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The Traditional Way of Thinking of Small Farmer Housewives in Finland

Abstract

The aim of this article is to throw light on the historical experiences and their memories of a housewife from a small farm in Upper Savo (*Yläsavo*) in Finland. Its motivation emanates from the fact that neither local, commissioned histories nor ethnographical studies have touched the orbit of their lives and their traditional, three-dimensional way of thought. The theoretical vantage-point applied here was put forward by Paul Ricoeur and further developed by Frank Ankersmit: memories of witnesses of historical experiences can tell more intimate and accurate narratives than documentary histories. As evidence, culled from interviews and diverse biographical and autobiographical material, they can complement the work of ethnographers who operate on the same field by recording past as lived life.

Keywords: small farming in Finland, housewife, memory, remembrance, historical experience, traditional way of thinking

Introduction

It is remarkable that commissioned histories of localities barely mention the social class of Finnish small farmers of the 1960s and 1970s, let alone the life-style and way of thought of housewives in such small farm families there. This article purports to correct this omission by analyzing the world of thought of one representative of the class. It is based on memories in narrative form collected in notebooks, diaries, letters, miscellaneous papers and interviews in as much as they count as evidence of historical experiences. The author's own impressionistic, autobiographical reminiscences intimately related to them as well as his reflections in the written material (notebooks) complement the lot.¹

¹ The housewife featuring in this article was its author's grandmother. They lived in the same house since 1956 after the author's mother and father divorced and moved away. The third person in the household was author's grandfather who died in 1960.



All the material is deposited in the author's un-catalogized archive collection in the archives of University of Jyväskylä, Finland.²

It has become almost a fashion among oral historians to analyze memory narratives born of historical experiences and even some philosophers are fascinated by their capacity of informing of past human experiences. For instance, French philosopher Paul Ricoeur emphasizes the role of an eyewitness or eavesdropper who can say emphatically: I was there.³ Nobody can refute such an experience which someone remembers so very well. There he/she has certain information about what happened or what was said and thought in the past which cannot be erased from his/her memory. Therefore, there is no reason to disparage – some scholarly circles still seem to do so – the significance of memories and remembrance as evidence based on personal historical experiences. It is fair to say that memories form narratives verified by autobiography, to the birth of which scholarly histories may stand as obstacles and hinder the accumulation of collective memory. Besides, when we remember something which has deeply touched us, we may have experienced the so called sublime historical experience or what Nietzsche called *Rausch*.⁴ Direct contact with the past opens a way to its own world and is one variation of ecstasy in experiencing the truth which is given to a man. Philosopher of history, Frank Ankersmit has couched this experience in this way:

“We stand face to face with [memorized] reality itself in an encounter with reality that is direct and immediate since it is no longer mediated by the categories we normally rely on for making sense of the world.”⁵

Thus, scholarly history is not self-satisfied or self-contained – it must trust memories and remembrance in general, be faithful and thankful to them. The source material of historical studies can support narratives based on memories but cannot very often oppose, nor refute it. Memories carrying historical experiences and traditional ways of thinking are quite resistant to any sudden changes in scholarly written historical narratives.

Leaning on these rather inchoate reflections, let us tackle the topic and concentrate on telling of one small farmer family from Upper Savo in Finland and

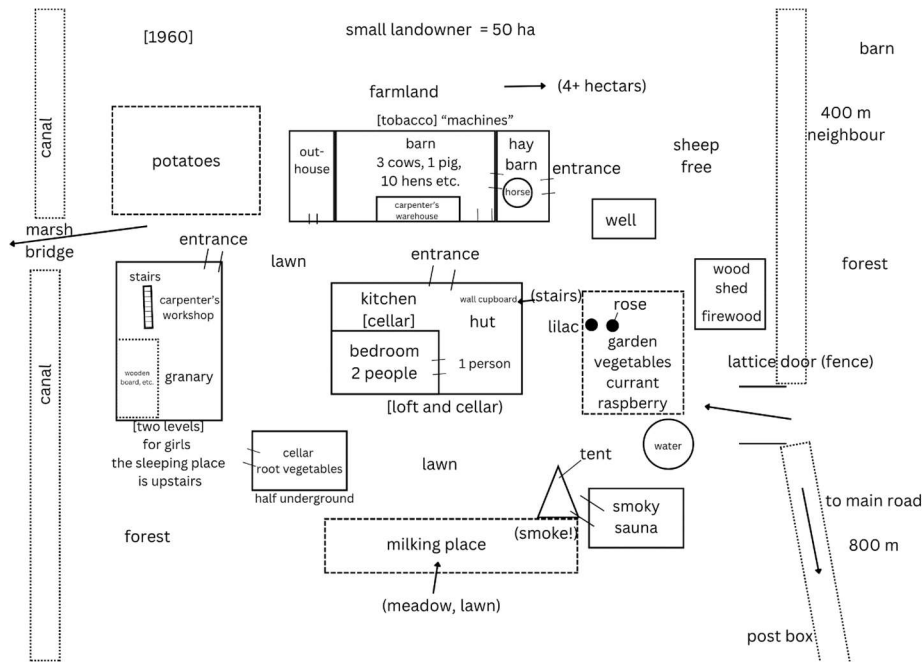
² The material was donated to the archives by the author in autumn 2020 under the auspices of the University Science Museum (Dir. Pirjo Vuorinen).

³ Ricoeur 2004: 163. Cf. Nora 1996: passim.

⁴ Halmesvirta 2019: passim. “Subliimi historiallinen kokemus”. Luentosarja Jyväskylän yliopiston historian ja etnologian laitoksella syksyllä 2019 (= lecture series on historical experience for postgraduate students).

⁵ Ankersmit 2005: q. p. 285; Hunyady 2014: 9.

the way of thinking of the housewife. The family can be regarded as quite representative in the district since quite a few such small farms were established there in the early 1920s and women lived in rather similar circumstances, milieu and mental atmosphere.⁶ The master of the house is a minor character here because the role of the housewife was quite prominent because she was very talkative, informative and more present mentally and physically in the house. This was the situation also because her husband was traumatized; he had suffered tuberculosis in the 1930s, served as a B-class man during the wars, not capable of fighting on the front but was commanded to make coffins for the killed soldiers. His wife called him “wretched” (*vaivainen*) because he could not perform heavy work (e.g. forest work) in the late 1950s anymore and occasionally needed help from neighbours and friends.⁷



Pic. Nr. 1. Map of a small farm (based on the author's drawing).

As background information it should be mentioned that the farm was one of the about 160.000 small farms established by the so-called Lex Kallio in the

⁶ For the sake of comparison, I have interviewed a person (X1) from another such family.

⁷ Interview tape no. II.

beginning of the 1920s.⁸ Its total area was about 50 hectares, out of which forest and swamp c. 45 hectares and arable land about five (mostly rye, oats, potatoes and hay). In the fifties it had, due to a drastic structural change in Finnish agriculture, become unviable, unsustainable like many other farms in the district and when the house master died in 1960 in the smoke sauna under the eyes of the author of this representation, the housewife was left alone to take care of the farm. She managed a few years but had to sell the farm to the state because no one of the male children who had fled from the poor countryside to Helsinki wanted to continue farming in such a desperate situation. The bitterest pill to swallow for her was to give up the three milking cows and other house animals she loved.⁹ In these experiences she was not alone. The commissioned history of the parish laconically sums up the change of the times: “There was no returning to the past world [...] the agriculture based on small farming had reached its end”.¹⁰ This history has nothing to say about the small people who had to face the predicament.

Consequently, the housewife had to go on living irrespective of the dramatic structural change – she had to move to the center of the parish, and she became a servant to an orthodox vicar. What comes to her view of the world in the situation, it had in no way been affected by the messages of female agricultural consultants who had been propagating equality among women working in agriculture, nor had the social reforms directed to agricultural working classes touched her orbit. What was left was a silent, somewhat engulfed bitterness about lost countryside life – a peculiar form of freedom to mind one’s own household in itself – and suspicion of all such ‘higher forces’ which could not care less of small farmers’ fate.¹¹ This had not necessarily meant poverty and if there had been hard times during the wars and after in small farm households, it was not readily shown or confessed to outsiders.¹²

⁸ The locality is the parish of Kiuruvesi, Upper Savo, which had considerable small farmer population. In general, small farming was widely dispersed all over Savo, Karjala and Kainuu on the Eastern side of the cultural border of Finland. See e.g. Ojala–Nummela 2018: 17 and Figure 3.1.

⁹ Interview tape no. I.

¹⁰ Pohjonen 2020: 15.

¹¹ Interview tape II; Markkola 2019: *passim*.

¹² *Helsingin Sanomat* 6.5.2021.

Three dimensional world of belief

For the sake of clarity, the world of thought of the housewife has been divided in three dimensions. She cherished religious beliefs, inspired by a close society of believers called Laestadians, a sect of a very strict interpretation of the Bible's message but among small farmers softened by everyday common sense.¹³ In contradiction to sect's articles, she was also superstitious in certain matters. And finally – and this was something peculiar to the Upper Savo district small farmers – she was a so-called 'backwoods communist', not in any ideological or professed sense but in matters of local social ranking and economic scale.¹⁴ She knew very well some local big farmers who in certain ways still exploited the smaller ones. Her husband had been a 'comrade' watched by the local police and occasionally manhandled by the extreme right local Civil Guards. Siding with him, the housewife called big, well-to-do farmers "thick necks" (*harjasniska*), referring derogatively to their fat necks. In her eyes they looked like overfed pigs. They were so "rich" that they had modern machinery (tractors, harvesting equipment etc.) and even such luxury items as TV (year 1963).¹⁵ One cannot say that she hated them or was overly quarrelsome, but indignation and anger broke out in certain situations, for instance when she had to take part in potato planting on a large farm close by – a long-lived tradition in the village – and received only three liters of milk as a pay for the day's work. It was usual that all such 'communal' work was paid in kind only.¹⁶

On the other hand, there was a very vibrant tradition of neighborhood help (*talkoot*) which to a certain extent balanced the situation of services. Planting and harvesting were usually done in company, and the author of this article remembers especially one case when a neighbour's cowhouse was burning down there was a line of people carrying water from a fountain to save the animals.¹⁷

Housewife's suspicion and avoidance of contact and confrontation with the village 'officials' (*herrat*) was also conspicuous. The word 'official' itself also contained negative connotations – they were somehow despised because of their attitude of superiority and officiousness, but when the housewife had to go to the center of the village to take care of some official family matter, she had to lighten her attitude, humble herself somewhat. Because small farmers were always short of income and cash they had to apply for compensation for forest improvement, digging the ditches in the swamps and clearing the fields from the

¹³ On the sect's doctrines and influence, see Talonen 1997: passim.

¹⁴ Interview tapes III–IV.

¹⁵ Interview tape IV.

¹⁶ Notebooks from the years 1982–1983.

¹⁷ Notebook from the year 1983.

village council. Sometimes the ‘official’ paid, but more usually taxed extra income. There was this quite traditional attitude towards village and state authorities: it was useless to expect that they had some special social sense. Nevertheless, it was traditional that the big farmers helped the smaller ones in times of crisis – they did not want to see them disappear altogether. This was a well-known existential fact for the housewife, too.¹⁸

In national and municipal elections small farmers voted the far left, The Democratic League of Finnish People (DLFP) from the 1950s to the 1970s. It was thought that it was the party that could introduce such social and agricultural reforms which might help their lot. The reigning party in the village, the agrarian Centre Party was in trouble with the rising support ratings of it, but it ruined its support base in a scandal in which the parliamentary representative of DLFP spoiled his reputation. Consequently, no help from the ‘high politics’ to localities either and small farmers, including the ones in consideration here, were deeply disappointed. The housewife lost trust also in leftist politics.¹⁹

The religious sect in which the housewife was involved, ‘Old Laestadians’, was deep-rooted among small farmers’ world and the housewives of small farmers were traditionally the most fervent believers in its doctrines. For instance, among the ten commandments, the most dictating were these: ‘Do not steal.’ and ‘Do not lie.’. And the negative attitude towards superiors could be detected in the manner the village evangelical clergymen and vicar were counted in the same class as other ‘officials’ who were socially higher in the hierarchy, and their sermons were regarded as too high-flying and not as freely flowing as the ones of layman preachers who preached in tightly knit, separate congregations. Speaking in the language of commoners was essential in such situations. The service drastically differentiated from the ‘normal’ church service: the atmosphere was high-spirited. The climax was often ecstatic, and people were in trance for a moment, kneeling or lying down in front of the preacher and confessing their sinful deeds aloud. The preacher soon declared all sins pardoned, laying his hands on the foreheads of the sinners who were then relieved. When the ‘purifying’ catharsis process was over, the sisters in faith went for a cup of coffee to somebody’s house.²⁰ Happy end. These devotional gatherings are still held in the village.

Spirituality was kept up at home by 8 o’clock evening prayers heard from the radio. The ten minutes broadcast ended with an evangelic hymn. The radio was high on the wall next to the print showing Jesus holding a lamb in his lap.

¹⁸ Interview tape no. V.

¹⁹ Interview tape no. VI.

²⁰ Notebooks from the years 1974–1975.

If Hungarians used to have a picture of Petőfi in their family albums reminding them of revolutionary spirit and victimhood, our housewife had this human Jesus reminding her of kindness needful in normal relations with other people and animals. When the housewife went to bed, she and the author of this article sang together a song ending with a prayer asking that if “we won’t wake up in the morning, please, take us to the Heaven”.²¹

What we call superstition was connected in the village to a famous folk healer and clairvoyant Anna-Mari. Our housewife visited her cottage at least twice, once buying extract from the berries of bird berry tree for her tormenting headache.²² The second visit was prompted by a dramatic incident home: her two sons were on a summer holiday and having had some drinks they started a fight, and the other son (my uncle) drew a pistol from his pocket. The housewife grabbed it and hurried with it to the forest and hid it under a tree-stump. Ten years later, when she had to start removal to the village center, for some reason she wanted to find it. She could not remember where she had hidden it, and she consulted Anna-Mari who gave instructions where it was. After some searching, the pistol was not found but it was not Anna-Mari’s fault, housewife thought she had not followed the instructions properly.²³

The workload of the small farm housewives was quite formidable. She had to do all the kitchen and other household work plus minding the animals (three milking cows, calves, one pig, cowhouse cat, rabbits, sheep in the summertime) and belongings in the cowhouse. In between of cooking, baking, cleaning, washing, spinning and knitting she also had to take part in seasonal harvesting, potato planting and picking and haymaking, in particular. Then there was the kitchen garden, flowers (roses and lilac in particular) and all sorts of vegetables. As one historian of the Finnish welfare-state concludes, women’s agricultural work was a benchmark of their strength, although the masters of the house did not always recognize it.²⁴ In order to acquire something extra to the table, our housewife set illegal traps in the forest to catch birds and hares – once her jealous neighbour broke the traps and she took revenge: when the neighbour’s pig wandered to her plot, she hit it in the head with an axe.²⁵

It is difficult to tell what kind of sense of humour our housewife had. One could not hear jokes and laughing loud was a rare expression of moods. Joy and occasional laughing could burst out, for instance, when a child did something funny or asked funny questions. The same might happen if some visiting

²¹ Interview tape no. VI; the wording from the notebook of the year 1975.

²² In a chemical test at the Kuopio University hospital it was analyzed poisonous.

²³ Interview tape no. VII.

²⁴ Markkola 2019: 180.

²⁵ Interview tape no. VIII.

neighbour made an especially entertaining comment on some odd phenomenon or ridiculous way of behaving or thinking. Our housewife could shortly join a hilarious company enjoying malicious pleasures.²⁶ The Laestadians thought that in front of God's eyes one should not be overjoyed but there were situations in which self-control could fail.

Her husband, who had built the house in the early 1920s with some friends and neighbours, minded the needs of the horse, ploughed, sowed and harvested, hauled hay and corn to sheds, felled, chopped and transported firewood, kept the house and other buildings in good condition, and made all the furniture also for sale – he was a joiner by profession. This all he could do when he still was in healthy condition. And of course, he was responsible of most of the official matters concerning the house economy in general – he was an atheist and hardline communist but did not mind his wife's religious beliefs and opinions. In the 1950s he had become quite a solitary person mainly because of his dismal historical experiences. One can retrospectively say that the relations between the housewife and her husband was most of the time unproblematic, sympathetic, occasionally caring (they had five children) so long as the husband could perform his part in the housekeeping.²⁷

One could enumerate many other tasks husband and wife performed but, most of the people from the countryside know most of them by heart already. What comes to working morality, it was uncompromising based on perseverance, and the result of work was mostly of good quality and durable – waste was an unknown thing. The small farmer mentality did not allow laziness, carelessness and negligence and the property in the house was well-kept, housewife was frugal, honest and modest and she was proud and had self-respect – she did not want outsiders to intervene into her daily routines. There were a couple of less self-disciplined households in the village, in one of them the master of the house was squandering money to alcohol and playing cards, and it harmed the house economy, family relations and caused some concern in the village in general.²⁸

What were the fearful things in the housewife's life? The worst was not the fear of losing livelihood, although it was always a lurking behind the corner (e.g. if the animals became ill), but fear of any accident which might happen to herself or to the members of the family. It would cause grief and harmfully stop the normal running of the household. The so called 'guardian angel' for children was needful at least as a symbolic care. Once, during a solar eclipse when birds stopped chirping, the housewife was a bit worried but knew that it

²⁶ Interview tape no. IX.

²⁷ Notebooks from the years 1981–1982.

²⁸ Interview tapes VIII-IX; Notebooks from the years 1983–1984.

would not last long. She had bad memories from the wartime (esp. the Continuation War 1941–1944) when the Soviet air-raid bombed the Iisalmi railway station (c. 30 kms away from the house) causing great damage and loss of seven family members who had worked at the railways. Even in the early sixties the housewife pulled the wartime ‘darkening curtains’ down every evening. If this ‘tradition’ showed a symptom of trauma or was just a habit, the notebooks of the author do not tell.²⁹

The housewife’s concept of nature was, naturally, connected to the lesson of her faith concerning creation. She regarded all living beings as created by God (“*Jumalan luomia kaikkē*”), and she thought that creation had had a good purpose which human beings must realize and exercise. This meant that she treated all animals with tenderness and care, and she became angry if somebody spanked children or was violent in other ways – one could threat rascals with harsh disciplinary measures but not put them into action as men sometimes used to do. What came to adult people, her attitude depended on their behaviour. She could easily reprimand people who did something wrong under her eyes and thank people who did a good service and said a nice word.³⁰

For her children housewife had envisioned two alternative careers in life: either one should go to school, study and try to rise above the previous generation, for instance to become a teacher, or go to work as soon as possible (her daughter was fifteen when she left to become a shop assistant) and earn a living.³¹ As is quite well-known, the tradition that children are encouraged, even pressed to leave home as early as possible to pursue independent living is still living in Finland. Note: In the 1960s and 1970s the problems of youth alienation and dropping out were quite unknown.³²

For the author of this representation housewife had chosen the first alternative. She had a box in the attic which contained the Bible, *Everyman’s History of the World* (*Jokamiehen maailmanhistoria*, 1948) and a compendium of knowledge (*Pikkujättiläinen*, 1945). With the aid of these books and the local newspaper, she taught the author to read before he had to go to school in the center of the village in 1963. As a result of reading the Bible together with her the author became somehow religious, but he cannot remember in what sense. It was as if some inexplicable, momentary miracle had happened.³³

²⁹ Notebooks from the years 1960–1963.

³⁰ Notebook from the year 1975.

³¹ Interview tapes VIII–IX; Notes of XI’s interview.

³² XI’s conversations with teachers involved with youth education. Notes of XI’s interview.

³³ Notebook from the year 1985.

Let us return to moral issues: the so-called small virtues were being practiced: friendliness, gentleness, helpfulness, humility and human understanding in general were as if inborn moral qualities. It deserves mentioning that the housewife's gentleness was directed also towards the wandering roma (*mustalaiset*) people. When they arrived at the door, she was ready to barter with them. The roma asked bread and offered beautiful scarves and necklaces in exchange. This happened usually just before Christmas.³⁴

One prominent obligation was modesty which could be seen from the outside: showiness was naturally excluded but it was also improper in a household which had to make ends meet. All representation was shunned, even criticized and disapproved, and if someone tried to be better or superior to the others in some special, extraordinary way, he/she made him/herself a laughingstock. Contentment with little was deep-rooted, they would manifest as everyday simpleness in attire, food and almost everything. The days of feast Christmas, Midsummer, harvest time) and visits to relatives were exceptions to this rule. Then everyone had to put on his or her best, the so-called Sunday clothes (*pyhävaatteet*). Our housewife changed her cowhouse scarf from a colourful one to a black one when she went to the church, to the funeral or the Laestadian congregation's devotional meetings.³⁵

Finally, one intriguing detail which highlighted the housewife's modesty should be picked up. It also testifies to the firmness of her identity and steadfastness. From a photograph, taken on the Mid-Summer Night's eve, in which one can see her sitting outdoors with her husband, she has cut her head off with scissors. Obviously, the occasion was repulsive to her from the outset. She considered herself as an outsider, underprivileged, a position she seemingly exaggerated. And anyway, she did not like being gaped at even in photographs. This attitude she took with her to the grave.³⁶

The housewife was born in 1909, and she died in 1990. Quite a few traditions died out with her. Until then quite a few small farms had disappeared from the Upper Savo's map which meant considerable loss to local collective memory, too. It remains to the ethnologists and historians to dig up clues and traces of it.

By way of conclusion, one may say that this article was rather impressionistic – quite in the sense hinted at by Ankersmit, since it was not a representation of documentary history.³⁷ Memories stood on the top of the other,

³⁴ Notebook from the year 1985.

³⁵ Interview tapes no. VI–VII; Notebooks from the years 1975–1977.

³⁶ Notebooks from the years 1975–1977.

³⁷ Cf. Ankersmit 2001: 71.

completed each other and overlapped. The entire remembrance vision was neither harmonic, clear-cut nor nearly complete. In such memory-studies complemented with autobiographical reflections there lurks the danger of either idealization or rationalization of memories. In this case 'the being there', i.e. being a witness of the historical experiences and an eavesdropper of past expressions of thoughts safeguards against them to a great extent, although misinterpretation cannot be entirely excluded.

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