
Reviewed by Larry Danielson

In my folklore classes I often refer to the personal reminiscence narrative and memoir as verbal art genres that demand more attention from folklorists than they have thus far received. Students and colleagues concur that they often tell the same favorite experience stories in different conversation contexts, and we all can cite examples of partial life history accounts that friends and family members have shared with us from time to time. Anthropologists and folklorists, of course, have collected life histories in their fieldwork, but, as Dégh points out, these materials have often been haphazardly elicited, re-organized, and dramatically edited for publication. Scholarly interest in the narratives has focussed on their value as cultural documents, field data that provide insights into the culture in which the individual moves. Oscar Lewis, for example, has given us the literary- anthropological autobiographies of The Children of Sanchez. Although "each member of the family tells his own life story in his own words," the materials are clearly re-organized and edited for publication and of primary interest to Lewis for their personalized documentation of the culture of poverty. The narratives are not unadapted folk literature, transcribed from the spoken word to give us some sense of how men and women tell their life stories.

In People in the Tobacco Belt: Four Lives, Linda Dégh acknowledges the value of the life history as an important source for historical and socio-cultural information, but she also insists that it is "an important product of folklore creation that belongs in the category of folk prose genres" (p. x). A few European scholars, she notes, have investigated the personal experience story as a narrative genre, but American scholars have rarely considered it an authentic verbal art form. Richard Dorson, however, in Bloodstoppers and Bearwalkers (1952) included a chapter on "Sagamen," colorful narrators of sometimes amazing (and fabulated) personal experience tales. These stories, collected without the aid of tape-recorder, read more gracefully than careful transcriptions of taped narrative. Dorson at that time recognized them as folkloric:

They are not folk tales in any accepted sense, although it may be noted that all the storytellers did know some traveled tales. Neither again are they chronicles for the conventional historian,
who would reject their extravagant touches in favor of the sober, deadly accounts of pioneer home-building. These are, I would say, folk narratives, folk documents of a sort, filled with the raw stuff of life and filtered through imaginative minds.

Sixteen years later, describing "folk in the city" (Gary, Indiana), Dorson again confronted the oral personal history and urged that folklorists attend to its collection and study: "The personal history may well be a genre of its own, honed and structured through periodic retellings." The publication of People in the Tobacco Belt dignifies research in this folk prose genre and, I hope, will be followed by many similar collections and analyses.

Dégh's introduction to the work briefly surveys anthropological and folkloric interests in the life history, establishes her theoretical stance, and describes her collection-interview methodology. The narratives were tape-recorded in relaxed, domestic settings with as little interviewer interjection and querying as possible. Family members, neighbors, and friends--together with the fieldworker--comprised the narrators' audiences. The texts remain unedited, transcribed and translated from the Hungarian into English by Dégh. All four individuals belong to the same Hungarian-Canadian enclave, are members of the Hungarian Reformed Church that became a part of the United Church of Canada, belong to a local Hungarian Hall, and have in some way been involved in tobacco farming. A short description of the community, Delhi, Ontario, its tobacco economy, social life and ethnic pluralism concludes the introduction. The life histories of four Hungarian-Canadians follow. Each narrative is introduced by a description of the informant's present milieu, details of behavior and personality of interest to the interviewer, a general overview of narrative content, and a dated log of life history events. A discussion of language, narrative style, and folkloric elements in the reminiscence follows the text.

The narratives read as one might expect verbatim texts to read. At times they describe events out of chronological sequence, are confusing because the narrator assumes the audience shares with him a specialized knowledge of persons and events, and raise questions about omissions and selectivity that are never answered. The narrators speak for themselves. For these reasons, the dated log of events that precedes each life history and Dégh's informative footnotes are helpful. I assume that the interviewer rarely asked questions, for interjections by audience members and queries from the fieldworker are noted in the transcriptions. On occasion, however, the informant's
remarks indicate that a question has been asked, though not included in the transcription. For example, one informant shifts abruptly from a description of his father's death and burial to "Yeah, we still use Szekely food..." (p. 254). Did the interviewer ask a question about ethnic foods at this point, later lost in transcription and translation? A few of the interchanges, for instance between husband and wife, are also unclear, and one supposes that certain speaker's designations disappeared between transcription and publication. On page 124, for example, Mr. Huszár appears to describe family foodways in detail, until the reader realizes that his wife is talking at this point, though the shift in informant has not been noted. Such details may be trivial, but they assume importance if we are to rely on texts as unedited and authoritative.

For students of ethnicity and ethnic folklore these life histories again illustrate the hazards of generalization about any given immigrant group and its culture in the New World. Though these four lives are circumscribed by common community, religious affiliation, ethnic association, and agricultural experience, they emerge as unique expressions of Hungarian immigrant life in Canada, sharing certain life patterns with one another, but creating their own cultural idiosyncrasies in the face of shared encounters. In the first life history, Frank Durko recounts somewhat achronologically his first immigration to North America, return to Hungary, military service and agricultural ventures there, a second trip to North America to ease his debts, a second return to Hungary, the third and final emigration, eventual success in Canada as a tobacco farmer, and successful retirement. Frank Durko and his wife do not want to return to Hungary. They feel no close ties with their acculturated and assimilating children, but the man has no regrets: "I left because of envy but I had a good life. Now I can pick the room in which I want to sleep each night." In her analysis of the narrative, Dégh points out how much attention the informant gives to his old-country experiences and how summarily he deals with his later years in Canada. Sub-plots and ego-characterization pattern his account of early adulthood, but the Canadian settlement years of tobacco farming and economic success inspire no excitement and narrative invention for the storyteller.

The second life history describes years of immigrant labor in Canada undertaken without complaint to pay off a debt for passage fare and to establish economic security in the New World. Joe Kéri's narrative is the longest of the four (ninety-three pages) and illustrates with stoic good humor the hard work and loneliness endured in order to procure farmland of one's own as well as the search for satisfying community that for many immigrants never concludes. When Kéri describes his disappointments and
final success in a post-office quest for a Hungarian bride, his wife supplements the story with her own accounts and their dialogue becomes animated. The man's narrative style, Dégh observes, is plain and dispassionate, the events described are always ego-centered, and attention to details of time, geography, and finance is extreme. The emphasis in the story on the grueling workaday world of the immigrant settler and its isolation is not colored by self-pity. In this life history we are granted insights into that world, not so much through the quality of its description, as through its significant quantity.

In my opinion the most poignant narrative in the collection is that shared by Eva and János Huszár, a family history that emerges in the form of a married couple's dialogue. Impoverished peasant life for the Huszászs gave way after the second World War to industrial employment and a modest affluence. Responding to the promptings of Radio Free Europe and dissatisfied friends, they left Hungary during the 1956 disturbances, arrived in Canada as refugees, and found adjustment difficult. In the New World, old peasant values were not revered, agricultural ventures failed, fellow Hungarian-Canadians took advantage of them, and the decision to emigrate came to be bitterly regretted. The narrative, a synthesis of reminiscence and interpretive commentary, is an unhappy story of failure, resentment, and guilt. Ponders János Huszár: "People who left their country cannot have a good heart. Period. If someone abandoned his place of birth, his home where he was born, his heart has changed; that's it, no more." The couple's enthusiastic description of their Hungarian home cookery relieves somewhat the somberness of their story, but even this simple satisfaction is affected by the New World: their children prefer American foods. The Huszászs' dialogue was not solicited, writes Dégh. It seemed to erupt in a series of confidences and candid observations, perhaps more easily shared with strangers than with long-term acquaintances. Both speakers used colorful figures of speech and proverbial expressions in their stories and avoid contaminating their Hungarian with foreign words. Dégh suggests that the individual episodes they narrate function as exempla, dramatic illustrations of their perception of life as a tragic experience to be endured.

The last life history is bright and positive in contrast to its predecessor. Sándor Ballago is a tobacco farmer who has succeeded, mediates the worlds of the Hungarian-Canadian and the Anglo-Canadian with ease, and enjoys the respect of a successful son who has chosen to honor his father's ethnic heritage. Ballago, however, is a member of a particular Hungarian ethnic group, the Székely, which has played a unique role in old-country history. Its immigrant descendants in the New World retain a strong self-identification as Székelys and maintain a
sense of Székely community. The narrative is another achronologi-
cal account of experience and opinion, descriptive of emigration,
immigrant labor, successful farming, and a disappointing return
trip to the old country. Unlike the other narrators, however,
Ballagó fondly describes certain ethnic traditions observed in
Hungary and in Canada and discusses his interests in the super-
natural, disdainful though they are. And, unlike the other
narrators, he speaks both English and Hungarian fluently, but
he does not mix the languages in his reminiscence.

I have described each life history in more detail than usual
in a review article in order to raise several questions about
life history publication and its analysis as a folk narrative
genre. These texts are presented as oral art forms and Dégh
discusses their artistic elements insightfully, though briefly.
The Mercury Series in which Four Lives appears usually publishes
descriptive monographs, so the major weakness of the work is
explained by exigencies of publication: if the central thesis of
the work is that life history is a verbal form deserving literary
analysis, one expects a more detailed discussion of structure
and style and a fuller treatment of the texts as examples of a
distinctive folk prose genre. In forthcoming publications of
such data I look forward to the kind of extended, penetrating
analysis of the texts that Linda Dégh has given us in her dis-
cussions of traditional prose genres like the Märchen and the
legend. If sophisticated analysis follows, her argument for
the recognition of the oral life history as a legitimate folk
prose genre will be substantiated.

Because I have collected a number of personal reminiscences,
albeit never in the extended form of the life history, the ethics
question in regard to their publication interests me. Most of
my fieldwork has taken place in a Swedish-American community of
some 2500 inhabitants. There are times when I am discussing
certain informants in public that I regret exposing as much as
I must about their private lives in order to illustrate a
generalization about ethnic folklore. There is much talk these
days about ethics in fieldwork, and life history collections
are especially vulnerable to misuse and misunderstanding in
print. Dégh stresses that she has used pseudonyms and has
avoided the citation of specific locations. Perhaps other
changes have been made as well in order to protect the identi-
ties of her informants in their small community, only 3800 in
population. Probably to answer my own questions about ethics
in the field, I would appreciate a discussion of the matter by
the collector. Were the informants clear about the possible
publication of their reminiscences or the eventual location of
their narratives in archives? Were official release forms
necessary before the materials could be published? Has the
publisher, the National Museums of Canada, developed an official
policy concerning the public distribution of field texts? Such questions require full discussion before the publication of personal oral narrative becomes commonplace in a literate society. It may be, of course, that I am especially sensitive about this issue because most of my fieldwork has taken place in my native community. I continue to visit the town both as native son and as researcher, and therefore must purposely withhold some kinds of data from publication for professional as well as personal reasons. Such decisions must be particularly difficult when dealing with life history materials.

During a discussion of field methodology in folklore class, one of my students categorized my approach to the topic as that of the "confessional school," satirizing my interest in learning as much as possible about the researcher in the field, his or her background, discomforts, and satisfactions. In future life history publications it would be helpful to include biographical data about the fieldworkers. Most readers of People in the Tobacco Belt will be aware of the Hungarian backgrounds of Linda Dégh and Andrew Vázsonyi, but perhaps not all of them. How does the ethnographer's personal history, implied or directly expressed, affect the personal history he or she collects from the informant? The startling candor of the Huzsárs indicates an immediate rapport between informant and collector. For those of us interested in field methodology, it would be useful to have the collector consider in print possible explanations for that easily established rapport and its narrative consequences. Dégh notes that the specific context was conducive to an open discussion of past experiences (pp. 220-21), but one doubts the results would have been the same if the collector had been a second-generation Hungarian-Canadian or an Anglo-Canadian conversant in Hungarian. The purpose of the work, it is clear, is not to provide a forum for the discussion of methodological and ethical problems in the collection of life history materials. Such a discussion would be welcome in future life history publications, however.

The format of People in the Tobacco Belt is not impressive. The National Museum of Man Mercury Series publications are "designed to permit the rapid dissemination of information pertaining to those disciplines for which the National Museum of Man is responsible" (p. i). We are forewarned on the first page that editorial errors may occur, and they do. In appearance the work resembles nothing more than a xeroxed doctoral dissertation. I concur, however, with the objective of the series--rapid dissemination of information--and I'm pleased with the inexpensive prices of the series publications. If we are to begin serious work with the life history as a distinctive folk prose genre, such materials must be made accessible to folklorists. Once a quantity of personal experience texts
appear in print, carefully elicited, collected, and transcribed, as in this collection, we will have enough data to begin extensive analyses of content, structure, and style. The Mercury Series seems to be the kind of publication (inexpensive and, I hope, quick to deliver) qualified to meet such needs.

In this review I have paid little attention to the richness of the narratives as cultural documents because the value of the life history as primary source material has long been recognized. They are filled with ethnographic details concerning ethnic foodways, settlement patterns, and agricultural techniques. Each story provides insight into immigrant attitude and perception of the old-country past and New-World experience. The narratives, again, illustrate the intricate relationships shared by culture and personality and would provide the psychoanalytic anthropologist with valuable raw data. For the student of ethnicity the reminiscences are especially interesting. Provocative patterns emerge, even though the individual stories are diverse and unique: the search for intimate community; second-generation disinterest in or rejection of the first-generation culture in some families and second-generation ethnophilial appreciation in others; the significance of sub-ethnic groups and intra-ethnic conflict; the importance of material success for many and its rejection by the few; ambivalent feelings about the old country and the cultural and social changes that have taken place there since the time of emigration. The list could continue at length. None of these patterns can be confidently generalized at this point in ethnic research. If nothing else, the life history dramatizes each immigrant's uniqueness. Eventually, however, with the accumulation of large numbers of reliable texts, generalizations about immigrant and ethnic culture commonly proposed by historians, sociologists, and folklorists can be tested convincingly against the data that count, the realities of men's lives.

Linda Dégh's *People in the Tobacco Belt* is an important publication for the folklorist and for the student of ethnicity. Since I wear both hats, I am doubly hopeful that other life histories presented with similar care will follow.

NOTES


(Symbol, Myth, and Ritual Series, edited by Victor Turner.)
Pp. 9 + 469, references, index.

Reviewed by Michael E. Bell

Firth's book is divided into two major parts, the first being theoretical and historical, and the second being the application of methodology to specific examples. In Part I, he discusses various conceptions of symbols (referring to works by philosophers, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, and folklorists), briefly traces the history of interest in symbolism (beginning in the 19th century and concentrating on religion, ritual, and mythology), outlines several of the contemporary anthropological approaches to studying symbols, and then sketches some of the problems and potential insights provided by the study of symbols and symbolic behavior. In Part II, Firth applies a kind of general, socio-cultural approach to studying symbols to several specific examples: food symbolism among the Tikopia, the symbolism of hair (which is generally cross-cultural, but emphasizes the Western world, particularly the United States), the symbolic aspects of greeting and parting behavior (especially in terms of bodily movements), the symbolism of flags, and the meanings and interpretations of giving and receiving. In the last chapter, Firth raises some theoretical (and metaphysical) questions regarding the "substance" of symbols: Where is the substance located? In the symbol itself? In its putative