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Tanja Petrović

Such Were the Times
**Serbian Peasant Women Born in the 1920s and 1930s and the
Stories of Their Lives**

1. Life story as a source of information on history, culture and identity

The analysis presented in this paper is based on eight life stories told by women born in Serbia in the 1920s and 1930s.¹ Most of the stories were recorded by students of the Faculty of Philology, Belgrade, between 1997 and 2000, and some were recorded by Sofija Rakić-Miloradović and Biljana Sikimić.² All interviewers were female and significantly younger than their interviewees. The stories were collected primarily for the purpose of linguistic (dialectological) research: the question *Tell me about your life* or *Tell me what life was like when you were young* gives the interviewees the possibility of telling a coherent story which is neither led nor often interrupted by the interviewer's questions, whereby linguistic interference between the collocutors is reduced to a minimum, as required for the material being used in dialectological studies.

The material obtained in this way can be a valuable source of two kinds of information. Namely, it provides information about how the people interviewed lived several decades ago, how they experienced important changes in their personal lives as well as important historical moments such as wars, major political changes, etc. On the other hand, this material

¹ Z. M. (1915), Čepure (near Paraćin); V. J. (1928), Mirilovac (near Paraćin); D. P. (1931), Venčane (Šumadija, central Serbia); J. C. (1927), Kladovo (eastern Serbia); R. Ž. (1934), Majur (near Jagodina); J. Đ. (1924), Guberevci (near Guča, western Serbia); R. M. (1926), Bagrdan (near Jagodina); B. S. (1935), Banatska Palanka (southern Banat, Vojvodina, close to the Romanian border).

² I am grateful to Radoje Simić (Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade), Sofija Rakić-Miloradović (Institute for the Serbian Language), and Biljana Sikimić (Institute for Balkan Studies), who were so kind as to make materials from their archives available for my research.

constitutes a linguistic unit, a performance of the *self* in discourse through which an interviewee presents herself to an interviewer. Discursive interactions between the two may be seen as manifestations of processes of cultural identity formation.³ Similarly to this view, Linde stresses that “life stories express our sense of self: who we are and how we got that way. They are also one very important means by which we communicate this sense of self to the others”.⁴

All the women interviewed are of similar age and the same social group (to which the majority of the female population of their age in the areas they come from belongs) – all of them come from rural parts of Serbia, have lived in peasant families, all have spent their lives in villages, and all are illiterate. The analysis will focus on the period when they were young, when they got married and moved from their father’s to the family of their father-in-law. This means that the portion of their life stories describing this period in their lives concerns the 1940s and 1950s. In her extensive and detailed study published in 1966,⁵ Vera St. Erlich analyzed approximately the same period (the survey was conducted in 1937–41), concentrating on the issues of authority, conflict, rank and position in the family, as well as on the process of transformation of all family relations. The fact that Erlich’s work refers to the same period and deals with the same phenomena of family life makes it possible for her results, acquired mainly by the questionnaire method, to be compared with this material, obtained by the oral history method, which offers personal accounts.

1.1. Communicative situation

In this article I present the way the interviewed women see what their position in the family was 50 years ago. The process of remembering is always highly dependent on the present moment, at which the act of remembering takes place. The present moment gives shape to people’s memories, and enables them to position themselves in the existing social reality, and to negotiate and justify their statuses and roles. Only in connecting the past with the present, in positioning ‘then’ in relation to ‘now’, can the full meaning of memories reveal itself. Narration, as a form of remembering, is a way in which people assign meaning to their memories. “Narrative is among the

³ Cf. *Relationality: Discursive Constructions of Asian Pacific American Identities*, eds. A. Lo and A. Reyes, *Pragmatics* 14/2-3 (2004), and therein B. Urciuoli, “The Discursive Emergence of the Cultural Actor”, 257-261.

⁴ C. Linde, *Life Stories. The Creation of Coherence* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 3.

⁵ V. St. Erlich, *Family in Transition: A Study of 300 Yugoslav Families* (Princeton University Press, 1966).

most important social resources for creating and maintaining personal identity.”⁶ As Kathleen Stewart argues, “to narrate is to place oneself in an event and a scene – to make an interpretative space – and to relate something to someone: to make an interpretative space that is relational and in which meanings have direct social referents”.⁷

Speaking about their own past and the time of their youth, the interviewed women were aware of the changes that have occurred in family structure and values in the meantime. One also has to bear in mind the fact that they told their stories to young women coming from a completely different family and social background; this fact certainly affected the form, concept and contents of their life stories – as stressed by Niedermüller, “the verbalized life history ... is not an autonomous text, constructed only in the function of the life course of the speaker but much rather the immanent product of the linguistic interaction, the psychological, sociological situation between the researcher and the ‘native’.”⁸ As during the interviews the interviewees were not “led” by specific questions, they were free to make their own concept of the story they were telling⁹ – to stress what they considered to be important, to make comments, evaluations and comparisons; as a result, the collected material shows which verbal strategies women used in presenting themselves. Life history is always “the print of the interaction

⁶ Linde, *Life Stories*, 98.

⁷ K. Stewart, “Nostalgia. A Polemic”, *Cultural Anthropology* 3(3) (1988), 227.

⁸ P. Niedermüller, “From the Stories of Life to the Life History: Historic Context, Social Processes and the Biographical Method”, in *Life History as Cultural Construction/Performance*, eds., T. Hofer and P. Niedermüller (Budapest, 1988), 458-459.

⁹ H. Bausinger, “Constructions of Life” in *Life History as Cultural Construction* (p. 485), mentions the German material collected by using the same method: in the late 1950s the Tübingen Institute took part in an extended project of collecting, documenting and classifying dialectological material, which involved a large number of interviewees. The research was concerned with language rather than with the topics interviewees spoke about, but the easiest way to obtain the material needed was to ask them to speak about their lives. As Bausinger stresses, topics such as birth, baptism, marriage or death were rarely brought up. People preferred to speak about moving to or visiting other towns and cities, or about extreme experiences such as war. By contrast, all life stories analyzed in this paper contain passages about childhood, marrying into another family, giving birth to and rearing the children. Explanation for this difference may be found in the fact that the living and social space of the interviewed women was extremely limited – most had no encounters with other people or places apart from their village. Of course, those who, for instance, had experiences such as meeting Bulgarian or German soldiers during WWII did mention them in their life stories.

between concrete, personal experiences and the individual understanding of reality".¹⁰

Narratives produced in the particular communicative situation are dialogic in nature. Dialogism, a concept developed by Bakhtin [Voloshinov],¹¹ has been fruitfully integrated into the theoretical frame of anthropological linguistics.¹² The dialogic nature of autobiographic narratives reaches beyond mere dialogical interactions between interviewer and interviewee (as we have already pointed out, these interactions were relatively rare, since the interviewers seldom interrupted the interviewees' narratives): it is also *inherently dialogical*, both with respect to the opposition *then* vs. *now* and to the opposing value systems prevailing in the two temporal frames. This dialogism is the reason why the autobiographical discourse analyzed here typically consists of statements describing events followed by personal comments; as a rule, these comments refer to differences between "their" (interviewees') and present times. The following quotation represents the typical pattern of narrating in these autobiographies:

<event> *There were three brothers and three sisters in my family. When I was old enough to take care of the cows, my father decided to marry me to a boy I had never met.*

<comment> *I did not love him, but I had to give in – life was different then, my dear, you had to listen to your parents back then. It was not as it is now – it was impossible to marry whom you wanted. There was no love then. (J. C.)*

¹⁰ Niedermüller, "From Stories of Life to Life History", 456.

¹¹ Cf. M. M. Bakhtin's works: *Problems of the Poetics of Dostoyevsky* [in Russian] (Moscow, 1963); *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson & M. Holquist (University of Texas Press, 1981); *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, eds. C. Emerson & M. Holquist, trans. V. McGee (University of Texas Press, 1986).

¹² Cf. L. Tsitsipis, *A Linguistic Anthropology of Praxis and Language Shift: Arvanitika (Albanian) and Greek in Contact* (Oxford University Press, 1998); R. Bauman, "Contextualization, Tradition and the Dialogue of Genres: Icelandic Legends of the Kraftaskáld" in A. Duranti and C. Goodwin, eds., *Rethinking Context. Language as an Interactive Phenomenon* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 125-145; R. Bauman and C. L. Briggs, "Poetics and Performance as Critical Perspectives on Language and Social Life", *Annual Review of Anthropology* 19 (1990), 59-88; C. L. Briggs, *Learning how to ask: a sociolinguistic appraisal of the role of the interview in social science research* (Cambridge University Press, 1986); B. Mannheim and D. Tedlock, eds., *The Dialogic Emergence of Culture* (University of Illinois Press, 1995).

2. *Position of the young woman (daughter/daughter-in-law) in the Serbian patriarchal family*

In the analysis, I focus on two phenomena quite uncommon in current everyday experience but, by contrast, common in the interviewees' youth: marriage against their will and the bride's subordinated position in the family of her father-in-law. The life history approach gives an opportunity to get a picture of traditional patriarchal life in Serbia as seen from the perspective of young women involved in it, and filtered through a period of five decades marked by a significant change of values and family circumstances.

2.1. *Marriage against women's will*

Balkan family structure is based on two main principles – the principle of seniority and a male-dominated system of regulations.¹³ In such a society the worst position in the hierarchy is that of a young woman. Some of the interviewees explain that they even feared their younger brothers. Generally, they explain their position as part of the then existing rules, so they not only considered it acceptable, but normal. In fact, they saw it as the only possibility in such a value system and the prevailing social order. But, at the same time they are aware that the people they are talking to have completely different value systems, so that a difference between “their time” and “this time” is often stressed:

When I was young, life was not like it is today. There were no cafes, no promenade, and my parents were so strict that I did not dare even talk with boys, never mind considering going to cafes and promenade. (R. M.)

Times have changed. It was completely different when I was young, unlike youngsters marrying whom they want now. (J. C.)

Subordination of young women was most obvious when decisions about their marriage were made. They usually had no influence on the choice of a husband. “To belong” to one's own times, which means to behave according to the rules created by the community, was the only way to remain an accepted member of the community. So these women saw their acceptance of prescribed roles and obedience as the only choice they had:

My mother told me: My child, you have to get married, war is beginning, a girl is worthless after a war, nobody will respect you. So I got married. (D. P.)

¹³ M. Mitterauer, “A Patriarchal Culture? Functions and Forms of Family in the Balkans”, *Beitraege zur historischen Sozialkunde*, sp. issue (Vienna, 1999), 17.

For a woman, being an exception from the existing socio-cultural model would have had much worse consequences than remaining in a subordinated position as a married woman:¹⁴

It was shameful back then to leave one's husband and marry another man. Women were supposed to put up with everything, and nobody asked how they felt. Then it was rare for a woman to leave her husband, because nobody would have respected her. (J. C.)

Their fear of remaining unmarried was stronger than their intimate disagreement with the family's choice of a husband:

I got afraid I would remain unmarried at the age of 22. In the past girls did not go to school and they married earlier – at the age of 18, 17, even as early as 16. (Z. M.)

Even when the interviewees speak of other women who married against their family's (father's) will, they only explain the possibility of such behaviour by "changing times":

Only my youngest sister married against our father's will. She married whom she wanted, she did not want to be unhappy like her elder sisters who had married unwillingly. She suffered a lot, but she made it. But by then a new time had already begun, and everybody was looking for love. When I was getting married, it was completely different. (J. C.)

However, when the interviewed women talk about their non-voluntary marriages, a kind of conflict between their personal and social identities becomes observable:¹⁵ belonging to a certain social structure, they accept it and consider themselves part of it. But personally, they disagree with their position as imposed by rural patriarchal society and see it as a very bad and humiliating state:

It was impossible to marry whom you wanted, they bargained over you as if you had been a cow. I kept thinking, God, do not let me have female children. I like girls, but they suffer too much in life. (Z. M.)

Times were different then. I like the way it is now. (J. C.)

¹⁴ C. D. Worobec, *Peasant Russia, Family and Community in the Post-Emancipation Period* (Northern Illinois University Press, 1995), 183, stresses that it was a serious crime for a Russian peasant women to default on her obligations to her husband; the author explains such an attitude mainly by economic reasons, in terms of "interdependent labour relationship of spouses".

¹⁵ M. Elchinova, "Autobiographical Story as Self-Presentation" [in Bulgarian], *Balgarski folklor* 6 (1994), 24-25, emphasizes the existence of the two types of identity: "Social identity is the individual's awareness of belonging to a certain social group, with emotional and valuable significance for the group members, while individual identity consists of a person's intimate images of themselves."

2. 1. 1. *Rethinking the past*

Bausinger says “the innate contradiction of autobiography is that something unfinished has to be presented as if it were round and done and closed”.¹⁶ Similarly, Linde stresses that “the nature of the process of narration contributes to the creation of ... reflexivity, because one can never immediately speak the present in the present. This necessarily creates a distinction between the narrator and the protagonist of the narrative, and interposes a distance between them. Consequently, the narrator can observe, reflect, adjust the amount of distance, and correct what is being created.”¹⁷

Reflexivity is also a characteristic of the analyzed life stories, which frequently contain statements that recapitulate the women’s lives. However, despite the fact they consider their non-voluntary marriages as a bad and humiliating thing, while recapitulating their lives the interviewed women always speak about it in a good manner:

There were 14 persons including me in the household I came into when I got married. Somehow I have spent my life there and, you see, I was happy with my husband. We have spent 22 years together. (Z. M.)

I have danced and sung a lot in my lifetime, and I am not sorry at all that I got old. (Z. M.)

I was very unhappy, but I had to agree and to marry the husband my father chose for me. We had children later, and we have loved each other because of the children. I got ill when I was still young, but I managed to educate my children and to raise them properly. They have the children of their own now. So, that was my life; it was brutal in a way, but it has come out well. Somehow, one comes to love one’s husband later. (J. C.)

We have been married for 50 years, my husband was often away, he worked a lot, he spent 26 months in the army. We had three male children, one of them died, so we have two sons and five grandchildren now. That is the way we are living now. (J. Đ.)

2. 2. *Father and father-in-law*

For the interviewed women, their father was an absolute authority. They stress his despotic, authoritative role in the family:

My father was very strict with me, he did not allow me to go anywhere. (J. Đ.)

¹⁶ Bausinger, “Constructions of Life”, 481.

¹⁷ Linde, *Life Stories*, 105.

My father was very tough, I was not even allowed to speak [with men]. (R. M.)

My father would take me to a dance, but he would also take a stick along. And when I danced with somebody, he would stand right next to me. If he disliked the person I was dancing with, he would beat me with his stick. (J. D.)

Once married and in a new family, “the position of young women derived from the position of the daughter-in-law in home of father-in-law and mother-in-law”. As Vera Erlich describes, the relation between bride and husband’s parents is more important than her relation to her husband – she primarily becomes a *snaha* (daughter-in-law), not a wife, so “as a rule marriage meant entering a home not of a husband, but of a husband’s parents”.¹⁸

Erlich notices “certain customs regarding the seniors which reflect the humility of the young wife (and to some extent every wife)”,¹⁹ and mentions the custom for a married woman to kiss the hand of men (first of all her father-in-law’s), to wash the feet of her father-in-law, and the custom of standing at meals. In the analyzed life stories, the first two of these customs are often mentioned:

I lived with my father-in-law for 16 years. I washed his feet, I cut his nails, I washed his hair, I did his laundry. He loved me as if I had been his daughter. (J. C.)

I washed my father-in-law’s feet for five years. Before going to bed, I would go to him to say “good night” and kiss his hand. Then in the morning I would go to say “good morning” and kiss his hand again. He was lying in his bed and I had to kiss his hand. But, what could I do, such were the times. (R. Z.)

Such an obligation of young women’s towards the father-in-law was institutionalized in a patriarchal community. Even though quite “extreme” from today’s point of view, it was considered normal and the women often talk about it. A bride had similar obligations towards her mother-in-law, but taking care of her intimate affairs was tabooed and only one of the interviewed women was ready to talk about it:

When my mother-in-law had a period, I had to wash her bloody shirts. She did not wear underwear, only a long shirt. And I had to wash it when I came to their house as a bride. (B. S.)

¹⁸ Erlich, *Family in Transition*, 228.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 229.

3. *Father-in-law–daughter-in-law alliance*

The analyzed narratives reveal some issues concerning the family structure and value system in the Serbian patriarchal community. The life story method gives an opportunity to look at the position of a young woman within that community from her own perspective; this method sheds a somewhat different light on this issue from the questionnaire method. So Vera St. Erlich in her study explains the custom for a bride to kiss the hand of her father-in-law and to wash his feet as a manifestation of the woman's extremely subordinated position and humiliation. However, the way the interviewed women talk about these customs in their autobiographies shows another dimension of the daughter-in-law/father-in-law relationship whose main characteristics are mutual respect and mutual confidence rather than humiliation and subordination. While fear is the basic feeling characterizing the passages about their fathers, when speaking about their fathers-in-law the women's emphasis is on cooperation and confidence:

When I got married, I asked my father-in-law to buy a cow which I would take care of. And we lived off that cow. (J. C.)

I asked my father-in-law: Do you agree that we can work in the field with our own cattle? And he agreed. And I began to work the land the way I had learnt in my father's house. At the end of the year my father-in-law was very pleased with me and my work. (R. M.)

These women are always very proud of the fact that their fathers-in-law were fond of them:

When my husband and his brother decided to live apart, my father-in-law decided to stay with us. I was very happy with his decision: it showed that I was a good daughter-in-law. I always cooked the food that my father-in-law liked. (Z. M.)

My life with my husband's parents was nice; we had lived together with my husband's brothers' families for ten years, and then we separated. My father-in-law and mother-in-law went on living with us. My father-in-law used to say: one does not choose a son, but a daughter-in-law. One should choose a daughter-in-law who will take care of her husband's parents when they get old. (V. J.)

Vera Erlich stresses that the groom's parents were absolute authorities in the household into which the bride came. But, why is such an unexpectedly important role given to their fathers-in-law by the women themselves in their life stories? In the segment of their life stories describing the bride's life in the new family, the father-in-law takes up much more space and importance than the groom himself. This may be explained by the fact that grooms were very often much younger than their brides. The analyzed autobiographies give evidence for this:

After the Second World War my father decided to marry me to a boy from the same village. But almost all boys of my age had left or died during the war, and the village was small, so there were only very young boys left. They wanted to marry and get brides from good families. But they were so young, short and immature, I disliked them very much. (V. J.)

My grandfather told me that he had been very young when he married my grandmother; my grandmother was beautiful and he was so young and short that he used to sit on a pillow to look taller. So, my grandfather thought I should marry a young boy as well. (M. R.)

It seems, however, that this phenomenon is not the main reason for the interviewed to attach so much importance to their fathers-in-law; more important is the fact that the father-in-law was the highest authority and decision-making person in the patriarchal family. By contrast, the young bride who had just come to his house was the person in the worst position, with no influence in the family. Dominant communicative functions of life histories being “self-presentation and self-expression”,²⁰ an emphasis on this kind of alliance between the most authoritative and least authoritative members of the family serves these functions too. While men had a relatively broad field of social activities in the patriarchal village community, women’s space was very limited – it covered the house and pasture.²¹ The communication which women could establish was also limited, to their children, other women and junior community members. So their communication and cooperation with the father-in-law as the highest family authority would significantly improve their position and make their role in the family more important. As their obligations towards their mothers-in-law imposed by patriarchal roles were obviously considered too humiliating for a young bride, the women do not talk about them in their life stories: being a woman too, the mother-in-law was not a high enough authority, and so an emphasis on her relation to the daughter-in-law would not add any symbolic value to the interviewee’s self-presentation.

Speaking about women’s taking typically men’s obligations such as taking care of the cattle and agriculture is one of very common verbal strategies they use to enlarge the symbolic space that belongs to them. Eckert stresses that women, “deprived of power ... can only gain compliance through the indirect use of man’s power, or through the development of per-

²⁰ Elchinova, “Autobiographical Story”, 17.

²¹ For more on these spatial distributions of gender roles in traditional societies, cf. T. Petrović, “‘Struggling for Space’. Self-presentation in Autobiographies of Women in Serbia Born in 1920s and 1930s” in *She in the Balkans*, eds. E. Tacheva and I. Nedin (Blagoevgrad, 2000).

sonal influence. Men's power can be used indirectly by winning men's cooperation through social manipulation or by borrowing men's status through the display and exploitation of connections with men."²² Ardner introduced the terms *dominant* and *dumb* in order to describe the unequal positions of men and women in society:²³ men, being dominant, had the opportunity to form and express their significance in society, while women, belonging to the group of the dumb, had no such possibility. Because of that they were forced either to transform their own significance expressing it through the dominant group's code, or not to talk about it at all.

The women's oft-stressed view that they were their father-in-law's favourite daughter-in-law shows another verbal strategy they used in order to improve their position and expand their significance in the family. Presenting themselves as persons who perfectly fulfilled the role they were given by the patriarchal society was a way to express their individuality, and to position "me" as the focus of narration, which is necessary and natural for an autobiographical discourse. That is why these women always stress that their fathers-in-law liked them better because they were hard-working and dutiful. There are many passages in the analyzed oral histories where women describe how they were eager to accomplish the prescribed tasks:

When my man returns home, if I haven't done something the way it should be done, I would start crying at once. He would say, "Do not cry for that, woman". But I felt bad for not having done it before he came. I wanted to have everything done before he came back home, so that he could say, "Well done, woman!" (J. Đ.)

I had to manage to get everything done. I would not let anyone say I was late, I do not know what I would do in that case, I would die of humiliation. I always got everything done on time, even though I had no watch. I could tell the time by looking at the sun. (Z. M.)

Analyzing the position of Russian peasant women, Worobec observes that they, "despite their position of second-class citizens, supported, or at least accommodated themselves to patriarchy", and explains this accommodation "by the nature of patriarchy itself, which was careful to give women some rewards, power, and safeguards. Russian peasants honoured women as mothers and diligent persons".²⁴ Accordingly, Serbian peasant women also sought to conform as closely as possible to the highest values existing in the patriarchal community.

²² Quoted in Linde, *Life Stories*, 104.

²³ Quoted in P. Vodenicharov and K. Popova, "So, I was not the last one...", Individuality and men's identity in biographical interviews of two Mohammedan Bulgarians from Smolian region" [in Bulgarian], *Balkanistic Forum* 1 (1994), 72.

²⁴ Worobec, *Peasant Russia*, 175-216.

4. *Life histories and research on the Balkan patriarchal family*

Phenomena characteristic of the Serbian patriarchal society such as non-voluntary marriage and the subordinate position of the bride in her new family reveal different meanings if, apart from ethnographic and historical data, the participants' experiences and perceptions are taken into consideration. The methodological approach of historical anthropology tends to bridge this gap between structure and experience, trying to view "people, and families, not only as subjects of social change, but also as agents of change".²⁵ The question as to "how people perceived social structures and what kind of strategies they formulated as a result of their perceptions in order to achieve their individual and collective goals"²⁶ appears to be essential and unavoidable. New dimensions of family relations in Serbian village communities in the mid-twentieth century, and the social and individual meanings of these relations derived from women's life histories are another proof of how important it is that "the history from below" should be taken into consideration.

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²⁵ U. Brunnbauer, "New Directions in Balkan Family Studies: Between Numbers and Biographies", *Talking History*, ed. D. Koleva (Sofia: LIK, 2000), 23-24. Brunnbauer gives an overview of methodological approaches to the study of South-East-European family structure.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

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