

**SCIENTIFIC FINAL REPORT**

Regnr Östersjöstiftelsen: 2018-0084

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Project title: Tell the West: Witness Literature from the Gulag Archipelago 1925-2012

1. Purpose of the project

Witness literature or testimonial literature is a literary genre that has characterized the 20th century, a genre that describes experiences of concentration camps, slave camps, working camps, genocide and the like. Unlike other forms of literature, it is reserved for those who have had first-hand experience of the event. The purpose of the project is to investigate testimonial literature from the Gulag Archipelago, in their double capacity as literary works and testimonies to a historical reality.

The project examines witness literature written by repatriated western Gulag survivors, published in English, German, French, Swedish or Norwegian. Furthermore, the project focuses in particular on the memoirs written by Swedish Gulag survivors from the purges in Soviet Karelia. The term Gulag is used in the sense that it has come to be used after Alexander Solzhenitsyn's publication of the *Gulag Archipelago*: as a term for the Soviet repression system from December 1917 until the dissolution of the Soviet Union 1991, including prisons, transit prisons, concentrations camps, forced labor camps, corrective labor camps, colonies and settlements. The project has three main purposes:

- 1) Due to the lack of other sources, Gulag memoirs have always constituted an important historical documentation about the Soviet repression system, and even after archives were opened, they continue to prefigure our understanding of the Gulag. The first aim of the project is to examine the double role of Gulag memoirs, as both literature and historical documentation.
- 2) The second aim of the investigation is to examine the question of truth in witness literature. How can we make claims to truth and reality with regards to a subjective narrative? What do we mean when we speak about truth in relation to a narrative that builds on a particular, subjective experience? The project approaches these questions from a phenomenological framework. My thesis is that phenomenology, due to its examination of the relation between first-hand experience and objective reality, can provide us with a philosophical understanding of witness literature.
- 3) The third aim of the project is to investigate the Swedish Gulag memoirs and their reception. In Sweden, the earlier testimonies sparked fierce debates and defamation



campaigns at the time of their publication. My aim is to investigate this almost forgotten material as well as the silence around it.

2. The three most important results of the project and what conclusions can be drawn from them

1. Literary Narratives and Historical Testimony

Most witness literature concerns a reality that already belongs to the past: a genocide that has already past or concentration camps that no longer exists. The same is, however, not the case for Gulag memoirs, which, for the most part describe an ongoing reality; a reality that, due to the secrecy around it, was mainly known through their writings. Whereas witness literature in general is met with trust, the Gulag memoirs published outside of the Soviet Union during the Cold War were often challenged. A lack of sources to verify the accounts in the memoirs was not only a problem for historians, but it also turned the writers into targets for slander and smears. Their testimonies, and the slander they caused, bear witness to the vulnerability of testifying to a historical reality that, on the one hand, has as yet not been publicly accepted and, on the other, refers to a system of repression that is still ongoing and effective. Furthermore, the Gulag literature were responsible for both re-instituting the public narrative over the years, and for changing the reality that they described.

Even after the archives were opened, the importance of memoirs still prevails. More importantly, the fictionalized accounts still inform our present-day understanding of the Gulag. The most recent comprehensive study of the Gulag in the English language, Anne Applebaum's *Gulag: A History*, draws to a large extent on memoirs and fictionalized Gulag literature, even though the book was published in 2003 when the archives had long been available. The use of fictional testimonies in historical research on the Gulag raises important questions about the relation between historical truth and literary truth, between factual accuracy and fictional presentation.

2. Truth and Truthfulness in Witness Literature

Almost all Gulag memoirs expresses the desire to speak the truth, to tell the western world the reality of the Soviet repression. What does it mean to speak about truth with regard to a subjective experience? Drawing on the phenomenological tradition, Simone de Beauvoir develops an understanding of truth in autobiographical writing, where truth is not only an accurate description, but signifies a writing that makes ones lived experience possible to imagine for others. What we call truth in testimonial literature is thus essential 1) representative for the collective experience, 2) presenting the experience in a way that makes it possible for the reader to imagine "what it was like to...". Even if those truth are not accurate with respect to the writer's experience, they can nonetheless be true to the extent that they are representative for the group or the collective experience.



3. *Forgotten Stories and Untold Tales: Swedish Gulag Memoirs*

Several hundred Swedes emigrated to Soviet Karelia in the beginning of the 1930s, a number of them remained until the Great Terror and became targets of repression; most of the repressed Swedes were sent to forced work in lumber settlements and their experience is thus one of the “other Gulag”, of a confinement without prison walls or barbed wire. There is as yet no coherent public narrative and no memory sites in Sweden that acknowledge the Swedish Gulag survivors; most survivors never talked publicly about their experiences, let alone wrote about them, and the few who did, did it reluctantly. Their reluctance can be seen as the consequence of conflicting loyalties and as the result of tacit pressures on the survivors. All of the writers came from Communist communities, and they all describe the same hesitation about telling their stories: the reason to stay silent is stated in terms of different loyalties: one with the Swedish worker’s movement, another with the victims of the purges, and a third loyalty to the survivors still living under the Soviet repression. However, the final reason for writing is often stated in terms of the possible consequences for those left behind. Thus, the memoirs themselves bear witness to the difficulties of testifying about a repression that is still effective.

One fear that recurs through the Swedish memoirs is the fear of not being believed. The memoirs bear witness to a universe of repression to which there was no proof, and no possible verification. Theirs were a struggle to establish an unknown reality without the support of any public record. In the wake of a public discourse, the history of the Soviet emigration is still largely unknown in Sweden. On a national level, the question of the involvement of the Communist Party reached the public discourse in the beginning of the 2000s. In spite of the large attention drawn to discussion of the guilt of the Communist Party, there is still no comprehensive narrative of the experience of the repression of the Swedish emigrants in Soviet Karelia. The absence of memorials, museums or a memory culture raises questions about the meaning of witnessing in the absence of a collective memory: what enables a culture of memory in opposition to a culture of silence? How can we establish a memory culture on an experience that has been silenced for so long?

3. The project’s contribution to the international research frontline

- 1) The study is the first study of testimonial literature that uses a phenomenological framework in order elaborate questions of truth with regard to testimonial literature.



It is also the first study that investigates the relation between the personal narrative and the claims to historical objectivity from a phenomenological framework.

- 2) The project is the first study that examines memoirs written by Swedish survivors from the purges in Soviet Karelia. Although ethnical purges targeting Swedes took place in Soviet Karelia, it is still a part of the Swedish-Soviet history that we know little about. The memoirs they remain essential for our understanding of the purges, since other sources are still limited. The silence around the survivors give us important clues as to the difficulties in bearing witness against an ongoing and as yet not recognized repression.

4. New research questions that the project has led to

The project has led to two new research questions:

- 1) If we understand truth and truthfulness in testimonial literature as representativity, i.e. as the expression of an experience that is a typical or representative of a group, we are then faced with the question of whose experiences are represented and whose are not. The most widely spread and famous narratives of the Gulag are written by male, political prisoners in the camps. Their experiences differ from the experiences of women in the Gulag, and in several respects. The most important difference regards their part in the system. Although fewer in number in the camps, many women were placed in the working settlements and colonies. While the conditions in the latter were supposed to be better, life could in reality be as hard or harder than in the camps. Furthermore, many women were deported either to the settlements or colonies because they belonged to ethnic minorities. Would we discover new “truths” about a Gulag if we shifted our focus to the experiences of women and children? Does every and all representation entail the exclusion of those who are not “typical”? How could we enlarge our understanding of typical experiences or truthful representation in order to make it more inclusive?
- 2) As mentioned above, the absence of memorials, museums or a memory culture in Sweden raises questions about the meaning of witnessing in the absence of a collective memory: what enables a culture of memory in opposition to a culture of silence? How can we establish a memory culture on an experience that has been silenced for so long?

5. The contribution of the research to the knowledge of the Baltic Sea Region and Eastern Europe



1) The Gulag memoirs have marked the understanding in the West of the Gulag. Even after archives were opened, they continued and still continue to play a role in our historical understanding of the Gulag. In particular, a number of western survivors after the second world war together with the writings of Varlam Shalamov and Alexander Solzhenitsyn have prefigured, marked and continue to mark the understanding of the Gulag in the West. The project has outlined an understanding of how testimonial literature have helped form the debate in the West on the Gulag, and how they continue to do so.

2) The memoirs written by Swedish survivors from the purges in Soviet Karelia is barely known at all, and they have not been studied before. I also want to highlight the historical documentation that these memoirs provide us with. In spite of all the survivors who could have spoken, and in spite of the few who spoke, this is still a historical reality we know little about, and to which the memoirs continue to be an essential source of information.

6. Dissemination of the results of the project within and outside the research community

The first article, “Literary Testimonies and Fictional Experiences: Gulag Literature in between Facts and Fiction” (published in *Studia Phaenomenologica*) investigates the relation between truth and personal experience, as well as the relation between fact and fiction in Gulag memoirs. The second article ”Motvilliga vittnen: svenska vittnesberättelser från utrensningarna i Sovjetkarelen” (accepted to *Tidskrift för Litteraturvetenskap*), examines the Swedish testimonial literature from the purges in Soviet Karelia. In particular, I examine how the lack of an official narrative silences the survivors, hindering them from narrating their experiences. In the third article, ”Berätta för Väst!”. Vittneslitteratur från Gulag-arkipelagen 1945-1953” (submitted to *Lychnos*), I examine how testimonial literature from the Gulag Archipelago has formed and continues to form the historical understanding of the Gulag in the West. The fourth article, “Selvbiografier som vitnesbyrd i Simone de Beauvoirs poetikk” (published in *Opplysningen av det estetiske. Kunstfilosofisk modernitet fra Kant til relasjonell estetikk*), elaborates a phenomenological understanding of the relation between



experience, truth and memory in autobiographical writing, drawing on the phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir. I have presented earlier versions of the articles on a number of conferences and seminars, among others, *Truth and Truthfulness in Gulag Memoirs* (at the Phalén Picnic, organized by the Department of Philosophy at Uppsala University and the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Studies, Uppsala, 2019) and *Personal Experience as Historical Testimony in Witness Literature from the Gulag Archipelago* (at CBEES 2019). I have also presented a paper on how the lack of memorials and memory sites contributed to the silencing of the survivors: *Memories without Sites: Swedish Memoirs from the Soviet Karelian Repression* in the panel *Post-Socialist Anxieties through the Prism of Silence: Poland, Albania and Sweden*, at ASEES (the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies) annual congress in Washington in November 2020. My paper *Reluctant Witnesses: Swedish Memoirs from the Soviet Karelian Purges* was accepted to The International Auto Biography Associations (IABA) congress 2020, a congress that has been postponed until 2022 due to the pandemic. Due to the corona restrictions, my intended collaboration with the Centre for Ethics as Study in Human Value, in Pardubice was postponed until November 2021, when I presented the paper *Afterlife between the Testimony and the Archive*, at the workshop *Death and Afterlife*. Furthermore, I have presented some of the results of my post-doc project at the research seminar in Aesthetics at Södertörn University and at the research seminar in Philosophy at Åbo Akademi.

Peer reviewed articles:

2021. Andén, Lovisa. Literary Testimonies and Fictional Experiences. Gulag Literature in between Facts and Fiction. *Studia Phaenomenologica* vol 21/2021. Special Issue: *From Witnessing to Testimony*. Open access: https://zetabooks.com/wp-content/uploads/SP21_Anden.pdf

Andén, Lovisa. Motvilliga vittnen: svenska vittnesberättelser från utrensningarna i Sovjetkarelen. Accepted to *Tidskrift för Litteraturvetenskap*.

Andén, Lovisa. "Berätta för Väst!". Vittneslitteratur från Gulag-arkipelagen 1945-1953. Submitted to *Lychnos. Årsbok för idé- och lärdomshistoria*.

Articles in anthologies:

2021. Andén, Lovisa. Selvbiografier som vitnesbyrd i Simone de Beauvoirs poetikk, övers. Eirik Ulltang Birkeland. I *Oppløsningen av det estetiske. Kunstfilosofisk modernitet fra Kant til relasjonell estetikk*, red. Ståle Finke och Mattias Solli. Oslo: Universitetsforlaget.

**Popular Science**

Andén, Lovisa. Vittneslitteratur och det förflutnas närvaro. In *Svensk filosofi*, December 2021, <https://svenskfilosofi.se/2021/12/07/lovisa-anden-vittneslitteratur-och-det-forflutnas-narvaro/>

Conferences/presentations

- 2021 Paper, *Afterlife between the Testimony and the Archive*, presented at the workshop Death and Afterlife, at the *Centre for Ethics as Study in Human Value*, Department of Philosophy, University of Pardubice, CZ, 8-10 November 2021.
- 2020 Paper, *Memories without Sites Swedish Memoirs from the Soviet Karelian Repression*, in the panel, *Post-Socialist Anxieties through the Prism of Silence: Poland, Albania and Sweden* together with Prof. Agnieszka Mrozik (Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences) and Dr. Eralda Lameborshi (Department of English and Creative Writing, Stephen F. Austin State University), at the ASEES (Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies) annual congress, Washington, November 2020.
- 2019 Paper, *Literature, Experience and Truth in Women's Memoirs from the Gulag Archipelago*, at the Nordic Summer University, within the network *Feminist philosophy: Time, History and the Transformation of Thought*, Roosta, Estonia.
- 2019 Paper, *Truth and Truthfulness in Gulag Memoirs*, at the Phalén Picnick, organized by the Department of Philosophy at Uppsala University and the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Studies, Uppsala.
- 2019 Paper, *Personal Experience as Historical Testimony in Witness Literature from the Gulag Archipelago*, at the Centre for Baltic and Eastern European Studies, Södertörn University.

Public Lectures

- 2020 Lecture, *Motvilliga vittnen: tystad erfarenhet och historiska sanningsanspråk i Gulagmemoarer*, vid terminsavslutningen för ämnet Filosofi vid Södertörns Högskola, Stockholm, december 2020.