

# What People Tell about Their Working Life in the ESSR, and how Do They Do It? Source-centred Study of a Civil Servant's Career Biography

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*I was satisfied with my work in this institution and the fact that I did not let down my schoolmates, or else I would not have been kept in this institution for thirty years. I also wanted to lead as good a life as possible. In order to achieve it, I had to develop a serious attitude towards the work I had to do. Also at that time (KV 993).*

## Introduction

When studying and interpreting self-centred stories, the aim of a culture researcher is to open the narrator's social and cultural world (Lieblich 1998). In this article I have made an attempt to open for the reader a part of this social and cultural world and outline of what people tell about their working life in a particular and special era, the period of Soviet Estonia, the central issue being the social relations expressed in career biographies.

The study is mainly based on the answers to the written questionnaire "Tööelu ja töötamine Nõukogude Eestis" ("Work and Working Life in Soviet Estonia")<sup>1</sup>, which have been sent to the Archive of Correspondents' Answers (KV) at the Estonian National Museum. The competition was publicly announced by the museum and the questionnaire was sent out to the correspondents of the ENM in the winter of 2001/2002, and it received over two hundred responses, which varied greatly by

<sup>1</sup> Q. No. 211 "Work and Working Life in Soviet Estonia". Compiled by K. Jõesalu (<http://www.erm.ee/?node=282>).

their content and volume. Among them there were stories only two pages long as well as monographs of 300 pages. The majority of the respondents were born before World War II; the generation born in the 1940s–1950s was represented to a smaller extent.

There are several possibilities for the analysis of biographical thematic narratives: we can observe which topics emerge in the stories told by different people and what is the significant experience to be emphasised; on the other hand, we can analyse the way people tell their story, what are the things that they omit and which “own” and “the others” stories are considered as important. Through analysis we can convey semantic categories, eliciting the joint narrative based on several stories. The source of this article is a single thematic narrative. I have been trying to interpret the single thematic narrative through the narrator’s own experience and the things he has emphasised. The analysis is also based on other career biographies. As I was a member of the competitive works jury of the Estonian National Museum, I have read and analysed most of the questionnaire answers sent to the museum. I have elicited the categories in social relations on which these narratives focus. So, taking one thematic narrative as a basis, the aim is to elicit more general categories treated in career biographies.

As the thematic narrative to be analysed, I selected the competitive work written by Ilmar, a civil servant. His story was a complete one, trying to find answers to all the topics concerned in the questionnaire, stating: *This is a story about my career in this institution, my activities and the milieu. Besides this, I am also trying to answer the things asked in the questions* (KV 993: 44). In the case of the answer it is a thematic narrative conveying experience of the Soviet-time working life in urban environment.<sup>2</sup> In addition to the completeness of the answer, the existence of another source – the written life story – became decisive. The life story under the heading “The Life of Myself and My Family in the ESSR and the Republic of Estonia” (ENSV: 91) casts a look at Ilmar’s life in the Soviet period from an angle different from the thematic narrative, focusing more on his family life. Working life is insignificant in Ilmar’s life story; here he mainly focuses on the welfare and destiny

<sup>2</sup> The answer analysed here was awarded the 1st prize at the competition of collecting reference material of the ENM in 2002.

of his next-of-kin.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, from Ilmar's career biography we only learn that he is married and has two children. He does not make further mention of these or any other biographical data in his thematic narrative. Also, on the basis of these two sources we can prove the dependency of memories on the way the question is posed or the time the story was written down. Ilmar's life story was sent to the Estonian Literary Museum in 2001, the answer to the questionnaire arrived at the Estonian National Museum in the summer of 2002, and if we compare these two, we can detect differences in conveying the memories. A few differences can be noted in texts (in addition to differences in the formation of the sources), which can be related to the shift occurring in Estonian society regarding the Soviet period. The latter is not any more a part of Estonian history just "erased" or left out. This change becomes obvious, for example, when Ilmar gives up the anonymity used by him in his life story when speaking about the changes in the Council of Ministers of the ESSR and the language problem; yet, in his career biography anonymity has disappeared.

The advantage of using two different sources lies in the possibility of analysing social relations on different levels. In addition to the analysis of social relations, I have made an attempt to initiate a discussion concerning the source. Before starting the analysis of the thematic narrative, I would like to dwell upon the problems of treating written thematic narratives as sources.

### **How to analyse different sources? Attempt for discussion**

When studying working life in Soviet Estonia, I have made use of three kinds of sources: biographical interviews, structured written narratives and life stories. This article is largely based on the analysis of a thematic narrative, which is the result of the answers given in a written structured questionnaire; the life story is treated in this analysis as another, comparative source. Both these sources are concerned with everyday life in the ESSR, yet the issues have been approached from different angles and due to that their analyses also vary. Below I will be dwelling upon the questions that spring up at different sources, with

<sup>3</sup> In the case of men's biographies it is rather an exception, usually under the topic "The Life of Myself and My Family in the ESSR and the Republic of Estonia" they tell about their career and self-realisation. See Kõresaar 2003: 168.

the main emphasis on the problems of written structured narratives.

Manuals abound in relevant advice for how to analyse life histories, auto/biographical stories, narratives in general.<sup>4</sup> But how to analyse answers given in a structured questionnaire? Which aspects should be paid attention to and what kind of a source are we discussing here? These issues have deserved little attention. When speaking about the analysis of written narratives, Albrecht Lehmann, a German ethnologist, states that in the case of the analysis of subjective written self-expressions the same scientific preconditions are applied than for the oral ones, only the emphases can be laid elsewhere (2001: 237). So in the analysis of a narrative obtained through a structured questionnaire we could proceed from this assumption. Lehmann himself has said the following about the narrative as the analysis of the consciousness (*Bewußtseinforschung*):

*Menschen artikulieren ihr Bewußtsein für sich selbst und für andere in Geschichten. Für empirische Forschung bedeutet das: Erinnerungserzählungen, Erlebnisberichte, Selbstreflexionen, Kommentare werden bei empirischen Befragungen, bei der Analyse von Tonbandtranskripten oder in Alltagsbeobachtungen vom Forscher inhaltlich und formal als Geschichten bemerkt, in ihrem Umfang eingegrenzt, festgehalten und im Hinblick auf wissenschaftliche Fragestellung ausgewertet (ibid.).*

According to this utterance, the thematic narratives obtained with the help of a structured written questionnaire belong under the analysis of a narrative. However, a question here arises of the borders of a subjective narrative. Can we really treat the written answers sent to the questionnaire as subjective reminiscences? Or are they set closed answers, which do not contain a concrete story? At the same time Lehmann (2001) claims that a fixed written questionnaire cannot be used as a source of the analysis of the consciousness for subjective reminiscences. Here we have to agree with Lehmann if we regard the aims that Estonian ethnology has up to now tried to achieve with the questionnaires. The earlier questionnaires used for collecting correspondent's answers in in Estonian National Museum were not directed at getting information about people's experience, which should actually

<sup>4</sup> A few manuals to be mentioned here are *Narrative Research* (1998) edited by Amia Leiblich et al., Brian Roberts's *Biographical Research* (2002), etc.

be the objective of ethnological research, but studying a concrete ethnographic phenomenon, asking for descriptive data about traditional occupations, etc. The main emphasis in these questions was laid on collecting descriptive information on material heritage (see: “Correspondent’s Notebook”: <http://www.erm.ee/?node=256>). The aim of more recent written questionnaires<sup>5</sup> has not been so limited any more; they are aimed at experience-centred approach; however, we are well aware of the fact that the ideal is difficult to achieve.

Questionnaires and the competitive works obtained through them should rather be treated as “a new old method” in culture research. Collecting material with the help of a written questionnaire is an old method for collecting material both in Estonia and in Nordic countries – competitions started at the ENM in 1958, the correspondents’ network was established in 1931 (<http://www.erm.ee/?node=57>) – which has been used for studying both the material and mental culture. In present cultural studies we have to focus more on people’s experience (which has successfully been done in the Nordic countries; see: Jaago 2002a: 400 ff.) and to phrase the questionnaires correspondingly. A questionnaire is just one possible approach to the issue under study and besides this we also have to employ other methods.

The problem concerning questionnaires is the way in which questions are raised. Tiiu Jaago has pointed out that Estonian researchers are afraid of asking questions related to people’s opinions (Jaago 2002a: 401). Questions are directed at the subject, not the decisions made by the narrator or the group. Yet, the researcher is trying to discuss people’s experience. This is difficult to achieve in the case of closed answers (Jaago 2002a: 400). So researchers should move towards more open questionnaires focusing on experience.

The formulating of the questionnaire “Work and Working Life in Soviet Estonia”, which served as a basis for the career biographies dwelt upon in the article, was preceded by biographical interviews on the same subject. When drawing up the questionnaire, I proceeded from the experience gathered from conducting the interviews. With the help of the questionnaire I expected to create a source similar to interviews. In the case of biographical interviews there were general topics related

<sup>5</sup> Here we could include the questionnaires compiled in Estonia since the 2nd half of the 1990s, e.g., “Home and Family”.

to working life, from which I proceeded. The concrete questions in the questionnaire resulted from the interviews conducted in the early spring of 2002.<sup>6</sup> With the help of the questions I tried to create a source treating of working life similarly to an interview, but in written form. When drawing up the questionnaire, it was people's experience that I was trying to bear in mind.<sup>7</sup>

The formulation of the questionnaire was a two-sided process: on the one hand, me as a researcher and, on the other, editors from the ENM as representatives of the museum. In the editing process quite a few questions directed at experience "disappeared", being either left out of the questionnaire at all or assuming another form (on the ground that the correspondents might get scared of a too "direct" question). Also, one section included questions which, being together, mutually influenced one another, this way changing the original idea of the question. The editing process changed my initial idea that the questionnaire has to focus on experience, and, as a result, it became impossible for me to treat the new sources as similar to interviews. When reading the answers, it became clear that they were different from the interviews conducted so far.

However, I am of the opinion that the source obtained with the help of the questionnaire must be regarded as a thematic narrative, as a biography, based on experience. As a shortcoming for the questionnaire has been mentioned that it yields the so-called final answers. Yet, an interview can also be subjected to strong self-censorship and, on the contrary, a written "testimony" (an ego-document) can be much more spontaneous: "... the meaning is mutually constructed or negotiated by writer/teller and researcher; texts 'cross-reference' each other – there is not a 'hidden truth' ... since the spoken may also be rehearsed while the written can be relatively spontaneous, one type should not necessarily be privileged over another" (Temple 1994: 37–40, quoted in Roberts 2002: 79). So we can see that one (the interview) should not be preferred over the other (the written questionnaire), they can both be

<sup>6</sup> 19 interviews conducted within the framework of the FOROST project and the ESF grant No. 5322 are in the possession of the author and also at the Institut für Volkskunde/Europäische Ethnologie, at Munich.

<sup>7</sup> Here I would like to express my gratitude to Terje Anepaio and Ene Kõresaar, who assisted me in drawing up the questionnaire.

treated as thematic narratives based on biographical experience. Folklorists who deal with texts do not differentiate between sources obtained in different ways; they treat all of them as similar texts. In Estonia, for example, Tiiu Jaago in her studies of the home and family has used the sources inherent in ethnology, approaching them as similar texts, making use of life stories, family chronicles and written thematic narratives (Jaago 2002a; 2002b). In this article I am treating the material obtained with the help of a structured questionnaire as a biographical narrative based on human experience.

In the case of written thematic narratives their openness remains questionable. Biographical interviews and life stories are more open narratives than the written thematic narratives created on the basis of a questionnaire. The other source for this article is a life story. Although the aim of a life story is to tell the story of one's life, proceeding from one's own life experience, which anticipates a free narrative the openness of a life story can vary, depending on the topics and guidelines provided by the collectors of the biographies. In Estonia life stories are collected by the Estonian Biography-Researchers' Society *Estonian Life Stories*<sup>8</sup>, which organises competitions for collecting biographies similar to the ones arranged by the ENM. The life story used here was obtained within the framework of the competition "The Life of Myself and My Family in the ESSR and the Republic of Estonia". The instructions of the competition asked the respondents to compare their own and their relatives everyday life in Soviet Estonia and the Republic of Estonia (<http://www.kirmus.ee/Asutus/elulood.html>). This also set frames for Ilmar's story, where he focuses on a comparative description of his family during these two eras.

In order to study working life in Soviet Estonia, I have also used biographical interviews. The latter can be considered as the most open kind of source. What are the differences between a structured narrative obtained with the help of a written questionnaire and biographical interview? Here I can rely on both my own experience and an article by Raija Warkentin, a Finnish-origin Canadian ethnologist, *Writing Competitions as a New Research Method* (Warkentin 2002). One of the advantages of collecting material through a questionnaire is certainly

<sup>8</sup> The collected life stories are preserved at the Estonian Cultural History Archives (EKLA), Fund No. 350.

its simplicity and quickness. A researcher can, at least in Estonia, make use of a ready-made structure – namely the correspondents' network of the ENM, through which questionnaires can be spread; the materials are also collected by the ENM, which diminishes the researchers' work load in collecting material and enables them to start the analysis immediately.

Yet, questionnaires structure a narrative more than biographical interviews. In comparison to interviews, written answers are narrower: in interviews I learned more about people themselves; usually they gave me a short version of their life stories, touching upon their origin, family, experience of their next-to-kin. Written thematic narratives, however, focus rather on a given subject (see also Warkentin 2002: 11). While building up the narrative, people do not proceed from their own sequence of events, but rather follow the guidelines provided by the researcher. Here forward-backward references occur inside the text. In a biographical narrative the story progresses proceeding from the narrator's person and the dialogue taking place between the interviewee and the interviewer. For example, in the thematic narrative analysed here, Ilmar describes the building and using of a shooting range in the attic of Toompea Palace<sup>9</sup>; however, he does not explain why they had to give up using the place, giving only a reference: *About the connection of these two events with our shooting range you can learn below* (p. 39, p. 74) (KV 993: 49).

Warkentin claims that a writing competition yielded more black-and-white utterances than did oral interviews (2002: 12). From my own experience I can rather say that, while giving answers to the questionnaire, people tend to polemicise more, try to find answers also to any assumed questions the reader could have. Proceeding from the respondent's position in the ESSR, people try to find answers fitting to the present, sometimes also searching for justification. As a comparison, we can mention Ilmar's answer about fringe benefits and compensations.

*While working for the Council of Ministers, I also enjoyed some fringe benefits. I have to admit here that quite a few other establishments and institutions, not to mention collective and state farms, offered their staff this kind of perks. So the perks granted to the staff of the Council of Ministers did not differ much from those provided by the other establish-*

<sup>9</sup> Toompea Palace in Tallinn housed the administrative machinery of the Council of Ministers of the ESSR, where Ilmar used to work.

ments, institutions and farms of that time, which were better off (KV 993: 76).

Biographical interviews pay more attention to personal relations, communicating with primary groups, emotional relations. Social network stands more in focus than in the case of written thematic narratives. Also, in interviews the speaker is placed in the central position, in written answers we often have to presume whether the respondents participated in the described events themselves or not. As a positive characteristic of the questionnaire we can mention that, while writing down their stories, the respondents have the possibility to recall their everyday life in more detail, using, for example, diaries, notes, house registers, and so on. The questionnaire includes, for example, several questions about the living conditions of that time, “the usual things” of everyday life, and then, differently from the interview situation, the respondents can collect data and relate them to their subjective recollections. We cannot claim that social relations have completely been left out of written thematic narratives; they rather touch upon other levels in social communication. This is also expressed in the analysis of social relations in this article.

A definite group of respondents sets certain limits to written thematic narratives. According to Warkentin writing competitions have been criticised in Finland as they comprise only special people or only those who crave for attention (Warkentin 2002: 11). In the case of the correspondents’ network of the ENM, we can speak about “experienced” respondents, who are willing to answer all questions, being sometimes too confined to the borders set. In places, the respondents tend to be too “harassed” by the questions, they try to follow and describe exactly the issues provided by the questionnaire. When they tell about their experience not directly asked about in the questionnaire, they feel as if they had broken a rule: *All this [supporting the church in the Soviet time] was not included in your questionnaire, but it shouldn’t be unnecessary* (KV 997: 136). The “Correspondent’s Notebook”<sup>10</sup> compiled by the ENM provides exact guidelines for answering

<sup>10</sup> The establishment of the correspondents’ network and its operating in the years 1931–1981 has been treated in more detail by Jüri Linnus. The extracts from the correspondents’ rules of procedure dating from 1935 referred to in the article are very similar to the present guidelines of the “Correspondent’s Notebook” (see Linnus 1988: 26).

questionnaires. Several of them eliminate passing on experience, they are focused on obtaining cultural-historical information rather than experience. For example, the guidelines read, “Answers should be **to the point and credible**. In order to achieve this, it is **indispensable** that the correspondents in the case of the issues they are **not so familiar with or have doubts about**, should ask for data from several local people” (<http://www.erm.ee/?node=256>; my emphasis, KJ).

Here it is also relevant to give a critical estimation of the written questionnaire which serves as a basis for this article. As a compiler, my goal was to focus on people’s autobiographical experience and, within the framework of the aforementioned institutional guidelines, I also managed it. However, in the case of a few questions, the wording still appeared to be inaccurate. For example, I asked questions about moonlighting and hackwork during the Soviet time. The first failure was the usage of the word “hackwork”, which is a notion of present society. The question about moonlighting was inconvenient. The question could be understood as penetration into the forbidden territory, as in Soviet ideology hackwork was one of the objects of ridicule and it was a socially condemned and illegal activity. In response to the questions “How extensively did hackwork spread? What were the possibilities for moonlighting? Describe your experience” (<http://www.erm.ee/?node=282>), Ilmar’s career biography states: *Cannot answer the questions because of lack of experience* (KV 993: 46), while in response to the question about if and how much the manpower of the institution was used for private purposes, Ilmar describes how he had had the electric system installed in his summer cottage by the electrician of the institution. *Of course I paid for the work directly to him, not through the finance department. As it happened outside his working hours. This way it was convenient for both sides* (KV 993: 70).

In conclusion we can say that, while analysing the sources obtained with the help of different methods, we also have to bear in mind the way in which they have been created. This article focuses on two written narratives – a thematic narrative created with the help of a questionnaire and a life story, with the main emphasis on the former. Taking into account the aforementioned discussion, I am analysing the thematic narrative created with the help of a questionnaire as a story created on the basis of a person’s own experience. In spite of several frames operating in the case of a written thematic narrative, the decision about what to say when conveying his experience is still made by the narrator.

## From a peasant boy to a civil servant through military career

The analysis of social relations in this article is based on the experience of one person, therefore I consider it necessary to give a survey of his career and development, and to elicit the fact that can be learned about Ilmar on the basis of two different sources. Ilmar's life story covers his adolescent years in the Republic of Estonia, his and his family's life in the ESSR and in the Republic of Estonia with regained independence. (ENSV 91). His career biography is concerned with the working years in the ESSR (KV 993: 41–144). The topic under discussion in this article is social relations in working life. As the questionnaire was focused on working life, it contained more material on the subject. In the further analysis of social relations I concentrate my attention on his career biography, his life story serves as a supportive source.

Ilmar, a civil servant qualified as a lawyer, was born into a farmer's family in 1918, finished a *gymnasium* in the second half of the 1930s, which was followed by military service and work in the Defence Army of the Estonian Republic. The year 1940 can be regarded as a breaking-point in his life – he continued his military service in the Red Army<sup>11</sup>, then joined the fatigue party in Russia, participated in World War II in the ranks of the Estonian Corps and worked as an officer in the Soviet Army until 1956. Ilmar gives a rhetorical description of his work on his home farm: *Was it the field of my home farm where I used to walk behind the harrow or the land roller, tie up sheaves and pick potatoes?* (KV 993: 42). Here Ilmar bears in mind the question about his first workplace. Typically of the childhood of a peasant child of the 1920s–1930s, it was the home farm, although it was not a paid job but a natural part of upbringing (the same in several other thematic narratives, e.g., also in KV 995: 53–236). So we get only a figurative description of his first workplace.

Ilmar mentions his military career neither in his life story nor in his career biography. Yet what is meaningful for him is the social network related to his military career and wartime and the participation in which has been important for him until the present time (ENSV 91: 20–21).

His life story explains why he became a career soldier. His peasant

<sup>11</sup> On August 29, the reorganisation of the Estonian People's Army into the 22nd Territorial Rifle Squad of the Red Army started.

origin is glowing through his life story; although he starts it with a statement: *I am a country-boy* (ENSV 91: 1), he will never become a farmer. As a justification for his choice, he mentions his wish to help the farm.

*I was the only child in the family, so my destiny was predetermined. I was to become the heir of the farm and its developer. Whether I wanted it or not, whether I was cut out for it or not. It was predetermined this way. [—] When I browsed the law on officers' service career, I had an idea. I realised that it would be the quickest way for me to improve the situation at home (to pay the debt and activate tilling) if I became an officer* (ENSV 91: 1–2).

The debt was meant to cover Ilmar's school expenses. However, he cannot see any other possibility for doing something for the farm: *If I had returned home after military service, it would have meant living in want together with my father and mother until going under the hammer. I could not think of any other jobs for earning money – also in my home neighbourhood...* (ibid.) The first correction in his farming plans was made by military service and the possibility to earn money in order to save the farm; the other – and more final for Ilmar – the kolkhoz order. *Collective farms started to be established in my home neighbourhood and I had nothing to do there any more. Father and Mother had also moved from our home in the woods to the settlement, where electricity, shops, chemist's shop, doctor and church were all at hand* (ibid.: 5). So, after returning into civil life (in 1956) he becomes a city dweller and a civil servant. In his career biography he describes his thirty years of service as an official at the Council of Ministers. *Here I also take into account the fact that part of my earlier jobs were in the time when there was no Soviet Estonia yet and part of them occurred outside Soviet Estonia* (KV 993: 41).

After World War II the veterans of the Great Patriotic War were offered positions of responsibility, which were of crucial importance regarding the new society. At least they were all provided jobs (see also KV 990: 176). So, when analysing the story, we have to bear in mind the fact that Ilmar belongs in the so-called privileged bureaucracy in Soviet society, who were considered as the bearers of typical middle-class values in Soviet time (Ledeneva 1998: 78 ff., quoted in Kõresaar 2003: 170).

## Why and how are social relations emphasised?

Below I will make an attempt to interpret what kind of social relations are expressed in the career biography and how they are emphasised. I will also try to understand why it is namely these particular social relations that have been stressed.

The two sources under analysis – the life story and the career biography – give different descriptions of social relations: the life story is more focused on the relations inside the family, the thematic narrative – on working relations. As my aim was to study working life and relations, the analysis below is concentrated on social relations in working environment.

Social relations can be divided into those operating on the primary group level and those operating on the secondary group level, or, generally, into the so-called strong and weak relations. The strong, first-level relations are based on emotional connections and here the general assisting principle is applied. The so-called weak relations proceed rather from instrumental connections and are not so many-sided, yet they perform an important function (Diewald 1995: 229). Social relations in career biographies usually cover the relations of the so-called secondary group level. The including of the primary relations in the career biography depends much on the narrator, their gender and marital status. The written thematic narratives dealt with here tell about the narrators' families and occupations, yet it is not a rule. Single people certainly mention their marital status<sup>12</sup>, and women do it more often than men. In Ilmar's thematic narrative family relations are exposed in connection with some fringe benefits he got due to his position: *I was able to exchange this flat for two two-room ones. Either daughter got her own flat. Me and my wife also got a two-room flat. [—] [about getting a car] Well, I didn't actually want it any more, although I had a driving license. But the family was interested (KV 993: 77); or as a "sufferer" in strenuous studies and working life: I also had a family – wife and two daughters. I was supposed to have time for them as well. To be honest, the family and family relations suffered. During the years of studying I was not able to pay too much attention to them and take good*

<sup>12</sup> Speaking about being alone at the moment of writing the story or a single person's life and their additional duties in the Soviet time (KV 990: 69–92); it often occurs, for example, in teachers' career biographies, e.g., KV 994: 159–191, KV 990: 11–25, KV 999: 242–317.

*care of them* (KV 993: 41).

Generally his career biography also leaves out emotional relations on the horizontal level; while describing social relations, it is the social relations on the vertical level, i.e., with superiors – which are meaningful for him.

Social relations appear with different intention in different stories, and the relations that are paid attention to and emphasised, vary by sources. From Ilmar's life story and career biography we can elicit as an example an event occurring in both sources – the acquisition of a landed property for building a summer cottage. In his life story this happens as if against his will; Ilmar is like a bystander, he does not play any role in the acquisition, neither does he explain the background or social relations related to it.

*The lot for building a summer cottage was offered to me in 1970. I was not really interested in it; I said to the offer that if I retired some day, maybe I would like to have it then. I was told that when I retired, I would get a lot in Haapsalu district.<sup>13</sup> After reconsidering, I accepted the offer* (ENSV 91: 6).

His career biography reveals that the acquisition of the lot was directly connected with his position, the network operating inside the privileged bureaucracy. Ilmar places this case in the rubric *with the elements of the system* “*scratch my back and I'll scratch yours*”. First, resources between institutions are exchanged and then the remaining lot, due to friendly relations, goes into Ilmar's possession. *One day a good pal of mine from our agricultural department called me and asked if I was interested in a lot for building a summer cottage* (KV 993: 118).

### **Horizontal relationship**

In Ilmar's career biography horizontal relationships mostly emerge in the instrumental meaning. However, emotional relations and contacts with former mates from military service, school, and sports training also play a significant role.

In the mid-1950s Ilmar starts looking for another job after about 20

<sup>13</sup> Haapsalu district is situated in West Estonia (the present Lääne County). A lot for a summer cottage was appreciated by its nearness to one's home (here, the city of Tallinn) and its location in a naturally beautiful place, usually near a water body. To have a lot in Haapsalu district was not by far as prestigious as to have it in Harjumaa, near Tallinn.

years of military service; as a party member, he finally reaches the secretary of the party organisation, who helps him find a job.

*After demobilisation from the armed forces (in 1956), after I had taken a short break, I started looking for my first job in the civil service. All my efforts were in vain,<sup>14</sup> as I was not qualified for civil service. At last I went with my problem to the secretary of the local Party Committee, who was responsible for personnel issues. [—] Finally he sent me as a personnel clerk to a small lace and ribbon-weaving factory. [—] My next and main job was at the Chancellery of State at the Council of Ministers of the ESSR (KV 993: 42–44).*

Social network is also needed for fulfilling one's tasks at work. When a problem at work needed a quick solution, emotional friendly relations had to be used for instrumental purposes. As an example, we can present the following problem-solution here: Bruno Saul, Chairman of the Council of Ministers, quickly needed data on Pärnu district (Saul himself was already halfway there). The necessary data could be procured from the Planning Committee.

*I did not know anybody among the management of the Planning Committee. I called a good pal of mine, the chairman of the board of athletics there (I myself was the vice-chairman of the board of athletics in my institution) and told him about the problem and its urgency. [—] After half an hour he called me back and started dictating ... (ibid.: 65).*

Before he started to solve the problem – to obtain the necessary data – Ilmar gave a quick estimate of his chances and found that the quickest (and easiest) way to do it was on the basis of friendly relation, expecting that, due to emotional relationship, the other side would help him solve the problem. This was the only time when he had deserved his superior's gratitude (emphasis in the text laid by the source).

*The next morning the head of department came TO MY TABLE, shook hands with me and said, "Thank you, comrade! You saved our department's reputation!" This was the only time he had thanked me (ibid.).*

<sup>14</sup> As a comment, it can be said here that several interviewees have told me about their difficulties in finding work especially in the 1950s.

Recognition in the case of social relations and especially working relations is a significant category. Personal recognition outweighed those on paper and it was something the respondent was willing to share with the reader. Mutual recognition also deserves mentioning in the career biography.

The existing strong emotional relations could also be used for instrumental purposes. It was easier to work with a superior with whom you were in friendly relations than the one with whom you had only official working relationship. [—] *the last vice-chancellor was my wartime regiment pal. [—] Thanks to him, also some of my rather complicated problems found a more favourable solution* (KV 993: 111).

In attending to matters not directly connected with work, multi-level relations also counted. As a comparison, we could mention here the story about establishing a shooting range for practising shooting in the attic of Toompea Palace. It had to be sanctioned by several departments. *I co-ordinated this matter with the Board of Architecture, national heritage protection, militia and fire departments. I have to admit that acquaintances counted here as well (without scratching anybody's back)* (ibid.: 48). Both the source under study here and several other career biographies reveal the essential role of those people who had served in the Estonian Corps: they held significant positions and a loose, yet strong network operated between them. The same kind of scheme can also be noticed in the case of other social networks in Soviet Estonia (studying together, beginning from the year 1964 student brigades, etc.).

Ilmar himself gives the best summary of the instrumental usage of horizontal social relations, answering the question about how he was employed by the top institution of Soviet bureaucracy, which the Council of Ministers with its administrative apparatus undoubtedly was.

*When later on some of my friends asked me how I got a job at this institution of higher administration, I answered, "Small wonder! It has been written about in "Kalevipoeg!" And if they still wondered, I quoted, "Dearer than a load of gold, superior than silver treasures, acquaintance must be declared"<sup>15</sup> (KV 993: 45).*

<sup>15</sup> The actual quotation from the epic "Kalevipoeg" reads as follows, "Dearer than a load of gold, superior than silver treasures, wisdom must be declared". The quotation (as well as the epic itself) was over-exploited in the Soviet time. It could be found in textbooks, as slogans at schools, etc., and

However, this acquaintance has an emotional shade of meaning: it is the schoolmates, a network that has been transferred from one system – the Republic of Estonia – into another, and, at the same time, it is the “brothers-in-arms” from the Estonian Corps, who help their schoolmate get a better-paid job.

*During the break [at the town’s active<sup>16</sup>] I caught a glimpse of my former schoolmates from Rakvere Comprehensive Gymnasium. We had also met quite frequently in the Estonian Corps. After the war they had been demobilised immediately as specialist required in national economy, and granted positions of quite high responsibility. [—] When I was asked about my salary and I told them what it was, they exchanged glances... Their salaries were quite different from mine. They knew me through and through (one of them had been my desk-mate at the gymnasium for three years) [—] (ibid.: 44).*

In his career biography Ilmar does not give a thorough description of the networks used in managing his personal affairs.

*In fulfilling one’s working tasks, everyone tried to manage on their own. [—] It was different outside working hours. Quite frequently you needed a helping hand from your colleague, but, as I understand, these cases do not belong under this question (ibid.: 118).<sup>17</sup>*

Owing to his position in the Soviet privileged bureaucracy, he did not have to resort to horizontal relations each time he needed help in solving some problems, but he was able to make use of the opportunities that resulted from his position. In order to improve his living conditions (several generations lived together under one roof), he took advantage of the possibility to get new flats from his workplace. The relations resulting from his position (or rather, the institution) are also revealed in fulfilling his personal needs.

*Sometimes I had to use the institution’s staff for fulfilling my personal needs. I was building my summer cottage. [—] Using strangers in this field*

finally started to live a life of its own, characterising the operating system and the new maxim, which was more useful to proceed from than the original proverb.

<sup>16</sup> Active – meeting of more active party members.

<sup>17</sup> The compilers of the questionnaire were actually interested in helping colleagues also in the case of problems not related to work.

*(electricity, drainage) would have been inconvenient for me. Our working times would have coincided. [—] ... gave our electrician [—] keys to my cottage and he installed the electric system as designed. [—] Water pipes and drainage were installed the same way. [—] Certain implements had to be used for personal purposes. It was mainly cars. [—] In this case I knew the people involved (director of the motor pool and the driver) and they assumed an understanding attitude towards the matter (KV 993: 69–70).*

It is typical of not only bureaucracy to take advantage of this kind of opportunities; similar practice also occurs in other occupations and the above situation where the means related to one's post are used for personal matters, can rather be regarded as a typical solution.

Ilmar almost never touches upon emotional, friendly relations between colleagues. The latter are nameless persons or just pals. However, they do things together at work: play caroms, billiards, participate in company parties and setting-up exercises (there was a period when obligatory exercises were organised at work at a definite time (11.45–12.00) every day, under the supervision of a hired expert).

In Ilmar's life story relations on the primary level become meaningful; he describes in great detail what he did together with his family in the Soviet time and what kind of festivities he celebrated. *Together with Helvi we went to the cinema, theatre, concerts, sports competitions, café, sometimes also restaurant* (ENSV 91: 9). An important level of communication for Ilmar is military veterans – both from the Estonian Corps and the ones from the navy from the period of the Estonian Republic. It is this level that plays the most significant role in his life story while describing his present life.

### **Vertical relations**

Although in his career biography Ilmar emphasises the horizontal-level relations through different situations and under various circumstances, the main stress in his story has undoubtedly been laid on social relations on vertical level. Ilmar gives emotional and verbose descriptions of his superiors and his relations with them.

The proportion of the descriptions of vertical relations might result from his choice not to speak about his colleagues' help in matters outside work or mingling after working hours, as well as the fact how Ilmar defines relationships at work.

*Relationships are essential both in everyday life and at work. Leaving*

*aside all the other people with whom relationships might develop, we will view part of them, namely those with superiors, both direct and in higher positions, which developed in the course of intermingling (KV 993: 94).*

Yet, we could proceed from the fact that people recall the things that are meaningful for them and the questions posed are interpreted from that basis. The reason why the topic of superiors rises in Ilmar's career biography, might be the strain imposed by their personalities, which is the only source of conflict that he has recalled from his working life. While giving a general estimation of the Soviet period in his life story, Ilmar mentions his family's well-being and feeling of security, and as the only disturbing factor, he points at difficult superiors.

*By the 1980s I was satisfied with my living and working conditions. We and our children had our own home – a flat. All of us had jobs. I was satisfied with my job and position. My salary was decent. I had a desk job, with definite working hours. A few days' business trips a month served as a pleasant change, making it possible for me to get acquainted with different people and places all over Estonia. The only infrequent inconveniences in my position resulted from my direct superior, the head of department. Fortunately this was a temporary, passing phenomenon, as were the superiors themselves. [—] These examples seem to be far-fetched as regards family life, yet, they have left an imprint on my (as a family member's) health and nerves (ENSV 91: 11–12).*

The great attention paid to the relations with superiors might also result from the special position of Ilmar's working place – the Council of Ministers – in the ESSR; it was the institution which directed local life on the basis of the ECP and CPSU guidelines. In comparison, career biographies, the authors of which have worked in the country or in small towns, focus on friendly, emotional horizontal relationships (KV 998: 11–97; KV 999: 318–371). Vertical relations are described by Ilmar on tens of pages, outlining the superiors' profiles; yet, the relations are also elicited in other contexts, when answering other questions concerning working life. In his career biography Ilmar describes relations with his superiors on three levels: heads of departments or direct superiors, chancellors or directors, and chairmen and vice-chairmen of the Council of Ministers or high superiors. Here I mainly dwell upon relations with direct superiors.

A superior could have been “an obstacle” in arranging personal affairs. For example, Ilmar as a military pensioner had to go after his

retirement pay during working hours – each month on a certain day at a certain time. By superiors' silent consent, he usually had no problems with that, he was able to do it during his working hours – as the superiors also had some personal matters which had to be taken care of the same way. *During the “rule” of one of the heads of department, this procedure brought about a fuss. I have to admit that in this respect he was extremely orderly and scrupulous also about himself. [—] “Do you have to go namely today?” I was asked. And then follows a whole range of questions and explanations. Ilmar shows his pension booklet where the date and time are marked, the superior checks them by his calendar and watch, and then they start discussing the working plan.*

*It really would not be worth mentioning, but the same thing happened each month according to one and the same scenario. I could not understand why he needed this kind of fuss. [—] But this was the way I had to manage my personal affairs during working hours. For all the fifteen years that he was the head of department (KV 993: 61–62).*

In biographical narratives describing the Soviet time, it is a widespread practice to depict an event in connection with someone's “rule” (e.g., *during the rule of the head of department*), though not the rule of a party or government leader, but the direct superior. The Soviet-time superior's figure in biographical narratives is very colourful and important, characterised as a patriarchal *batyushka* (“patriarch”), an autocrat. A superior assumes a patronising, guarding role towards their subordinates, who in some narratives also solves their personal problems, especially in smaller urban settlements (KV 986: 147–227). Autocrats-superiors, who let their subordinates decide upon matters at work at their own will as well as minded their personal matters during working hours, were regarded as good ones. In his narrative, Ilmar also appreciates highly this kind of superiors.

*He had normal, good relations with the staff of his department. He did not interfere in his subordinates' work very much. He was often superficial in working matters. Usually there was an open newspaper or a magazine – “Pravda”, “Izvestiya” or “Ogonyok” – on his desk. One of the cases of his superficiality might also have cost me dear (KV 993: 94).<sup>18</sup>*

<sup>18</sup> Superiors as superficial workers are mentioned also in other career biographies (e.g., KV 993: 31–32).

Due to their superiors' superficiality or inaptitude, the subordinates might have got into critical situations. In reminiscences relations with superiors are intertwined with problems at work. Ilmar also recalls a conflict like that. One of the issues that belonged in the competence of Ilmar's department and was his direct task, was renaming small country towns into towns. Due to the indifference of superiors – the direct decision-makers – a problem arose with the renaming of Maardu. Educational and cultural workers in small country towns were granted some fringe benefits, which were not meant for those living in towns.

*Their [the educational and cultural workers'] discontent would have been an unexpectedly strong blow at the threshold of the coming elections – they would not have participated in the elections, or voted against the candidate, or written down their opinion on the ballot paper, and so on. These things were of great political importance at that time. The situation was explosive (KV 993: 99–100).*

The problem is discovered by Ilmar, who also tries to solve it, but, to his great disappointment, he is the one who gets scolded about it. He thinks that this is unfair, yet it was the way the system worked – it was the lower-level officials on whom the blame fell.

Superiors' profiles in Ilmar's career biography are mostly caricature. They are much more emotional and colourful than those of his colleagues', especially in the cases when he intermingles with them outside working hours. For example, he had a former classmate for a superior, who before the war had been travelling around the world, wanted to become a dancer and, having participated in the war in the ranks of the Estonian Corps, naturally worked in the Soviet bureaucracy system.

*It was quite logical that after the war we found him in the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the ESSR. But quite soon his restless blood started to boil again and he spent two years in Moscow, in a school whose name was not mentioned publicly (ibid.: 97).*

After a failed career as a spy, the classmate was “grounded” in a convenient position in the Council of Ministers. In spite of the fact that he is a failure as a superior, Ilmar expresses his friendly attitude towards him, as he is a former brother-in-arms.

*Good relations with the head of department continued also later on (still a*

*classmate!), despite the mentioned and unmentioned strains that sometimes occurred between us (KV 993: 101).*

Yet, it is the school-time contacts that are essential for working relationships later on, even if the classmate's different life style had found disapproval already during school-years: *During school vacations, when the other country-children helped their parents in the fields and pastures, he as a deck-boy sailed on board his uncle's ships from one European port to another (ibid.: 97).* Personal relationships are rendered greater meaning, they are valued more than working relations. Strains at work are rather not mentioned, people would not remember them (or would not like to speak about them).

Another superior might have brought about a new managerial style, new decisions, which also adjusted relations at work. As a comparison, I present an example of Ilmar's career biography, which demonstrates how a new head of department exchanged the districts subordinated to different officials.

*When I was trying to find out the reasons for that, I was told that it was better this way from the point of view of work, as local people in these districts knew me too well already. He [the head of department] had explained it to us already during his first weeks in office. Right? While until now, when I had been told that a certain person in the district was, for example, an excessive drinker, I had simply told him, "Kaljo, hold it back! You might get into trouble!" Now, in a situation like that, I had to tell him, "Comrade Mölder. The Council of Ministers has been informed that you are an excessive drinker, which is not compatible with the requirements of the Soviet moral code. Please take into account that corresponding conclusions will be drawn" (ibid.: 102).*

At the formal working level it was a superior who created a mess in work arrangement, yet he was a nice person. While describing vertical relations, Ilmar draws a line between a superior as a superior and as a human being. A superior as a pal in the "caroms corner" or at a company party was a nice companion; the superior described above is characterised by Ilmar as follows:

*By the way, outside working hours he was polite, keen on sports, a good mixer, a pleasant interlocutor, a real society man (ibid.: 104).*

Ilmar himself, when communicating with his subordinates (as a higher

official from Tallinn), preferred to use a more emotional, non-official way of interaction. It was easier to talk business on the level of a “pal” than proceed from official ways of communication and moral. In practice it was a more efficient way than “knocking” at the Soviet conscience. At the Council of Ministers, on the contrary, the relations between superiors and subordinates were strictly hierarchical, a different kind of behaviour was surprising.<sup>19</sup>

*His [the chancellor’s] behaviour was peculiar when he wanted to see one of his subordinates in his office, to talk to them. In these cases we were used to his secretary calling the person needed, saying, “Come to comrade Udras (Pertels), please!” At the time when G. Martin was in this position, I was told over the phone, “It’s Martin speaking. Drop by, if you have time! When it is convenient for you!” Of course I went at once (KV 993: 109).*

Emphasising the importance of upbringing and respectful attitude, which he had been taught at home, his respect for a superior depends on the latter’s personality. He values the same personal qualities in them as in himself: good behaviour, competence, as well as the ability to adapt themselves to the system.

One of the topics emerging in Ilmar’s career biography is the issue of superiors’ competence. How did the subordinates behave if the superior’s rearrangements and orders seemed to be foolish? The following story from Ilmar’s career biography is a survey of how the training of the staff for local soviets was reorganised.

*The work of Soviet organs was a bit strange for him [the new head of department], [—] he quickly learned the differences from party and Komsomol work, as well as the elementary elements of this work. He wanted to share his knowledge with the others and teach them right away. [—] The new head of department became actively involved in the work of these courses. He switched into the curriculum topics he had recently discovered for himself. Many of them dealt with the elements of the work of soviets [local executive committees]. In many a cases we were trying to*

<sup>19</sup> References to the Council of Ministers as a hierarchical institution can be found in Ilmar’s career biography also in the descriptions of space division and service sector. It is especially colourful in the case of the latter, where the institution had several canteens and they were meant for different staff members. *This canteen was used by the so-called rank-and-file workers whose only wish was to satisfy their appetites as easily and quickly as possible (KV 993: 86).*

*hold him back and persuade him that one or another topic could be excluded, as (for example) the secretaries of the urban and district executive committees for whom the course was meant, were mostly qualified as lawyers and new these things inside out. "They have forgotten these things," the superior was sure. [—] It was difficult again (KV 993: 103).*

Ilmar reduces the absurdities inside the system to the superior's personality. He is quite modest in criticising the system, the existing order, and if he does it, it is namely through his superiors. If the system itself cannot be criticised, it can be done through his superior's personality. This can be regarded as a peculiarity of the socialist system, where decisions are not based on rational electoral system, but everything boils down to singularity, which also gives greater power to officials (Srubar 1991: 418–419). Criticism of a superior can reveal how the Soviet power worked too well as a system, and agreeable personalities who were well adapted to the system were preferred as superiors. This approach also shows us the reason why Ilmar in his career biography differentiates between a superior as a representative of the system and a superior as a human being and a pal.

Why and how are social relations emphasised in the sources like a life story and a structured thematic narrative created with the help of a questionnaire? First it has to be pointed out that different sources reflect social relations differently. Here we presented a survey of a single career biography and a life story. Ilmar's life story gives a meaning to social relations with primary groups. He concentrates on his own and his family's life and relations with the so-called non-formal groups. In his career biography Ilmar emphasises social relations on two different levels – horizontal and vertical ones. On horizontal level relations at work are presented rather on instrumental level, although they also have an emotional meaning. Ilmar stresses the importance of social relations both when solving problems at work and outside working hours. What is important here is the network of former mates from military service from the days of the Estonian Corps. His career biography pays more attention to relations with superiors than horizontal relations. Through vertical social relations Ilmar presents to the reader small details of his working life and describes the events that he has remembered from the years in the subordinate unit of the Council of Ministers. His descriptions of superiors are emotional and often also critical. In the case of vertical relations the differentiation between the opposing us/them is also meaningful, where "them" represents the

system and superiors working for it. In Ilmar's career biography the network outside the institution often constitutes a more important social relationship. Ilmar's access to various benefits results from his position and therefore the "deficit networks"<sup>20</sup> are not emphasised here.

## Summary

In the story about working life in the ESSR, it is undoubtedly the events related to the narrator's life that occupy the central place, whereas he distances himself from social developments. One part of working life is constituted by social relations, and more attention is paid to them while writing a career biography. In addition to describing social relations, through which we can learn about a number of concrete events as well as their present interpretation, the career biography also gives a good survey of the Soviet-time living conditions and the diversity of society.

Although in many places in his career biography Ilmar makes us understand that the institution where he worked was not a special, privileged one, the central topic in the descriptions is its peculiarity. Here rules different from those established in ordinary institutions are applied. On his first working day the new staff-member is introduced to the first vice-chairman of the Council of Ministers, and Ilmar recalls how the latter emphasised the singularity of the Council of Ministers: *You are going to work for the Council of Ministers... but you are employed with a test period... And if you do not justify our trust with your work... Then we have to sack you...* (KV 993: 44).

He considers himself as an ordinary civil servant, however, he admits that their work was paid more attention to than in any other institution.

*There was a certain attitude towards the personnel department and its staff, not because they were appreciated, but more because people were afraid to make a wrong move under their eyes (at parties, excursions, etc.). This kind of attitude was based on the fact that they also watched the other people's behaviour and actions. Almost the same kind of attitude prevailed concerning the special, military and communications departments, whose functions were recommended to be kept unknown (ibid.: 91).*

<sup>20</sup> "Deficit networks" – social relationships based on informal contacts and personal networks which was used to obtain goods and services under the rationing which characterised Soviet Estonia (editors).

When using career biographies as sources for everyday life, their significance for the researcher is in the extent they reflect personal experience and worldview. In the analysed career biography Ilmar conveys his experience of the Soviet-time working life. Social relations are just a part of the narrator's social and cultural world, through which it is possible to pass on perceptions, categories that are essential for the narrator.

Ilmar's life story helps us understand his career biography. In the latter he does not voice his opinion, does not give any reasons, and avoids any evaluations. When reading it, we fail to understand his attitude towards the Soviet power and himself as part of the state machinery. Yet, in his life story he sounds more concrete when defining his point of view:

*Life was not stagnant at that time, either. People worked, brought up their children and threw parties. Somebody has said once that if you live together with wolves, you also have to howl together with them. And this is exactly what people did at that time – some of them less, some of them more, and louder (ENSV 91: 13).*

Ilmar expresses his attitudes, giving a general evaluation of his work, trying to interpret the things essential for him.

*Did I like the work I was doing in that institution for thirty-two years? Somebody once said that if you wanted to find satisfaction in your work, you had to make it pleasant for yourself. I could not do anything else but this, although my work there was not very pleasant. [—] I tried to get myself into the spirit. The first thing I experienced was that I was not allowed to make mistakes in my work. [—] While I was working during these years in the Chancellery of State at the Council of Ministers, I could not work differently there, either. Besides, somebody (again someone else's words!) has said, "In order to live, you have to work, in order to live well, you have to work hard." I also wanted to lead as good a life as possible. In order to achieve it, I had to develop a serious attitude towards the work I had to do. Also at that time (KV 993: 130, 136).*

When analysing the source, one of the factors that became essential was the non-fulfilment of the expectations that I as a researcher had towards my source. It became clear that it is not possible to create a situation similar to an interview with the help of written questionnaires, as relatively little attention is paid to the wider context – people's

understandings and origin. It was difficult to elicit all the important categories through a career biography. A person's working world is just a part of his whole life and directly depends on them. Here it was a lucky chance that the analysis of the career biography was greatly assisted by the existence of another source – the life story. In career biographies, when answering written questionnaires in a more general way, the approach becomes narrower. In life stories people tell the stories of their lives and try to relate it to the general story of time (it also results from different aims of collection work as mentioned above). A written narrative obtained with the help of a questionnaire undoubtedly opens up other aspects in the Soviet-time everyday life than an interview or a life story, focusing on common, everyday communication in working life during the Soviet period.

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ENSV = Life stories under the topic "The Life of Myself and My Family in the ESSR and in the Republic of Estonia".

KV = Archive of Correspondent's Answers at the Estonian National Museum.

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