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Account books, amateur literature and true stories. The practice of rural life writing in 20th century Austria

For historians, using life narratives as sources is exciting and problematic. The semi-fictional character of, and the particularistic perspective provided by this kind of text has provoked criticism in our trade. In particular, in the German language tradition of the discipline, there is a manifest distrust of autobiographical sources, and findings about the malleability of memory in psychology and neurology do not help to improve their reputation. One reason for this problematic situation is the lack of an acknowledged method of evaluation. What can be done in order to fruitfully use these stories for historical research – stories that can neither be taken at face value nor be dismissed as irrelevant fiction?

Critique of the sources is part of the standard repertoire of any historical method; the question what kind of text is being used is central in this procedure. To understand the result – the text – it helps to find out about the practice that produced it. Besides the material aspect of writing, life writing is foremost a discursive practice. Whoever sits down to write up his or her memories relates to a context of oral and written tradition of recording past events based on one's own testimony.[1] The traditions an author can relate to vary, and the intensification of media communication during the past two centuries has considerably broadened the pool of traditions, models etc.

The findings I want to present at this panel are part of the research I did for my doctoral thesis on rural exodus in 20th century Austria. I was relying on

autobiographical source material, and in order to place the texts in their context, first of all I had to establish this context. I found myself in the favourable situation of having an institution which collects popular autobiography.

1. A powerful resource: The collection of life accounts at Vienna University

In the course of an Oral History project organised by the Department of Social and Economic History at the University of Vienna in the early 1980s, a book-length autobiographical manuscript was presented by a student. The author was his grandmother, who had been born to a sub-peasant family in Lower Austria in 1901. The discovery of this text initiated the founding of *Dokumentation lebensgeschichtlicher Aufzeichnungen (DOKU)*[2], an association dedicated to the collection, publication and initiation of popular life writing. From the beginning, three fields of activity were pursued: first, the collection and documentation of life narrative texts, involving media calls for newly written texts as well as for old manuscripts in family possession; second, the publication of a book series drawing on the collection; third, close cooperation with institutions in adult education, providing methods for life writing seminars and training for the trainers. Austria is a small country, and DOKU soon established itself within a network of adult education institutions and local publishers, working closely with print and broadcast media. The book series has a rural bias, although calls and publications were issued that targeted, for example, the urban working class or Jewish emigrants. But the books containing rural live stories sold best and still do, and therefore maintained the autobiographical discourse about the rural past better than any other.

DOKU stored manuscripts and maintained a database mainly on popular autobiographies; secondarily, the collection also contained biographical texts, family or farmhouse chronicles, account books, and, in some cases, diaries – both unpublished and published texts. By now, the DOKU database reflects popular life writing in Austria in the traditional paper formats (or electronic equivalents) very well, while omitting more recent formats like blog. For my purpose – finding out about the scope of variation in 19th and 20th century writing practices – the database was a good starting point. Out of approximately 2100 authors/protagonists, 340 were selected, who were known to have held a job in agriculture. The data was processed as it stood in 2004. It covered sociographic information (year of birth, gender, place of birth, parents' social status, professional biography), information on the text (length, number, genre, topics, style) and on the contact between author and DOKU (mediating institution/person, publication, response to calls). The statistical technique I used is multiple correspondence analysis. This is an explorative technique using nominal data.

The output is a two-dimensional scatterplot which provides a synopsis of positive, negative and non-correlation in the data.[3] Without discussing the method in depth, I'd like to provide a brief reading-instruction for the scatterplot. The two axes (horizontal, vertical) are to be interpreted as dimensions of the research object, in this case: dimensions of rural life writing as represented in the database of *Dokumentation lebensgeschichtlicher Aufzeichnungen*. Positive correlation (two items are more likely to coincide than not) is expressed by closeness on the scatterplot. The intersection of the two axes represents the divide between positive and negative correlation. Items that lie on opposite sides of the intersection are more likely not to coincide (negative

correlation). The further away from the intersection an item is placed, the stronger a correlation is, and the more important it is for explaining the dimension.

2. First dimension: The relation between author and audience

The first dimension (the horizontal axis) is defined by two different features: the relation between author and audience and the closeness or remoteness of the author to the collecting institution DOKU. Remoteness can mean spatial distance, but foremost, it means a distance in time. A certain way of relating to one's audience corresponds to whether a certain text has been written earlier or later in the period covered. Older texts (which are represented on the left side of the horizontal axis on the scatterplot) tend to address an audience which is close to the writer – the family or another local community. Authors are male rather than female; the most important genres are chronicle (family, farmhouse, village) and biography of family members, but also autobiography written for family commemoration. Such a close audience has an influence on what can be said and what cannot. These texts have a tendency to comply with shared self-images within the group and omit the intimate experiences of the authors. The oldest tradition here is the writing of farmhouse account books, which combine economic issues, working schedules, weather observation for prognostic purposes and family events. There are three texts like these in the collection, dating to the early 19th century.

On the opposite side of the axis (horizontal on the right), a writing practice is represented that is close to DOKU. The texts have been written by authors from younger age-groups; they tend to be styled for media publication in journals or books,

or for answering calls issued by DOKU. They are often shorter and episodic in structure, and relate to an audience that is anonymous or at least does not form part of an author's everyday social environment, e.g. social historians who ask for texts on certain topics. Therefore, these texts offer the possibility of addressing controversial and intimate contents without exposing the authors within their own social context. In particular, individual childhood and youth memories are frequent in this region of the scatterplot.

3. Second dimension: social origin and style

The second dimension (the vertical axis in the scatterplot) is defined by the social origin of the author and a certain style of writing. The most important difference in this dimension is between peasants and their offspring on one side (vertical axis, bottom) and authors from non-peasant families (vertical axis, top). The majority of the latter are members of sub-peasant families, children of labourers, or craft-workers, but in a few cases also authors of urban origin, who were forced to take up agricultural labour in times of food shortage during and after Second World War, or in times of unemployment during the 1920s and 1930s. These social positions go along with certain styles of writing. While peasant authors often preferred a poetic style, referring to an idyllic or nostalgic representation of the past in short, episodic texts, their non-peasant counterparts more frequently wrote longer, consecutive life accounts about growing up in hardship. To understand this divide, it is important to know that from the second half of 19th to the second half of 20th century, rural society in most (but not all) parts of Austria was characterised by a strong hierarchy with landowning peasants at the top and the landless or smallholders below them, which caused the economic

dependence of the poorer families on the landowners. Together with the traditional, scarcely mechanised agriculture, this rural social order vanished during the second half of the 20th century. The great difference between rural life then and now is a strong motive to give testimony for both the peasant and the non-peasant autobiographers. In fact, the difference between old and new agriculture and rural society, and the transition from 'traditional' to 'modern' is the most prevalent and most defining topic in 20th century rural life narratives. I assume that the exotic nature of the not-so-distant past before the social transition can explain the lasting economic success of rural life narrative in the book market.

Interestingly, the non-peasant autobiographies were more frequently designed for book publication, which is indicated by the importance of publishing houses as contact institutions. In these cases, the authors sent their manuscripts to the publishing houses first, who rejected the manuscripts, but forwarded them to DOKU. Calls in print and broadcast media, which were issued by DOKU, are also important for non-peasant writing. On the other side of the axis, where poetic peasant writing is represented, the intention to publish is not important.

It is noteworthy that these two contrasting modes of life writing make reference to forms and structures of the complex that is called *Literaturbetrieb* in German, and that includes both the writing of acknowledged literature and the business of printing and publishing. But they refer to two entirely different aspects. The poetic peasant writing refers to *Heimat- und Provinzliteratur*, a type of literature featuring rather idyllic views of country life, which is described as being threatened by modern developments. This type of literature was canonised during the Austrofascist regime in the 1930s, was

well appreciated within the National Socialist regime, and was de-canonised after 1945 by academic and journalistic literary criticism. However, it was promoted in school education well into the 1970s. Apart from the subject - rural or peasant life - the poetic life writing of peasants and their descendants shared with *Heimat- und Provinzliteratur* an attitude of simultaneous pride and humility. This combination goes along with autobiography in the sense of amateur literature, claming poetic value, but avoiding exposure within the literary business. An example of this poetic style is the account of the agricultural year with its seasonal tasks, seen through the eyes of a child.[4]

The life-writing of the mainly sub-peasant rural authors on the other hand does not claim poetic merits but refers to the form of printed autobiography of common people, which goes back to politically motivated working-class autobiography, but also to forms without political inclination.[5] They also share common features with *Anti-Heimatliteratur*, a genre which emerged during the 1970s in reaction to *Heimat- und Provinzliteratur*, providing critical and explicitly non-idyllic views on rural past. The stories of sub-peasant autobiographers draw their dignity from the truthfulness of the account, often describing overcoming extreme poverty and emancipation from a discriminatory social situation. Such teleology – from a poor childhood and youth to a contemporary life in relative comfort and security – promotes longer narratives and a dramatic structure.

4. Conclusion: The context of rural life writing

The two dimensions obtained by processing data from the DOKU collection describe different aspects of writing, collecting and circulating autobiographical texts. Both

dimensions together provide a map for the landscape of the possibilities of claiming authorial voice and the attention of the audience. Most autobiographies give some answer to the question, why of all the lives that ever existed, a particular one is chosen to be narrated?[6] In popular autobiography, which tells the stories of people who do not enjoy the attention of the public, and which is rarely written in an artful language, a justification for claiming authorship is very common. Most frequently, the truthfulness of the account is mentioned, or the striking difference between past and present is interpreted as a motivation for testimony. In short, claiming autobiographical authorship requires a certain dignity, and in the scatterplot – the integration of our two dimensions – we can find different ways of gaining it. In the first dimension, it is the dignity of the elder, who knows about things the young do not know anymore. On the left side, the testimony is given with pride, by elderly gentlemen of a certain standing; the dignified role of the chronicler is played by men more often than by women.[7] The text is a gift and a service for the family or another community for whom it has been written. On the right side, knowledge about the past probably would not be related at all, if there wasn't a magazine or an academic institution asking for it. The authors often express self-consciousness about the value of their accounts, or are ashamed about bothering anybody with their humble life stories.

In the second dimension, both modes refer to writers with an attitude. The sub-peasant writers draw their dignity from testifying about economic hardship and the unjust social conditions they have suffered. They reject the notion of a better past (in German termed *Gute Alte Zeit*). The peasant writers on the other hand, do refer to a good, sometimes idyllic past more frequently. However, their appreciation of the past is nearly always ambivalent: some things were good, but not all; some things have

changed for the better, some have changed for the worse. The difference in evaluating the past corresponds with the difference between growing up under humble conditions (for the peasant authors) or in sheer poverty (for the sub-peasant authors). In the region of the map where the peasant authors are represented, yet another motive for life writing can be made out: the pleasure of writing, and the pride in the ability to write, or, in some cases, to compose verse.

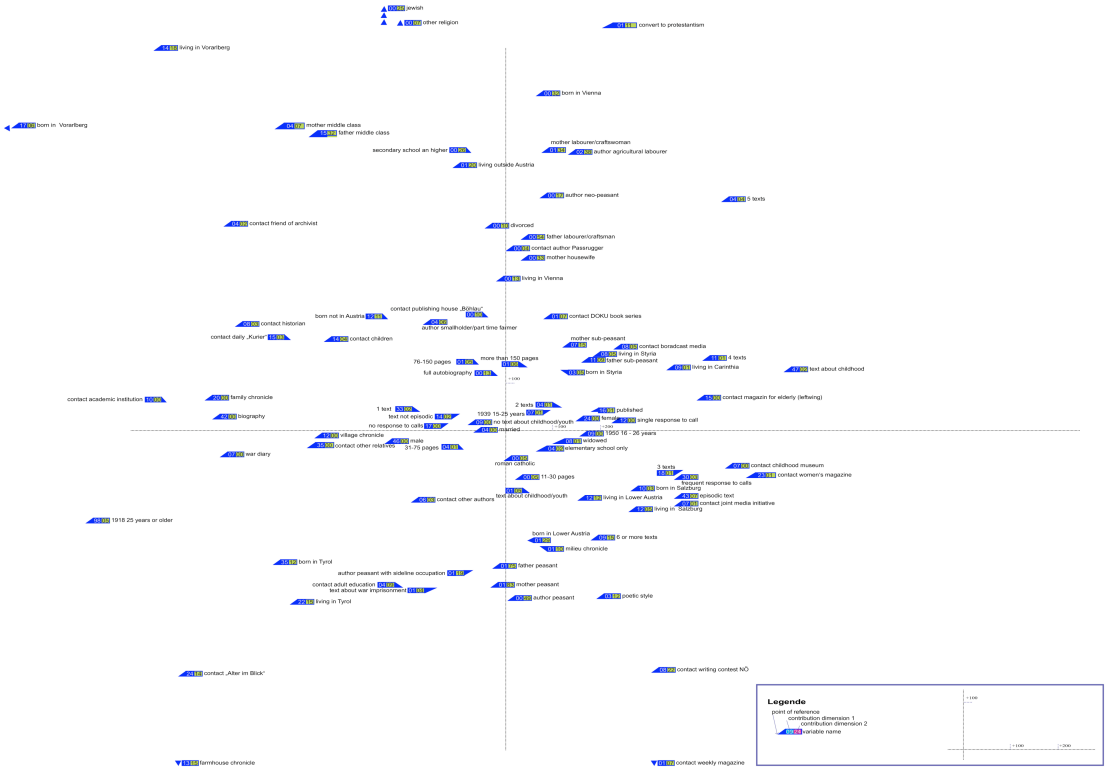
How does this context of rural life writing help us in utilising autobiographical texts in historical research? In popular autobiography, it is usually impossible to check the validity of the information. If incorrect information can be identified, this can have two causes: a flaw of the memory, or deliberate intention. In most cases, there is no possibility of deciding which applies. There is, however, certainty that any account is partial and selective. Therefore, I suggest treating the disputable authenticity of autobiographies as an attribute of the text, not as a criterion for elimination from the corpus,[8] and focussing on the question of how remembered life experience is put into story form. To do so, it is necessary, first, to compare a sufficient number of texts to discover patterns, and second, to compare other texts that provide models for how to put a life course into a narrative: fictional texts, institutional CV standards, the stories related in the media about extraordinary fates, or others.

It is worth mentioning that the life writing initiatives conducted by DOKU through media calls and adult education have opened a window for texts written without particular skill and for stories about failure. The DOKU policy of calls and writing seminars is purposely non-competitive, claiming that any information is valuable for social history. In this way, many life stories have entered the pool that are downright

unpleasant to read for the lack of narrative closure, and in some cases even difficult to decipher, because the authors did not dare spell out their personal misery in detail. The great value of this new style however lies in reducing at least a little bit the bias of life narratives towards tales about successful lives and happy endings.

The landscape of rural life writing I am sketching in this paper describes a little of 19th and a lot of 20th century practice. But autobiographical styles are changing according to the universe of writing, reading and narrating in which the authors live. Rural autobiographers nowadays have been better educated than those of previous generations, and have had easier access to literature. After twenty-five years of promotion by DOKU, rural life writing has gained the status of normality in Austria, with the book series disseminating models in form and content. But those who have witnessed the massive social transition in rural society during the 20th century are now old; within a few decades, nobody will be left to write about this exotic past they knew. Rural life writing of the 21st century will be of a different kind.

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[1] Jerome Bruner, 'The Autobiographical Process', in Robert Folkenflik, ed., *The Culture of Autobiography. Construction of Self-Representation*, Stanford CA (Stanford UP) 1993, pp. 38-56, at p. 41.

[2] http://wirtges.univie.ac.at/TCgi/TCgi.cgi?target=home&P_KatSub=79 (Webpage in German)

[3] J.-P. Bezècri, *Correspondence Analysis Handbook*, New York (…), 1992.

[4] This style of narrative has also been found among peasants in Bulgaria; see Daniela Koleva, 'The "Chronotopos" in life histories', in Marija Makarovic, ed., *Vrednotelnje zivljenjskih pricevanj*, Pisa (…) 1997, pp. 77-83.

[5] Wolfgang Emmerich, ed., *Proletarische Lebensläufe. Autobiographische Dokumente zur Entstehung der Zweiten Kultur in Deutschland, Bd. 1: Anfänge bis 1914*, Reinbek (…) 1974, pp.11-26.

[6] Jerome Bruner, 'Self-making and world-making', in Jens Brockmeier and Donal Carbaugh, eds., *Narrative and Identity. Studies in Autobiography, Self and Culture*. Amsterdam (....Studies in Narrative Vol. 1), 2001 pp. 25-37, at p. 29.

[7] Charlotte Heinritz, *Auf ungebahnten Wegen. Frauenautobiographien um 1900*, Königstein/Taunus, 2000, pp. 138-142.

[8] In doing so I adopt a suggestion of Sigrid Wadauer, in *Die Tour der Gesellen. Mobilität und Biographie im Handwerk vom 18. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert*, Frankfurt/Main (...Studien zur Historischen Sozialwissenschaft Bd. 30), 2005, p. 357.