How to Use Life History in Sociology?

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Abstract

In this study I present how life history method may contribute to better understanding of society and culture or historical periods. The past lives in the present—as they say. “Putting together” a person’s life according to different aspects complements the social self-awareness. First, I briefly summarize the characteristics of life history, then I describe some aspects of analysis and after these I will present a concrete life history analysis. The last step was when I drew attention to theory—that it is worthwhile to support and sum up the narrative of life history with a carefully chosen theory.

Keywords: Biography Methods; Personal Documents; Life History; Turning Points; Analysis of Life Stories.

Introduction

The gathering and analysis of personal documents has become a popular method in the sociology in the last decades. Personal documents include correspondences, personal diaries, biographies, autobiographies, life histories, narrative stories and the like. The biographical method is used when we scientifically analyse personal memories. By using this method, social processes and phenomena can be understood better, through personal documents (Atkinson, 1998; Denzin, 1989; Miller, 2005).

In the 1980s an intellectually interesting and useful scientific discussion went on among the „reinventors” of the biographical method—unfortunately we cannot deal with it in much detail here. In that period a multitude of studies appeared with arguments for the use of qualitative methods, which had been irrationally squeezed out by quantitative methods by then. The authors of these studies thought that qualitative methods should be valued more and should get their well-deserved place in sociological research (Bertaux, 1981; Roos, 2005; Thompson, 1981).

Short history and characteristics of biographical research

There are several reasons behind the Renaissance of qualitative methods we are experiencing nowadays (Glen, 1981; Thompson, 1981; László, 1998; Pataki, 1995; 1996; 1997; 2001; Roos 2005; Miller, 2005). Positivism was dominant as a basic attitude in social science for a long time but its dominance broke from the seventies, so researchers’ attention can turn more towards personal documents again. The study of the behaviour of adults and the aged using a life history perspective has recently come into the forefront, leading to an increase in the value of personal memories in the eyes of researchers. Increased longevity has become a central topic of interest in developmental psychology, and the systematic observation of changes in personal life has become important. Although the number of results of quantitative studies about the role of the family and the individual in social history has grown, many researchers still see a lack of data necessary for general conclusions. These gaps of knowledge can be bridged by information from personal histories and stories. The sociology of old age has become connected to the research of life histories. The fast development of information technology has made it possible to analyse...
data of life courses with computers, allowing even their multiple reanalysis (Lewins & Silver, 2007).

When speaking about the “return” or “rediscovery” of personal documents we refer to the fact that these were already used in American sociology, by Thomas & Znaniecki, in the first decades of the 20th century (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1958 [1919-21]). The connections between changes in personality and social changes were studied by them with the help of diaries and correspondences. The results of their research were published in the USA in 1919-1921. The method of these (now classical) sociologists was not generally used in sociology by their contemporaries, even though it was adopted by the Chicago School in criminology and in the research of deviance.

Their attitude in dealing with personal documents is notable even today. Thomas & Znaniecki (1958) thought that a life history was the most perfect set of data a sociologist could dream of. But they also saw the dangers of using this method: “We attribute a general value to individual attitudes prematurely.” To avoid this, they proposed that “a certain behavior observed in the life of an individual, at a certain point in his life, should be checked by comparing it to similar behaviors in his life course, to those ones that define the meaning of his life”. The danger they indicated still exists today, and the answer given to this problem is worth rethinking when using this research method. I believe the narrative life story has also gone in this direction (Kochuyt, 2005; Kovács, 2011; Rosenthal, 2005).

It is necessary to take different factors into account when we interpret personal documents (by which we henceforth mean life histories). One of those, for example, is the question of the selectivity of human memory. We know that an individual only remembers things important to him as has been evidenced by several psychological, anthropological, ethnographic, historical and sociological studies. A person telling stories about his life chooses them from his “collection of stories”. And he even arranges these in a particular order according to the importance of his memories and stories. The order of importance of memories can be rearranged by everyday life events that influence the individual. Consequently, a life history is an open system that acquires its final structure and chronology only at the moment of death (Denzin, 1989; Plummer, 2013; Smith, 1998).

Life stories mean processes with a continuous possibility of smaller changes and this feature of them should also be considered by us as researchers. Major changes, such as change of the political system or a huge personal life crisis, might even lead to breaches in the life course and to essential turns in one’s fate. By mentioning these problems, we do not mean that the selective mentioning of events is random or arbitrary. On the contrary: life stories do not mean random series of isolated events but constitute a special structure by their order of importance for that particular person, as we noted above. The individual tells the story of his life according to that special structure.

It has become known by now that an individual presents her/his subjective self-portrait when he tells the story of his life – he formulates the picture of his self-interpretation then. It is often the very situation of being an object of research which creates the possibility of this self-expression (Atkinson, 1998; Bertaux, 2005; Denzin, 1989; Kohli, 1981; Riessman, 1993).

The questions whether “this really happened so” and if the events told are real often come to mind. A consensus has been reached about this among the experts of this method: according to them not the events of the story themselves are what really count but the subjective perspective of the individual expressed in the story. But what can subjective truth mean in such cases where the researcher can clearly see that the stories told by the subject are full of omissions and distortions? As an example, one can mention one of the best made Hungarian documentaries of the last years about the camp for political prisoners at Recsk. Both prisoners and guards of that infamous camp had a chance to speak. The guards said–contrary to what could be heard from the prisoners—that they had tortured nobody. It was obvious about the majority of guards that they had lied without batting an eyelid. Among the guards the one with the nickname “Piros” (‘Red’, pronounce as “pirosh”) meant the most extreme example: the audience of the film responded to his memories with a loud uproar because just a short time before that in the film prisoners had

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2 Their opinion is quoted by Markiewicz & Lagneau, 1982, p. 12.
spoken about the very tortures “Piros” had done to them. In this case it was not a question as to who told the truth. This case is interesting in itself, but the reason why we refer to it here is that it demonstrates to us that life stories lead us primarily to the storyteller’s worldview and identity—much more so than to the truth the narrated events contain. What we were able to find out about that guard in this example is that today he cannot or does not want to face his earlier behaviour any more. So Piros’ statement does not mean he did not beat the prisoners but that today he thinks it is better not to confess this publicly.

Interpreting truth and credibility subjectively means that our memories become part of our identity and this way they unavoidably undergo some changes. So, the primary question is not whether that particular person tells the truth or lies—instead, it is worth concentrating on the question why he presents his life the way he does.

Thus, a life history is an individual’s construction about himself (Bausinger, 1988). The sociologist must discern and recognize a particular version of the past the storyteller actually lives together with as his own at the time of the interview (Bertaux, 1981; Bertaux 2005).

**Methods for the analysis of life stories**

When a sociologist begins to analyse life stories, he/she can meet the problem of the lack of practical help she hoped to get from literature. This is not to say that one cannot read about practical applications of theory in textbooks on qualitative methods. On the contrary, studies describing the methodology of processing data are proliferating³. Nevertheless, it is still a frequent experience that researchers cannot find proper help in translating theory into practice. They themselves have to elaborate the actual steps of analysis at this initial phase of research either alone or—in the best case—together with a few fellow researchers. This is so because the analysis is greatly influenced by the very topic itself, by the particular aspects chosen to concentrate on in a given case and by the sensibility of the researcher towards a given topic. We can rarely find a case where an already successful pattern of analysis can be applied the same way, as a recipe. We, of course, do not claim that knowing others’ experience cannot mean help: knowing more methods facilitates creating our own. What we emphasize here is the fact that knowing how to apply certain analytical methods in our particular case is of primary importance and knowing actual methods is only secondary to this.

We must concentrate upon teaching each other how to create analytical methods or patterns rather than only upon teaching existing patterns.

The work of interpretation actually begins for a sociologist when she first takes the written version of life histories into her hands. First the abundant tide of data should be arranged in a way that the analysis from a chosen aspect will become possible. Before proper arrangement the material might seem to be chaotic and full of contradictions. At first every life history appears as a unique and irreproducible adventure and it is only after the interpreter’s work that a one-off text becomes general and particularity leads to generalizability.

By now several approaches to arranging and analysing texts have become known. We will introduce some of them here.

**Aspects of the proposed way of analysis**

One of the first tasks of a researcher is to make a chronology of a life history. When doing this, she makes a scheme of the life history, ie a detailed data sheet. An essential question is the necessary content of this data sheet.

³ One example of that is the *Qualitative Research Methods Series* published by Sage, which began in 1986 and nearly 50 volumes have already been published about this topic by now. Besides this *The Narrative Study of Lives*, a series of books also from Sage is worth to be mentioned. The volumes of the periodical *Journal of Narrative and Life History* continuously publishes the results of qualitative research, too.
To make a chronology, it is not only the data and events mentioned that should be gathered from the text but also any stories told by the storyteller\(^4\). The most general aspects a researcher should take into consideration are these:

1. Dimensions of personal life: cultural, social and psycho-social dimensions.
2. Recognizing the turning points in the individual’s fate and registering the circumstances of his life during the periods between them.
3. The individual’s particular way of adaptation to the given social circumstances.

When speaking about the cultural dimension of a life history we basically examine the character and content of an individual’s career: we trace those interpersonal systems of expectations and behavioural patterns among which the individual grew up. One can say that every culture offers more general models or plans of a life course for its participants and they use or change this according to their individual opportunities.

In everyday life the social and the cultural dimension are not separated. However, for the purposes of analysis it is useful to distinguish between them. The social dimension can be discovered in those actions and decisions of an individual which allow us to recognise the behavioural patterns of certain groups.

In our example brought forward as an illustration of life history analysis (see the ‘Marta’ life history part later), cultural and social dimensions were specified as follows:

*Family environment:* We establish the interviewee’s social layer of origin. What memories does she have of her parents, what did she stress when she characterized his parents? How did she present her family’s expectations toward her as a child? Was she able to identify herself with her family’s expectations, or does she foreshadow her later escape from those?

*Local society:* Based on the life history, we established the characteristics of her everyday life. What memories of these does the subject have, what and how much does she tell us about these things? What did she deem to be worth mentioning with respect to the local system of relationships? Why? What kind of stories did she attach to these?

Unavoidably, the psycho-social dimension appears in the life history. This dimension divides the life course into eight stages, according to Erikson (Erikson, 1991). There is an obvious developmental process throughout these stages as a result of the interplay between society and the individual human psyche. Of Erikson’s eight stages we shall deal with only seven of them here:

- (1.) *early childhood:* events, players, systems of expectations,
- (2.) *school age:* events, players, systems of expectations,
- (3.) *adolescence:* events, players, systems of expectations,
- (4.) *early adulthood:* events, players, systems of expectations,
- (5.) *adulthood:* events, players, systems of expectations,
- (6.) *working career:* events, players, systems of expectations,
- (7.) *establishing of starting a family:* events, players, systems of expectations

We can also make a rough chronology of the life-changing turning points in the individual’s life. The most profound and thoroughly described parts of life history interviews are about these turning points in the individuals’ lives. From these stories we can understand how the individual interprets her life’s turning points, what she traces them back to, what she thinks about them in retrospect.

We can compile a chronology of the adaptation strategies, too. If we choose adaptation as the basic aspect of observation, it will lead us to the comparison of behaviours and life conditions before and after those turning points of the individual’s life. What kind of changes in the individual’s behaviour can be observed during the different periods of her life, and to what extent can these changes be seen as particular or as generalizable – these are the questions that arise here. The individual’s adaptation strategies appear in the periods between the turning points of his life. What kind of social roles has the interviewee taken in her environment and how has she got those roles? How does she interpret those roles of her own?

\(^4\)Life history is, practically speaking, the personal history of a person in the light of events and data. This is almost always completed with *life stories*, which are very important, because they speak about the picture the storyteller creates about himself and about his way of thinking. The *life stories* appearing within *life histories* are fiction expressing personal identity.
How to Use Life History in Sociology?

We try to answer these questions by presenting a life history – displaying the self-image of an individual and locating their life’s story in a particular social and historical situation. We try to interpret the total life history by the help of a theoretical framework and doing so we create the possibility of drawing a general conclusion based on this particular life history.

Gathering data by life history interviews

The life history interview analysed in this study was made as part of the Hungarian part of an international research of the sociology of church and religion.\(^5\) I have investigated the problems of religion and identity in the period of the Communist dictatorship. We have conducted thirty life history interviews the subjects of which were gathered by the snowball sampling method. Our aim was to find some old persons who claimed that they maintained their religious identity in the period of the Communist dictatorship, too. The type of the interview can be classified as oral history, in which one can observe how individual fates intermingle with great societal changes. The interviewer endeavoured to ask every supposedly essential question during the interview and let the interviewee talk about anything he or she considers to be important. Several studies and books have been made based upon these interviews since then (Bögre, 2004; Koltai & Tóth, 2003; Máté-Tóth & Mikuscsák, 2001).

Márta’s life story was chosen partly because it was a suitable demonstration of the steps of the processing of life history interviews and the possibilities to interpret them.

In the following I will present the analysis of Márta’s life story using the above-mentioned methodological tools.

The life story of the widow of a victim of a pre-planned, „staged” political trial

The Summary of Márta’s biography

Márta, the second child in a craftsman’s family, was born in a village near Budapest, in 1922. Her father, a brazier, sent his daughters to a state civil school\(^6\). He wanted to ensure they had good education, but he could not–he died in 1935, when Márta was 13 years old. Their mother not being able to afford the orphans’ schooling, they had to abandon it and start work.

After these few words about her childhood, she continued her story with her memories from the age of 17–the memories of war. First, she mentioned the Polish soldier refugees who appeared in their village. The inhabitants received them with compassion and food.

In another memory of hers, German soldiers were billeted in the village, of which she has kept good memories, the reason being that the Germans wanted to transport the female members of her family to some “secure” place because they feared for them, considering the possibility of the violent deeds of the approaching Russian soldiers.

It was during these years that Márta lost her first fiancé–he had leukaemia. No more than that was revealed about him during the interview.

Márta married after the war, in 1948. She was 26 years old then. She was able to live for 3 years with her husband, who was dragged away by the Communist secret police, ÁVO in 1951. Márta’s husband was convicted and executed through a pre-planned “staged” trial connected with the so-called Grősz-trial\(^7\).

Marta left no stone unturned to save her husband but in vain. She has never even been given an official notice about either the time of the execution or of the burial. It was only by accident that an official document about her husband’s execution got into her hands in 1956, in the days

\(^5\) Aufbruch I. wave (1999-2001). In this international research participated 10 post-socialist countries. The author conducted an oral history / life history theme in it as a team-leader. From this time, she continuously collected life histories in Hungary. Márta’s life history is part of this research work.

\(^6\) In Hungarian: „polgári”; it was, practically, a higher category of elementary school, it meant 4 classes for 10-14-year-old children – after the first 4 classes for the 6-10-year-olds.

\(^7\) This was a politically motivated “staged” trial pre-planned by the Communists against József Grősz /yozeht gres/, archbishop of Kalocsa/kalotcha/. 
of the Hungarian uprising against the Communist dictatorship. Then one of the insurrectionists found that document in the local council building and showed it to Márta.

After her husband was dragged away she got mental breakdowns several times, and she couldn’t find her place in the world. Only in the Bible was she able to find a solution. She had been religious earlier, too, but then the world changed for her. One day, while she was sick, she was turning over pages in the Bible when she suddenly felt she had never been able to understand the sentences so profoundly and she did believe what she had read. From then on, she felt she had found her only support, the Christian faith.

Pressed by her relatives, she married again in 1963. This marriage of hers did not last long, either. Her second husband died after four years of marriage. Márta was 45 when she was left alone again.

She tried to come to terms with the shocks of life in two ways. On the one hand, she buried herself in work—she built a house. Meanwhile she cared for her sick mother, who did not have a pension. When her mother died, she regularly visited one of her sisters and helped her family. On the other hand, her deep depression was over since her conversion. She took Communion daily, but she did not want to meet people, so she went to church by back yards every day. She was invited to work as a maid at the local parish at the end of the 1970s, but she turned down this job, citing family reasons.

At the time of the interview Márta was considered to be strange in the village: her deep faith was acknowledged but her way of behaviour appeared to be inexplicable to many. She liked to address children or youngsters on the street, but she talked only about Jesus or the truths of the Christian faith with them.

After 1989 her decision to reject the financial compensation offered to her for her husband’s execution caused puzzlement. She consciously failed to receive the 1 million HUF sent to her by the government. Her explanation was this: “I promised to Jesus that even little would be enough for me.” This was hardly acceptable to the villagers.

The next case symbolized her special situation well. One day she found a wreath pinned up on her gate, and a small flower and a slip of paper also pinned up beside it. On the paper, written by a child’s hand, there were names and one word: “SECRET”. Márta interpreted this to mean that she was loved by the children in the village.

Presentation of the periods of her life with analysis.

From childhood until marriage

Márta talked very little about her childhood memories. For a few sentences she flashed the vision of a happy childhood but she kind of overwrote it with a following half-sentence. It turned out that the three sisters loved each other very much and that their father was a very good man. “It was nice, but my way now is not …” and she stopped.

With that half-sentence ‘it was nice but …’, does she already indicate that nice things have ended in her life and her life is nice in another way now? Or did she mean that the life she saw as nice was not really like that after all? Or did she remember the loneliness she had experienced? This unfinished half-sentence may be continued in several ways—what one can already note with certainty is that the split character of her life’s story re-emerged in her memories again and again.

It was her father’s early death that she actually started the series of tragedies that happened to her.

“We remained orphans and we remained alone. But, notwithstanding, life was nice. We started work. The notaries loved us, intelligent people loved us. Unfortunately, no one were left. All of them disappeared.”

Márta was first left alone by her father’s death. In spite of this she was even able to describe this period of her life as nice, but she does not admit this to herself. She confesses that they were loved in her village, at least by some intelligent people, but she added at once that “no one was left” among them and “all of them disappeared”. Why could she not stress more that she was loved by these people and that she also loved them? Why does not she linger on her memories a

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8 Today this would mean about 3 million HUF or 10,000 €
bit longer – for example with an anecdote? Why does Márta use her memories about love and happiness only contrapuntally? She stated that had been a time when she was loved but it was not so now. She did this perhaps because she wanted to declare already at the very beginning how she could view her life. The same narrative style continued when she was recalling her memories from her youth.

She mentioned that Polish soldier refugees had appeared in their village and were catered for by the inhabitants. They gave civvies to them and they were allowed to remain in the village until the German occupation of Hungary. She preserved a sweet picture of them in herself, she said that they had taught her how to dance polka. “They were lovely” as she characterised them. But she did not leave even that memory alone.

“They were lovely but then they left, and I don’t know where they went.”

The next event she spoke about was already her experience in the 2nd world war in a period when Márta shared a house with German soldiers. She described the German officers as worried about their safety who were afraid for them because of the Russians. The Germans were just about to leave when one of the officers turned back to her family.

“It is horrible what one can hear about the Russians, what they do to girls. This cannot happen. And he came back. And says: I am going to send a big lorry, and everyone should escape. If you have someone in Buda, then go there. The girls are still more protected there than in a village.”

So the women and children of her family were rescued from there to Budapest by the German soldiers. She finished the description of her preserved memory about the Germans’ compassion with a negative turn again: “When they let us leave, they were sobbing so much. All of them were weeping. They probably knew where we were heading to…”

Her life from her wedding until the pre-planned, “staged” trial

Márta married after the war, at the age of 26.

“Then all of us married. Me, too. In ’48. In ’51 they executed my husband.”

She mentioned her marriage and her husband’s execution at the same time, not leaving but a minute for herself to be absorbed in some sweet memory. Is this only self-defence in order to avoid the pain of the loss of the once found earthly happiness? Or is this a blame against the world that so brutally crushed their lives? The laconic and rugged style in which she spoke about the events seems to support this latter idea.

Márta thinks that the reason for her husband’s death was that he was clever and talkative, and he spoke his mind about his dislike of the Communists.

“They were intelligent children /her husband and his brothers/, very intelligent. He liked history so much, he was a bookworm. He was interested in it. He also liked Nature very much. He supported both of his brothers’ studies. He, himself, wanted to study when they succeeded in their studies by his support. His older brother was an interpreter. They were intelligent. What a waste!”

Mentioning her intelligent husband was not possible without also mentioning his loss in Márta’s recollection of memories. The earlier dichotomy continued. A husband appears she is proud of because of his intelligence–but one she lost. „What a waste!” Again, she began the recollection with a positive memory, but adding that all of that was destroyed. What else did dragging away his husband mean to her?

“My poor husband was preoccupied with politics. He always spoke about politics. I loved work, I loved going to church. Having a tidy home was everything for me. I did my task, I worked a lot, I earned money, too. I saved money so that we can have our own house. Because we lived in my home, in my mother’s house. I was a creature inclined to vitamin deficiency. Pista /’pishtaa’, her husband/ had a good friend, the doctor, who lived here, just round
the corner. He liked Pista very much because of his intelligence. The doctor said: This Márta cannot have a child, because she is so infirm. She will die or she will have a disabled baby. “I will look after my Pötyike better” /'pötyikeh/, Márta’s nickname for her husband/ my husband answered. The doctor proposed that I should take vitamin C. “We don’t need vitamin C. Now that we are building a house? Later, when we have a house, we will have a child, too.” So we had some money all right. And I delayed childbirth again and again.”

A new aspect appeared here. Márta talks about the two of them now: she portrayed herself, too, besides her husband, who was interested in politics–she portrayed herself as a person continuously working for their common home. The tiring work distracted her attention from the question of having a child. Why did she talk about this in such great detail? Does she think that vitamin C should have been more important than building that house? Did she want to express this way her opinion that she shouldn’t have worked so much and then they could even have had a child? Does Márta think that her husband kept his promise and “looked after his Pötyike”? This mentioning of the expression of “looking after” might refer to the intention to avoid a risky pregnancy but might also refer to her possible opinion that her husband did not keep his promise and did not care for her after all.

“Pista hated the Communists–oh how angry he was with them. The doctor took out a book about Stalin’s life, I don’t know from where. He gave that big, stupid book to Pista. The doctor also hated Communists. But Pista could talk well. He discussed government’s ministers, he could talk so well… He read it out loud /from that book/ to me when he came home from work. “Pötyike, my darling, that is a pure devil walking on Earth. How one can live in such a Communism?!“ And he dealt with politics ever more. He got involved in a kind of plot. I was against that. “You see, we simply work, and we do not have any problem” I told him. “But I still hate the Communist! Those things they do: they kill people, they do such things!” He always spoke about that.”

We can see from this that Márta disapproved of her husband’s involvement in politics. We cannot know whether she really thought so already then, at the time of those events, or emphasized this only later.

Data from archives show that an agent provocateur arrived at their village from Budapest and he influenced people there so that a “plotting” group was organised against the Communists. The Communist secret police, ÁVO, planned to catch them in the politically most profitable moment. This arrived when they were preparing the pre-planned, staged Grősz-trial. They deported 23 men from the village all at once, and also Pista among them.

“It was in ’51, on a Wednesday. The 21st of February. Someone knocked at the door. 7-8 men came in /from ÁVO/. Pista was here, too. “How many pigs have you slaughtered without official permission?” they shouted. “We have just turned in the fat we have produced, so how could we slaughter a pig illegally? Who was that sleaze who has laid such a thing at my door?” I asked. “What did you say? Sleaze?” shouted the ÁVO man. Poor Pista was pale. –My darling, Pötyike, do not say a word or you will get into very big trouble.”

Her husband was bundled into a car and at that moment Márta’s loneliness and vulnerability began. This is the point in her life from where she sees all of her life course. She interpreted her earlier and later life in the light of this event. She thought about this tragedy when she gave the year of her birth as “I was born, but for what?”. She left no doubt from the first moment in the interview that her account of her life will be formulated in the shadow of this event.

“I had no house, or a husband, or a child, or money. I remained like that.”
Her husband did/could not keep his promise. He did not look after her, or at least not well enough. We can see from this enumeration that the roots of human existence, the fundamentals of finding a home in this world have been lost forever. Nothing has been left for Márta. The efforts they took in the first years of their marriage proved to be futile. She especially stressed that her husband dealt much with politics while she worked a lot. How many times could she have thought about this? If her husband hadn’t been involved in politics, then everything could have happened another way. Both of them could have worked a lot, for example, and they could have had more money, so they could have bought a house. And she probably also thought about what could have happened if her husband had stayed alive. Then they could even have had a child, too.

She did all she could to save her husband after he was arrested. At the time Márta could not know yet that the villagers deported were collected as the would-be victims for a pre-planned, staged trial and so there was no question whether they would be convicted. Another of the unlucky circumstances aggravating Pista’s situation was that even in prison he couldn’t change his habit of speaking his mind, so he lashed out at Communism even in his last speech at the trial. This could be the reason why he as a secondary defendant was executed while the primary defendant got “only” life imprisonment.

Márta has hardly spoke about God, faith or religion in the first half of the narrative of her life’s story. Neither did she mention anything in connection with friends, or others also suffering, or their relatives. She mentioned only that she used to go to church. But after the tragedy she got mental breakdown several times, and then only the Bible was able to heal her.

**Conversion without forgiving?**

Márta knew that her husband would be executed, as the attorney assigned to his case had told her. Nevertheless, the news about that or the way she was informed about it still hit her hard.

“*When he was executed… it was the village fair on the Feast Day of the Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary, on the 8th of September. And then it was publicly announced that he had been executed. People said that there was a great cheer because he had got his just punishment. For the fact that he couldn’t stand Communists.*”

Márta was not in their village at that time, so she heard all this from an acquaintance. And she only had hearsay evidence about people’s reaction with “*a great cheer*”. This was in the year of 1951, which was one of the hardest years of the dictatorship in Hungary. We can imagine what an official village gathering meant in that period and how people were forced to react to the news of such an execution. Márta emphasized the phrase “*a great cheer*”. By this she seems to accuse the residents as if they had unanimously supported the tyranny and had been happy about Pista’s execution. Was that really so? From this wife’s account one would deduce that the majority of people supported the dictatorship, which is hard to imagine today.

Márta was in the village of Márianosztra, to celebrate the feast of Mary on the 8th of September, and when she got off the train in the evening she got the news about the execution.

“*When I came home, they were waiting for me at the railway station, crying and telling me that Pista had been executed. Because it had just been announced publicly in the cinema that Pista had been executed.*”

So Márta got the news directly from crying, compassionate people. These could have been parents, relatives, or some relatives of Pista’s companions in distress or friends. So, she was able to experience compassion in her closer or wider social environment. In spite of this she said:

“I had a severe mental breakdown, not even once. Everyone lived their own lives. I did not dare to say anything, no one could. Nobody was allowed to say anything, to tell the truth. I did not say a word, I just worked and worked. I will show you that we are not despicable. I have got this house alone! There was no man. When no man can help any more, your power… the Good Lord has such great power.
My dear God showed himself to me so much. I live with Him, from Him. He gives to me, so I can give, too.”

At this point we are informed that Márta chose the Good Lord instead of men. Not “also Him”, but only Him. Was she really so very much left alone in her village? It is not that quite clear in the light of other details from her life history.

“People were afraid of me, they believed I had leprosy, and that we are really nasty. I have shown that I can make a house. I settled down to it and did it alone. After 12 years, when I had a mental breakdown, then even the needle fell out of my hand. I even lost my voice. My mother-in-law was begging, and also a lovely old Calvinist lady here: Márta, marry a man, you will not even have bread otherwise.”

The dichotomy mentioned earlier appears here again. “They believed I had leprosy” and there were also people who feared for her. It was also revealed that her father-in-law and her cousins had helped her to build the house although she put up the money for it alone. And when she was sick, she was treated—supposedly with what we can reasonably assume to have been true compassion—by the doctor who has already been mentioned.

From this last quotation we can see that at least her mother-in-law and some of her neighbours worried about her future so much that they even had her marry.

Márta said nothing about her second husband except that he also died four years later. But still the fact remains. There was a man who knotted his life to a “neurotic” woman. For this reason, it is hard to believe about her environment that they all were all indifferent or hostile. Márta still judged her village in such a light. She did not only spoke in a condemning way about Communism and the dictatorship, but also about the villagers. These two things overlapped in her mind and when she spoke about the dictatorship’s sins she also condemned the villagers.

“They took from me everything that I had shared with him. My citizens’ rights were restrained by an order. After that I settled down to work very much because they even threatened to expropriate the plot. My father-in-law says that if we have no other chance, we can put something on it, so that they will not get it. Just a very little room. I worked so much that I had already saved 20 thousand forints by then already. I worked night and day. I wanted to become crazy, I shut myself mentally. I saw the bad things in everyone. Because they had said that Pista deserved it.”

That restraining order was one of her punishments, but she was disenfranchised in other fields, too. She was denied the financial support of the state bank that was necessary for building. “They did not give OTP[^9] to me, they gave nothing”. This could have strengthened her feeling of being an outcast, since she could see that while she was rejected by the bank, her neighbours could get credit for their buildings. This may be why she once mentioned that she had built her house alone.

Before her conversion Márta seriously contemplated suicide. Presumably she was withheld from it by being a churchgoer. So, she began to turn the pages of the Bible, seeking a mental refuge.

“It helped me a lot. This helped me, the Bible. I lived by it, I gave myself up to it. I opened my heart. I read lots of religious books. I thank the Good Lord that I read when I could still see. The Bible is more than anything. Jesus speaks to me, I know He speaks… I have Jesus, this is my treasure. I listen to this. I always tell Him: Won’t you take me home yet even now? He doesn’t take me, He doesn’t want to. I am afraid of winter. It is a nice thing but not for someone as old as me. This was my lot, I bear it. I will die in peace. No soul accuses me. I did not get back what I gave. I tended to one of my aunts, I tended to an old lady from the neighbourhood, I tended to my father-in-law, and my mother. People do not get back

[^9]: OTP meant National Savings Bank, and also its (often state subsidized) credits.
the same here, on Earth. You do not get back anything. Just a slap on your face. When I look at Jesus, then I endure it. He did not get back anything, either. Life is like that. One can take it more easily this way.”

She explained why she had chosen Jesus instead of people. She symbolically likened life to winter. She is afraid of this, as she says it is not good for such an old person. The word “such” might mean all the things she has gone through, but it may also mean that she already feels very old. These two might be interpreted as basically meaning the same thing. She remained alone, and her life is not nice. Jesus became her companion with whom she can talk about the most important question of her life. And this question is “when she can return home at last?” She declares that her soul is at peace, but she immediately adds, contrapuntally, that “I did not get what I gave”.

She seems to stand uncomprehendingly at the sight of her destiny, since she thinks that she has done everything that she could for her environment. Her sentences above indicate fragmentation, the lack of inner peace. As if her conversion was incomplete.

Seeing her life from outside one could think that she could have come to terms with her sorrows after a while. Perhaps she could have buried her past with her old injuries and, aided by her faith, she could have turned to those who were even more miserable than her. Or she could have adopted a child and lived her life looking after it. Her solution was conversion, which meant keeping a distance from the world.

**Answers to the questions asked**

The psycho-social dimensions of the different life periods in Márta’s life history appear in varying depth and detail. She recalled a few colourful stories of her childhood—but they were always interrupted. These were stories that looked nice and then history or politics always broke them. From her youth, she spoke about her marriage and husband, emphatically but shortly. In the busy years of the third period of her life she already lived without her husband, a lonely life. The encouraging beginning and the catastrophic cessation of something was a recurring motif throughout the description of the periods of her life. She framed her stories so that she played the role of a helpless victim of history or politics in them. She narrated all periods of her life as parts of her Calvary.

One can observe three turning points in Márta’s life. 1. Her husband’s arrest and execution. 2. Her mental breakdown as a consequence of this tragedy. 3. Her religious conversion.

The third turning-point could have meant the healing of the wounds of that tragedy, too. But we know from the text that this was not what happened. Márta could not escape her victim role after her husband’s execution and she progressively became more and more lonely. She gradually lost touch with the “sinful world” while she tried to prove that she was not guilty: this process meant the special basic feature of her fate. Her religiosity did not solve her loneliness but increased it.

On the one hand, religiosity lightened Márta’s unbearable burden when it raised her from the everyday world and redirected her attention to a world of ideals. On the other hand, her religiosity also isolated her from those people who could have helped her to take strength in order to get rid of her “disgrace”.

How can we interpret all this?

**Religious identity, with splitting**

Márta’s refusal of the world can be well interpreted by psychoanalyst Melanie Klein’s notion of “splitting” (Klein, 1977). According to her theory life as an entity is not a coherent phenomenon, but several different realities appearing in separate parts. Two opposite realities exist for Márta: one is that of people, which she rejects in the name of faith, and the other is Jesus’, where she wants to be. This cleavage of identity is not surprising in people who have gone through
tragedies. Lots of time is needed until the wounds caused by society are healed. Márta’s low opinion of life would not be surprising after the series of events that happened to her. But since she attributed such life-changing importance to her conversion, the question arises: why does she still “split” her life, her self-image, and why does she still reject people until this day?

Or putting this question another way: why could religion not give an inner peace to her, and why “does she have to leave Earth to get peace from Jesus” as she said in her life history?

She gives a clue to her unrest in this text:

“I don’t care how big other people’s houses are. And I don’t mind not having anything, either. Jesus had nothing, either. He had no place to lay his head. That is why I always apologise to Him: Forgive me that I have more than You had… Can you see that we do not follow Jesus? We do not follow Him. Because if we followed him, then… I always ask Him how he was able to love those many bad men. Even on the cross He said, even on the cross “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing”. I often say: How can you love even murderers? Even in evil? I could not understand this. There was a… priest here who has already died. He says to me: Márta, see Jesus in everyone! But, Father, how can I see Jesus in that bad man when he is so bad? Jesus was not bad. I should see the suffering Jesus in him. That Jesus is suffering. He is in everyone, but he is suffering in bad persons. I could not understand this. I cannot see, Father, what this is like. I don’t know this. If someone kills another man how can Jesus be in him? Does he let him kill? Or is Jesus suffering in him, because he is a murderer? For me this… I rack my brains to understand how these things are. I can understand what is simple. But should I see Jesus in that very bad man?! He is suffering.”

Márta has found no solution, so she is left with the compulsion to maintain the splitting, to build the world on this opposition of good and bad. Márta’s identity remained “split”, she could not come to terms with her past. Figuratively speaking, the “dead” did not let her rest in peace, even in spite of her faith.

Summary

In this study I have summed up the features of life histories, with special regard to the subjective understanding of the interviewee. Then I listed the aspects one can use to analyse life histories. These are (1) the observation of the significance of different periods of life in the narrative, (2) grasping the turning points in the text, (3) the observation of the changing of behaviour after turnings of fate (as compared to before them) in order to understand the individual’s methods and ability to adapt herself to her new social situation and roles. (4) I also drew attention to theory—that it is worthwhile to support and sum up the narrative of life history with a carefully chosen theory. With that we widen the validity of that particular individual life history toward general conclusions.

References


