

# Introduction

In this book I examine how 132 pensioners in the Swedish town of Visby told us about their lives when they were interviewed in the summer of 1995. The interviewees are all individuals with unique life stories, but they also have shared experiences. Every person's life is unique, but it takes place in arenas where other people live at the same time and in similar conditions. The dimensions that are commonly referred to as belonging to ethnology – place, time, social affiliation, along with gender and generation – are specific to each place and time.

They all talked about the Visby in which they had lived. Their stories could very well have provided a basis for a rather detailed description of Visby in the mid-twentieth century, especially the period 1935–1965. Narratives of that kind, however, rarely add any facts that are not already known. The twentieth-century history of Visby is readily accessible in traditional historical source material, particularly the rich collections of photographs and later also films. What these pensioners' stories offer instead is the subjective, personal experience of what it was like to live in this Visby. In several narratives it is also clear that Visby is located on the island that is the province of Gotland, which in turn is part of the nation of Sweden. Several of the interviewees were born in rural Gotland or on the Swedish mainland, and they related their experiences from Visby to other geographical locations with which they were familiar. Some were born outside of Sweden, and some told of travels and stays in other countries. The events of the Second World War in particular made the outside world ever present.

The time aspect should be considered in relation to the first half of the twentieth century and to the biological age of each storyteller. All the respondents in the study had lived during the Second World War, most of them had experienced and participated in a large section of Swedish twentieth-century history. The labour movement, the crisis committee, ration cards, blackouts, the own-your-own-home drive, the welfare state, the state retirement pension, television shows like *Hyland's Corner* and *The 10,000 Kronor Question*, and the switch to driving on the right were familiar phenomena for most of them. Another thing they had in common was that they had all come to the end of their working life. They all knew what it meant to look for a job, to find employment, to deal with bosses and workmates, and to be presented with a bouquet of flowers on the last day at work. Most of them had (or had had) a family, children, and grandchildren, and all of them had at some time lost a relative or a loved one.

The greatest differences in experience emerged in terms of social affiliation. Some had grown up in meagre circumstances. Some had been subjected to physical and psychological violence as children. Others had the advantage of a higher social position. Naturally, a group that is missing from the survey consists of those who, for various reasons, did not make it to retirement.

Differences in gender roles are also striking compared to our own time.

In this book I will use my knowledge of traditional folk narrative – what in scholarly contexts is commonly called folklore – to investigate how people formulate such experiences in words. A feature that is common to much folklore is that it is collective traditions that can be used by an individual.

When we listen to a folktale, we know that it is not the storyteller who has invented it. We also know that the events told in the tale never happened, that it is fiction. The storyteller also knows, of course, that we listeners know that he or she did not make up the story. Yet a skilled narrator acts as if the content of the tale were perfectly true, and in the role of a responsive audience we are expected to be astonished, amused, or horrified at the right places. Storytellers and listeners together create a play situation where they can explore the border zones of reality: imagine if there were caps of invisibility or seven-league boots, or boats that could sail just as well on land as on water!

Another genre of popular storytelling, the folk legend, helps us to explore other border zones: what would happen if you met a wood nymph or saw a UFO or found out that a Chinese restaurant stuffs its spring rolls with rat meat? In the world of legends, there is already someone who has had that hair-raising experience; often it is a friend of a friend of the storyteller. What older and newer legends have in common is that they are about the things that people fear or find uncomfortable and problematic. Legends commonly portray a safe, cosy sphere where good people live, normal ones, people who are like us. Lurking outside this sphere are all the dangers. The way legends depict the relationship between this protected, safe sphere and the world around it can give a good image of the society in which the legends are told, and they show who feels threatened and what or who constitutes the threat. In legends we can play along the boundary between the normal and the abnormal, amid real and imagined threats, in the tantalizing borderland between “us” and “the others.” By telling stories about what is deviant, we define what is normal.

What folktales and folk legends have in common is that they are part of a collective tradition, while they exist by being brought to life by an individual who makes them his or her own during the time the performance lasts. This also applies to other genres of folklore such as jokes, riddles, ghost stories, or proverbs. Those who tell a folktale, a folk legend, a joke, or a ghost story can

captivate their audience with their personal charisma, while the performance gains authority from the audience's knowledge (or feeling) that the story is a venerable tradition. It is this tension between the collective and the individual that makes folklore effective. It is this power that allows groups of people to use folklore as an efficient tool to create, communicate, and negotiate their interpretations of reality.

The genre of folklore that scholars call memorates does not give the impression of being collective in the same way as folktales, legends, jokes, or ghost stories. Memorates are stories about supernatural experiences told in the first person. The experience is individual and the narrative told about it rarely spreads to become a collective story, although memorates may sometimes show signs of having been influenced by local collective tradition. Memorates are usually told in very small groups, perhaps only with one listener. If the actual narrative in the form of a memorate rarely attains a collective distribution, the content is all the more collective. For a scholar of culture a memorate is useful source material because it shows how people handle the boundary zone between an experience and the interpretation of that experience. The content of a memorate can signal that people are inclined to accept dimensions of reality that cannot be explained rationally, also showing exactly what these dimensions are. The content of a memorate can give the researcher insight into parts of the human cognitive world.

The personal life stories that I have investigated in this book are a genre similar to the memorate in that they are neither entirely individual nor entirely collective (cf. Stahl 1989, 13; Klein 2006a, 13, 19–20). Both the form and the content can be more or less traditional. When life stories are performed, the interviewer and the interviewee find themselves in a kind of cultural play situation with both private and collective elements.

The life-story interviews I have investigated and the folkloristic methods of analysis I have applied provided information about how people used verbal means to take up a place in the ongoing passage of time, how they located themselves in social contexts, how they positioned themselves in relation to what they had personally experienced and what they knew had happened in the course of time, as well as how they shaped their narratives in relation to other people's. A term to sum up these collective ideas about social, cultural, economic, political, and historical conditions could be "figures of thought." These may exist in whole or part in observable reality, but do not necessarily do so. In any case, there is a tendency for people to treat them as existing phenomena to which they must relate.

When people in their life stories position themselves in relation to these figures of thought, a number of imagined communities arise, as described

by the Irish-American anthropologist Benedict Anderson in his study of the emergence of the nation, of nationality and nationalism (1983). A number of the common figures of thought and values that the interviewed respondents have demonstrated can be regarded as being imagined in the sense that they exist as accepted truths that are rarely put into words, but which nevertheless exert a great influence on what you can think and say about different things.

Anderson devoted a great deal of attention to how spoken vernacular languages acquired official (that is, national) status during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a result of the increasing production of different types of printed matter. I have become aware of such imagined communities by listening to people's orally performed narratives. A close-up narrative analysis study of 132 tape-recorded life stories will clarify some of the mechanisms that operate when imagined communities are produced.