

Was It Actually So? A Foreign Exchange Student's Experiences as Portrayed in Diaries and Letters

By Hanna Snellman

At a previous Finnish-Hungarian Symposium of Ethnology Pekka Leimu gave a speech about foreign exchange and language students in America. His paper was based on a mail questionnaire carried out at the Department of Ethnology, University of Turku, and a series of letters from a Finnish foreign exchange student published in a Finnish newspaper during a one-year period. In his paper Pekka Leimu reported on the informants' impressions of the American lifestyle, youth culture and family life. Pekka Leimu emphasized that his study was experimental and he concentrated on features of which the informants were unanimous (Leimu 1993:63-66).

In the discussion that followed Pekka Leimu's presentation, the question of letters and diaries as source material was brought up. Even though the habit of writing letters has diminished compared to the times before the phone, fax and e-mail, in some circumstances letter writing is still common. Long distances, lack of money, and homesickness - experiences that most foreign exchange students encounter - are surely factors that accelerate one's desire to write letters. The combination of being young, living away from home and loved ones for a year and getting acquainted with a different lifestyle, usually results in piles of letters to family and friends at home. In addition to that, a feeling of estrangement and loneliness, which are also common experiences for foreign exchange students, is eased by writing diaries.

Today, self-reflection is somewhat in fashion in ethnological research (Gerholm 1993; Wikdahl 1992:17). Therefore, I dared to carry out an experiment myself. This paper is based on letters and diaries I wrote before I knew I would be an ethnologist.

Yet this is primarily a methodological experiment with the aim of comparing two different types of source material that have been produced by one person using the evaluation of sources point of view. As far as I know, such an experiment has not been performed before.

Source Material

When I was 17 years old I spent one year in the United States as an AFS foreign exchange student. My temporary home was in the Midwest, Wisconsin, where I lived in a middle-class family with two daughters. The older one was my age and the younger one a couple of years younger. The parents and the older daughter were white and of Scandinavian-German descent, as was most of the population in the area, and the younger daughter was adopted and half-Indian. My host family lived in the outskirts of a town of 50,000 inhabitants. I attended the local high school, which was much bigger (1,800 students) than the one I attended in Finland (300 students), and graduated with the other students my age. During that year I also visited other areas of the United States and visited several schools with varied ethnic and social profiles.

For one year I lived the life of an American teenager. During that year I wrote letters to my family and friends and I also kept a diary. In fact, it was my aim "to write everything down", since during the selection of exchange students, it was emphasized that spending a year abroad is merely for learning about the culture, not learning the language. As a matter of fact, those whose motives were mainly to learn the language were not accepted into the program.

In the following I will use the letters I

wrote home to my parents and the diaries I wrote during that year as source material for discussing the following problems: Firstly, how the we/they dichotomy that is essential for the concept of ethnicity' is expressed in the material, and secondly, how the same events were described in letters and diaries and therefore discuss the problem of reliability of letters and diaries as source material for ethnological research. The material consists of four diaries written between August 18, 1978 and July 11, 1979 (524 pages, A4-format) and 17 letters written between August 26, 1978 and June 18, 1979.

The American Experience as Portrayed in Diaries

When Finland's recently appointed Minister of Education, Olli-Pekka Heinonen (age 29), was interviewed, the young minister emphasized that for his development as a person it had been essential that he had spent a year in Texas, USA, as a foreign exchange student when he was young. "Indians are proud of their roots, are selfassured and selfesteemed. There is something in common with the Indians and Finns. All in all, that year aroused the rebel in me, and questions about what is taught in our schools and why" (*Suomen kuvalehti* 25/2 1994: 56). On the other hand, for many the foreign exchange student experience is so puzzling' that there are even psychiatrists who have specialized in healing the wounds of former foreign exchange students.

Ethnological acculturation studies have usually dealt with migration from rural communities to urban areas or emigration and immigration or refugees. The starting point for these studies is that an individual suddenly moves away from everything that

is familiar to him, and is faced with a different language and culture. Two different ethnic realities affect his life, the original and familiar and the new and unfamiliar (Tuomi-Nikula 1989:2380). Foreign exchange students face parallel circumstances even though it is known that they will return home afterwards. The unfamiliar is always there, students are called *foreign* exchange students to distinguish them from native exchange students.

In the following I will first list the features of American (they) and Finnish (we) culture in my diaries that I have felt are worth mentioning and then compare the diaries with letters I have written home during the same period.

The first impressions of the American lifestyle were enthusiastic. I reported new things I saw and new people I met. Yet it seems like I tried to find incidents that were familiar to me. In my diary as I describe the first day in my new home, I report that the house is nice because it is not American style, and it feels like home because there are birch trees in the yard. Boats on the Mississippi River are compared to the familiar floating boats at home (diary 25/8 1978). I even tried to make it more familiar by cooking Finnish food and introducing Finnish customs to the American family (31/8, 12/11). I felt truly unhappy when I met a girl with a Finnish last name, "Moilanen", who did not know and was not interested in her Finnish roots (8/10).

On the other hand, the American youth culture seemed so different that it was difficult to find the homelike features which would have made my orientation more comfortable. I repeatedly described American teenagers as peculiar. The way of dancing, the way of laughing and shouting in the

movies and at football games, as well as driving around in cars and the open (and common) habit of smoking hashish, are frequently mentioned (22/8, 8/9, 9/9, 16/9 and 3/11). The American system of dating and the boy's role in opening car doors and paying for everything was only mentioned because it was already familiar to me from former exchange students' stories and from the movies (16/9).

Church affairs are commented on frequently as being different from Finnish ones. The pastor telling a joke and people laughing during the service, everyone, including infants, taking the Communion, the habit of drinking coffee after church, square dancing lessons in the church's basement and the church's youth club's play, where Moses had a speech impediment, and women pastors were commented on as astonishing (3/9, 20/10, 3/12).

After two weeks the tone of the diary changes, everything is not as "great" as I had first assumed. What appalled me most was the difference in family life. In Finland teenagers are fairly independent, but in the United States parents have more authority. Quotations from the diary speak for themselves:

28/8 By the way, there is a rule that I must be in bed at 10 p.m. on school days. Good grief!

29/8 I break the rule of the concentration camp. I'm not asleep even though it is already 10.30 p.m.

2/11 It is so difficult to be quiet. I am used to having the right to give my opinion to my parents back home.

However, it is amazing how little time a teenager needs to become adjusted to a new way of life. In one month one can see a difference. Instead of the earlier comments

about the feeling of homesickness there are comments about how one feels a part of the host family (4/11) and adopting habits, such as shaving one's legs, that was not common in Finland (10/9).

Gradually English words start appearing in the text. The first time English sentences appear in the text was after two weeks in the United States. After two months English is quite common and there are even whole chapters in English. After seven months the diary is mostly in English and after nine months totally in English. When Finnish-speaking teenagers meet on rare occasions, English was partly used in the conversation. On the other hand, it was mentioned how nice it was to speak Finnish with an immigrant who had migrated from Finland in the 1930s (8/9, 8/10, 19/10, 18/11, 1/12 1978; April and May 1979).

After three months I report that I had told my new friends that it was difficult to adjust to the way of life in the beginning, but not anymore (30/11, 1/12). However, everything - from skis to rye bread - with a "made in Finland"-label on it made me happy (11/12). On many occasions I report how proud I am of wearing my national costume (12/11), an outfit I would never have worn back home, which I also report (23/11), and how important it was for me to celebrate Finland's Independence Day, a festival I had only sporadically paid attention to in my earlier life (25/11, 6/12).

After five months in the USA, I report on incidents of everyday life, hobbies, friends, family life, weather, and school work - hardly anything seems new anymore. The familiar-foreign opposition that was frequent in the first notes has vanished; I don't label things as Finnish or American anymore. It seems like I had adjusted well to

the American way of life and I feel as though I had lived there a much longer time (January 1979). On the other hand, notes about headaches and the habit of sleeping every day after school reveal that adjusting was perhaps not as easy as it first seemed like (January 1979). Alongside of adjustment the first signs of alarming disagreement with the host family's daughter of the same age appear (7/3, 8/3, 18/3), which, at the end, results in a break up (20/3, 11/4).

When the day of departure comes closer, notes on my return home start appearing in the diary (5/3, 11/4, 13/5, 28/5, 29/5, 18/6, 21/6, 25/6). Repeatedly I debate the question whether I am Americanized or not and how I will adjust to the Finnish way of life again (16/4, 18/5, 25/5, 7/6). American youth culture, which was so alien at first, had become familiar. Again, quotations from the diary speak for themselves:

18/5 Finland seems so far away, even if I love the people and the country. It is going to be so difficult to go back - I eat like Americans, I act like Americans - I think like they do. This is awful. Still, I love to get letters (from friends), but the dull things they talk about seem so boring.

19/5 We talked with Christine (a French exchange student in the same school, H.S.) about how Americanized we want to be.

The diary ends with a description of the return flight and the songs *Kalliolle kukkulalle*, *Oolannin sota*, *Heili Karjalasta* and *Ryysyranta* - all songs with a certain Finnish tone in them - that were sung by the returning Finnish foreign exchange students in the plane after landing in Helsinki (11/7).

Culture shock³ is a typical experience for persons visiting another culture for a longer period of time. In the process of cultural shock four phases can be distin-

guised: excitement, disillusion, recovery, and adjustment^o (Furnham & Bochner 1986:131ff.). During the first phase, which has also been called the tourist or honeymoon phase, the visitor is fascinated by the newness of everything. After some time - from a couple of weeks to months - excitement is compensated by disillusion, the point at which the visitor may so reject the entire experience that he returns home. If, however, the visitor traverses this crisis phase and begins to acquire the language and to find his way in the new culture, the recovery stage is entered. The fourth stage, that of adjustment, is achieved through learning the cues that guide behavior and accepting the alien customs; a person simply gets used to the new way of life and feels a part of the culture (Golde 1986:11; Furnham & Bochner 1986:69). The process of culture shock can also be traced from the diary notes mentioned above.

The American Experience as Portrayed in Letters

Diaries are private, usually not meant for outsiders. In circumstances away from home, diaries are often outlets for feelings, written not only to document but also to process experiences. Letters, however, are not in the control of the writer after they have been mailed, and therefore, there is always a possibility that they reach a wider range of people, and they are always communication with someone else than the writer alone. Therefore, it could be asked if letters give a different picture of the same events. Was the description I had reported about for myself, and therefore one I wanted to remember, the same I wanted to reveal to others?

In the first letters I describe the same

events with the same words as in the diaries, as if I had picked the things I thought were important (Thur6n 1976:66). The variety of ethnic groups and religions in America, the variety of classes at school, architecture, furniture, food, landscape, climate and vegetation.⁵ The letters show even better my attempts to keep my Finnish identity on the one hand and on the other to introduce Finnish customs to my temporary family by experimenting with Finnish cooking.⁶ English words start appearing in letters much later, after seven months in the USA.⁷

It is surprising that letters don't give a more optimistic picture of life, as, for example, the letters soldiers write home in order to alleviate relatives' anxiety (Thuren 1976:46). In letters I complain about the authority in the American home even more than in diaries. The feeling of loneliness in a big school during the first days, which can only be read between the lines in the diary, is thoroughly reported in letters." In general, difficulties are given even more attention in letters.⁹

A letter is always addressed to somebody, which is apparent in this experiment, too. I have written about things I expect the reader to be interested in, in this case descriptions which are close to my parents' interests, both in their professions and as parents; but as could be expected, in diaries there are notes about boys and free time activities that are not mentioned in the letters. For example, when I describe visits to colleges, in the letters I concentrate on the academic side,¹⁰ but in the diaries I hardly mention the classes I attended, but concentrate on the free time activities (13/ 11 1978). When I describe school life, I concentrate on classes in my letters" and

people and hobbies in my diaries. That tendency is apparent throughout the material. Surely both the diaries and the letters give an accurate picture even though from a different angle.

It is also noticeable that the process of adaptation and culture shock, which was so obvious in the diaries, can't be found in the letters. Therefore one could ask whether letters are reliable sources when mental processes, such as cultural shock, are examined. At least this experiment shows that even to the nearest relatives letters do not reflect the mental processes of an individual as clearly as diaries do. In that respect letters are unreliable sources and these defects should be taken into consideration when letters are used as source material for ethnological research (cf. Djupedal 1989:61).

Conclusion

What is the relationship between "lived history" and the science of history? What is the relationship between history and memory? These are questions that have recently been asked on many occasions (Le Goff 1992, Preface xv). We ethnologists know from experience that for some people the past is a Golden Age and for some the opposite. Material found in folklore archives is a compromise between remembering and forgetting, and many times a result of the ideas and preferences of the collector (L6nngvist 1989:31). As Le Goff has stated

memory is the raw material of history. Whether mental, oral, or written, it is the living source from which historians draw. Because its workings are usually unconscious, it is in reality more dangerously subject to manipulation by time and by societies given to reflection than the discipline of history itself. Moreover, the discipline of his

tory nourishes memory in turn, and enters into the great dialectical process of memory and forgetting experienced by individuals and societies (Le Goff 1992, Preface xii).

When I went to the United States I had many expectations from the year since my sister and friends had been exchange students and we had had two American exchange students in my home. Furthermore, during the orientation in Finland former exchange students told us new ones about the American lifestyle and the differences we would face.² All in all, when I left Finland I already had an idea of what the year would be like. As I read the diaries and letters, I had a feeling that no matter what my thoughts and experiences were, I wrote down the experiences I had expected. One sees what one expects to see (Thuren 1976:23).

As an ethnologist it was educational to read the diaries and letters and evaluate them as source material for research. If somebody had interviewed me about that year, would I have given the same kind of picture of the experience as the diaries and letters give? In fifteen years I have forgotten most of the things I labelled as very important in my diaries and furthermore there are features of American culture that I remember, for example, competitions at school, but they are not mentioned neither in diaries nor letters. Therefore, the picture I would have given in an interview would have been, again, different (Thuren 1976:33f).

One could ask which is more important, the historical facts, biased though they are, that can be found in contemporary sources or the experience as one remembers it? As we know, ethnologists of today are primarily interested in the subject; it is as, or even

more, important to know how experiences have affected people's lives and what is more important to them than to be sure if what one remembers is historically true.¹³ In that respect the question whether something was actually so or not is irrelevant. Perhaps more important would be to reveal the intentions the producer of the sources has had (Kalela 1992:79).

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Notes

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1 The Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology (1986:95) defines the concept of ethnicity as follows: "The key features of this concept are the identification and labelling of any grouping or any category of people, and the explicit or implicit contrasts made between the identified group and another group or category. There must always be a we/they dichotomy to apply a concept of ethnicity."

2 About the difficulties see e.g. Storti 1990.

3 The Macmillan Dictionary of Anthropology (1986:69) defines culture shock as follows: "An individual or group psychological response to exposure to a new and unfamiliar cultural environment, whether it is a result of migration, invasion, colonization, or some other social or political upheaval. In situations of culture contact this culture shock may be a mutual one. The components of culture shock are both emotive and cognitive. The term is in fact a label for a wide variety of different possible responses to this particular kind of stress, which may include disorientation, depression, apathy, irrational or inappropriate responses."

4 This generalization of the phenomenon has also been criticized.

5 A letter to Toini and Erkki Snellman August 26 and December 9, 1978.

6 Letters to Toini and Erkki Snellman Septem-

- her 14, October 1, October 28, December 1, 1978 and February 28, 1979.
- 7 A letter to Toini and Erkki Snellman March 23, 1979.
- 8 Letters to Toini and Erkki Snellman September 14, December 9 1978, March 6, 1979. 9 A letter to Toini Snellman March 27, 1979. 10 Letters to Toini and Erkki Snellman November 12 1978, March 6, 1979.
- 11 Letters to Toini and Erkki Snellman January 25, March 23, 1979.
- 12 That foreign exchange student folklore is well documented in Pekka Leimu's paper. 13 There have been discussions about contemporary sources (such as newspaper articles, letters and diaries) and memories collected afterwards (such as interviews and questionnaires) as source material. Oral history material has been used as a tool to find facts, but lately it has been emphasized that it is more important to know how experiences have affected informants' lives and what is more important to them than to be sure if what one remembers is historically true. See Wikdahl 1992:15f; Hjartarson & Bjömsson 1991; Gaunt 1992:65; Kalela 1992:77, 82.
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