

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE CULTURAL CONCEPT OF BIOGRAPHY: WORK AND MARRIAGE IN THE LIFE STORIES OF PEOPLE FROM A VILLAGE IN EASTERN SLOVAKIA

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Abstract

This article presents the analysis and interpretation of life stories of men and women in a particular cultural environment in relation to the theoretical explanations of autobiographical memory. The author aims to establish the difference between the cultural concept of biography of men and the cultural concept of biography of women who were born before 1950 in the village of Žakarovce. The paper demonstrates how major life events and related themes are reflected in the life stories of women and men. The analysis is based on the theoretical platform of cultural psychology and uses the notion of the cultural concept of biography. The author concludes that both men and women included the same normative events in their biographies, but the cultural concept of biography in terms of what is considered a major life event and how it should be told varies between women and men. The author argues that in explaining these differences the main factor is the persistence of the traditional gender roles in Slovak society. The traditional model is reflected in the themes and life events that women and men emphasize.

Key words: *life stories, autobiographical memory, gender roles, cultural concept of biography, Žakarovce*

Introduction

Talking about life events is one of the universal characteristics of the life of individuals, as well as of social life. Life stories reflect not only personal

considerations and feelings, but are also a reference to the cultural environment and sometimes to historical events. For this reason, this type of narrative has become an important topic in social sciences and the object of biographical research. We can trace its beginnings to the inter-war period in the United States of America, but its true boom in interpretation in social sciences took place in the 1970s. This was linked to the growth of new theoretical approaches, as well as to the mutual exchange of knowledge, in particular between cultural anthropology, sociology, history, psychology and linguistics. The current results of research indicate that cultural processes and individual life stories do not represent separately delimited areas, which should be examined independently of each other, but on the contrary should be examined in (auto)biographies where they overlap (Rosenthal, 2004, p. 48; Nosková, 2007, pp. 22-23).

Slovak folklore studies were the first to begin to pay particular attention to life stories, despite their uncertainty concerning the definition of the genre. They became a subject of interest after 1945 in connection with oral tradition research on the topic of the Second World War and the Slovak National Uprising (Kiliánová, 1995, p. 128). The interest of folklorists in this genre shifted from the group to the individual as the personification of the bearer of folklore (Hlôšková, 2013, pp. 62-63). At the beginning of the 1990s, after the fall of the socialist regime, an interest in life stories spread to other disciplines of the social sciences. The efforts of social scientists were focused on examining recent history. This was related to the trend appearing in all post-Socialist countries concerning their coming to terms with the socialist past (Rupnik, 2016, as cited in Bužeková, 2018, p. 57). The socio-political events of the end of the 20th century which took place in the so-called Eastern bloc encouraged the thematic focus of research projects; in particular topics which had until then been taboo and marginal began to develop (Hlôšková, 2013, p. 65).

When examining representations of the past, social scientists work in the first place with the concept of *collective memory*. This concept was elaborated for the first time by the French sociologist M. Halbwachs, a pupil of E. Durkheim, in the publication *On Collective Memory* (1992)¹, in which he highlighted the social conditioning of the individual's memory. M. Halbwachs' ideas influenced historical, sociological and anthropological research (Bužeková, 2018, p. 57). G. Kiliánová concerned herself with the term "memory" in relation to ethnology in Slovakia. According to her, this term was not very widespread, since ethnology and folklore studies focused mainly on the category of "tradition". Although they did not operate with the term of "memory" as part of their research on cultural traditions,

¹ In French in the original *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire* (1952).

they referred to the mechanisms of memory, even though they did not always name it in this way (for further details, see Kiliánová, 1996, pp. 57-58). Researchers working with biographies also point to the importance of understanding memory as “the projection of the past into the present” (Krekovičová, 1996, p. 45), which implies paying attention to the processes of memorising, bringing back to mind and forgetting.

From the point of view of ethnological research, the memories of respondents are usually reconstructed and interpreted as references to past events, taking into account certain aspects of memory mechanisms. In this paper, when analysing ethnographical data, I use the theoretical concepts of cultural psychology, which apply to the influence of cultural context on the life stories of individuals. This sub-discipline of cultural anthropology focuses on explaining the formation of meanings depending on cultural context and the method of adopting culture. The analysis of narratives, or narrative episodes creating life stories, as well as the process of the creation of their structure from this perspective relate to research into autobiographical memory.

I use above all the term of the cultural concept of biography, which refers to the determining influence of the cultural environment on shaping life stories. The cultural concepts of biography can differ not only across cultures, but even within a single society, depending on the social status or gender roles of the individual. In my paper, I focus on analysing and comparing the life stories of men and women which I recorded in the village of Žakarovce in eastern Slovakia in September 2018. My aim was to discover the difference between the cultural concept of the biography of men and the cultural concept of the biography of women born before 1950 in the village of Žakarovce. I also explain what life events, and the topics related to them, are reflected in the life stories of men and women.

Cultural concept of biography

According to D. Berntsen and A. Bohn (2009, pp. 62-63), the content of life stories, including the selection of life events, is conditioned and framed by cultural norms which also influence what respondents consider as more or less important in their testimony. They call these cultural norms “life scripts” and define them as “culturally shared expectations about the order and timing of life events in a prototypical life course”. This idea is well documented in anthropology and sociology: Neugarten, Moore and Lowe (1965, pp. 63–64, as cited in Bužeková, 2018, p. 64) call it a “prescriptive timetable for the ordering of major life events”. This issue is also dealt with in ethnology in Slovakia as part of the study of the traditional life cycle (Horváthová, 1986; Botiková, Švecová, Jakubíková, 1997)

and gender roles and ageing (Hlôšková & Leščák, 1998; Botiková, Herzánová, & Bobáková, 2007; Botiková, 2008; Voľanská, 2016; Bužeková, 2018, p. 64).

The contents of life scripts, according to D. Berntsen and D. C. Rubin (2004), are culturally significant transition events which mark a culturally approved transition from one social role to another (for example the transition of an unmarried girl into the bond of marriage), and their expected sequence and timing. Life stories also include events which are important from the point of view of an individual, but do not meet the above-mentioned criteria and the criterion of age norms (for example a work-related accident). For this reason, such events are not considered part of life scripts. The life script presents an “idealized life story”, but need not be identical to the real life story (Berntsen & Bohn, 2009, p. 65).

S. Bluck and T. Habermas (2000) introduced into the discussion the new construct of autobiographical memory, calling it “the life story schema”, which connects autobiographical memory with autobiographical memories of the “self” in the course of time. While the life story refers to an oral or written life narrative, the life story schema refers to the mental organisation² used to create life stories (Bluck & Habermas, 2000, p. 123). One important aspect in the creation of a life story is the “cultural concept of biography”, which offers a model for organising important life events and forms the basic template of the story (Bluck & Habermas, 2000, p. 124).

In my work, I focus more closely on the cultural concept of biography which is gradually acquired during socialisation (Habermas, 2007). Biographical cultural norms define fixed life phases and age norms for timing the transitions between life phases, thus helping to define the order of life events (Conway & Bekerian, 1987; Heckhausen, 1993, as cited in Bluck & Habermas, 2000, p. 131). Memory processes are similar in different cultures, but the cultural concept of biography in terms of normative life sequences or what is considered an important life event can differ between cultures, social classes or genders (Bluck & Habermas, 2000, p. 131). In this paper, I concentrate on these gender differences in the cultural context of biography.

Each culture has its ideas about men and women which apply to their outer characteristics, behaviour, oral expression, position or status in society, or to their roles, mainly in reference to the division of labour. These culturally specific ideas are the object of interest of gender anthropology. In Slovak ethnology, the gender viewpoint was reflected since its beginnings, even though it was not dominant or interpreted separately (Botiková et al., 2014, p. 30-33). The topic of gender

² They mention mental, not cognitive, organisation, which reflects their opinion that representation of our whole life is not purely cognitive, but also experiential: it combines knowledge and emotions and is influenced by and potentially also driven by motivation (Bluck & Habermas, 2000, p. 123).

was important, for example, in the areas of the traditional (patriarchal) family and social life (Filová, 1956; Botiková, Švecová, & Jakubíková, 1997); material culture (clothing; Kovačevičová, 1956); spiritual culture (family/calendar cycle of customs; Čajánková, 1956; Horváthová, 1986) as well as in folkloristic research as part of narrative repertoires and opportunities (Gašparíková, 1986). The gender viewpoint was also applied in the comprehensive ethnographic monography *Banická dedina Žakarovce* [The Mining Village of Žakarovce] (1956), which is important for my explanation in order to understand better the cultural context and shaping of life stories.

The aim of this article is to apply the concepts of life script and the cultural concept of biography to the examination of the life stories of women and men in a specific cultural environment, i.e. in the village of Žakarovce. I will not examine the life story schema, since I use ethnographic methods and techniques. The life story schema is the abstract organisation of mental representations of the past which shapes the individual's life experiences. Life stories are not the equivalent of a life story schema. Their properties cannot be considered identical with the organisation of memories, because they are formed in specific social contexts which serve various situations and motivational requirements. For this reason, an ethnologist examines life stories as linguistic phenomena, in which background there lies a life story schema. I am starting from the assumption that the cultural concept of biography of men and women, in the sense of what is considered an important life event, will differ in their oral interpretation of their own life. My intention is to interpret them within the chosen theoretical perspective.

By "life story", I mean the whole extent of oral interpretation on the course of the life of individual respondents, as well as on the life of their family members and their surroundings, including non-verbal means of communication. I do not limit the life story to any specific period or topic, but I take into account the whole range of narratives, that is from past to contemporary events from their own life and the closest surroundings.

In the concept of "cultural concept of biography" I include normative life events and topics concerning the respondents' own lives or the lives of their close family members/ acquaintances, which refer to important life phases in our cultural environment, such as a wedding, becoming independent from parents, the birth of a child etc.

Research environment and methods

I carried out the field research at the beginning of September 2018 in the village of Žakarovce in eastern Slovakia, in the cultural region of Spiš. In terms

of administrative divisions, it belongs to the Košice self-governing region and the district of Gelnica; historically, it was part of the Spiš county. It is only accessible from the Hnilec valley, from the district town of Gelnica, and is enclosed from the other sides by the Volovské Hills.

One of the reasons which played a role in the choice of research site was the opportunity to compare the current and past situation, offered by the publication *Banická dedina Žakarovce* [Mining Village of Žakarovce] (1956)³ prepared by employees of the Institute of Ethnography of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, which was the first comprehensive historical-ethnographic monograph in Slovakia. This study was the first to deal with the working class/ proletariat in Slovakia in the rural environment, which must be understood in a wider historical context and in the context of the development of the history of ethnology and the object of its research. It is a source of rich historical and ethnographic material which I will partially use in my interpretation of the results of the research.

At the time of the field research, J. Mjartan gives the then population as approximately 1,500 (Mjartan, 1956, p. 177). The Office of Statistics of the Slovak Republic gives 725 inhabitants as of 31. 12. 2017; out of the above-mentioned number of inhabitants, there are 364 men and 361 women. The age structure of the population is: 15% (0 – 14 years); 64% (15 – 64 years); 21% (65 years and over) (Babiak, 2018).

In my research in Žakarovce⁴ I decided to apply the biographic method, that is to collect and analyse data documenting the personal life and individual memories of the interviewed men and women. For the collection of data I used the methods of ethnographic interview and participant observation. I analysed the collected data using narrative analysis. The aim of the analysis was to generate key sets of topics and the related normative events, thus clarifying the content, as well as the structure of the individual life stories.⁵

³ It is no coincidence that mining in particular attracted the attention of ethnographers. In the history of our country, mining and metallurgy production is the most significant industrial branch in Slovakia, which is usually presented as an agrarian country (Lacko, 2012: 208).

⁴ The village has only a nursery school; the nearest primary and secondary schools are in the district town of Gelnica, where healthcare facilities are also located. The closest specialised medical practices, however, are in Krompachy, Spišská Nová Ves, Levoča and Košice (Babiak, 2018: 26). Gelnica is around 7 km from the village and is linked by a regular bus connection, as well as by a rail connection, but the railway station is 3 km from the village. In the central part of the village, there is the Roman Catholic church of St Michael the Archangel with a presbytery and cemetery, and a village hall housing the post office. In addition, there are grocery shops, a shop selling miscellaneous goods and a public house in the village.

⁵ For the analysis, I worked with the program system ATLAS.ti, which is aimed at the textual interpretation of documents. This software simplified and made my work more effective with audio documents in particular.

The target research sample was composed of women and men born before 1950. I analysed and compared the life stories of 21 respondents. The aim was to balance female and male narrative and to preserve a homogenous sample of respondents. By this, I mean an almost identical group of narrators in terms of age, faith, ethnic group, education, socio-economic class. The result was that the above-mentioned characteristics of the respondents were not significantly reflected in their life stories; it was their gender which played a key role. The oldest respondent was born in 1927 and the youngest in 1947, with the average year of birth of all respondents being 1938. They lived their working life in the second half of the 20th century, meaning in the period of socialism. The total number of respondents was 5 women, 4 men and 6 married couples, who more or less complemented each other or took turns in their narration.

Structure of life stories

The results of the analysis of the stories collected by me do not entirely match the statement by L. Voľanská who points to gender differences in written autobiographies: “The texts written by women differ from those by men, for example, in their length – women tend to write shorter texts on various topics. Men write longer texts in the form of overall autobiographies (from birth to the present).” (2016, p. 90). The biographies collected in Žakarovce also differed in length. In general, the women’s narratives were usually longer than the men’s narratives. However, I presume that the extent of the narrative was influenced to a great extent by external factors. At the time of our meeting, the female narratives were not interrupted, since the respondents either lived in the household alone, or if they were living with children, the latter were at work at the time. In the case of the men, their wives were almost always present in the household, and they had a direct or indirect influence on their narrative. The men’s narratives were comparable to the women’s in the case of two men who did not have wives present.

Most of the women’s life stories are characterised by a non-linear organisation. Women often ordered important life events in a non-chronological order. As Z. Kiczková and the collective of authors state, “women often remember in circles, not in a linear manner. They return to the same points and bases in order to expand the story even more” (Kiczková et al., 2006, p. 55). The breadth of the narrative is also characteristic of their stories, both including various topics as well as a complicated network of varied relations, which ends up creating a chaotic impression in places. Men ordered their life events chronologically more than women; their narrative is thus closer to the linear; it was more concise and ended up being clearer. With a few exceptions, the male narrative always began

with a short introduction, providing basic information, while this introduction was missing for the women. All narratives were retrospective. As an example, I will give the beginning of the life stories of Anna (1936) and Jozef (1935)⁶:

We were in a terrible situation before, very poor [emphasised]. I am from such a family, a poor one. A poor family, nine children, eight, there are six of us and three died. Something terrible. Mother died at the age of eighty-two, and Father died, do you know at what age? He was thirty-nine! Father died and he left us [children; the oldest of the siblings], we had twins, but a boy, one of them, died. Now there's only me and the girl from those twins. There are only two of us. They are all dead. And then such bad luck came to me, my dear [cries]. Now three of my siblings died, one after the other. Sister, sister, brother, but I'm saying that now there are only two of us, and here in S. a fourth sister. And when I remember, there was just a wooden cottage, and that burnt down. If you go along past that shop, then below the shop, it's been bought by people from Košice. They don't want any palaces, they just want cottages. We're so happy that it's lived in, that they're there. They can't say anything bad of the place, and they didn't do anything to it, didn't change the floors and windows, they just put a bathroom and toilet at the back and it's lovely. It's nice and warm there, so there you have it, my dear. And I had such trouble with my man. We went to live in those settlements. And you know what it's like, my dear, living with your mother-in-law. For the six years I lived there, all I wanted to do was hang myself. That's the life I had, my dear, a hard one [Anna]. I was born in 1935. I went to school in 1941 or 1942. And I went to school here in Žakarovce, normally to school. Then I went to the town school in Gelnica. When I finished school in Gelnica, I went to study, it's now called Letohrad, in the Czech Republic. I studied for two years! To be a locksmith. Then I worked in Krompachy until I went for my military service in 1956. In 1956, and I finished my military service in 1958. Afterwards, I went once to do military manoeuvres in Prešov, once in Košice [laughs]. And in 1960 I got married [Jozef].

My aim before going into the field was to address men and women, with the intention of obtaining their individual memories of their personal lives and avoiding the presence of any further people during the interview. My request was not always accepted; I was not always able to avoid the presence of other people, especially in the case of married couples. I primarily addressed men, directing at them my first prompt to talk, mainly due to the lack of them in the village and the difficulty of making contact. I always tried to explain to the couples that it would be ideal to talk with only the two of us present. It often ended in reassurances that

⁶ The names of the respondents are fictitious, the year of birth is given in brackets.

they would not interrupt each other's narratives. Even when the second partner left us alone, they almost always returned a little later. For the respondents, I was in the position of a guest, clearly a very interesting one, and for this reason they were interested in the course of the interview. At the same time, they certainly felt that they were part of their partner's life story, so we can consider that they wanted to be part of the interview. Despite promises of passivity and later alternations in talking, between married couples the narrative was added to or interrupted⁷.

To sum up, the narratives of married couples took place mostly as follows: first, the man spoke, with the woman intervening in the narrative – adding information, correcting, sometimes taking the initiative in the narrative. At the same time, they encouraged each other in their narrative, returning smoothly to the woman's life story. They also compared their stories, so in the end, the woman usually told her life story alongside the man's oral interpretation.

Content of life stories

Life stories as linguistic phenomena are “very complicated, multi-layered, multi-semantic social texts”, including within them the “symbolic worlds of society and sub-cultural narrative communities” which are conditioned by the collective systems of rules and norms of the society in question (Kiczková et al., 2006, p. 52). They contain two basic levels in particular: historical and subjective. As well as individual, biographic information and the experience of individual respondents, every single life story contains a socio-historical level, in the form of historical events and processes which took place during the 20th century, which impacts to a certain extent the subjective experience of the creators of the stories (Vořanská, 2016, pp. 75 - 76).

The results of the analysis of recorded stories revealed the following key topics in the life stories of women and men:

- Death of family members
- Work
- Education
- Military service
- Marriage
- Employment
- Health

⁷ In the example which I give in the text, I define and highlight the speech of the second person in round brackets, for example: “Never in your life let anyone in here, as you as you live” (And since then, it's been locked [ZB80]). I had a doorbell, I got rid of everything. I don't have anything. I always lock the door. [...]“ [MA84]. In square brackets are my notes or the codes of the respondents.

In all these thematic areas there are differences between the stories of men and women, with women paying greater attention to certain topics than men and vice versa. For example, for men, military service was an important milestone in their life, as documented by their wide-ranging memories and stories about this topic, but in female biographies, this topic was almost entirely non-existent. Due to a lack of space, in the following analysis I will deal with only two topics, work and marriage, since I consider them relevant in the field of gender issues and a suitable example of contemporary gender roles and the roles of men and women from Žakarovce.

The topic of family, which includes talking about children, grandchildren or great-grandchildren was present in all thematic areas. I did not earmark this topic separately, since it did not figure for the most part as a separate unit. It was present within individual thematic sets and served as a bridge between the respondents' past and the present. In other words, references to offspring by the respondents often took the form of comparisons between the past and the present. Bluck and Habermas (2000) explain this phenomenon as a specific method of creating thematic and causal cohesion, where the search for and introduction of parallels should provide an explanation for a better understanding of life events.

Work

Mining in Žakarovce goes back a long way, and from the 1880s it became the main employment of the local population, mainly men⁸, but it was never the only employment. Until this period, the main work of the local population lay in the alternation between farming and mining work, which depended on the prosperity of the mines. In the conditions of Žakarovce, neither of these jobs provided sufficient subsistence or a livelihood for a family. Working the land was the most stable form of subsistence, as documented mainly by periods of total unemployment for miners. Nevertheless, mining work was dominant and agriculture was also a secondary employment (Podolák, 1956, pp. 63-66).

The permanent transition of the male members of the family to the Žakarovce mines meant leaving work on the land exclusively to women, which became a characteristic feature of the local way of life. According to the local gender division of labour, the women together with the children were in charge of almost all the work in the fields for the whole agricultural year, except for the ploughing

⁸ In the period of the greatest boom in the Žakarovce mines, we also encounter women and children being employed in the Žakarovce mines (see further Filová, 1956, p. 33; Pátková, 1956, pp. 151-152).

and mowing. Mowing was exclusively a male task; for this job, the men had to take leave from the mines, but when the men were absent, women had to deal with this activity, too. If the farmers did not find a suitable carrier from outside to plough and sow, then the grain was dug in, and this work was done exclusively by women. In comparison, from ethnological literature we know that this agricultural work was a farmer's privilege in many regions of Slovakia (Botiková et al., 1997, p. 66). In relation to the status of women in family relationships, B. Filová talks of a certain gender equality with men. By this she does not, however, mean that women had a dominant role in the family. The status of women was particularly important in the period of unemployment or absence of the man, which was the case mainly in the inter-war period during the economic crisis, when farming became the main occupation. During the post-war economic crisis, men looked for employment in other activities, but due to the high unemployment in the area they were forced to go abroad to make a living. Under these circumstances, women could become the family's main breadwinners (Filová, 1956, pp. 25-46; Podolák, 1956, pp. 63-119).

In the 1950s, ethnographers in the village note the decline of mining work to the benefit of other employments, as a result of the depleted mining reserves after the Second World War. Mining was still the principal employment, but new job opportunities began to appear in the area, mainly in the mechanical engineering industry. At that time, work was available only in the mines below the village, where 42% of the total population (around 1,500 inhabitants) worked, primarily older miners. Retired miners and miners' widows made up an important group. At that time, unmarried women began to be involved in employment, but the majority of women still worked in agriculture. In this period, the majority of the respondents interviewed belonged to the category of unmarried youth.

In the first phase of life narration, the narrators also included descriptions of family circumstances; they mainly talked about the work of their parents, the family's financial situation as well as about the work in which they were involved as they grew up. Their descriptions are identical to the above-mentioned worker cum farmer way of life. All respondents talked about the same model: miner father and mother at home looking after the household and farm, which differed in minor details. This topic was all the more dominant when the father was absent in the family of the respondents, which was the case for seven respondents. For example:

I was ten years old and I was already mowing. I had no father and we had cows, we lived just from them. Some sheep, there was bryndza cheese, some milk, a pig was kept, and we went to Šarišská for flour [Štefan (1937)].

We had a hard life with our mother. Father died young, at the age of 42, because he worked in the mine. He left behind five children. I was one year old, I don't remember my father. We had a hard life, we had to work hard. Carry manure on our backs across

these fields here. We had to collect wood from the forest, get things ready for the winter, no-one helped us. Mother had no money to buy anything [Mária (1947)].

Almost all respondents, regardless of age, included memories of the hard work which they had to carry out as children in their life stories. However, their narratives do differ; we can follow in them the gender division of labour on the family property, based on social norms and rules. The gender division of labour on the farm is comparable to other sites within our cultural environment (Botiková et al., 1997, p. 86).

Compared to men, women included in their narrative more work obligations, whereas men mainly mentioned mowing and grazing animals. This was easy to observe in the case where married couples interrupted each other, with each of the partners trying to put across their obligations. Women mentioned weaving, embroidering, baking, raking, beating crops, carrying potatoes, leaves and wood on their back, and mainly carrying manure on their back, which most women described as the most tiring work. J. Podolák called carrying manure on the back one of the most difficult tasks performed exclusively by women: “A woman carries eight to twelve baskets of manure daily. Eighteen baskets make one cart of manure. Soil in which four sacks of potatoes are planted (around 200 kg) needs to be fertilised with around four carts of manure” (1956, p. 75). If we add the steep slopes of the land to this, we realise that carrying a load on the back was a very demanding task.

In the following example, we can observe another marked feature of female narrative. In relation to carrying a load on their back, women proudly talked about how they managed it, despite the physical difficulty and thanks to their cleverness, for example:

We carried things. Only later did I realise that there was a little forest near our field, and I said: “How silly we are”, and they said to me “Why?”, “So look at those lovely hazelnut trees growing. Cut down three trees and put those things on them and pull them down to the village”. Then there was a sort of road and we had some trouble with that, because there was a stream, some water, we couldn’t pull them across the water [laughs], so we struggled a bit but found a way and then we were home, by the village. We didn’t even take the main road, but there was a little path on the other side, so we took that path and straight into the barn. When you think a bit, you come up with all sorts [laughs] [Zuzana (1930)].

For men and women alike, narration in this context had a strong normative dimension, since they compared their work obligations and physical performance at work with the obligations of their children/grandchildren or today’s young people:

We met in the meadows, we went to rake [...] Now where? Everything is overgrown, no-one does anything, they just have those mobiles in their hands, and just do everything with those phones, our children. Everything has changed. (Well, what can we do... [Ján (1945)]). Well, we can't do anything [Mária (1947)].

Now young people don't want to work [laughs]. And we had to work, whether we wanted to or not. There was a storm and I was with the oxen and walking. I had a coat like that, not like the ones now...Ah, what if it kills me... The lightning was up here, I had seven oxen. And the neighbour, she didn't have children, but she gave me bacon and that was it [laughs] because she had a pig. So we did all we could to earn a little extra money [František (1927)].

Women and men reflected on work on the family land during their childhood and adolescence; I did not note any significant difference between older and younger respondents. The exception was respondent Eva (1945) who described the work of women and unmarried girls on the farm only indirectly, although her peers, or an even younger respondent, spoke from their own experience. However, women and men included in their life stories differing farm work which they carried out on the family land, which fits in with the local gender division of work described in the village monograph (Podolák, 1956). In the end, through this topic respondents described the social conditions of their families, that is the main sources of subsistence of the family and what role they played in obtaining them. The topic of work on the family farm during adulthood was absent for the majority of respondents, which is closely linked to the processes of industrialisation and collectivisation on the territory of Slovakia. After the foundation of the Unified Farming Cooperative at the end of the 1950s, changes in property circumstances took place in Žakarovce; space for individual farming began to be reduced and the policy of forced employment was implemented. At the beginning of the 1950s in Žakarovce, B. Filová already recorded a growth in new job opportunities and the integration of unmarried young people in seasonal work or in permanent employment in the district town of Gelnica, where industrial factories were developing as a result of the industrialisation of Slovakia (Filová, 1957, pp. 49–50).

Marriage

Narrated biographies are very complicated and complex socio-linguistic products; on occasions it was very difficult to separate important individual life events in the life of respondents. One example is the topic concerning marriage. Women and men included in their biographies mention of the following normative

events: choice of partner, wedding, settling down of the married couple, birth of children, building a house or renovating a house. The same space was not given equally to each event in the stories of women and men. For example, with the narrator Jozef (1937), the above-mentioned events were absent, despite the fact that he was married. The narrator responded to additional questions concerning marriage with curt answer, which reflect his lack of interest in talking about this particular topic. From other respondents I learnt about their family problems, which was probably the reason for the absence of this topic in his narrative. Research showed that women paid greater attention to these topics than men. When the interview took place in the presence of the spouse, particular attention was not paid to these events. However, this was not the case when the construction/reconstruction of a house was concerned.

The rules for the choice of spouse were subject to local norms. The ethnographer E. Čajánková (1957) noted in Žakarovce that “young people mostly decide about their future on their own; parents only make sure that the son-in-law or daughter-in-law are from a good family” (p. 454), which might be the result of the homogeneity of the local community. Respondents Anna (1936) and Margita (1938) spoke about the interventions of mothers in their choice of spouse:

Well, my mother... She didn't want my man, she wanted another one. And my poor late man was called up for his military service among the first. [...] And when I was writing him a letter, my mother came quickly and asked who I was writing to, then she shouted, she hit me: No! Not that one! This one. I didn't obey my mother. By the time that one had come back from the army, I was already married. They spent two years in the army, didn't they. [Margita].

Well my mother made such a fuss because she didn't want my man at all, because he was ill. Well, and then I wanted him even more [Anna].

A continuing principle of the 1950s in Žakarovce was concluding marriages within the local community (Filová, 1957, p. 55), which is confirmed by the marriages of the respondents. From ethnological literature, we know that violating endogamy was sanctioned by ridicule, gossip etc. (Botiková et al., 1997, pp. 77-78). The narrator Zuzana (1930) devoted a lot of space in her life story to the topic of the choice of partner and the relationship between partners, which was caused mainly by her unhappy marriage with a man who had a problem with alcohol. The motivation for the narrator to talk about her life story was also to come to terms with her past. Looking back, she reproaches herself for preferring her “boyfriend” from Žakarovce to one from a more distant village. In her statement, we can observe the role played by local norms and rules in the choice of a husband:

But I'm old now, and I still regret him! He was a good man. He never drank spirits, nothing [...] I always had him on my mind, I was always dreaming about him. So I was always whispering to myself "I could have married there, I could have." But here there were these old women, witches [laughs], and when a girl went to marry in another village, they said "Well, no-one wants her, she's a no-one who goes to marry in another village." Well that's how it was, and now no-one says it, that they're getting married in another village. But before they gossiped: "No-one wants her!" [...] Well, you see, young, scared girls have no common sense. I could have been in U., I'm always saying [to her daughter]: "You wouldn't be in this world if I'd been there." Oh, my God, sometimes you cheat yourself so much. As they say "young people make mistakes", don't they? [Zuzana].

The conclusion of a marriage was preceded by the choice of a spouse, which women associated in their narrative with spending free time during their youth. They remembered the circumstances in which they met with future husbands. From their narratives, we know that village dances in particular, which were subject to local rules, were a place where young people met and came to know each other. This is best described by the narrative of the oldest, 90-year-old, Alžbeta, but the same descriptions appeared in the narratives of women born before 1939:

And then when we reached the age of eighteen, nineteen, then we started looking at the boys [laughs]. And the boys at us, of course [...] I say we used to go to Haldički to dance, they played in the pub, and if someone liked you, they invited you to dance several times [husband laughs]. And a girl knew that if he took her once, twice, then he was interested. And when I liked him, then I went to dance with him. If I didn't like him, then when I saw that he was coming, I bent down to do up my laces [laughs] so he would go for another girl. I didn't want to dance with someone I didn't like. And when I liked him, then afterwards, when it was late, he took me home: "I'll walk you home, if you like?" He walked me down and then it went on. We didn't sit at a table with the boys, like today. We sat separately from boys. Us girls, as soon as they stopped playing, then we tidied ourselves up a bit, braided our hair, combed our hair and went into a round. We made a circle. Yes. And then when we saw that the gypsy had taken up his violin, we separated and waited to see who would take who for a dance. The boys went to have a drink, to make sure they had something stronger inside them and then went to get their girl for a dance [Alžbeta].

Events such as the wedding and the birth of children were mentioned by respondents, but in most cases only in the form of brief reports, such as: "So I got married in 1959 and then we went to build a house. My son was born in 1966 but we were still living upstairs with my parents" [Margita (1938)]. Respondents added

years to these life events, but in the case of weddings, only four men included the year. In the chronological order of events, the model of first the wedding, then the spouses settling down and then the birth of children was applied. The narrator Juraj (1938) in this context referred to a change compared to today's young people, which points to a change in cultural concept: "Before it was the case that young people got married, but now they live just like that. That's how gypsies lived before, like young people today, that they need to try it out, and see whether it works".

The wedding ceremony itself was mentioned by women to point to changes which have taken place: "And when there were weddings, they weren't like today..." [Vladislava (1933)]. In one case, Zuzana (1930) included in her biography *čepčenie* - putting on the bonnet worn by married women – which was an important ceremony of transition in traditional village society. Placing the bonnet on the head symbolised a change in status; the unmarried girl took on the status of a married woman (Jakubíková, 1995, p. 71). Zuzana sung me some songs, laughing, which her "neighbour" sang during the ceremony, while she sat on a bucket filled with water. We can interpret the bucket with water as part of the accompanying magical acts which were to ensure an easy birth and the function of the erotic songs sung was to acquaint them with married sexual life. Zuzana's accompanying laughter could be interpreted, according to T. Bužeková's findings (2015), as an indicator of taboo topics closely related to shame.

The status of the married couple in the family depended on the form of settlement, that is whether they settled in the groom's or in the bride's family. Until the mid-20th century, patrilocal marriages dominated in the rural environment, which was mainly associated with the inheritance of family property along the male line. When daughters began to inherit the same share of family property as sons, then matrilocal marriages also began to grow in number (Botiková et al., 1997, p. 75). In the case of my respondents, we encounter both forms of settlement of young married couples.

When the young couple settled in the man's family, there were frequent conflicts between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law who entered the family as a outside member of the family (Botiková et al., 1997: 88). In a similar way, the relation with the mother-in-law was reflected in the narratives of Anna (1936) and Zuzana (1930):

My mother-in-law wanted to give orders, and that I would be the servant. But grandpa, my husband, I only call him grandpa now, he was a wise man. He wouldn't let her, but if he hadn't seen to things, I might have ended up somewhere in the cemetery [...]. My man worked in the mine at the time and I, my dear, worked in the forest. Then I spent some time on maternity leave, as I had a boy, we were at home. Then I just took him, my man was at work, and I went into the forest with him, up here... I was so

afraid of my mother-in-law. But then she was afraid that I'd do something, so she came up there, on to that hill, and she saw me on the other side, and I saw her! Well I can't even say what I lived through [Anna].

And then I thought to myself that all my children have gone and why should I make it harder for myself by having a pigs. And she got my man worked up, so that he came home and asked: "And who's grazing the cow?" The cow wasn't in the shed, I sold it, put the money in the bank to give the children money for their studies. She told him to tell me that I should be tied to that chain in the abattoir. Well that's what I married into. [...] I didn't know what life was like with them [Zuzana].

Relations with mothers-in-law were described as very conflictual, while in Zuzana's case, this conflict was heightened by her father-in-law's and husband's persistent problems with alcohol. As a result of a bad relationship with her mother-in-law, Anna gave great importance to the construction of a house which represented gaining independence from her husband's family.

Almost half of the respondents perceived settling with their in-laws as a temporary situation and it was clear from their narrative that they made great efforts to become independent. The construction of a house was perceived by respondents as an important breakthrough in their life, as well as the reconstruction of a house, the aim of which was to extend the living premises in the house. Like the men, the women also described how the construction of the house took place; how they gradually bought furniture and equipment for the household; how they had to be content with little; about help from their family and friends. As A. Pranda (1978) indicates, the socialist collectivisation of agriculture in the rural environment changed the system of basic values which had been dominant until then. The ownership of land as the permanent existential provision for a family was no longer the primary and most important value in the system of values. From the 1960s, obtaining a building plot and the construction of a house took over the position of the greatest value, which matches the results I obtained. In the construction of a house, an important role was played by the institution of help from family and friends (Pranda, 1978; Škovierová, 2001), which was mentioned by the respondents.

In this topic, a normative aspect was present; respondents mentioned that young people today would not manage such work around the construction of a house, and that in the past the family helped more, whereas today you have to pay for everything. They also talked about how young people today want to have everything at once. They perceived the current situation of young people very negatively, and the fact that they must take out a mortgage, and their pride at having managed without one came to the fore.

The relationship between partners was another topic in exclusively female biographies in which a normative aspect was present. If the interview took place

in the presence of the couple, then this topic was not given any space; the couple usually only stated how long they had been living together. Women in their biographies pointed to the divorce rate around them, which they placed in contrast to their life. The narratives also had an educational aspect, when the women tried to give me advice relating to marital relations, for example:

It was all sorts. Good and bad, and with my husband it was all sorts, but we didn't get divorced, like now. As we promised in church, we lived for better and for worse. For better and for worse, that's what you say, isn't it? [laughs]. We stuck to that, nowadays they have an argument and then they leave... You need to give in, my dear, to your husband, or you'll be like the men don't like it, bossy. No, [laughs] they don't like that. You have to be nice towards them [Alena (1939)].

I say you need to be nice towards your man. I say I don't know how many times to my daughter, because she's divorced, how did you live together? We didn't hit each other, insult each other. When he was drunk, I sat down nicely with him and said "Off to bed!". Then I went after him to make sure he didn't fall. I was protecting myself, too, I didn't swear at him, or insult him [Margita (1938)].

Conclusion

The objective of the field research carried out in 2018 in eastern Slovakia in the village of Žakarovce was to find out the difference between the cultural concept of women's biographies and the cultural concept of men's biographies in a specific cultural environment. In order to meet this objective, I show what life events and related topics are reflected in female and male life stories.

The life stories of all respondents were retrospective. One of the characteristic features of female biographies was their non-linear nature; they frequently arranged important life events in a non-chronological order, as opposed to men, who ordered them more chronologically, and for this reason linearity was more characteristic of their narrative. The results of the analysis of life stories revealed the following key topics: the death of family members; work; education; military service; marriage; employment; health. In all thematic areas there were differences between the stories of men and women, but in this study I have dealt only with two topics: work and marriage.

My intention was to interpret the life stories in relation to how autobiographical memory works. Men and women included in their biographies the same normative events, but the cultural concept of biography in the sense of what is considered an important life event, and how individual events are narrated, differed between men and women. My assumption is that persistent gender roles, originating in

Slovakia's traditional society, play a key role in explaining these differences. In the traditional model, the woman was bound to looking after and bringing up children, as well as looking after the house, whereas the man had a dominant status and was supposed to take care of the family financially (Botiková, Švecová, Jakubíková, 1997). This model is reflected in the topics and life events to which the women and men gave space in their biographies.

All respondents included in their biographies work on the family farm during their childhood and adolescence. They were thus making allusion to the social situations of their families, the main sources of subsistence in their family and the role they played in obtaining it. In these stories, the existing gender division of labour between men and women comes to the fore. In relation to marriage, the following life events were presented: choice of partner, marriage, settling down of the couple, birth of children, building or reconstructing a house. Women paid greater attention to these events than men and described related topics: the circumstances in which they became acquainted with their husband, the wedding ceremony, or their relationship with their mother-in-law. However, this did not apply in the case of the construction / reconstruction of the house, to which men also paid significant attention. According to A. Pranda (1978), the process of collectivisation in the rural environment changed what had until then been the dominant system of basic values. Until then, the most significant value in the system of values was the ownership of land, which was then replaced by the acquisition of a building plot and the construction of a house. This is one of the possible explanations why men and women in their biographies paid so much attention to this topic.

The life stories of women and men create an opportunity for examining cultural processes: we can observe in them the signs of changes in cultural norms which also point to a shift in the cultural concept of the biography. The articulation of changes is reflected in those fragments of narrative when the narrators name the differences between their own life and that of the young generation. Life stories also reflect how the processes of autobiographical memory work. An analysis of the latter thus provides ethnography with a rare opportunity to link the universal and culturally specific aspects of human life.

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