We and the War. Between Private Memory and Collective Grand Narrative

Most people live their lives in societies together with other human beings. We work together with our work mates, spend our spare time next to our neighbors, maybe we form a family and raise children. Individual life-stories are enacted in collective arenas, where other individuals live at the same time. Everybody's life is unique, but it takes place alongside other people's lives in shared settings. This double and possibly contradictory quality becomes visible when people narrate their life-stories. Every individual life narrative must be possible to locate in collective arenas where other persons have lived at the same time and it must be compatible with the local society's history that has taken place at the same time.

In my talk today I will take autobiographical narratives about experiences during the Second World War as my starting point, so as to be able to discuss the relationship between individual and collective narratives.

The material I have studied consists of some 40 tape-recorded life-story narratives. The recordings were made during a concentrated collection period in the summer and fall of 1995, and at the time of the interviews the narrators were all living in Visby on the Swedish island of Gotland in the Baltic Sea, and they were all born between 1910 and 1930, thus representing more or less one and the same generation.

It is almost impossible to speak about the years 1939-1945 without mentioning events that have to do with the Second World War. War time conditions, like food rationing, mobilization, and black-outs profoundly affected people's everyday lives. News bulletins in newspapers and on the radio were dominated by the war events in Europe and in the rest of the world. More or less serious analyses, personal or reported experiences, and sheer rumors were themes in people's everyday discussions. And such discussions, both public and private, have continued to take place during the years since the war ended. People have compared their own experiences, and their memories of the experiences, with each other and with the official historical accounts. Those who were actually there have been answering questions from their children and grandchildren – and from inquisitive folklorists. Innumerable conversations during the war and afterwards have contributed to form a collective picture of “what it was actually like” to live on Gotland during the war years. This picture is partly distinct and univocal, but vague and evasive in other parts. Here and there we find open contradictions that are so manifest that we can speak about several competing narratives.

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In the recording situation, the narrators were asked to talk about their lives without specification of any certain themes. When war time experiences appear in the life narratives, it is the choice of the narrators or, if you like, of the immanent demands of the life narrative as genre.

**A Gotlandic Grand Narrative**

I will start by making an attempt to give you a general overview of the collective narrative about "what it was like" to live on Gotland during the war. The population of the island was doubled many times over when people from the Swedish mainland were commanded to do military service on Gotland.

Food rationing was difficult, but there were many possibilities to deceive the authorities. Many had relatives in the countryside that could help with a side of pork, a sack of potatoes, or a bag of flour. Those who had gardens grew potatoes and vegetables in them and kept chickens and rabbits in cages. Everybody picked mushrooms and wild berries.

A couple of the war winters were exceptionally long and snowy. Snow-clearing, house heating, and inadequate clothing were eternal problems. People were constantly cold and the water froze in the bucket every night, but conditions were the same for everybody.

At the beginning of the war the general sympathy was with the German side. German propaganda films were shown in the cinemas and collector’s picture cards of German officers were distributed in the chewing gum packs.

This brief Gotlandic grand narrative was constructed by me, but by using motifs from the individual life-stories. My method can be compared to the one that astronomers use to prove the existence of celestial bodies they cannot see in their telescopes. Astronomers study the deviation of a planet’s orbit due to the attraction power of an invisible sun; I have studied how the individual life-stories are influenced by the invisible grand narratives.

The fact is, you see, that each and every one of the narrating individuals has to relate to the collective history, and adapt their individual stories to harmonize with it. I will give you some examples of the forms that such relationships can take.

**Rabbits in the Garden**

A recurrent everyday motif is that during the war years people grew potatoes and vegetables in their gardens where they also kept cages with chickens and rabbits. Almost all houses in the center of Visby are one-family-homes and even the smallest of them usually has a garden of its own. The factual situation was such that practically everybody that grew up in Visby at that time was able to tell a story something like this:

> During the war we had lots of rabbits in the garden, because food was scarce. In the evenings after work my dad used to take his scythe and go outside the town wall to collect grass for the rabbits. He brought it home in his bicycle trailer. He grew beets in the garden, too, to get winter feed for the rabbits.

Many of my informants actually do tell stories like this one. The intellectual question that these stories raise is why so many persons recount their versions of a commonplace everyday
phenomenon that does not fill any dramatic function in the narrative? The obvious answer is, I believe, that this is an image of food shortage that is easy to visualize. A garden where neat pathways, lawns and flower-beds have been substituted by rows of potatoes, beets, and turnips and where chickens and rabbits look out from unpainted cages. Earnest men in working clothes toiling with scythes and bicycle trailers at dusk in front of the medieval town wall. This is how years of famine are narrated. The fact that the picture appears in so many individual narratives charges it with symbolic power. Whether you need it dramaturgically or not, this picture must be included in every narrative about the war years in Visby. We could regard it as an example of the agency of the collective narrative.

The Dropped Bottle of Cream
A strong and frequently appearing narrative that illustrates food rationing is about a child who dropped a bottle of cream in the street.

Once my mom got a rationing card for cream from a neighboring woman whom she had helped to sew a dress. On Saturday mom sent me to the milk shop to buy the cream. It was a small glass bottle, one deciliter I think. The bottle was cold and slippery and my hands were sweaty, so I dropped the bottle and it fell on to the paving-stones and broke. When I came home with the broken bottle and the splinters my mother beat me. It was the only time during my whole adolescence that mom beat me. But I went back to the milk shop and told them what had happened. The lady in the milk shop felt sorry for me and took another cream card that somebody had lost and gave me another bottle of cream. When I came home with the cream mom hugged me and she cried and apologized for having beaten me.

It is never a loaf of bread or a sausage that was dropped on the street, not even half a dozen of eggs. It is hard to find a stronger image than the thick, white cream slowly spreading over the dirty paving-stones. Or the red, frostbitten fingers of the child picking nervously among the sharp glass splinters. It is not necessary to have experienced the situation to be able to visualize it.

Of course several children did drop bottles of cream both in Visby and in other places, but probably not nearly as many as those that grew vegetables or kept rabbits in their gardens. Still the story about the dropped cream bottle is almost as common. Just like the motif with the rabbit cages in the garden, the one with the dropped bottle of cream is ever present in the established collective narrative.

From a scholarly point of view, however, there is a significant difference: the cultivated garden was probably a reality for many of the narrators. The dropped bottle of cream probably was not. But the immanent drama of this story is so strong that it almost begs to be narrated. Every account about war time food rationing would be incomplete without it. In all probability, most Swedes have heard variants of it so many times that they take it for granted that this must have happened. The story about the dropped bottle of cream has become public property, just like a folk legend. Anybody can take the opportunity to retell it without risking their credibility.
Against the Flow of History
The following story gives a wonderful illustration to how an individual might literally collide with the collective flow of history:

I had studied my first year in Uppsala and I was on my way home to Visby after the end of the spring semester. On my way, I stayed one night in Stockholm to visit an old friend of mine. We went to a restaurant and we went dancing and I slept on his sofa. The next morning I was going to walk to the Central station to take the train down to Nynäshamn and get on the boat home. When I got down to Kungsgatan, I found the number of people in the street incredible. It was impossible to walk against the flow. Everybody was walking in the opposite direction. I had two huge trunks. Soon I understood what was going on. The war was over! It was May 9, 1945. I had to take another street to get to the Central station.

I can hardly think of a more lucid image of how the grand history at times may penetrate an individual life story. This young Gotlander experienced this clash physically when fighting against the flow of people with his two heavy trunks. Although he was walking in the wrong direction so to speak, his narrative does not actually contradict the great collective history. Most Swedes have seen the black-and-white documentary footage showing how the office windows along the main street of Stockholm, Kungsgatan, were opened and the office workers emptied their wastepaper baskets over the jubilant masses marching along the street. This narrative confirms the well-known picture by emphasizing the young man’s physical presence.

Adolescents Enjoy the War
In one respect many of my narrators contradict what at least I had taken to be the established Swedish war narrative. They describe the war years as rather pleasant. Instead of the solemn grand narratives, fraught with gravity about a resolute united nation patiently and bravely enduring the hardships of the war years, these informants recall playful jokes, freedom from responsibility, joy, happiness and erotic escapades.

Among the female narrators many recalled how nice it was to attend the Saturday night dances, where there were ten boys in smart uniforms to every girl. They noticed the advantages with the black-outs, when you could hug and kiss without being watched. Younger children used to sneak along the park paths with flashlights and reveal loving couples fondling on the park benches.

The male narrators liked to describe the pleasant outdoor life in the countryside camps when on guard-duty. To a large extent the mobilized soldiers were farmer’s sons, used to spending a lot of time outdoors. They knew how to cut fire-wood, how to make a cooking fire, they enjoyed sleeping in a tent, bicycling, going for a swim, picking mushrooms and wild berries in the forest. Their narratives reflect excitement, but not fear. To them, the war was a thrilling adventure, but it never became threatening or dangerous.

How is it possible to tell such stories in spite of the extraordinary war time conditions that must have deeply affected everybody’s everyday life? I can think of a number of plausible explanations. One is that the war time reality was not only as black as coal. As a matter of fact, Sweden, thanks to a careful foreign policy (some call it cowardly), managed to stay outside the war. Compared to the
situation in our Nordic neighboring countries, very few Swedes have any particularly dramatic war experiences to relate.

In the established Swedish grand narrative, however, the depression of the interwar period and the war time hardships are used as a dramaturgical contrast to the successful realization of the welfare society of the 1950s and ‘60s. The darker the earlier epochs are painted the more flourishing the building of the welfare state will appear.

Nonetheless, the most important explanation to the positive attitudes taken by my informants is, I am convinced, their age. Most of them were born in the 1920s and 30s, meaning that they were teenagers or adolescents during the war. They had no families or children to provide for. When they received their draft cards they could regard the draft as a compulsory but also pleasant vacation from their ordinary duties. From their life-stories I can hear that they had their years of struggle after the war. That was when they were supposed to enter the labor market, start a family, raise children and provide for them, find an apartment or plead for a bank loan to build a house, thus entering the constant struggle to make ends meet. To many of them the advantages of the welfare society did not become apparent until one or two decades later.

Certainly these narrators are as aware of the discrepancies between their stories and the official narrative as the young Gotlander with the heavy suitcases was. As a matter of fact, several of them actually state that already during the war they were rebuked by their parents for not taking the war as seriously as one ought to. Some of them comment on their juvenile lack of judgment and are eager to emphasize that as grown-up, mature citizens they agree with the collectively accepted version of the narrative. Their war narratives represent the experiences of one specific generation, but they are not revolutionary or oppositional. They fall well inside the limits of normality. Adolescents are allowed a greater degree of irresponsibility, spontaneity and short-sightedness, as long as they agree to leave this stage, grow up, mature and accept to conform to the established values of the society.

**Conclusion**

The war narratives I have analyzed proved to concur to a lower or higher degree with the collective grand narrative that I sketched out at the beginning of my talk. However, the conclusion I am prepared to make is that irrespective of if they agree with or deviate from the shared narrative, they all contribute to confirming it.

The stories about small scale farming in the private gardens comport completely with the common story. They are trivial and lack dramatic points. When they appear in the individual life-stories they achieve a symbolic function to express qualities of belonging. “We experienced the same conditions as everybody else”. In relation to the established grand narrative they have an authenticating, confirmative function,

The story about the dropped bottle of cream is almost better than reality. It appears so often that it has almost acquired folklore qualities. Like folk legends it has become common property. It can be retold by almost anybody about almost anybody, it appears in several variants. Regardless of whether it has happened as often as it is told, the story brings together many persons’ experiences of food rationings into one single visually strong and emotionally touching image.
The story about the Gotlander struggling against the flow of people in Kungsgatan does not contradict the fact that the conclusion of peace was celebrated in Stockholm. On the contrary, his story makes the celebration even more tangible. His walking against the flow of history was easily explained by his having a different individual plan, just there and then.

In the narratives about the positive experiences during the war years, several of the narrators declared that they were aware that their accounts deviated from the accepted picture. They even gave examples of how they had been reprimanded by their parents and they stressed that they were young, naive and inexperienced at the time. Their narratives reflect the viewpoint of a younger generation and can, consequently, easily be combined with the established grand narrative.

All the individual narratives I have analyzed here (and many more that I have not got the time to mention) proved possible to harmonize with the shared narrative, because they indicate their positions in relation to it and because these positions are logically and culturally acceptable. It is not alarming or threatening that individuals regard reality from their specific points of view, be it age or generation, place of residence, profession, or ethnic origin. On the contrary, our concept of normality is constructed to embrace all these positions. And it should come as no surprise that these aspects are just the ones that we usually call the basic ethnological dimensions: time, place and social belonging.

To return to my astronomical metaphor, we could view the personal experience narratives as physical particles or planets moving in orbits that are controlled by the attraction of invisible power fields. In the narrative universe these power fields emanate from a phenomenon that we usually call grand narratives.

From the perspective of a single individual it is next to impossible to follow the long and slow developing processes of a society. Even our own lives are too long to be framed by one self-narrated story. None of us remember how we were born and none of us will ever be able to tell how we died. That is why we need grand narratives – and the science of history writing.

While folk legends typically deal with the extraordinary, the deviant and the unexpected, both individual life-stories and collective grand narratives are dedicated to normal, everyday, predictable matters. While folk legends explore the boundaries of normality, the almost unknown borderlands facing the backyards of the unbelievable grand narratives summon the agreements that everybody subscribes to.

Grand narratives lack the legends’ focal concentration on one single, dramatically charged chain of events. That may be one reason why they seldom show the elaborate form of the verbally formulated narrative. On the other hand the causal elements appear to be strong. Grand narratives obviously have a function to support cause and effect-explanations or as a common cultural standard with which you can compare your own experiences and values (cf Hyvärinen et al 2010). Largely, they consist of non-narrative, descriptive elements and we cannot even say for sure that they have a consistent verbal form. Probably they are never narrated. Instead they are ever-present as collective frames of reference for what is considered to be normal and how it is accepted to talk about local history.