




**Māra Zirņīte**

[University of Latvia]

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3938-6177>

## **Dialogue Between Generations: A Case Study**

DOI: 10.26774/wrhm.293

The article is based on a broader research project funded by the Latvian Council of Science:  
“Narrative Perspectives on the Intergenerational Transmission of Memory”  
(project number: lzp-2018/1-0458).



## Background

This analysis is based on two interviews with Emma Jozuus from the collection of Latvian National Oral History (NOH) Project in the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the University of Latvia. Both interviews – the first, an hour-long video, the second, after a short while, a three-hour-long audio tape were recorded in 1991, a year of a crucial turn in Latvia's history. The country's independence from the USSR was defended on the barricades in January and Latvia's statehood was restored later that year. The traces of these events can be discerned in the way Emma's memories unfolded.

When someone is one hundred years old, as Emma Jozuus was at the time of the interview, she can sit in silence in such a way that the interviewer can be afraid of disturbing this silence with a clumsy or stupid question. Her silence seemed so pregnant, and it had to be approached with reverence. At the same time, you also understand that this conversation may be the only chance; this possibility may not present itself again. If you do not hit the right topic or tone, the doors will not open for you and the discovery of people's memories will not happen.

This article is inspired by my own experience. During my first interviews with people 50 years or more older than myself, I imagined their memory world as compressed and hidden, and I thought that I needed to find a way to open this world. I wanted to open the gates of memory to help people find their way back to events, impressions, and feelings that are important for them and for their worldview, their personality, and intellectual development. I also experienced this distance of age when I trained the students for interviewing and participated in fieldwork together with them. Some of the younger students were afraid of the elderly, while others started speaking in their every-day manner; only some of the younger interviewers found a wider focus through which to enter the unfamiliar mental world before them.

## Oral History and the Life Story Approach

The Latvian NOH Project has been active for 30 years in the fields of the humanities and social sciences at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the University of Latvia. In this capacity, the researchers have accumulated a collection of life stories<sup>1</sup>

1 Several scholars have distinguished between the life story and other forms of oral history. According to Charlotte Linde: "The first criterion for the including of a story in the life story is [...] that its evaluative point primarily be to show something about the kind of person the speaker is, rather than to demonstrate something about the way the world is. This distinction arises from how the story is constructed, not from the particular type of events narrated"; C. Linde, *Life Stories. The Creation of Coherence*, New York 1993, p. 22; "The life story is shaped in the informal conversation of interviewer and informant without

that represents a wide range of people and their pasts as far back as their memories reach.

Life stories are used as a source for social research, including topics such as human values and their evolution, cultural identity, etc. However, we have some projects that are focused on specific themes. We have used both oral history and life story approaches in a research project on poverty in Latvia after the collapse of the Soviet regime. Also, we have used both oral history and life story approaches to study life in one apartment house in Riga, all of whose residents we interviewed. The current research project is devoted to the intergenerational transmission of memory.

From the beginning of NOH research project, the target age group was the older generation, whose memories could testify to historical experiences. Therefore, the first goal of research was to develop a collection of people's informal biographies, presented in ordinary language and thus also providing insight into personality of speaker and such features as speech, modes of expression, and everyday culture. At the present, we have gathered over 4,800 interviews, most of them life stories. The average age of narrators exceeds 70. In 1997, we initiated a project titled "The Long-Lived", in which we recorded 20 people whose ages ranged from 90 to 100. The NOH collection includes 33 interviews with people born in the 19th century. The oldest respondents were Ignats Gercans, interviewed in Riga, who was 102 years of age, and Erna Sviestiņa, interviewed in Stockholm, who was 103. We are also continuing to supplement the interview with Ēriks Tomsons, who is turning 103 years old on December 31, 2021 and lives in Valmiera – near Emma Jozuus' birthplace in Vidzeme.

The sociologist Baiba Bela-Krūmiņa has stated that 'personal narratives are [...] very sensitive to dominating narratives and social values present at the moment of telling. People frame their stories in relation to dominant storylines.'<sup>2</sup> This finding can be encouraging when preparing to listen to an older respondent. Despite different time and space, little-known events and depicted objects, the narrative will be encompassed by a certain structure. The key is to build rapport so that the narrator understands what the interviewer tries to elicit.

In interviews with the older generation, we were particularly interested in asking interviewees about historical events or ethnographic rituals, beliefs, and tradi-

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clichés of the structural quantitative surveys. The life story told in an informal conversation expresses sincere human feelings, the inside world of tellers, not using alien words and expressions. The author of the life story can tell about the feelings and the situations and life events in an ordinary manner. Topics, the way of telling, use of language, patterns of imagination – they characterise the life culture of the teller"; M. Zirņīte, *Summary: Cultural Identities in Life Stories*, in: *Atmiņa kultūrvēsturiskā kontekstā. Starptautiskas konferences materiāli*, Daugavpils 2002, p. 84.

2 B. Bela-Krumina, *The Relationship Between Personal and Social: Strategies of Everyday Life in the Process of Radical Social Changes*, "Pro Ethnologia 16: Studies on Socialist and Post-socialist Everyday Life," vol. 16 (2003), p. 10.

tions. They have a wealth of knowledge. But our original hope – to hear a sequential story that would answer all our imagined questions – was not realised. Why? Does this mean that there are insurmountable barriers between elderly narrators and younger interviewers that impede expanding our knowledge about the past?

### **Two Interviews and Three Different Interviewers**

To answer this question, I would like to offer the case study of a video-interview with a 100 year-old woman. Emma Jozuus was born in the countryside of northern Latvia in 1890. Among Emma's relatives are educated well-known people<sup>3</sup> Even though in this part of Latvia peasants historically received education earlier than in other parts of the country, higher education for girls at this time was not very popular. Emma, however, was one of the first women in this region who went to study at the Chemical Pharmaceuticals Institute in St. Petersburg. Historically, St. Petersburg was one of the cities where young people from Latvia sought higher education.

During her studies, Emma worked as a pharmacist and as an assistant at the institute. Her career was interrupted when she returned to her father's homestead, where she lived the rest of her life as a farmer; after the Second World War, she milked cows, tended livestock, and grew crops on a collective farm.

Emma was interviewed a little after her 100th birthday by two interviewers: Māra Zirņīte, 56 years younger than the narrator, and Arta Savdona, who was 78 years younger. The interview was videotaped. A short time later, an audio interview was recorded by Anita Timans (70 years younger), an oral history researcher who had carried out fieldwork on the topic of Latvian women's experiences throughout the 20th century. Thus, there are two different interviews and three different interviewers, whose interviewing approach and content priorities differ.<sup>4</sup>

### **Construction of the Video Interview**

The videotaping begins with the interviewer, Māra (47 years old), questioning the narrator to reveal what she knows about her oldest relative. Instead of answering, Emma remains silent, and this silence lasts for 60 seconds. This one minute of silence is significant. The interviewer wants to allow Emma time to shape the story in her own words and does not want to impose her own vocabulary. When, after one minute, Māra breaks the silence with a simple 'Please start!', Emma begins speaking and continues to speak freely. Apparently, she had not understood when she was expected to open her story. Without the interviewer posing a question Emma fluently narrates how her ancestors chose to settle on a piece of land far from roads, with

3 Emma's cousin Pauls Jozuus (1873–1937) is a well-known choir conductor and music teacher in Latvia.

4 Both interviews are documented as NOH-3037 in the Latvian National Oral History Archive.

barren and wet soil; how her father bought out the land from the estate owners in the 1890s and reveals that she was the 5th generation to manage the farm.

When Arta (22 years old) asks descriptive questions: 'How did you live here? How many sisters, brothers did you have?', Emma follows with information about a brother and two sisters, who all received primary education in their parish. After 15 minutes, Emma describes her path to higher education. Arta asks supplementary questions like: 'Did her parents have the money to pay for her schooling?', 'Who made the decision about her pursuing higher education?' Emma answers proudly: 'I did myself! I suggested it to my parents. I decided it myself because my teachers gave me such advice.'

Emma speaks in great detail about her studies, recalling details, dates, and surrounding events. In the course of this narrative, Emma mentions her father's brother Eduards who was educated in the first teacher's Seminar in Valka and his classmate who was one of the first educated Latvian pastors in Vidzeme. The memories of her youth focus a great deal on educated people who were active in society.

In her story, Emma mentions her relative who was a refugee after 1905. This provides an opportunity to pose a general question about the family's attitude toward the Revolution of 1905. Even though there had been times in the course of the interview when she had not answered general questions, this time, after a moment of silence, she answers spiritedly that the feeling about the 1905 Revolution was positive because the family had suffered under the Russian tsar.

Specific questions (How? In what way?) confirm that one of the forms of repression was the Russification of the schools. During the last quarter of the 19th century, the use of the Latvian language in schools was forbidden by law. Emma recalls an anecdote about a school inspector who examined the schoolboys' Russian language ability. The boys did not understand Russian and as a result of the misunderstanding, all the schoolchildren fled from the class. The point of the anecdote is that Russification efforts in Latvia were not successful.

Emma says that she never married, but she raised children that she took in. Based on earlier information, it seems that the obstacle to marriage may have been the time she devoted to her studies. But in answer to a question about: 'Why she did not get married?', she says: 'It was my generation that went away to war.' In this subtle way, Emma reminds the interviewers of the historical context of her youth.

In the 50th minute of the interview, Emma takes note of a turning point in her life. In the 20s, having finished her studies at St. Petersburg but interrupting the career she had begun as an assistant at the institute, she returns home to help her mother run the homestead.

1928 was an unfortunate year – floods ruined crops and cattle died. Still, because of a variety of resources – the support of the state, flour imported from the United States, state-sponsored loans, and the help of seasonal workers – she was

able to get the farm on its feet. They were able to plough about 30 hectares of land. With pride and joy, she discusses how much could be done in this period of Latvian independence.

When Māra asks: 'Did you apply your studies in any way the rest of your life?,' Emma answers that knowledge never goes unused. Perhaps this is why she has lived such a long life, she adds.

In response to a question on the cultural life in the countryside, Emma shares that she attended the open school, which the popular Latvian philosopher Zenta Mauriņa<sup>5</sup> had organised in a nearby center. Many educated people gathered there.

The story that follows takes place without questions from the interviewers. The interviewee's tone of voice does not significantly change as she describes how, when the Soviet regime established a collective farm, she lost her land and barn. Still, Emma continued to care for the *kolhoz* cows in her barn that the *kolhoz* had seized, milking 10 to 20 cows by hand. In 1965 (when Emma was already 75), the collective farm started to give out pensions. She retired and received 12 rubles – the first and very low pension that *kolhoz* workers received at the time. When her home burned down, Emma moved into the sauna and made her life there. Now she lives with her adopted daughter's children in a completely different region of Latvia from her earlier life.

Her conception of her long life is reflected in her answers to the concluding questions:

'What remains of your life's work?'

'Nothing remains. Everything has an end. Life also.'

'How did you survive it all?'

'I can survive everything.'

'Didn't it hurt?'

'One is not allowed to feel pain! A lot is destroyed, not just my home.'

At the end of the video interview, the interviewers draw attention to the knitted white gloves on the table. The gloves open up a very good end to the conversation, as Emma talks about the knitting she continues to do despite her poor eyesight and that the fact that patterns no longer turn out evenly.

### **Audio Interview as Oral History**

In the audio interview, Anita, who is a 30 year-old oral history researcher trained in psychiatry in Great Britain, uses direct informative and descriptive questions to construct the broad social landscape in rural Latvia from the 19th century to the 1960s. The researcher receives clear answers to all her specific questions that address topics such as: the division of labour between men and women; how

5 Zenta Mauriņa (1897–1978) – Latvian writer, philosopher, and essayist.

the interviewee's mother and father wove and how they set up looms for themselves and for the neighbours; children's chores; societal relationships among farmers and the family and so on until the period of the collective farm.

The interview reveals new emotion-filled evidence: Emma's mother grew up as a full orphan, but also received a good education. She graduated with great success from parish school as the only girl among 40 boys. Emma's father heard about this event and came seeking a bride. Her mother was 17 years younger than her husband and after her marriage lived for her home and family.

When asked whether she feels that because she did not get married that part of her life perhaps is left open or unfulfilled, Emma answers: 'I consider myself a fortunate person. I have always done well. After all, I finished my education. I then saved my home. I did what I could. What needed to be done, I did.'

### **Life Story and Oral History Approaches**

In the video interview of the life story, the narrator was given more freedom to shape her story. As a result, a life story was created with the culmination of the composition at the end of the interview: 'What remains of your life's work?' – 'Nothing remains. Everything has an end. Life also.'

The audio interview uses the oral history approach: the interviewer follows a thematic plan that had been previously developed. Yet, she does not use a set of questions but allows the questions to be shaped by the course of the interview. Thanks to the wealth of the narrator's wide cultural experience, she answers the question precisely, demonstrating her keen memory and perception.

Both approaches, each in its own way, respect an important aspect of oral history interviewing:

Instead of worrying about asking the "right questions" – a traditional historical method – oral history needs to listen to the self-evaluative comments of the narrator, the metastatements, and the overall logic of the narrative that is unfolding. The idea is to give the person the ball and let them run with it, the longer the better.<sup>6</sup>

Such an approach accomplishes several purposes:

- It allows the person to demonstrate unique knowledge, which will then become the central subject of the interview;
- It makes it clear that the person interviewed will be expected to do the talking, after having been generally launched on the topic;
- It demonstrates that the interviewer will be supportive, not confrontational;

6 I. Gale Carpenter, *Oral Interview – Theory and Praxis*, in: M. Zirņīte (ed.), *Spogulis: Latvijas Mutvārdu Vēsture*, Rīga 2011, pp. 96–97.

- It gives plenty of leeway for subsequent questions, linked to the interviewee's particular point of view.<sup>7</sup>

In both cases, Emma confirms that the knowledge she acquired secured her a good and long life. She demonstrates this evaluation of her life by responding to the variety of approaches by the different interviewers and by traversing the age difference with the same simple language, clear conclusions and summations. In each case, she elicits a deep respect for her courage to face the facts and realities of life without self-illusions. She fully demonstrates that a person has unique knowledge, which will be the subject of the interview. It is she who answers the interviewers' questions with understanding and deep intelligence, which reaches across generations. Her life parallels Latvia's history and Latvian people historical inclination, including the high regard for education, and the desire to manage their land. In an interview that took place in 1991, when Latvia was still striving for independence, it was important to remind Emma of the Russification that the nation experienced 100 years ago.

At the same time, I must take note of the minute-long silence at the beginning of the video interview. This silence reminds us of the external barriers in interview situations, but also demonstrates that these can be overcome by sensitively adjusting reactions and questions that correspond to the situation.

### Conclusion

Interviews that bring together people across great differences of age and life experience reflect the interaction between two different cultures, each of which points us 'to the acquitted knowledge that people use to interpret experience and generate social behaviour.'<sup>8</sup> The interviewer in this case works as a medium to bridge the gap between cultures.

The life story approach also provides a greater opportunity during the course of the interview for the interviewers to understand and evaluate the cultural world of the narrator. This approach allows the interviewers to pose questions that interest the narrators. These questions are not created outside the context of the interview but are a part of the interview and communication process.

The interview will be successful, despite the generation gap:

- If both parties are interested in the interview;
- If the interviewer is able to involve himself in the narrator's cultural world;
- If the interviewer can identify with the situations described in the story and is able to ask questions to elicit more specific information;
- If the interviewer is willing to gain the full picture of the narrator's life with all its complexities.

7 *Ibidem.*

8 J.P. Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview*, New York 1979, p. 58.



Possible conclusions derive not only from the text, but also depend on the interviewee's interests in the topics discussed. Even though the age difference may make it difficult for younger interviewers to follow detailed historical accounts, reliance on and trust in the narrator's own story produces a personal and emotional understanding of cultural experiences over the course of a long life separated in time from one's own.

These examples indicate that the age difference does not disturb the interview if the interviewee is open to dialogue. Any moments of confusion or misunderstanding are overcome by the interviewer's empathy and focused awareness of the aims of the interview. Even a moment of silence may aid the beginning of an interview, in helping each person to become accustomed to someone new and unfamiliar, to establish an open relationship with that person, and to carry out unencumbered conversation.

From a temporal distance, understanding particular spiritual endeavours and physical conditions equals approaching a different culture. Respect and empathy are the interviewer's main tools that help approaching an unknown reality. Only through grasping the harsh conditions of the narrator's life can one understand the way Emma sums up her story: nothing is permanent, not even a life, yet she is content that at every moment of her life she has done what was needed.