrounding=them

P: barbed wired=crossed everywhere //aha// (1) yes, many barracks, ah where the people was=living, it exists still today //aha// ...' (p.6);

2. P: because the infection was (minor) //uh huh=uh huh=uh huh// because of that, I woke up (1) they (they) com=completely different blood injected-, how do you say /scrubbed or what ((laughing questioning))

F: /no ahh ((laughing))

P: drip

F: he had a blood transfusion

P: made a transfusion //yes// (1) completely new //yes// (1) ...(p.19).

- What seems like permanent interruptions of Jurij by his wife, are also her attempts to contribute telling his life story. Although one can feel that he does not like her interruptions and sometimes tries to resist them, he does not argue against what she is saying. It seems that they have complete consensus with each other about the contents of his story. She does know him since his childhood, she knew his mother and his life as a young boy. This 'permits' her to construct a joint story of his life. Although she interrupts him during the whole interview, she holds him in high esteem (for example, when she explained her fear about his reaction to their new born child, which she found ugly: '...but oh well thank=God /he always managed to control his tongue pretty good, and therefore it=it all went well ((laughing))...' (p.10).
- One can also argue that she mediates between his story and the imagined position of the interviewers, acting in Stonequist's term as 'cultural translator':
  1. She mediates between his tragic 'normality', his 'silence' and her ideas about a more appropriate positive, optimistic, tolerable presentation to others, who presumably have a different perspective on 'normality';
  2. She mediates between two different cultural and social worlds and tries to translate his reality with appropriate cultural-symbolic rhetoric codes.
- 'Western bourgeois self distancing' in social interaction, in which it is usual to spare the interaction partner when you are feeling bad, is absent both with Jurij and his wife who are socialized in the Soviet context, in which a certain degree of personal exposure is expected in the interaction with a trusted person. Jurij's wife tries to correspond her feeling of this interaction with 'foreigners', but also her descriptions have an irritating effect in some cases (for example, when she describes how ugly their child was, when she was born).
- She presents herself as very active assertive person, who follows her own description of usual behavior in Germany: '...and **here**, whoever screams loudest also gets heard' (p.17).
- We should not neglect the general role of supporting each other in the migration process. Also, we should understand the important role of an extended family, of an intimate trusted community, replacing the feeling of home, which was taken for granted before migration, in contrast to the anonymous new society. (I1 and I2 summarize at the end of the interview: 'P adds, that the family regularly telephones with one another. F then explains in great length, that the contact with family here is more important than it would have been in Kazakhstan...' , p.35)



### 3.2 Interaction with interviewers

- During the whole interview (3.5 hours) the family members try to be very cooperative and friendly towards the visitors (also especially towards the interviewers as German visitors). They eat and drink together, Jurij and his wife shows pictures. They do not only expose themselves through the description with very personal details and involved emotion, but also try to describe the situation in understandable comparable terms for the German interviewers. For example, in describing the rare contact to the sister of Jurij, his wife tries to 'translate' the way to her house through comparing it to the distances in Germany: `...P: there was little contact F: you have to imagine- P: ah I lived in one spot, ah they lived ah (1) one hundred and twenty kilometers from the other spot, that isn't so (1) the same connection as with- imagine it here in Germany //hmm// (1) one gets in the car and runs forth...' (p.32) F: /visit someone in Bayern just for a weekend ((laughing)). (Or, another example: `...P: solely a highway [there] F: that is not exactly like a highway here in the West' (p.6).)
- They try to present even unpleasant experiences in Germany (connected to hospitals and misunderstandings of doctors) in such ways that the interviewers do not suspect a general hostility against 'Germans' (including the interviewers).
- There is an unusual ending of the interview, during which Jurij suddenly realized that the whole personal intimate story that he entrusted to the interviewers could be used further in the 'public sphere' further. He stresses that the story that he told is 'completely private'. After the promise of I2 that the interview will be anonymous and he cannot be recognized, he says that he is embarrassed rather than afraid. His wife interferes and explains the value of the story they told, how dear these memories are and their hesitation that people would read their story and it would seem ridiculous to them (p.36-37). In the end, Jurij agrees that the story will be published.
- His first reaction to I 1's question – would he please tell his life story – are defensive gestures of shock and protest (1:25); „to tell everything he can remember“, he sighs. He is not sure, he says, if he can fulfill what is expected from him; he is a „quiet man“. Jurij hesitates already at the beginning: `(you know) there is some limits, what can one say, what should one not say, should one keep everything to oneself, I don't know uhm I can say so much, that is -how do you say - my issue //hmm// (8)' (p.6); and then again later on:

`...I1: that is fine, thank=you, /could you please tell us once again about the death of your mother ((questioning)) (2), P: o:h ((groans))...' (p.17)

This raises questions of ethics: when are we entitled to ask, and to continue asking when an interview partner repeatedly refers to his own way of keeping silent?

- The cooperation, talking and joking of family members is interpreted by the interviewers as irritating, not as a part of the situation but as a disturbance.
- For interviewers in general, the interviewing and interpreting is considered as a part of their job, as part of their profession, in which they try to apply certain theoretical methodologies. For immigrants, in contrast, their story is very personal and exposing, they

are not prepared go public with it. Do they want to be investigated? Do they want their story to be read and interpreted by absolute strangers, as a part of their professional work?

### **3.3 In conclusion: Interpreting “working alliances” in interview situations**

This is a very impressive interview, we feel privileged to understand something about Jurij’s life and about the way he and his family members communicate and interact. We learned about the social worlds and life experiences of *late repatriates (Spätaussiedler)* from rural regions in Kazakhstan, also about the conditions of their immigration to Germany.

During our interpretation, we found out that both of us – from our different research traditions and experience – look for context knowledge to relate our analysis to. This includes understanding linguistic codes, local conditions, and relevant socio-historical developments. We also found out that in interpreting an interview in which we were not present ourselves, we *imagine* being participant observers, to better understand what happened in the situation. Interviewers are part of the interaction and observe many things they sometimes only become aware of when they write a protocol after the interview situation. Interpreting somebody else’s interview made us feel a need to get closer to the situation. In other words, we did not only interpret a transcript, we tried to understand interactions, relations, individuals “from within”. Of course we do not know whether we came close at all. What set our imagination to work was interestingly not empathy at first reading. We were really puzzled and felt very distant to the narrator and to the interfering members of his family (whom we could not even place in their relation to Jurij, except for his wife.) We proceeded through many layers of strangeness until we got a sense of the person, his life story and ways of telling it. Analyzing the transcript of an interview conducted by others means working with highly selective and also overly focused material. “Textual understanding” meant for us putting it back into a broader, lived social context, also by trying to imagine what the interview situation was like (including how we would have acted as interviewers). As we proceeded by associating possibly relevant knowledge, associations, intuitive leads, we critically looked at our reconstructions as approximations, as trying to get as close as we can, but not as “explaining” a person’s life. “Cases” tend to be looked at “under the microscope” with an alienating glance. Critical interpretations can work against such “clinical” impressions by re-situating interview partners in their context.

In our reconstruction of the interview, Jurij’s reluctance to the repeated requests of the interviewers to go into narrative detail of his life story have to do with the very sad loss of close relatives. The death of his younger brother to whom he was especially close just two months ago must have brought back the pain of losing his mother as a child. It is very possible that in his present situation he avoids going into his feelings and back into what he remembers.

In our reading of the transcript, it would have been appropriate to conclude the *interview* situation after a longer explanation of Jurij’s wife and, at the same time, her mother saying something that is not transcribed (p15, line 41). From then on, as we see it, it would have made sense to participate in the family situation as guests. In our view, the interviewers kept the interview format still going when Jurij had already said what he wanted. We imagine that

a somewhat awkward situation arose when the interviewers said that they still have questions (16.1-23):

**I2:** I didn't want to interrupt you, I am not sure how much time you have today but we would like to ask you a few more questions if -

**F:** /he **is waiting** for your questions //yeah=yeah// (1) that is why he **called** us of course ((laughing))

**P:** well uh

**F:** /because he didn't know what to say- what he should say ((laughing)) //uh=huh (1) yes//

**P:** ((sighs))

**F:** /ask him now and he will answer ((laughing))

**P:** no per=perhaps we go to drink some tea (2) /hmm ((questioning))

**I1:** then we need to go with you, together

**P:** well (1) as you like

**I2:** or we can bring the tea over here (1) if you like (1) perhaps we can talk at the same time

**F:** /alright ((questioning))

**P:** yeah (1)

**F:** oh dear we are making a fuss

**I1:** /alright ((questioning)) (1) good then (1)

**I2:** you said right at the start that you are a quiet man, /perhaps you could tell me a little more about this ((questioning))

**F:** unfortunately (1) we don't have a small **table** //oh=I see// but it doesn't matter

**I2:** oh that is really=very kind of you, uhm 'perhaps you could tell me (1) more about the fact that you are a quiet man'

F, Jurij's wife makes up for his reluctance to continue talking about himself by exaggerating his willingness to do so. Jurij and his family members are sociable and hospitable and do not want to disappoint the interviewers, they keep offering stories, serving tea, showing photos. The two interviewers, however, seem oriented towards methodical ways of asking for more narrative detail. To resume, we think that as participant observers, in "going with the flow", the interviewers would have understood just as much – and possibly more about interaction in the family – than through repeated questions.

With the concept of "working alliance" (*Arbeitsbündnis*), Sigmund Freud pointed out the relations of transference and counter-transference in the psychoanalytic situation. The concept was part of what Alfred Lorenzer termed "scenic understanding", and it has been further worked out for critical sociological inquiry into the conditions of data production by Heinz Steinert and his colleagues at Frankfurt university. The analysis of "working alliances" concerns the multiple dimensions and different aspects of the research situation, the research interests of the parties involved in it, power relations and hierarchies at work, contextual conditions, and especially the taken-for-granted general notions about the research subjects and one's own research perspectives. There are similarities to analyzing the positionality of the research subject, in how class, gender, ethnicity, etc. intersect and become significant; analyzing "working alliances", however, especially focus on "blind spots" of the researcher/interviewer of how his/her own positionality interacts with that of the research subject.

While questions concerning the "working alliances" are typically asked during data analysis, we suggest that it would be helpful to integrate some of the reflections already into the interview situation (or before entering the situation), especially concerning one's status as an academic researcher towards a non-academic interviewee, and the obligations this might create. This might balance against "stretching" academic status and authority and help to adapt into what we are presented with. In our view, Jurij's uneasiness at the end, when the interviewers get ready to leave about what will happen with this interview, points at an insufficient balance during the interview. It is rare that such doubts are voiced at the end, we assume that they show that the interviewers' research interest are still seen by Jurij in opposition to his interest.

In conclusion: Migration is usually treated as a transition state, which is accompanied by many changes and modifications. Most of the migration research literature describes difficulties, problems and crisis stages as connected to the settling down in the new society. Other research focuses on migrants as active and creative social agents, who are able to design and influence their own life and are not only victims of given circumstance. In this interview, we can understand what happens if the life of concerned person is not primarily defined by the sharp transition of migration. Jurij Baumann suffers from an incurable disease that can interrupt his life every moment. We tried to analyze his reconstruction and presentation of the migration process under this existential condition. The almost taken for granted exposure to the new life world, the necessity to cope with feelings of strangeness that are often articulated by immigrants acquired a new meaning in this special case of coping with disease. Jurij's life story before and after migration is interwoven with permanent tragedies connected with the disease that is transmitted to several family members (and also to Jurij's daughter). How his wife and the other family members "interfere" in the interview situation enables a close understanding of modifying Jurij's tragic self-presentation.

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## **Gerhard Riemann (University of Bamberg, Germany): Narrating my – his – our life? The analysis of an interview in a German family from the former Soviet Union**

### **Putting things in perspective**

I am not a member of the research team which collected and transcribed the interview which is at the centre of our discussion. That's what I learned from reading the transcription and the contextual information (on the first page of the text) which I would like to share with you to put things in perspective:

- The data was collected in a research project (headed by Gabriele Rosenthal) on „three-generation families of ethnic Germans“ from the Soviet Union.
- A contact was established with an “ethnic German family” in this context in order to do interviews with members of different generations. Apparently it was possible to arrange an interview, I don't know how this was done.
- Two female interviewers visited the family to do an autobiographical narrative interview with Jurij Baumann (a member of the “second generation”) who was aged 52 or 53 at the time of the interview.
- The interview took place at the family's home and lasted for three and a half hours. Other family members also participated in the interview, especially his wife Anna, but also his mother-in-law. In the beginning his wife was not constantly present, but then she stayed around until the end. It is not clear to me if his mother-in-law was always present during the interview. At a later part of the interview also one son and his eldest grandson participated in the conversation.
- The interview was transcribed in a detailed way, i.e., paralinguistic phenomena, self-interruptions etc. were also taken into account. There are some sequences (in a later part of the interview) which were not transcribed but just summarised, because (as the person transcribing the interview explains in the text) the so called “biographer” was constantly interrupted by his wife.
- The transcription was carefully translated for the purpose of our session in Durban in which different styles of approaching such a text and doing biographical case studies are supposed to become visible. For some of us it is possible to base our comments on the German transcription. The work of translating must have been rather difficult, especially since it is not always easy – at least I did not find it easy - to fully grasp the details of what Jurij Baumann is referring to (because of the features of his German). This also has to do with the issue of the cultural or ethnographic background knowledge.

A final comment: I have not done research on ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union who migrated to Germany, but once in a while I learned about their situation and history

from students of mine who collected interviews with "Spätaussiedler" or social workers working with them. Something which impressed me in a study of a social work student of mine (Freitag 1991) was the fact that the interviewees would often start their autobiographical narrative in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when Catherine the Great had attracted their ancestors to settle in Russia. They assumed that the student researcher – just like the large majority of the native Germans whom they encountered – did not know much about their history, and so started their stories by providing historical background information which was necessary to understand their history and the history of "historical homecomers" in general. The category of the "historical homecomer" was used in the sociolinguistic study of the sociologist Ulrich Reitemeier (2006) on the encounters between Germans from the former Soviet Union and native Germans and is meant to stress what is different from the experience of the "homecomer" as described by Alfred Schütz (1971).

### **My approach**

In order to give you an idea of how I approach the specific data which are at the centre of our session I would first like to give an overview over the sequence of analytical procedures which my students and I have used in doing biographical research and in working with narratives of self-lived experience in general. Right now I will neglect the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this approach which has been mainly developed by Fritz Schütze (1983, 2005) – that means: insights into the epistemic work of narratives, the phenomenon of the constraints of off-the-cuff story telling and how narratives of self-lived experiences can be used for analysing biographical and other social processes - , I will also neglect issues of collecting data. After this outline I will turn to the data.

This type of analysis has emerged in working with autobiographical narrative interviews (Schütze 1983, Riemann 1987), but it has also been used in the analysis of spontaneous narratives of professionals about their work and their shared histories with clients (e.g., Riemann 2000) in order to understand their work and its recurring problems and paradoxes and in the analysis of written narrative presentations of self. The approach has been shaped by an interest in formal features of story telling (an interest stemming from Conversational Analysis) and by the research strategies of Glaser's and Strauss's "Grounded Theory" (1967) as well as can be seen in the integration of collecting and analysing data, in "theoretical sampling", the development of contrastive comparisons, and the concept of "theoretical saturation". Something which differs from most studies in the Grounded Theory tradition is the use of structural descriptions in contrast to open coding, but the close scrutiny of primary data and the "bottom-up" style of generating theory have been deeply influenced by the work of Anselm Strauss. Strauss's style of conducting research classes and research team meetings (Strauss 1987) has also been consequential for a discursive and basically egalitarian style of working on data and generating theory which is practiced in those student research workshops in Germany and other places in which a lot of studies in the field of narrative analysis have been completed (Riemann 2005 b). This style of analysis has mostly been practiced in departments of sociology, social work, and education. It has turned out to be relevant for the research based training of future professionals because it is a way of ac-

quiring skills of a social scientific case analysis which is useful for understanding clients' biographies and life situations (Riemann 2005 a, pp. 87-90).

I will shortly outline these procedures with a special reference to biographical analysis. Of course there are deviations from this "normal form". After having decided that doing narrative interviews makes sense and presumably fits the particular (and still quite vague) research interest in biographical and social processes - this is never clear right away since other procedures (like participant observation, interaction analysis etc.) can be more appropriate depending on one's interests - the following sequence usually unfolds:

- The research topic has to be developed ("dimensionalised") in close interaction with data, especially excerpts from one or two narrative interviews which have been conducted for this purpose. The instrument of collecting data gets modified on the basis of the first field work experiences and a first round of collecting data gets planned under aspects of "theoretical sampling".
- The next step consists in selecting a first interview (a first "corner stone" case) from the data which have been collected in the meanwhile: an interview the analysis of which appears to be especially worthwhile since the biographical processes and other social processes which the researcher is interested in seem to be clearly visible. The researcher makes a detailed transcription of this interview.
- The case analysis of this first interview consists of the following steps:
  1. A critique of the interviewer's work and a formal differentiation of the text sorts or schemes of communication of narration, description and argumentation in order to arrive at first insights how the narrators present their experiences and how they retrospectively deal with their biography. It is necessary to reconstruct how the specificities of the context, the setting and the interviewer's work have an impact on the shape and the substance of an interview. It sounds trivial, but quite often researchers try to make sense of the data and focus at what the interviewee apparently reveals without sufficiently taking into account how they contributed to the emergence of the data in the first place. A common example: It does not make sense to wonder and speculate why the interviewee did not tell a story, if the researcher's question was formulated in such a way that it would rather generate argumentation or theorising instead of a narrative. Of course every narrative also contains argumentative or self-theoretical sequences, but it is necessary to find out which scheme of communication is dominant.
  2. A detailed formal and substantive structural description of the carefully identified narrative segments, sub-segments and suprasegmental compounds of the introductory narrative and (partially) sequences of the subsequent questions and answers. When you do a structural description you proceed sequentially, regard the textual structures as indicators of the narrator's sedimentation of experiences and take into account how she / he is again "overtaken" and influenced by the events (in which she /he had been involved) while she / he is spontaneously telling about them. The purpose of the structural description consists of explicating the "substantive" biographical structural processes (like trajectories of suffering (Riemann and Schütze 1991, Schütze

1995), biographical action schemes etc.) and other social processes which are being represented in the narrative. This step of analysis is especially difficult: One has to develop specific skills of representation in order to adequately deal with the multiplicity of perspectives contained in the narrative and has to demonstrate one's work of analysis (the things over which one "stumbled" so to speak, the development of questions and lines of interpretation, and the identification of patterns) so that it can be intersubjectively controlled and critically scrutinised by a reader.

3. An analytical abstraction on the basis of the structural description, i. e., spelling out
    - (a) the sequence and relationships of different biographical structural processes;
    - (b) the relationship between biographical processes and other (collective, organisational etc.) social processes;
    - (c) the narrator's theoretical and evaluative work (which is visible in argumentational commentaries contained in the narrative) and its relationship to biographical processes, so that it becomes possible to discover its functions (like orientation, explanation, legitimation, self-deception etc.). One should put down what is remarkable for this particular case and which preliminary general insights can be developed on the basis of this single text analysis?
- The researcher selects (at least) one other interview from the data which have been collected in the meanwhile, i. e., she or he selects a second "corner stone case" which differs from the first case as much as possible as far as dimensions which are relevant for the analysis are concerned.
  - A case study of the second interview consists of the same analytical procedures as the first case analysis: critique of interviewing / differentiation of text sorts, structural description and analytical abstraction.
  - The next step is a contrastive comparison of these two "corner stone cases" and – most of the time – additional cases in order to exhaust the theoretical variation within the data as much as possible and to discover new theoretical categories. (Contrastive comparisons had already been important before, e.g. when doing a structural description, but now it is especially elaborated.)
  - In doing such a contrastive comparison one enters into a process of generating a processual theoretical model in which theoretical categories are systematically related to each other.
  - By confronting the model with other data which had been collected and had been more or less disregarded up till now it is subsequently examined, differentiated and densified. The idea is that this process lasts until "theoretical saturation" has been reached.

I just wanted to give you an overview of how my students and I work with narrative interviews and how we combine single case analyses with contrastive comparisons. A lot of this work gets done while meeting in our research workshop, but of course there is enough to do for every researcher who is trying to make the best out of the ideas of the group, to further develop ideas and to put all of this together in a written report.



### Comments on the interview which we dealing with here

I will now turn to the interesting interview which is at the centre of our discussion and will mainly deal with *the first research step within single case analyses* which I just alluded to in presenting the arc of work which I am used to, that means I will mainly focus at the interview situation as such. Due to the limited time which we have my comments will necessarily remain superficial, I cannot claim to do justice to the complexity of the situation and the substance of the text.

I chose the title "*Narrating my – his – our life? The analysis of an interview in a German family from the former Soviet Union*", because I would like to get across my own perplexity which reflects what appears puzzling to the participants - or at least some of them - of this interview situation themselves. (If I were to work with this data together with my students we would probably spend a lot of time trying to find out what's going on in this situation – much more time than in dealing with (so to speak) "regular" narrative interviews in which an interviewee has clearly ratified the scheme of narration and takes over the role of the narrator so that it easy to focus at the substance of her or his story.) I also purposefully speak about "*an interview in a German family from the former Soviet Union*" instead of "*the interview with Jurij Baumann*" because I want to leave open who is the interviewee and to sensitise myself and you to the tension between what the researchers or interviewers had in mind when focusing at Jurij Baumann as "their" narrator or "biographer" and what actually developed in the situation of the interview.

When I come together with my students in our research workshop in order to analyse an interview which had been distributed some days before the session and which everyone has become familiar with I always ask the student researcher who presents her or his data to tell her or his story with this particular interview and the interviewee (whose cooperation had to be secured in the first place). Since setting the stage for a narrative interview is a very complicated process which cannot be dealt with according to "cookbook recipes" it is also important to get as much information as possible about (1) how the student researcher told the interviewee about the development of her or his research interest, (2) how she or he enacted the action scheme of the interview and informed the interaction partner what she or he had in mind, and (3) how the chosen interviewee defined the situation, asked questions, expressed reservations etc. – and finally agreed to tell her or his story. I always suggest to not just start the take recording at the slot where the narrator is offered the floor, but to start recording much earlier after the informal small talk between the interaction partners has stopped and the researcher had moved to something else: i.e., when she or he sets up the interview: tells about her or his research interests, makes suggestions about the course of the interview, talks about matters of confidentiality etc.. Thereby it becomes possible to learn a lot about what is "conditionally relevant" (to use a term of Harvey Sacks) for the emergence of the specific data. The transcription which we are focusing at here starts with one of the two interviewers, Thea Boldt, offering the floor to Jurij Baumann by asking him "*to tell us uh the story of your life, everything you can remember, everything you can tell us is of interest to us.*" (My own translation into English differs slightly from the (very good) translation which was given to us.) There had been much going on before which would be

interesting to hear more about *before* sharing impressions on the interview and focusing at the transcription. This differs a little bit from the way in which we proceed today.

I alluded to the fact that there is something in the interview situation (at their interviewee's home) which the interviewers apparently experience as unnerving: While they pursue the line of trying again and again to get Jurij Baumann to tell his life history, he reveals several times that he feels ill at ease as a narrator, feels perplex and uncomfortable and is at a loss how to tell his autobiography as such, even though there are many phases and episodes of his life which he talks about in a very detailed and personal manner in the course of the interview. But he doesn't do so in one single narrative and seems to experience some stress of performance when confronted with the general task to narrate about his life. The interviewers are very persistent in focusing on his life history and personal experience. They do so in different ways, for example by using his apologetic self-typification as a "quiet man" for a question (*"perhaps you could tell me (1) more about the fact that you are a quiet man"*) – a strategy which is similar to what Goffman (1968a, pp. 41-43) referred to as "looping" in discussing psychiatric communication with patients in mental hospitals - , but much more often they ask him to remember situations and details of events and experiences which he had already mentioned, e.g., the death of his mother. He is cooperative in responding to their requests.

I would like to mention several aspects which appear relevant for understanding this particular interview situation, a situation which I found unusual in comparison with the autobiographical narrative interviews which I have worked with in the past:

1. **Ratification/non-ratification.** I don't know if and to what extent Jurij Bauman had really ratified the scheme of narration himself (to use a technical term), that means: if he had freely agreed to tell his life history and to turn it into "his own thing" (to use a colloquial term) and had understood what was expected from him. There are quite a few expressions - at least in the first part of the interview - of feeling not at ease with this task, already at the beginning (cf. 1:28-33) before he gives a very short summary statement which contains a reference to his early loss of his mother due to a blood disease and an autobiographical commentary on the fact that he has inherited this disease from her and that this is *"like uhh time bomb in me, I live that way, since a child //so//."* There is a pause of six seconds before he offers the floor to the interviewers: *"You know (4) I don't know what is still interesting for (you) (1)"*. One of the interviewers makes another attempt: *"Everything which is important for you."* to which he responds, *"Uh important, I don't know wha=what's important in my case, everything's important, life (is important)." Thea, the other interviewer, takes this up by saying, "Then tell everything."* He responds by excusing himself again: *"I say I am not (not such a good talker ((or story teller: "Erzähler)), not at all)." Thea is quite persistent: "We have time."* After another pause of seven seconds he starts anew and a somewhat longer narrative develops.

The interviewers are quite effective in playing the ball back to him – it is difficult to remain silent for so long - , but my impression is that at this point in time it would have made sense to help him overcome his perplexity by providing some more background again on (let's say) "how it had come about that we are so interested in your life history

which we don't know anything about". I think that the generality and vagueness of "everything which is important for you" or "Then tell everything." is not sufficient to overcome the perplexity and stress of performance which Jurij Baumann experiences here.<sup>7</sup> I assume that Thea and her co-interviewer had invested a lot of time in trying to communicate their interest in Jurij Baumann's life history (and the life histories of other members of the category of "Spätaussiedler" from the former Soviet Union), but at least he conveys a sense of a lack of plausibility which should be dealt with in this situation.

One aspect which came to my mind: Regardless of the information work of the interviewers: His reluctance might have something to do with his lack of trust in his ability to make himself sufficiently understood in German, as he mentions he had also been stigmatised by former colleagues in Germany because of the peculiarities of his German (cf. p.9: 20,21 (*"we don't understand you ((higher)) you don't speak German like we do"*)). This must have been an extremely painful experience for him, a "degradation ceremony" in the sense of Harold Garfinkel (1956) – as it is for many other "Spätaussiedler" (as I learned from the study by Ulrich Reitemeier (2006)), since the ascription of such linguistic incompetencies is used to deny his claim of belonging to the category of "essential" Germans. Being a stranger without being able to openly talk about it because of the fear to risk doubts about a legitimate membership in the collectivity of Germans ("How come you claim to be a German if you talk like this?") seems to be a hallmark of the collective experience of "Spätaussiedler" – in contrast to the experience of other immigrants who cannot claim to return to "their" country or the country of their ancestors. But Jurij Baumann's self-typification as "a quiet man" has also a long history (going back to the days of his childhood and youth) which is being reconfirmed by his wife and in the discourse of the couple during the meeting with the interviewers.

2. **Conditions for telling one's life history and possible irritations.** Georg Simmel wrote down an observation in his famous "excursus on the stranger" (Simmel 1992) that strangers are often told secrets which one would not dare share with members of one's own familiar milieu because this could be too risky. According to Simmel the stranger can be trusted to not spread this information, since he does not belong to one's inner circle and does not stay around. As he writes, chance encounters between strangers often lead to the "most surprising confessions". Simmel's observation has become important for me to understand what is going on in narrative interviews: People are willing to tell their life history or other personally significant experiences to people whom they do not know and who appear trustworthy at the same time. (Of course researchers have to work on creating sufficient conditions of trust.) Interviewees assume that the things which they reveal about themselves do not have negative consequences for them and that the researcher treats all of it confidentially – also with regard to members of one's private or work milieus who are not supposed to hear this. This applies to narrative in-

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<sup>7</sup> It reminded me a little bit of situations of "communication under constraint" (Schütze 1978) – examinations and interrogations, e. g., when a professor tells the candidate that he has all the time of the world to wait for the answer to a question which the candidate finds difficult to respond to. Not answering such questions could entail negative consequences. Of course Jurij Baumann is not a candidate who is in the danger of not passing an examination, but his refusal to respond to the interviewers' request could create trouble nevertheless.

interviews with individuals as well as to couples or families which are asked to tell their joint history (cf. Christa Hoffmann-Riem's (1990) research on adoptive parenting, when adoptive parents were asked to tell the history of their adopting a child. The interviewees told their story of becoming an adoptive family together: a co-narration of the development of their shared experiences).

Okay, one important feature of the interview which we are dealing with here is the fact that it is meant to be the interview with one person, Jurij Baumann, who is asked to tell his life history. But at the same time all of this happens in the context of a family situation – his wife and mother-in-law are close by and actively participate in the interview as co-narrators and co-commentators. Important parts of their shared history are recollected, narrated and evaluated together. Of course I do not know if the interviewers expected the other members to be around (maybe it had even been arranged to interview Jurij Baumann while other family members stayed outside of the interview space), in any case I think it is very difficult to engage in a narrative interview about one's own personal history in the presence or close proximity of significant others. I suppose that appears debatable (e.g. with regard to a possible cultural bias of my claim), at least this is my conviction based on my research experience. What I have in mind are phenomena like shame, embarrassment, self-censorship, saving face before strangers or reproaches by one's next-of-kin because of not having kept something under "information control" (Goffman 1968 b) etc.

- 3. Collective remembering and narrating.** The person transcribing this interview decided to leave out some parts because she or he regarded them as deficient to a certain degree: deficient in the sense that Jurij Baumann was not able to take the floor or was "interrupted" by his dominant wife too often. Yes, Anna Baumann, who is much more fluent in German than her husband and makes herself understandable in a very clear cut, unambiguous way, becomes an active participant in the interview and contributes a lot of personal biographical and shared memories and assessments herself – even to the point of telling a lot about her husband's life, e.g., his difficult childhood, as if she had experienced it herself - , while the interviewers continue to address their questions solely to Jurij Baumann who is their chosen "biographer".

Of course one could argue that she "interrupts" him or repeatedly throws him out of the conversation (so to speak), she also knows the "rules of the interview game" and leaves the scene after a first active involvement because her husband is the "official" interviewee. But my impression is that her contribution to the conversation is much more complex and has to do with the fact that she wants to be a good hostess to her guests, the two interviewers, i.e., she wants them to leave their home with a rich and differentiated picture of her husband's and their shared lives in the former Soviet Union and in Germany. She often adds clarifications when she thinks that something which her husband says might not be totally understandable to her interviewers, and she starts a lot of narrative sequences which her husband also contributes to. Their co-narratives are lively and detailed, often very serious, e.g., when talking about a life threatening crisis in her husband's chronic illness, but they also celebrate memories of collective reciprocity in neighbourhood relationships or in the Soviet army – beyond ethnic divides – and draw

contrasts to later experiences of a collective and personal deterioration of their life situation. Jurij Baumann's mother-in-law also contributes her memories of living on a sowchose and of being victims of religious persecution during and after the war. A painting which Jurij Baumann made of his daughter Julia and photographs are shown to the interviewers and used for adding narrative and descriptive details, and at the end of the interview funny anecdotes are told (in the presence of a son and a grandson) – e.g., the anecdote of "the drunken chicken" - which seem to belong to the repertoire of cherished family stories. But the tone had already been humorous before, a lot of teasing is going on between the couple, e.g., when Jurij Baumann remembers his time with the army and talks about his wife as "lieutenant" and about himself as "sergeant".

There is a continuing tension between the "official" definition of this interview, which is visible in the interviewers' persistent focus on specificities of biographical experiences of "their" (reluctant) interviewee, and the attempts of the family members who are present, especially the interviewee's wife, to turn this event into an occasion for telling about what "we" have experienced and gone through in Kazakhstan and after migrating to Germany. By narrating, describing and evaluating their hard life and its circumstances - moral achievements and meaning resources (especially with regard to caring for one's family); dramatic turning points; experiences of pain, loss and degradation; collective trajectories in connection with the fate of ethnic Germans in the former Soviet Union and in connection with the dissolution of the Soviet Union; experiences of reciprocity in neighbourhood relationships and in the army; cherished moments etc. – the family members reveal important features and topics of their collective remembering. And they share many things with the interviewers (including family memorabilia like a painting or photographs) which have a special biographical significance for them. They enjoy their guests' interest in their lives and it seems to be a special situation for them.

I have used almost all my time to comment on the **complex interview situation** itself because any attempt to focus at what can be learned about Jurij Baumann's and his family's life has to take the circumstances of the "production of the data" into account. When engaging in a **structural description** of this text I would also try to look at it as a text which reveals interesting interactional processes in which a family remembers and relives important phases of its history in the presence of sympathetic outsiders. That means a conversational or interactional analysis of certain sequences would be interesting in order to learn how the family members cope with their situation and their history by way of collective remembering and story telling. But of course it is also necessary to focus at the substance of what Jurij Baumann and others reveal about their biographical experiences, there are many narrative sequences which show how Jurij Baumann – and also his wife – relive important experiences and phases and evaluate them in retrospect. One can arrive at insights about biographical and family processes and their relationship with collective historical processes. I would suggest a selective description of narrative sequences in order to discover structural processes of Jurij Baumann's life course like trajectories of suffering and biographical projects, but would also look carefully at argumentative sequences (biographical commentaries etc.) which have to be understood (or "pragmatically breached" as Fritz Schütze (2005) calls it) in the context of his biographical experiences. What one can learn from a careful interpretation

of these narratives has to be put together like a mosaic. And you also ask yourself about the general insights which can be arrived at on the basis of such single case studies.

One interesting sequence can be found on pp. 8:48 to 10:35 in the German original version and pp. 8:28-10:10 in the English translation. It starts when Jurij Baumann's wife announces that she would stop "*disturbing*" now – i.e., stop not playing according to the rules of the interview – and comments and jokes about how the division of labour has developed in the couple's life: he being in charge for manual labour whereas she was responsible for all situations which required verbal skills. And in order to not prolong such a pattern which would allow him to "*rely*" on her, she would now leave the scene and let him "*talk to the young ladies*". She is very artful in contextualising what happens in the interview situation in how (she perceives) their life as a couple had developed, and by commenting and joking about it she reaffirms it at the same time. It is like teaching a lesson: "*and you talk to the young ladies*".

Her husband reaction is like a proof or confirmation of her claim: He loudly protests against her leaving the scene: "*And now, and now you go out, I=I=I want to sit quietly there, okay ((questioning)), well what can I still talk about, I don't know.*"

After his wife has left and retreated into another room – I don't know if his mother-in-law is still around, I think so – he shows his perplexity again and hesitates to take the floor as narrator by commenting on the biographical roots of his being a "quiet man". He had talked about this before by referring to his plight as the oldest child being in charge of his younger siblings after the early death of his mother. After a long pause of 13 seconds he starts talking about his biography again, and he does so in a summarising way which stresses the hardship and disappointments which he had endured during his life. (This differs from a narrative which is not shaped and motivated by an overriding self-theory.) The narrative details which he presents serve to back up his **sad global evaluation of his life history** and present life circumstances:

- how he had to take care of his siblings when was a boy; how he had been absorbed by hard work and had missed seeing a lot of his children during their childhood and youth;
- how he is refined to staying at home now after unsuccessful attempts to find a place in the German work life; his experience of being regarded too old and too "Un-German" because of his language ("we don't understand you, you don't speak German like we do");
- his dramatic experiences with crises (a few years ago) related to his chronic blood disease;
- his neglect of his medical treatments because of the plight of his sick brother who had also arrived in Germany (after his other siblings had also arrived here);
- the death of his cousin and his brother in Germany after which he feels very lonely; he had "*fought*" for a long time that his brother could come to Germany (enduring a lot of bureaucratic trouble; at first his brother had not passed the "*test*" as a prerequisite for migrating to Germany, i.e., the language test);

- the development of his meaning resources to always care for his siblings (after his mother had died);
- his dream to become a painter, he had become a truck driver instead and had to develop a lot of manual skills which were necessary under conditions of scarcity (in contrast to Germany where people always call someone else to repair things).

At this point he calls his wife and asks her to bring the painting which he had made of his baby daughter Julia (based on a photograph which had been sent to him when he was in the army). His wife gets drawn into the conversation again and recounts in a detailed way the dramatic events when Julia was born and was a small baby. And then gradually other topics evolve in the course of shared recollections of husband, wife and mother-in-law.

I hope I could convey a sense of the seriousness and wealth of his biographical recollections – recollections which refer to his personal experiences, but also reveal general features in the lives of Germans who left the former Soviet Union and tried to settle in Germany: the importance of the family project; the experience of having become useless and of having become too old too early after migrating to Germany; and the experience of being faced with doubts regarding their claim to be legitimate members in the collectivity of Germans.

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**Thea Boldt (Georg-August-University of Goettingen, Germany): The encounters with Jurij Baumann and his family from the perspective of the interviewer**

The purpose of my talk today is to make you familiar with some details about the context of the interview with Jurij Baumann me and my colleague Viola Stephan did in May 2005. I will also give you some ideas I have according to the role I as an interviewer played in the interaction with Jurij and his family members.

The contact with Baumann family has been established by a friend of one colleague of mine, a social worker in the field of ethnic German youths. Between July 2004 and May 2005 I met Jurij and some of his family members several times. I conducted narrative interviews with members of all four generations of that family living in Germany at the moment. They were all aware of the fact, that I am working at the University and that I am involved in a project about biographies of Russian Germans and they all (also Jurij) agreed to talk to me. The opening question in all of those interviews was to tell me their life and family story. Everything they can remember was interesting for me.

First person from the family I met was Jurij's mother in law – let's call her Lydia. She is living in a small town in central Germany together with Jurij's family - his wife Anna (Lydia's daughter) and three adult sons of Anna and Jurij. Even though they are all living together in a small 4-room flat, where there is no too much space for privacy, I was very surprised that other family members were constantly interrupting my interview with Lydia. Some of them were asking her about some daily matters – for example to give them some money for cigarettes. The others, as Anna did – were taking over not only the moderation of interview but were also negotiating the different meaning of the situations narrated by Lydia. So this was during the interview with Lydia when I first met Anna. She came back home in the middle of my interview with Lydia and came directly to the kitchen, where Lydia and me were sitting. Without introducing herself she started to translate what her mother was saying, as she called it. This was quite surprising as Lydia and I were talking for 3 hours already, and I had



enough time to get use to her German pronunciation from Volga. Apparently Anna was not translating at all but was telling her own story, which was contradicted to the story narrated by Lydia.

When I came back few weeks later to make an interview with Anna the situation repeated. Interview has been interrupted many times by Anna's sons, but also Lydia get herself involved in our conversation. Both women started to argue at one point about the meaning of their life together. Anna was strongly accusing her mother for not taking proper care of her in her childhood. At the end Lydia gave up the struggle to tell her version of her relationship to her daughter.

It is important to point out, that Anna's mother - Lydia is an ethnic German person and Anna's father is Russian. Lydia was born 1927 in Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Volga Germans and she has suffered through the collective condemnation of ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union. She personally together with her family members experienced the banishment to Kazakhstan 1941. Lydia's mother, father and brother have been sentenced to work in the Trud Army<sup>8</sup>. Lydia's father died there. Anna was born in Kazakhstan 1949. As her mother was working in the kolchos many hours a day (she wasn't in the Trud Army) Anna has been taking care of by her grandmother, the mother of Lydia. It seems that this person - Lydia's mother after coming back from the Trud Army has established very strong decisive position in the family. It is also important to stress, that there were no man in the family as Lydia's father died in the Trud Army and her husband, the one of Russian origin, left shortly after Anna was born. The gender notion connected to these facts seems to be very important for the Baumann family and is very much present in the interview with Jurij.

As Anna established very strong bound to her grandmother and took her as an example I assume that she reproduces the role her grandmother had in the family. It was Anna who decided to study German language in Moscow and to work as a German teacher. She was also the one to take an opportunity to migrate from Kazakhstan to Germany 1999 and she persuaded her family to follow her.

So let's go back to the interviews with other family members. You probably won't be surprise when I tell you, that I experienced this same "interrupting" dynamic during the interview with Anna's and Jurij's oldest daughter - Julia (born 1973 in Kazakhstan). Not only her own children were present during the interview taking over the narration for their mother, but also Anna came to visit while we were talking. She was best informed about our meeting in Julia's flat and unexpected for me she came by to take a part in the interview. At this point it was already noticeable, that Jurij never get showed up during any interview. There was always Anna, who was curious about our conversations, and sometimes Lydia. The interview dynamic got even more interesting when I was interviewing Daniel - born 1993 in Kazakhstan the eldest grandson of Jurij and Anna, the son of Julia. I asked Julia explicitly to be alone with her son during the interview, which took place in Julia's 3-room flat in the same small town her parents live. First she accepted my request and let us go to the living room alone. You can imagine how surprise I was realizing, that the living room had no door at all

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<sup>8</sup> Trud Army were work camps in Sibiria and Kazakhstan where 17 to 50 years old women and men of ethnic German origin were forced to work under very difficult circumstances (hunger, cold, humiliation).

to be closed and that Julia was sitting all the time in the corridor listening to us. After a while she came uninvited to the living room joining the conversation. Noticeably enough - this was exactly the moment of the interview when 12-years old Daniel couldn't remember anything anymore.

At this point it was already very clear to me, that some family members were responsible for controlling the family dialog and that there were always women! The gender notion of that phenomenon was striking. Something particular has not been allowed to be said. Something else has had to be stressed. I started to ask myself what and for what reasons had to be hidden within that particular family. And of course what is my role as an interviewer in the process of revealing or supporting the hidden agenda. Is it possible that my questions could be dangerous and this is why every conversation has to be controlled? I had a strong feeling that some of family members are using my presence in some way to strengthen their position in the family – I think about Anna right now and the others see it as a chance to make their story to be told.

The other question I was asking myself was concerning the way the family spokes-woman has been chosen. I was very curious about the process of creating the power of one discourse over the other in that family as well as how this was all connected to the family history?

Let me follow some traces in the script of the interview with Jurij searching for the answers to these questions, yet without revealing the particular context of that interview.

One of the most important subjects of that interview could be called **Jurij as a "quiet man"**.

It is obvious, that Jurij accepted his role as a "quiet man" within the family dialog. Maybe it was even comfortable for him. As any other process that one has also been established through the interaction – in this case probably interaction between the family members. But during the interview Jurij has been asked directly to tell his own story and after some time I had a strong feeling that he wanted to tell it, but he didn't know how. It was tragic. But actually even without knowing that context information we can read it in the script of the interview as Jurij points out that subject himself (I'm quoting Jurij):

*(you know) there is some **limits**, what **can** one say, what should one **not** say, should one keep everything to oneself, I don't know uhm I could say so much, that is -how do you say - my issue //hmm// (8) (Jurij.eng.6/2-4)*

The other important topic of that interview is **Jurij's sickness**, which belongs to the subjects that are aloud to be told. It is also the sickness and its connection to Jurij's mother death that is the main subject of Jurij's live. Talking about the sickness he is not breaking the family rules. But he could say so much more if he would not be obliged to keep silent, as he pointing it out himself (I'm quoting Jurij):

*it's so=such a border this=you=can=tell=this=you=can=**not**=tell because, hm:m ((knocks rapidly four times on the back of the chair)) (4) no idea //I: mmm// (3) I was raised=that way I don't know //hmmm// (3) obligatory silence//I: I see// ((laughs)) (13) (Jurij.eng.8/43-46)*

If we would follow that sentence we would need to look for the genesis of Jurij's silence in the way he has been brought up. But there is also another trace given by Jurij's wife Anna during the interview with Jurij. I am quoting Anna:

*I was always afraid that he would say something rash and it would insult me it would stand between us, but oh well thank=God he always managed to control his tongue pretty good, and therefore it=it all went well ((laughing)), (Jurij10/46-49)*

So it is not only that something has had to be kept silent during Jurij's childhood. Also the marriage between Jurij and Anna is build up upon Jurij's "quietness".

Let me include my context knowledge to elaborate on that. There are indeed some important reasons for keeping Jurij's mouth shut. There is something I know from Jurij's daughter – Julia, something she reveals very unwillingly during her interview. The Baumann family has a secret connected to the collective history of Russian Germans in Kazakhstan. Jurij was born 1952 in Kazakhstan, but his family has not been banished. They lived in Kazakhstan for a long time already so their family history didn't match to the general history of Russian Germans. Above it all Jurij's grandfather has been imprisoned but in fact not out of political reasons. He had stolen something. Jurij's grandmother left her husband while he was in prison. She married again and was having other children. Let me point out, that those kind of facts were obviously unbidden to be talked about when Jurij was a child. From the other hand Baumann family willing to emigrate to Germany has had to proof their German origin and the best way to do that was to proof their belonging to the collective prosecution of ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union. Jurij's family history didn't match with the classic sample and was therefore dangerous.

Let me say few more words about context of the interview with Jurij. It was the last interview in that family and the only one I did together with second interviewer. I must admit, that it was quite uncomfortable situation for me as well as for my colleague. In all other interviews there was an interruption and negotiation process between the family members concerning the meaning of the narration. But it was the interview with Jurij that I experienced as a most irritating one. And probably that was the reason why we decided to give you this interview to comment on. Actually it was one of the most difficult interviews I have ever done. During the interview I constantly had a feeling, that Jurij has been literally incapacitated by his wife – Anna. And as you can see on the transcript all the longer parts of the text were produced by Jurij while being alone with us – interviewers in the room, without his wife to control him or us.

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