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UDC: 82-34.01:398.2
 Original Scientific Paper

Received: October 15, 1987

TELLING ABOUT LIFE
 ON QUESTIONS OF
 CONTEMPORARY ORAL
 LITERARY GENRES

The article sheds light on talking about real life from two fundamental angles: as an elementary literary phenomenon and as a genre of oral narrative prose. The folklore and literary notions of *skaz* are compared and related. Terms and definitions are reviewed. There is discussion of the interrelation of the documentary and the fictional - with the conclusion that every instance of talking has fanciful parts and narrative fiction rooted in the very act of telling, when it shapes the plot. The problem of its place in oral literature is discussed from the point of view of the existence or lack of artistic features (comparison with legends). The separation of structured talking from functionally bound conversation is analyzed. Aspects of collectivity and tradition, as well as individual experiences and creative work, are respectively related to analogous aspects of other oral literary prose genres. Analogies of variants can be seen in maintenance of relating individual events in one person's or groups repertoire, while analyses of traditional plots and motifs are in typified thematic circles.

* This article was read in a somewhat shorter form as a paper at a meeting on literary kinds and genres held in Belgrade, 1983. It was published in its entirety in the journal *Umjetnost riječi* 4, Zagreb, 1983 and also in the periodical collection *Theoretical Investigations* 3, Belgrade 1985. It also came out in a book by the author of the article *Usmeno pjesništvo u obzorju književnosti* (Oral Poetry on the Horizon of Literature), Zagreb, 1984. Meanwhile, and in part during the period when this article was published, the literature on the subject of

Tell us that one, Master Ivo:
 Biscay around us, sky is gray...
 And we, you know, will not mind
 if you toss in several more.
 (popular song)

1

In the 1950s and early 1960s, the Zagreb Institute for Folk Art (now the Institute of Folklore Research) was a small organization with close contact among all its members. *This contact went beyond work and included informal communication during field work, in the everyday half hour break when everyone got together over a cup of coffee, on the relatively frequent birthday parties, celebrations when a child was born, a work published and so forth. Aside from conversation about current projects, people often chatted during coffee breaks and parties about things happening in their lives. We knew that Zoran Palčok the director and Olinko Delorko, researcher of oral poetry and a poet himself, told them best. Delorko used to tell the most about his childhood and teenage years in Split, the Split "oridinali" (eccentrics) and life in Split's bustling Senjska St.

Palčok told us many events from his own life. He related an episode from the childhood of his father, more or less as he had heard it, that became decisive for his father's entire life. As a boy in a Slavonian village, he had been a ministrant in church during mass. At that time he stole a coin from the collection box. He confessed this to the priest at confession, and the priest told his father. The father was so outraged that he threw the ten-year-old boy out of the house. The boy wandered from place to place. In Valpovo he learned the cobbler's trade, more as a servant to the cobbler than as an apprentice, but afterwards he couldn't find work. He did the most grueling jobs, pulling boats along the Sava riverbank. He made it to Dubrovnik on foot, and only there did he manage to find employment, settle down, marry and remain to live the rest of his life.

Prof. Palčok told us this bizarre episode from his father's life on several occasions. Each time we listened with rapt attention.

Prof. Palčok's other story that I clearly remember is related to his earlier years as a teacher on Korčula Island. He told about how he went off with the Korčula fishermen to fish for sardines. This joint departure for night fishing was of vital importance for the entire village, because the catch would decide whether they would have enough food the coming year or not. The women and children saw off the fishermen with prayers and blessings. Prof. Palčok described all this in lively detail, as well as the agonizing fishing all night long - that was futile. Silence and hush reigned in the boats on the return - and they were greeted by women on the shore who impatiently shouted their questions about the catch. Only then did the fishermen break out in the most vicious curses, they vented their anguish, as a vital contrast to the prayers on departure. One fisherman cursed a "hundred sailing boats of dried Jesus Christs", and when asked why dried, he muttered: "You can pack more in that way!".

everyday narrative and its various sub-categories has grown considerably. The text of the article is presented here in English translation without any changes or later additions, because this would interfere with the picture of the perception of "telling about life" at the time when the article was written. The editors considered the paper still to be relevant in its former form, among other things because it presents exhaustive information of interest in this genre of narrative in the periods that preceded the general trend of its study.

“Dried Jesus Christs corresponded, of course, to the image of dried sardines that wouldn’t be there after the night of fishing. We heard about that tragic-comic event several times, asked to have it repeated and remembered it as an anecdote.

This and similar stories reproduce true events, but it is a good question just how true all their details actually are.

Ivo Habunek, my closest childhood friend, of whom nothing remains today but a name on a plaque at the Faculty of Philosophy commemorating those who fell victim to fascism, and one line in a poem by Jure Kaštelan, possessed a magical gift of bonding all who listened to him with his words. He spoke of books, of his ideas, and among other things of his experiences. We knew how much he embellished and furnished detail, and loved his story-telling all the more for it. The central point was always based on truth, but the story was all the more charming for what he added. This is not entirely characteristic as an example because Ivo’s stories were not required to be fully true to life, but at the root of most of the relating of true events that one follows with breathless attention and interest, those that are often re-told - one usually finds a germ of personal combination and fancy that is appreciated by listeners.

I remember how my Aunt Jelka used to tell about her childhood experiences, the basic substance of which was a mixture of fancy and reality. In Voćin in Slavonia, where her father, and my grandfather, was the physician, there stands a ruined fortress called the Turkish Castle by the local populace. As a young girl at the turn of the century my aunt once came back from the Turkish Castle and told her mother of an exciting experience: there she saw three Turks in many-colored broad silken trousers, with turbans and unsheathed swords. Her mother, in keeping with the upbringing of the day, tried to stop her from “lying”, even beat her, but Aunt did not go back on her story. Many years after my aunt’s death I told this story to her granddaughter in the presence of her mother, my aunt’s daughter-in-law. The daughter-in-law, it turned out, had also heard Aunt’s story, but had remembered it slightly differently: there were six Turks and they were fighting among themselves with swords. Where the change had occurred - perhaps as Aunt re-told the story or in the daughter-in-law’s or in my memory, we will never know. But true stories survive, even without intentional embellishment, the way the person who told them had shaped them.

At some time in the mid-Fifties our household chimney sweep in Zagreb told me an exciting episode from his life: after many years of absence while learning his trade, and years in the army, as prisoner of war and participation in the partisan struggle - he returned in 1945 to his village. He spent a night in his native home as an unknown soldier and spoke, unrecognized, with his father, mother and sisters. When he disclosed his identity the next morning, unheard-of celebration broke out in the village and all the surrounding areas that lasted for three days. As I listened to the story I was reminded of an almost identical recording I had made in Istria about Grga Dončić Peteh who several centuries ago served the Emperor as a soldier in Vienna for a full seventeen years, and when he returned home even his mother didn’t recognize him.¹

The chimney sweep, of course, had done a bit of exaggerating; he had embellished on the point of his narrative according to the patterns of traditional story-telling. Yet the

¹ I presented the chimney-sweeps story in my article Bošković-Stulli 1961: 29-30. The legend on Grga Dončić Peteh is given in my manuscript collection *Folklorna grada okolice Pazina* (Folklore Material from the Pazin Vicinity, 1953). Manuscript of the Institute of Folklore Research in Zagreb (previously: the Institute for Folk Art) no. 96: 69-70.

foundation is true. Fifteen years after he told me his story, I heard quite a similar story from the life of an acquaintance of mine, Joža Iveković, a driver by trade and originally from the Klanjec area in Croatian Zagorje (the chimney sweep was also from Zagorje), which he told me during a drive to an excursion: when he completed the first four grades of elementary school his father sent him to the Bjelovar area to pick up a trade in a nearby village. Nine more children were at home, and there was no money or time to travel and visit. Joža didn't see his family for several years, and when the war came he still hadn't seen them. When the partisans came through the village where he was staying he left the village and his employer, at the age of fifteen, and joined the partisans because he liked them. He fought in many battles and was gravely wounded. Only at the end of the war did he return home, and then discovered that two of his brothers had also been partisans. The story is quite similar to the previous one; both speak of the facts of someone's life, but the storytellers are different: while the chimney sweep formed his tale according to traditional folklore pattern, Joža was closer to reality, though also fond of spicing up some of his episodes with a little Schweik-like humor, in contrast to sentimentality.

All these stories - everyone knows other, similar ones - have sprung naturally out of ongoing conversation, imperceptibly assuming the form of a full-fledged story.

In my field work people have also told me about their lives. I have asked them to tell me traditional songs and stories, while the stories of their lives only interested me as backup commentary for the songs and stories. Sometimes we simply chatted, informally, relaxing and getting to know each other as people do. I rarely recorded their talk of their lives, but would only note down an occasional important detail about them. Yet sometimes I observed that such talk was also carefully shaped in substance and narrative, and then I would write down what I had heard in short notes immediately afterwards, or would discretely switch on the tape recorder in the middle of the story. I have very few such recordings, but their value lies precisely in the fact that they sprung out of conversation, they were not answers to specific questions, they are authentic stories at the moment of generation.

In the village of Stubalj near Kostajnica in 1960 I met Roza Medić, a seventy-year-old woman who had been bedridden for months due to an accident, a fall. I was told that she could tell me many folk songs. And she did, in fact, tell me a few, not many, but she had another story to tell: her biography. She felt a need to tell about what she had experienced in her life. She talked broadly, with moving words and drama, and the key moments in the story were shaped into dramatic dialogue. She started with the words: "I got married like this..." And then followed an exciting story about how she was married off against her will, by abduction; nonetheless she continued to live with her husband, the abductor - and wasn't badly off with him - but he was young, only twenty-four years old when he was killed in the First World War in the battle at Crni Vrh; she was left with three children, a sick brother-in-law and ailing mother-in-law and she supported them all; in the end she had this accident - the fall. Her story was not a uniform, precise description of her path through life, it was concentrated on three key dramatized episodes: the abduction, the husband's death and her accident. From the real course of life she chose for her narration what worked well in narrative form.²

The narrative was quite different of twenty-year-old Danica Basta from Kukunjevac

² Roza Medić's narrative is presented in my manuscript collection *Folklorna građa okolice Kostajnice* (Folklore Material from the Kostajnica Vicinity, 1960), Manuscript of the Institute of Folklore Research in Zagreb, no. 385: 93-98.

in Slavonia (in 1951), who had experienced an Ustashi massacre as a child and lost her father in the course of it. She composed a decasyllabic poem on various events, including the massacre when her father had been killed. The horrible bloodbath and related events were described in detail in the poem. Narrating its text, Danica was reminded once more of the gruesome events. Actually, she remembered her father. She talked about her sorrow at the loss of her father and the inspiration she felt to write the poem. It started like this: "I will never be able to forget Daddy..." She expressed her feeling that no one should ever sit on the bench I was sitting on at that moment, because her father had made the bench himself, "something sacred". She then talked about how she took shelter with her mother and sister in the village of Brezine "with some Croats", and once when their son said to his father: "Daddy, cut me a slice of bread", she remembered about how her father had cut and served them their bread. She began sobbing so painfully that "later they never let the boy say 'Daddy' to his father; instead he always had to call him 'Ivan'." She said that her father once came to her in a dream. "It upset me so, pain in my heart every day, and I think, oh dear God, I will go and write it down. I keep thinking, when I am old, let my children hear it, let them know how sad my days and young years were." And that is why she decided to write the poem *Moj Doživljaj* (My Experience).³

The crux of Danica's story, unlike the previous ones, is not the relating of external events, rather they are projected through a lyrical, subjective experience. But that very subjective illumination and selection of episodes that became the subject of the story (the bench that the father's hand had fashioned, the serving of bread) showed how stories from life, no matter how truth-based they may be, are given a stamp by those who tell them, and not by the bare facts alone.

2

The talking described above serves merely as an introduction here to the principal theme. It is intended to provide an image of the type of talking we will be dwelling on, modest and unnoticed, which, as far as I am aware, has never been the subject, in Yugoslavia, of folklore or literary theoretical research. Our examples have demonstrated in part certain natural settings for such talking.

This is the relating of real events taken from life, a narrative that grows into a story, more or less shaped, out of conversation, based on one's own reminiscences or something experienced by someone from one's immediate vicinity, the experiences of closer ancestors, with which there was still direct or close indirect contact.

We all come across such narratives, and they certainly existed in the past. Folklorists have always happened upon them, but most of them were never recorded, or they are only mentioned in a generalized form in order to characterize the narrator and milieu.

Earlier recordings of such stories can be found in material that was intended for other purposes, for instance material in books on ethnography, dialects and other subjects, when

³ The text of Danica Basta's narrative was published in my article "Narodna poezija naše oslobodilačke borbe kao problem suvremenog folklornog stvaralaštva" (Folk Poetry of the Liberation Struggle as a Problem of Contemporary Folklore Creativity) in the book Bošković-Stulli 1971:329-330. On p. 328 there are fragments given of the poem *Moj doživljaj* (My Experience), whose full text is recorded in my manuscript collection *Narodne pjesme i pripovjetke iz okolice Pakraca* (Folk Songs and Stories from the Pakrac Vicinity, 1951), Manuscript of the Institute of Folklore Research no 68: 25-27.

they are documenting the social and living conditions or features of speech.⁴

Fifteen years ago (1969) the Belgrade journal *Delo*, spurred on by modern interest for the documentary side of literature, began to publish authentic, tape-recorded conversations with people and their monologue narratives in a sequence of issues, as “an attempt to place literature in the direct service of people and life, at a moment when other, much more powerful communications media may fall short”. Along with conversations in question and answer form, with discussions on our living conditions, we also find here narrative on the life of the speaker, where certain scenes are even shaped into real little stories (for example the narratives of Vidak Markov Inić and Rom Petar Šajn, 1969, no. 4 and no. 11). These testimonies are moving in substance, and were begun “on the street, in the house, in the snow or in prison, in a factory and in the cellar”; they stem from members of various strata, though mostly from the poor and outcast - poor lonely old women, peasants whose land has been confiscated, untrained workers, prostitutes, the mentally ill, smugglers, as well as conversations with an engineer, soccer player, a tram scene, etc. With these authentic testimonies, which appeared over a number of years, valuable and interesting in many aspects, the meaning within the framework of our endeavor is to show how some stories from someone’s own life may assume elementary literary structure.⁵

I do not know whether these recordings attracted the attention of literary theorists, folklore researchers, sociologists, psychologists. They certainly should have.

The specific folklore interest for relating life reminiscences appeared, as O. Sirovátka has noted, in parallel to the vanishing from living tradition of so called classic genres, such as tales and legends and with the simultaneous development of folklore views and methods which includes demands for authentic recordings and registering current states of folk tradition and creation.⁶

Folklore interest for telling stories about life, known under the term *skaz*, has its roots in the Soviet Union of the late 1920s and early 1930s.

It started with the collecting of reminiscences, most of them written down, of the revolution and civil war, and on the pre-revolutionary way of life for workers and peasants. Such recording of historical testimony was soon joined by folklorists, and then the first collections of oral narrative appeared on reminiscences from the civil war, meetings with Lenin and so forth. One of the specific aspects of this Soviet material is that its theme is markedly social and political, yet seen through the experience of ordinary people. The history of Soviet recording and research on narrative about life, called *skaz* or *ustnyj rasskaz* (narrative, oral story) is presented by S.N. Azbelev⁷ in his quite exhaustive, informative and sharply critical article. From his writings one sees that those who collected such material often manipulated their narrators, suggesting what they should say and how; that they also freely edited the recordings later; that the recordings were often not stories about life, but rather sparse general statements; that the narrative became, in the words of the researchers themselves, “one of the powerful means of mass agitative work”⁸; and that the assumption

⁴ see: Sirovátka 1977: 266; Leščák and Sirovátka 1982: 171.

⁵ Under the title *Ljudi govore* (People speak...) in the column *Svjedočanstva* (Testimonies) published by the journal *Delo*, these narratives begin in issue #2, 1969, and appear on and off until 1976. At first they were edited by Dušan Jaglikin, and then subsequently by other members of the staff. Our quotes come from issue #2, 1969.

⁶ Sirovátka 1963: 114; Leščák and Sirovátka 1983: 171.

⁷ Azbelev 1964.

⁸ Ibid: 137.

that the narrative would become the foundation for the flourishing of a new Soviet epic was wrong. The history of attitudes towards the *skaz* in the Soviet Union is tied in to the overall treatment of literature and culture under Stalin. It is therefore hardly surprising that a segment of the Soviet folklorists, even before Azbelev, weary of such experiences, had grown unreceptive towards the real life story as a folklore genre.

It is true, however, that the beginnings of work on real life stories that hold a prominent position within international folklore research today, come from the Soviet Union. It seems to me that the roots of folklorist interest for such true life stories can be tied indirectly to avant-garde currents in the Soviet literature of the 1920s. Ejhenbaum, when speaking of the crisis of old literary genres, notes that in modern literature the "writer is not 'fabricating' by coming up with particular intrigues or situations for his characters, rather he is talking about his own or others' observations", and that "the original basis is reborn for prose, the narrative as such"; he discovers the phenomenon of a leaning "towards pure narrative, description of individual scenes, recollection, forms of the chronicle and epistolary genres".⁹ Along with this orientation towards non-fiction and documentary aspects of literature, Ejhenbaum was the first to draw attention to the construction of what was termed the *skaz* in literary works. In the article "Iluzija skaza" (The Illusion of the Narrative) he is referring to the "illusion of real, direct, oral narrative" in literature and speaks of an author of short stories who "attempts, with the aid of various literary techniques, to create the impression of direct narration, improvisation".¹⁰ He also deals broadly with the *skaz* in his article *Ljeskov and Modern Prose* where he sees in the phenomenon of the literary form of the *skaz* "on the one hand a shift of focus from the plot to the word (and as such from the "hero" to the story-telling on this or that event, episode, and so forth), while on the other, a liberation from traditions related to written and printed culture, and a return to oral, living language (...)"¹¹.

The *skaz*, then, is under discussion. This is not however an oral, but a written *skaz*. Ejhenbaum's understanding of the *skaz* was subject to criticism. Vinogradov contended that Ejhenbaum "was not studying the *skaz* structure in a specific meaning, rather merely its 'phonetics'"; he defined the *skaz* as a "particular literary and artistic orientation towards a narrative-type oral monologue, an artistic imitation of monologue speech (...)"¹². Bahtin also criticizes Ejhenbaum for neglecting to notice "that the *skaz* in most cases is an orientation to *someone else's speech*, and only from there, as a consequence - to oral speech"¹³. Flaker defines the *skaz* as the "stylization of popular speaking" in a literary work.¹⁴

The corrections of Ejhenbaum's interpretations of the *skaz* as a literary technique have their foundations - but in this instance they are not important. His interpretation of the *skaz*

⁹ Ejhenbaum 1972: 143 (article: "U potrazi za žanrom" - In Search of a Genre).

¹⁰ Ibid: 61 (article: "Iluzija pripovedanja" - The Illusion of Narration). The article "Iluzija skaza" was first published in Russian in the book Ejhenbaum 1924: 152-156.

¹¹ Ejhenbaum 1927: 215.

¹² Vinogradov 1980: 49 (article: "Problema skaza v stilistike" - The Problem of the Skaz in Stylistics. The same article was previously published in the collection *Poetika*, 1 Leningrad 1926).

¹³ Bahtin 1963: 256.

¹⁴ Flaker 1983: 448. Flaker translated the literary term *skaz* with the word *kazivanje* which in English is usually translated as narrative.

as a literary orientation towards oral speech, his interest in pure story-telling sheds light on certain aspects of the approach to the directly oral *skaz*, telling about life. Both approaches point to analogous modern sensibilities in literature and folklore research. In literature, move away from fictionality and the growth in interest for documentary genres and oral narrative, even in the illusory, stylized form, on the one hand, and on the other, in folkloristics, the loss of an exclusive interest for what are called the classic genres, and an orientation of research attention to authentic speech on events, on life factors - all this hardly seems coincidence. This parallel phenomenon was not, of course, explicitly evident at that time, and it died off before fully developing, but it is evident from our perspective, and relevant to the current approach to telling about life.

André Jolles notes the ubiquitous spiritual preoccupation of modern man with the cluster of factualness. This vision of the world as a system of facticities was suited to the broad application of the simple form called *memorable*. The memorable is a fragment of reality, a form from which concreteness comes to us in all aspects. It may be a newspaper report on some event or a depiction of an historical episode. Such fragments highlight something for one time only out of the flow of events, while designating, at the same time, the significance of the overall sequence. They do not receive anything that was not a fact, but from the sequence of comparative facts within them emerges a superimposed factualness.¹⁵

Telling about life, both as a phenomenon in its own right and as an area of research interest in this day and age, closely corresponds with this preoccupation with facticity although it is not entirely identical to Jolles' simple form of the *memorable*. It is primarily distinguished by the form of communication: telling about life grows out of conversation. It admittedly emerges from a preoccupation with facts, but these facts are not limiting it strictly: it may deviate from facts to a greater or smaller extent.

For Hermann Bausinger the notion of a spiritual preoccupation is above a living relation to factualness, to facts as facts. In his view, a general spiritual attitude conditioned by the total cultural historical situation of an age stands above facticity. Through the influence of that general attitude of the age certain spiritual preoccupations are modified which are lasting and represent the structural dominant of the psyche, archetypes in the Jungian sense. Although fairy tales, legends and traditional witty tales are told less and less today, their motifs and structures continue to act as man's lasting inner spiritual preoccupation. It happens that talking about current, truthful or at least plausible occurrences are sometimes structured according to the archetype patterns of fairy tales, legends, witty tales.¹⁶

In this way, old archetype spiritual preoccupations change their countenance under the influence of the present prevalent spiritual attitude which is oriented towards facticity, while on the other hand, talking about facts needn't be strictly factographic, because, among other things, of the influence of archetype dominants.

¹⁵ Jolles 1978: 142-154.

¹⁶ Bausinger 1958; Bausinger 1975, column 327-329; Bausinger 1980: 228-233.

3

Talking about real events from life goes on every day. Bausinger includes them in a somewhat broader framework, along with other ordinary talking, for example, describing movies, various rumors, and the previously mentioned stories about plausible or believed events, stories that have the appearance of true events, while in fact they belong to modern travelling plots.¹⁷

All such narratives are grouped by Bausinger under the common heading of *everyday talking*.¹⁸ The term is adequate, and corresponds equally to the situations and substance of the narrative. Everyday talking does not serve Bausinger as a term for some precisely defined narrative genre; rather it is a broader contrasting and complementary notion for a modern narrative domain that can not be covered by the notion of the folk story in the traditional sense.¹⁹

Everyday talking and *everyday stories* are sometimes taken as terminological synonyms for the narrower notion of talking of life, for example in the title of an article by O. Sirovátka written in German, by an author who, when he writes in Czech, gives preference to other terms.²⁰

The title of a book that brings us articles by a group of German linguists has the title *Talking in Everyday Life* (in which the term *everyday talk* is used in several places throughout the text, and in the title of one of the articles). Talking here is studied in various communication situations from practical everyday life, often in institutionalized situations - court debate, therapeutic session, social counselling, classroom work, conversation - and with this written communication such as the readers' letters to newspapers or radio. The talking is utterly commonplace, captured in its most elementary manifestation, and only in small part does it separate into simply structured patterns in which one might recognize the proto-forms of literary expression.²¹

Telling about life as the subject of our interest is certainly within the framework of the greater phenomenon of *everyday talking*, but it does not overlap in scope with either Bausinger's definition or with the definition of the group of German linguists.²²

Researchers use various terms for telling about life, and they divide them sometimes into lesser distinct groups. We will touch in brief on the most important.

We have already said a few things about the Russian *skaz* and the oral *rasskaz*. These two terms are often treated as synonyms, while other authors strictly distinguish between the

¹⁷ Such stories are presented in my article "Zagrebačka usmena pričanja u prepletanju s novinama i televizijom" (Zagreb oral story-telling interwoven with newspaper and television) in the book Bošković-Stulli 1983: 272-316.

¹⁸ Bausinger 1958 and 1975.

¹⁹ Bausinger 1975, column 323.

²⁰ Sirovátka 1975.

²¹ Ehlich 1980.

²² From the title of an article by Divna Zečević (1976) it would seem that the theme is everyday storytelling. Along with several examples about real events, she also includes mythical and historical legend. The focus is on present-day narrative on inexplicable, supernatural experiences, which shifts the basic emphasis of the notion of everyday storytelling to the sphere of the numinous.

two. When they are contrasted, *rasskaz* is most often used as chance, still unformed informative narration on an event, which has not gone beyond the fact, while the *skaz* is further from the event and eye witness report. It has been padded with fanciful elements and tends towards artistic generalization. The thematic focal point of the recorded *skaz* or *rasskaz*, as we said earlier, belongs to the sociopolitical sphere; these are, according to J. Sokolov, "biographical and memoir talk about oneself, one's life, the events that the narrator took part in, and the exceptional people that he met or worked with".²³ Among the *skaz* commentaries there were occasional earlier narratives from the last century, and more recent ones, that speak of the former difficult conditions of the workers' life; some of them contain mythical motifs.²⁴ These narratives on the past are often difficult to distinguish from historical and mythical legends.²⁵

Oldrich Sirovátka, mentioned above, the Czech folklorist, has dedicated several of his studies to telling about life. Such narratives interest him as a category of modern oral prose, as an aspect of talking that is authentic to our age, as "tense and touching, comic and tragic, real events from life, everything that the narrators experienced, and took part in or heard of".²⁶ He alternatively uses several synonymous terms. In his most recent book, and in his earlier papers as well, he called this narration *stories from life*, *talking from life*, *talking of reminiscences*, and by the international name of *memorate*, adding to Czech terms applicable Russian, German and Polish terms.²⁷ Other Czech and Slovak writers use similar terms: *talking from life*, *stories from life* (Jech, Kolečányi-Kosová, Šramková), *talking of reminiscences* (Michálek) and others.²⁸

Attempts at an inner distinction are frequent, usually according to the degree that the story is part of tradition. Slovak author Michálek proposes that narrative about one's own experiences should be called *telling about life*, while those that the narrator has adopted from the tales of older people or his contemporaries which are not, then, his personal experiences, should be *telling about reminiscences* (spomienkové rozprávanie). He suggests as generic term *memorate* or *memorable*.²⁹

The proposed terminological division is quite arbitrary and is hard to sustain. It is no coincidence that German folklorist S. Neumann proposes opposing pairs of terms for the same clusters. According to his suggestion the generic term ought to be *stories from life*; talking about one's own life ought to be *talking about reminiscences* (*Erinnerungserzählungen*), and the narrative adopted by oral story-telling or have even grown into a

²³ Sokolov 1941: 507.

²⁴ Čičerov 1959: 458-463.

²⁵ On definitions of the concepts and terms of *skaz* and *rasskaz* and their various sub-types see: Sokolov 1941: 507-512; Bogatyrev 1956: 526-528, 552-554, 561-563, 571-572, 596 and 615; Čičerov 1959: 427-428, 458-463 and 496-499; Jemel'janov 1960: 251; Kuz'mičev 1961: 34-35; Domanovskij 1964: 194-195; Azbelev 1964: 133 and 145-146; Gusev 1967: 128-130; Kravcov 1971 (a): 135-137 and 330-331.

²⁶ Sirovátka 1961: 472.

²⁷ Leščák and Sirovátka 1982: 171-172; also see: Sirovátka 1963: 115; 1975: 663; 1977: 262-263.

²⁸ Jech 1956; Kolečányi-Kosová 1958; Michálek 1971; Šramková 1977 and others.

²⁹ Michálek 1971: 105-107.

tradition should be *everyday* or *grandfather's stories* (*Alltags- und Voreltern geschichten*).³⁰

The term *true stories* are met in the paper entitled *True Stories* by Ilona Dobos, published in 1978 in English, though considerably earlier in its Hungarian original (1964). The author divides these stories into two groups: stories of one's own experience and those of others', which have been folklorized to a greater degree, and through transmission they have been embellished and are further from reality.³¹

To the contrary, Sandra Stahl considers that there are two separate narrative categories in question. Collective, folklorized everyday stories in the third person, in her opinion, could be called true stories, but the personal element is the focal point of those about one's own experiences with untraditional substance, told in the first person; they comprise a distinct genre that the author terms *personal stories*.³² The perspective is essentially altered in doing so - no longer are these conditionally proposed terms for two sub-groups within a single genre; rather personal stories are treated and analyzed as an independent category.

The term *memorate* as a synonym for talking about real life events is used quite frequently (Sirovátka and others). It is also used by Soviet scholar K. Čistov. His memorate is not a synonym for the oral genre termed telling about life; rather it designates a communicational modality of narrative in the first person, but Čistov explicitly notes that this is narration "without the participation of supernatural beings", that this is *skaz*, an oral story-memory.³³

Albrecht Lehmann treats the memorate as talking about events of unusual subject matter, which are told because they are entertaining. He does not get involved in discussion of whether the content is natural or supernatural³⁴.

The problem lies in the fact that the meaning of the term memorate has been unclear and ambiguous since its inception. Its creator, C.W. v. Sydow described this notion in 1934 as a realm that should be distinguished from legend because despite what they have in common, the memorate is not poetic in character and is not part of tradition. These are "what people tell about their own, utterly personal experiences. They talk about their own reminiscences, and that is why we call them *memorate*".³⁵ There has been considerable debate and discussion on the notion of memorate, which is not important for us in this context in all its dimensions - except for one: the question of whether memorate designates talking about experiences without participation of supernatural beings, which would correspond to telling about life, real events, therefore Sirovátka's interpretation of the term; or, to the contrary, as some other experts hold, whether the memorate is determined "predominantly by folk belief"; thus, it is a "valuable source for studying folk religion because it discloses a situation in which certain supernatural traditions are realized"; the memorate is "exclu-

³⁰ Neumann 1966: 179. The terms *grandfather's tale* and *working memory* were taken or modified by Neumann from the book Becker 1957. (I only know of this book indirectly).

³¹ Dobos 1978: 174. - The Hungarian text was published in the journal *Etnographia*, 1964, 75, no. 2.

³² Stahl 1977 (a), p. 20 and 24-25; also see Stahl 1977 (b).

³³ Čistov 1967: 20 and 34; 1969: 368 and 369; 1974: 22 (our quote) and 26.

³⁴ Lehmann 1980: 65.

³⁵ v. Sydow 1948: 73 (article *Kategorien der Prosa - Volksdichtung*). The same von Sydow 1969: 78.

sively a report on a supernatural experience", and folk belief is a "vital base for the memorate".³⁶

The interpretation of the memorate as narrative on supernatural experiences is very frequent. Because of differing interpretations, the memorate is not a suitable term for talking about reminiscences from real life, even if that were to correspond to v. Sydow's insufficiently clearly stated thought on the notion of the memorate.

In this article the term *telling about life* is used as the basic one. It encompasses memory of real experiences and events, whether from the narrator's own life or based on the narrative of a contemporary or close ancestor who experienced the event in question. These two degrees can be distinguished, if necessary, but they are not delineated with separate terms. The narratives that have merged with a broader tradition and have become widely known, ones, therefore, which are more caught by the process of folklorization are not encompassed by the notion of telling about life.

4

Telling about life has various functions in human communities. The functions of aesthetic and entertaining intermingle with the psychological and social, which contribute to regulation of human relations.

At broader family meetings, events from the past are narrated in order to revitalize reminiscences of younger years, in order to include the younger family members in the family tradition and to develop a feeling of belonging together. This kind of talking, with its characteristic introductory formula of "and do you still remember?", designed to reinforce or enliven a feeling of group membership is typical for occasional get-togethers of friends, gatherings of high school classes after graduation, various celebrations, and so forth.³⁷

Behind everyday talking about one's own experiences, the joyful, sad and entertaining events, various psycho-social functions are often concealed, in which Lehmann observed the wishes of individuals to interpret their life - with conscious or unconscious correction of the facts - to confirm one's reputation, to solidarize with a group, to re-formulate negative experiences as positive ones, to justify one's bad actions.³⁸

In 1968 Isolde Gardoš took part in the meetings of women at feather-plucking bees in a Lusatian Serbian village and followed their narrative repertoire, within which telling about life held quite a prominent position. Along with the practical goals of the narrative - exchange of reminiscences, experiences, mutual communication, transmission of information and knowledge - the story-tellers were also presenting their experiences in successful forms; in part the aesthetic function dominated here, when the "intent to impress the audience was generally more important than a precise recapitulation of the experience".³⁹

This brings us to certain key issues related to telling about life. Along with the sparse

³⁶ Granberg 1969: 93; Honko 1964: 10 (= 1969: 295); Pentikäinen 1968: 162; Dégh and Vázsonyi 1974: 237.

³⁷ Woeller 1968-1969: 307-311; Gardoš 1972: 49.

³⁸ Lehmann 1978 and 1980.

³⁹ Gardoš 1972: 56.

and clumsy reports on an event, successful narrative forms appear; along with practical life functions there are varying degrees, of aesthetic functions as well; within the framework of talking about real events, facts are sometimes, consciously or unconsciously, adapted, padded, left to the play of fancy.

Telling about life is certainly based on a current general spiritual attitude in which predominates an orientation towards factuality. It corresponds closely to Jolles' simple form of the memorabile as a "fragment of reality". Similar to these in literature are documentary genres such as the memoir, report, diary. Only on that basis can one view the possible transformations and fancy that appears when telling about life.

In his studies, Kirill Čistov emphasizes the orientation towards the documentary, towards informativeness and veracity, with the aesthetic function subordinated, not only in telling about life, in the *skaz*, but also in traditional genres of what is known as "non-narrative" prose (i.e. prose that is not a tale in the narrow sense), therefore in mythical and historical legends, religious legends, etc.⁴⁰ In this it is important for judging the relation between the practical informative or instructive function, on the one hand, and the aesthetic on the other, to discern what context, and in conjunction with this, what form a traditional text is being presented in, whether merely as a dry information or as an elaborated form. The circumstance is important that the aesthetic and practical function in oral literature merge, join, so that at least in instances of formed narrative (unlike sparse conveyance of information), usually both functions are dominant at the same time.⁴¹

When discussing telling about life - that is not part of formalized traditional genres, whose information is not merely fictive, believed, as it is in most legends, but speaks on true facts - the documentary role is certainly the more important, while the aesthetic function is indeed often secondary.

When presenting a group of narratives about work reminiscences, Neumann states that their "point is in communicating special facts or events", and that the "concentration on content and pronounced concreteness lends the presentation its form"; that the utterance is more important than form, while the language is ordinary, everyday.⁴²

On the other hand, the problem of the documentary aspect of telling about life is neither simple nor unambiguous. L. Jemel'janov placed emphasis on the documentary, exclusively informative and non-artistic character of such narrative in his well known article, clearly inspired by a large quantity of valueless material scattered among various Soviet publications. Using the example of talking about the death of Čapaev, which served him as an illustration for an entire category of talking, Jemel'janov claimed that "it adds nothing, applies no literary procedures to the material, except for those which are dictated by the structure of facts. It is plot-based in as much as the very fact is plot-based."⁴³

The observation is probably accurate with regards to the above, and many other examples, but it is not justified as a general statement. At present we are interested in the

⁴⁰ Čistov 1967, 1969 and 1974.

⁴¹ See Bošković-Stulli 1983: 157-161 (article: "Usmena književnost izvan izvornog konteksta" - Oral Literature Outside the Original Context).

⁴² Neumann 1966: 183.

⁴³ Jemel'janov 1960: 259.

relation between the documentary and fancy. The question is whether the informative, documentary function corresponds equally to objective documentary narrative. Examples of talking that I gave at the beginning, as well as examples of theoretical considerations of the other authors presented - indicate the need to distinguish between the documentary function and the real documentary nature of telling about life.

The documentary aspect of telling about life is brought into question as well when it renders on authentic facts in a way that is essentially different than that of an historical document. Analysis of a very successful *skaz* on the death of the Vengerov brothers in a Siberian village during the civil war shows how the choice of facts in this kind of narrative is arbitrary, objectively important information on the time and conditions is left out, and varied and at first glance haphazard material is brought together. But the fragmentary documentary aspect of the text is not felt as a fault, because story-telling, when it depicts reality, is not a document. From depiction of individual, concrete people and events one begins to discern typical lines, characters and conflicts of an epoch; events and people acquire a certain general meaning.⁴⁴

According to B. Beneš, each individual talking encompasses reality with a certain dose of intentional or unintentional fancy, which determines its documentary nature.⁴⁵

It is often noted that people, when they talk about themselves, embellish the image of their personality. The talking may be only slightly shaped, as a part of the ongoing conversation. Such factually unreliable talks - that D. Stempel calls "everyday fictions" are, according to the opinion of another author, H. U. Gumbrecht, the "sign or symptom of the speaker's identity" and are different than an intentional literary fiction. But they can also act on the listener aesthetically, "as evidence of another's imagination and inspiration for one's own".⁴⁶

The question of factuality and fictionality serves as an important measure in judging the literary nature of a text.

In one recent public discussion between professors Škreb and Katičić the subject of the debate was the question of literary and non-literary works. For Škreb the border between the first and second is created by their fictionality or non-fictionality, in which case 'non-fictionality is based on the principle of truthfulness as an absolute necessity of confronting the content of the work with reality which is independent of the work', and "fictionality is indifferent towards the principle of truthfulness because it does not relate to any sort of reality and is independent of it".⁴⁷ For Katičić, to the contrary, fictionality is not an essential feature of a linguistic artwork, "rather it lies in the irrelevance of the question of whether the content of the language base is fiction or not (...) For content that is not fictional may be an instance of total and true literary art as long as the fact that it is not fiction has no importance whatsoever for its meaningfulness and reverberation in the fullness of life experience". As an example, Katičić cites Tacitus's historical work, whose characters and "the entire world

⁴⁴ Mihajlova 1966: 147. - The text *skaz* on the Vengerov brothers was published in the book Kravcov 1971(b): 410-413.

⁴⁵ Beneš 1973: 110.

⁴⁶ Stempel 1980: Gumbrecht 1980: 417.

⁴⁷ Škreb 1976: 19-20.

of his work, completely built and structured as it is, speaks vitally to the totality of experience".⁴⁸

Discussion on fictionality is directly related to telling about life from the point of view of its place as a literary genre. It goes without saying that the narrative on the Vengerov brothers, and all other examples of telling about life have not reached the degree of "total and true literary art" (Katičić,), but that here somewhere, in this telling literature begins, narrative creativity is germinated - of this I am quite certain. Several times I have stressed the interplay between factuality and fancy in such talking, the lack of a true border between truth and fiction not only from the narrator's viewpoint, but from the listener's as well. Not only because listeners do not always require full veracity, but also because they are unable to check up on it. According to Žmegač's observation, "even the most strictly documentary-based text is experienced as fiction as soon as the historical model vanishes from the audience's awareness".⁴⁹ Telling about life does not, of course, have a concrete, reliable, checkable model even though it is based on real events. The border between reality and fiction in it is quite relativized. Such telling is, in its own way, similar to some aspects of documentary literature for which Žmegač notes: "If a documentary text avoids facts as such, finding its material in unregistered everyday life, it approaches a type of fictional narration (...) In a real documentary recording, all elements of the text are entirely determined by the reality that exists outside the text, and the author's possibility of deciding is reduced to zero".⁵⁰

And, finally, fiction does not begin where events are imagined independent of reality or at least without the possibility of verification. The germ of fictionality is hidden in the telling itself. Čapek, immortally lucid, said words on this subject that are so essential for the question we raise here, that we will quote them in a somewhat abridged version: "The plot is in fact a product of the telling; as soon as I start to tell a story, I am forced to tie my performance together through a plot (...) If I tell something that really happened to me, then I leave out most of the unimportant and boring moments; in doing so in fact I am interrupting the continuity of the real event and replacing it with an epic continuity, which is created directly and immediately by the very act of telling. Each story-telling is creative, and to a great degree a free, effective action (...) The plot (...) lavishes us with gifts of an immeasurably rich life - and only for one price: that a fiction is created from it. Every story-telling has its laws. And when you tell the most authentic event, if you do so for the pleasure of the telling, then don't claim that you didn't lie in the process with a shameless naturalness" you exaggerate the entire event a little, you leave some out, you add something, in order to make it more interesting and unusual, you dramatize the situation and spice up the point, as all epicists do, you try to blow up the subject and shock the auditorium."⁵¹

⁴⁸ Katičić 1977: 136-137.

⁴⁹ Žmegač 1982: 104.

⁵⁰ Žmegač 1976: 151-152.

⁵¹ Čapek 1967: 124-125 and 127.

5

Discussion of telling about life is concentrated principally on two foci: on the question of whether it can be considered literary, artistic, and on whether they are part of the domain of folklore (in the narrower meaning of literary folklore, oral literature). These questions are often closely intertwined. If a place in literature (in our case prose literature) begins where fiction begins, but not merely pure fiction that does not relate to the reality independent from it rather the fiction that is rooted in the very act of narrating and shaping the plot - then telling about life belongs to literature, to its elementary forms. Telling about life approaches Ejhenbaum's earlier cited tendency towards "the narrative as such", towards "pure narrative".

The scope of literary features in various forms of such narrative, however, is quite large, of course, ranging from mere report on events to a full-fledged story, in which the expressive means of language play a pronounced role. All this greatly depends on the talent of the narrator. But now we are discussing the types of telling and the tendencies that surface within it, and not individual concrete narratives.

In his many articles mentioned earlier, Sirovátka has convincingly stated that the narrator, when talking about life, can have a creative mastery of the facts, selecting themes and episodes, not of what is historically preeminent, rather of what is interesting, surprising, entertaining; the narrator is attracted by an exciting plot, dramatic situations and tense build-up, which he himself shapes and brings to climax. He shapes the plot by selecting the theme, facts and motifs, and by modifying them. The plot is stabilized through repetition, when the facts change, augment each other and merge differently than they would in real life. The narrator wants to draw listeners, touch or move them, and not merely to inform them.⁵²

The artistic or non-artistic character of telling about life is one of the key criteria when discussing its place in folklore - along with the yardsticks of traditionality and collectivity, which will be discussed later on.

In the opinion of V. Gusev, such narrative is a part of folklore artistic prose, it tells about events "that have been refracted and shaped through narrative imagination, acquiring elements of artistic fancy and image-based expression, effecting the listeners emotively".⁵³ In the textbook *Russkoe narodnoe poètičeskoe tvorčestvo* (Russian Folklore) *skaz* is the type to which belongs "that part of oral narrative prose that provides an artistic generalization of reality".⁵⁴

Unlike this, Jemel'janov, as we said before, negates the artistic character of this type of narrative, and if artistic elements are occasionally manifested, then they are literary, but not folkloristic; for them we should have the "same demands as for every literary work without the slightest leniency with regard to 'folklore-ness'".⁵⁵

Jemel'janov did not expressly negate that telling about life holds place within folklore; he compared it to legends and certain similar oral literary types which, in his view, are not

⁵² Sirovátka 1963: 117-118; also see Sirovátka 1977: 265; Leščák and Sirovátka 1982: 172-173 and 175.

⁵³ Gusev 1967: 129.

⁵⁴ Bogatyřev 1956: 552 (author of this part of the text: S. I. Mine).

⁵⁵ Jemel'janov 1960: 261.

a "genre of artistic reflection", since their artistic character is subordinated to practical needs, has an applied character and is unconscious and secondary.⁵⁶ Unlike Gusev, Jemel'janov does not consider artistic features a characteristic of this folklore type, rather, if such do appear, they contradict it.

Azbeljev went one step further: he concedes that telling about reminiscences from one's own life may, though rarely, be artistic, but it does not belong in folklore since it is not "a fact of social consciousness".⁵⁷

One group of scholars, therefore, sees in the artistic side of telling about life a criterion for its place in folklore as the oral art of speech, while others interpret its possible artistic character as inadequate to that folklore type.

But it is possible, from the characteristics of the genre itself, to consider its artistic nature. Both Jemel'janov and Čistov⁵⁸, each in his own way, speak of legends and similar folklore prose types as primarily practical and informative, with a subordinated aesthetic function. In the broader sphere of these types they also include telling about life (*skaz, ustnyj rasskaz*). In approximately such a nature of narratives which lean more towards information while still virtually poetry - whether legend or telling about life - Sirovátka sees the variety of modalities of their forms and expressions: in one instance they appear as dry reports, while another time they are full stories. He sees no contradiction in this, rather the underlying characteristic of the genre. Therefore one needn't limit the notion of telling about life to those expressions alone which bear in themselves literary quality, just as one needn't see them as mere unrefined information which may through further tradition be polished into crystallized form.⁵⁹

A transition by degree is characteristic for this genre from one way of existing to others, a transition from ongoing conversation to a simple literary form - with which telling about life is tied in with the oral literary genre of the legend, thereby with folklore, oral literature.

6

Telling about life, therefore, grows out of conversation, the transitions are by degree, the possible features of literary expression vary from case to case. But one can not avoid the question: where does the narrative begin? Narrative begins where the report on some event is shaped into a story, where it acquires at least a simple structure, where the narrator attempts to entertain and draw in the listeners; the story rises up out of conversation as a formalized unit, the conversation being its direct context.⁶⁰

An attempt at a more precise definition of the emergence of the story within the framework of conversational situations has been done in one study on the communicative functions of everyday story-telling.⁶¹ Unlike functional talking within the framework of given conversational patterns, when conversants confirm, illustrate or argument an opinion

⁵⁶ Ibid.: 254.

⁵⁷ Azbelev 1964: 164 and 176.

⁵⁸ See section of paper where you find note #40.

⁵⁹ Sirovátka 1977: 270.

⁶⁰ see Lešák and Sirovátka 1982: 172; Stahl 1977(a): 38.

⁶¹ Gülich 1980: 349-356.

expressed in conversation, some forms of talking begin to move away from a conversational functional framework. As an example, a conversation is analysed in which, among other things, there was talk about the police's rough treatment of citizens at the time of an accident, and a young French student, in order to confirm this view, began to tell about a situation that he found himself in during one of his travels (it happened to be in Yugoslavia). But the narrative soon moved away from its functional framework, he departed from the communicative function of confirming an opinion. The narrator now describes his travels, works to form the story, to make it tense, using parallelisms in his linguistic expression, delaying the point. The narrative acquires new functions: presenting one's person, one's image; the factual function of maintaining communicative contact; the entertaining function, the function of play, which is evidenced in the satisfaction of the listeners even though they have already heard the story.

The example given here is not marked by a particular effectiveness, nor was this the intention of the analysis; this is a story from everyday conversation, a kind we are all familiar with - yet analysis with a tape recording of the conversation, along with description of its situation, showed exactly how talk within a functional framework began to break free of it and grew into a story.

Just as the young Frenchman repeatedly related his experience, other narratives about life often are maintained as a lasting part of the fund of their story-tellers. This aspect of telling about life brings it closer to the way that other oral literary prose genres exist.

Neumann was correct in noting that narrators gradually through repetition form their plot, taken originally from real life, into a rounded story, "so that eventually they are more telling a story than telling about the event which is the basis of the story". The same event may change considerably through repeated telling, depending on the memory and mood of the moment, and it is this immediate forming that acts and bonds listeners; it is adequate to the narrative of traditional contents. But skillful narrative of an experience is possible at the very first instance of telling, so it is often impossible to know whether a narrative from memory was formulated at a given moment for the first time, or it has been told by the narrator previously in an identical or similar form. As the sole and basic criterion remains the fact that something was "told".⁶²

Unlike Neumann, S. Stahl, in her description of the personal narrative (telling about life from one's own reminiscence), considers that a single narrative on an event, if it has not become a part of the narrator's regular repertoire with stylistic polishing, can only be treated as a potential part of the genre.⁶³

It is true that individual impressive experiences stand out in telling about life from the course of events and are condensed in episodes that the narrator often repeats, forming and embellishing on them at the same time. But not only are many successful narratives told only once, without future repetition, and not only are we unable to know whether a narrative has been repeated or not, but it would be unnatural for the definition of place in a genre to seek the beginning of a story in its first version - and not in the very act of telling it that separates it from the functional framework of its conversational context and forms it into a story. The tendency to repeat a narrative, the process of stabilizing plot and form, but at the same time

⁶² Neumann 1969: 161-162 (quote on 161).

⁶³ Stahl 1977(a): 38.

the possible improvisations, all reinforce the narrative on life among other traditional oral literary forms, while the circumstance that tradition may be created within the context of a special personal repertoire and that narrative begins to exist as a genre at the very first moment that it is related gives it a specific place among the folklore genres.

7

If telling about life grows out of conversation and if it is necessary for understanding the process of its formalization to consider the way in which it is included in a more lasting, repeatable repertoire of an individual narrator or even several persons from the same circle, then it is very important to get to know the authentic narrative circumstances, and register the text in a documentary way. In modern folklore research considerable attention is accorded to the study of the context of all folklore performance, but in the case of telling about life - which is much more individual, where there is no firm narrative structure handed down from generation to generation, and where individual stories may be captured at the very moment of their generation - such observations are particularly important. And they are as difficult as they are important.

The most successful narratives originate during moments of spontaneous conversation, when the researcher, if he happens to be present, rarely has time to record or get them down on paper, simply because he or she is rarely ready for them, and because any intervention would destroy the narrative. All that remains is to either describe the situation later and jot down the text from memory, or to ask the narrator to repeat his or her story, which can then be recorded or registered faithfully, but it will no longer be authentic. It is possible to set up a "laboratory" situation in a circle of friends and record their ongoing conversation, but even these circumstances are not, of course, authentic, and it is unlikely that they will produce the true, desired forms of narrative.

Neumann pointed to similar difficulties. As to the function of this narrative he pointed to the importance of studying it in individual social groups, "starting with the family, and including the village community, and individuals of various trades", and not merely in the milieu of the narrowly defined "folk person" from an agrarian world, but also among the "workers, employees, artists, academically educated people, secondary school and university students, etc."⁶⁴

Although obstacles for authentic registration have not been overcome in a way that would be entirely satisfactory, the ways of empirically studying telling about life have advanced well beyond their beginnings. The methods are recalled only with horror of collectors who tried to artificially prod a narrator's memory, who interfered in the narrative out of a wish to "help the narrator develop the narrative more fully, to recall certain episodes, to toss out the ballast", and then considerably altered the recording in the end.⁶⁵

One of the possibilities of more or less faithful documentation lies in examining the total repertoire of a single narrator, someone versed in traditional stories, when he inserts narrative about his own life into conversation with a collector. M. Šramková, working for

⁶⁴ Neumann 1969: 164.

⁶⁵ See Azbelev 1964: 135-136, 141, 147 (our quote) and 172-175.

an extended time with a good story-teller who told her legends and other oral prose genres, also recorded what she told of her life (episodes from her childhood and others). The women told these stories spontaneously, without special invitation, repeating some of her favorite ones several times.⁶⁶

Another option is when a researcher is systematically taking part in narrative situations in some narrow circle. I. Gardoš, as mentioned earlier, spent considerable time in a certain Lusatian Sorbian village, where they had taken her in as "one of them", and at various spontaneous events - in the family (at birthday parties, for example), in public places (taverns, parties), and particularly during feather-plucking bees she heard characteristic everyday narratives, including reminiscences from life. Unfortunately, the recordings or notes were taken later, based on her recollection or repeated telling.

The functional importance of living situations in which one narrates cannot be sidestepped in modern research of telling about life. Along with the situations described above, Lehmann points to typical circumstances for such narrative in today's urban environment, the "family gathering in the evening, get-togethers of relatives and friends, home parties of married couples, meetings when members of a society convene and chat over a beer".⁶⁸

8

In determining the notion of oral literature, collective and traditional character are usually brought up as the essential features, though not, of course, in their rigidly defined meaning, rather as an interplay of collective patterns and individual creativity, and as a creative merge of tradition and innovation. In telling about life, to the contrary, reality and the individual nature of the event or experience are in the foreground, as is the individual form of verbal interpretation. Even in such narratives, however, traditional and collective features are manifested, which though distinct from those in the classic genres, can nonetheless be compared to them.

The events and experiences are objective and individual, independent of the future story, but the selection of events that the narrator will use, the way that they are conveyed with words, the way they are accepted and reacted to by the audience, the possible later repetition or further re-telling - this is partly within the personal experiential horizon of the narrator, and partly subject to general views, evaluation, taking of stands. The collective character, according to Sirovátka, in telling about life, is evidenced in a "collective interest for their thought and feeling structure, in identification with an image of the world and in its function in a national group".⁶⁹ S. Stahl considers that performance of stories on personal reminiscences is more traditional than innovative; although it is founded on individual sources, most of such narratives are under the influence of collective models and express traditional views.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ Šramková 1977: 296-297; also see Šramková 1975: 4.

⁶⁷ Gardoš 1972: 45, 48-49, 51-58; Gardoš 1968-1969: 87.

⁶⁸ Lehmann 1978: 200.

⁶⁹ Sirovátka 1975: 665; also see Sirovátka 1961: 473 and 1963: 116.

⁷⁰ Stahl 1977 (b): 17 and 22.

Traditional overtones have been noted not only in general attitude, and theme and episode selection (of which there will be more discussion later on), but also in style and expressive techniques - in composition, character sketches, descriptions, dialogue, comparisons and metaphors, phraseology, and in mimicry and gestures.⁷¹

Tradition, finally, surfaces in the very act of telling an event, in the way it is adopted and then given to others, although the scope of such transmission is limited in comparison to the classical folklore genres.

The phenomenon has been noted that in certain environments several people will tell about the same event, but as Mihaylova observes, these are usually not versions in the specific folklore meaning of the word, rather variations on a theme which are quite distant from one another.⁷²

It was equally noted - and this observation is frequently the basis for judging its status as an oral literary genre - that some narratives are transmitted from mouth to mouth, that they are 'folklorized' by creating a real tradition, with significant deviations from the event and its factual circumstances, with shaping mutually distinct versions, with the interjection of traditional, even fantastic motifs into the story. Examples of such narrative usually relate to recent historical events and personalities, particularly from World War II, recorded among Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian and Slovak soldiers, partisans and populace.⁷³

Occasionally, though much less frequently, there are variations traditional traits in the narratives from private thematic sphere. Such is, for instance, the true story, in an Estonian village, about a quarrelsome woman, which in certain versions acquires a traditional motif from a well known joking tale, while others, much like legends, end with condemnation of her sons.⁷⁴

The possibility of the emergence of various variants, and even the tendency towards them in a portion of the telling about life is markedly manifested, especially in narratives dealing with events and personalities with a historical and social importance, but the value of these narratives does not lie in this fact, nor is it the basic yardstick for specific folklore features of this genre. Most of the telling about life springs from personal experience and that of the family circle or immediate community, so re-telling usually does not enter the mainstream. It is in this functioning that their central features and their specific traditional features are hidden. By entering into tradition of a broader scope along with shaping of variants typical for other genres, telling about life changes its generic features, becoming legend, anecdote and so forth. In this process, of course, there are pronounced transitional forms between the first and second genre.

9

From time to time a concrete event and known motif may be so intertwined that one no longer knows whether the narrative is telling about life or a traditional folk story. Here

⁷¹ See Mihajlova 1966: 157-158; Sirovátká 1961: 473; 1963: 116; 1977: 265.

⁷² Mihajlova 1966: 157; also see Šramková 1975: 3.

⁷³ See Domanovskij 1964: 204, 207-208, 217-228; Kravcov 1971(a): 330-331; Michálek 1971: 109-113; Gašpariková 1977: 396-397 and 430-433 and others.

⁷⁴ Proodel 1969: 149-152.

are two examples to illustrate.

The text of a story "Juriš na maгарca" (A Charge on a Donkey) was included in my collection *Istarske narodne priče* (Istrian Folk Tales), about how Italian fascist soldiers in Marčana opened heavy fire one night on a - donkey, thinking that they were shooting at partisans. Several other similar partisan stories are listed in the footnote. In similar circumstances, in Slovak stories, the Germans captured a goat instead of partisans.⁷⁵

In an anecdote about Sava Kovačević, a hero from the National Liberation Struggle, it says that he came upon a great column of Italian soldiers once while walking alone through the woods, and he chased them all away - by barking loud orders to his non-existent fellow fighters. The Slovaks have quite a similar story, in several versions, about the famous partisan "Miško from Kiev".⁷⁶

It is possible that these narratives spring from true events. Their similarities to known motifs may have come from typical similar real situations that happen in wartime; yet perhaps these narratives come directly from travelling folklore motifs. But even in the first case, if the events were true, the narrative on them is condensed into formalized motifs.

The examples given above also demonstrate how telling about life, when it grows more distant from the concrete event and melts into a series of similar versions, acquires the outlines of other oral literary genres, in this case the anecdote.

A possible transition into anecdote is indicated by the very features of telling about life. Some writers (Bausinger, E. Moser-Rath) classify telling about life, i.e. its major portion as the greater domain of the anecdote and what is known as the *Beispiel* (a genre corresponding to the example). Connecting them to the anecdote is the circumstance that when relating experiences and living situations, they characterize a personality through an individual case (often that of the narrator) or an age, and with the *Beispiel* they are bound by instructiveness, the exemplarity of the described case.⁷⁷ Moser-Rath notes anecdotal overtones in many narratives that one might hear in a circle of family or friends - on experiences from childhood, the things children say, stories from school, exams, things that happen while travelling, in the army, war, etc. In such narratives there is, however, greater factuality than in the travelling anecdotes about famous people.⁷⁸

A second connection, more often mentioned, places telling about life within the greater complex of legends. We pointed earlier to the modalities of existence by degree that both legends and telling about life have in common, evidenced in the range from dry information to fully formed stories. We also mentioned the phenomenon that some narratives on contemporary or recent historical events and personalities may become part of a broader tradition forming various variants, and on the way telling about life may transform into legend.

If telling about life is seen as close in many respects to legend, or even as its specific sub-type, it is important to know what bonds and what distinguishes them. They share, aside from what has already been mentioned, an orientation towards truthfulness, towards veracity - which in both genres is the starting point for both narrators and listeners (regardless of the objective truthfulness of the narrated substance).

⁷⁵ Bošković-Stulli 1959, text no. 85 and note on pp. 188-189; Michálek 1971: 186, text no. 76.

⁷⁶ Orahovac 1970: 65; Gašpariková 1977: 430-433, texts no. 49, a-f.

⁷⁷ Bausinger 1980: 222-223.

⁷⁸ Moser-Rath 1975, column 537-538.

If we turn to mythical legends, those that are often called memorates, and speak of contacts and experiences with supernatural beings, told in the first person as if they are, in fact, true personal experience, we will find that they have in common with telling about life the form of first person narration, they share the personal character of the experience and the demand that listeners believe in its truthfulness. But while legend about supernatural experiences, as Michálek notes, move from certain general assumptions to a concrete event, telling about life go from a real event to generalization.

Historical legends touch on events from the distant past, while telling about life touches on the present or recent past. Telling about life speaks of the narrator, his or her family or immediate environment, and from their individual and subjective experiences and fates one can acquire an image of human relations and greater social phenomena. Historical legends, to the contrary, are superindividual in their themes and they are preoccupied with social events. There has been frequent discussion of all these differences and similarities between legend and telling about life.⁷⁹

No matter how similar telling about life may be in many respects to legends, I still contend that it would not be wise to consider them a genre that is part of legends (especially if we take legends as an oral literary genre and not as a cluster of genres). On the one hand, the notion of legends would be extended greatly by such an inclusion, and it would be quite watered down due to the unquestionable differences between them. On the other hand, telling about life has quite a bit in common with other genres as well. We have already discussed such ties with anecdotes and exemplars.

I. Dobos noted common features with traditional tales. She compared them, for example, in choice of hero. Just as the suppressed heroes, stripped of their rights are triumphant in the end in tales, in male narratives about life the humbled servant takes revenge on his tyrannical master. In female tales the favorite characters are innocent victims and suffering mothers or queens, while in narratives about life women have similar fates. The heroes, of course, are the narrators (male and female) themselves.⁸⁰

S. Stahl analyzes the personal story in the context of other genres and forms of storytelling (the memorate, true story, legend, anecdote, hero tale, tall tale, joke, family story, local history, rumor, gossip, conversation and reminiscences) and she establishes their significant interaction with all these forms, but also the sufficient specialness which shows that the "personal narrative is a clearly separable, autonomous genre with its own defining features and its own place in the conventional system of oral narrative genres".⁸¹ I am not completely sure that personal narrative is quite this autonomous in terms of other forms of narrative about life (in the scope it is given in this article) and I'd prefer to include them among these narratives, but no matter whether we separate the personal narratives or include them among the other narratives about life, we are certainly dealing with the independent category in comparison to traditional forms of oral prose.

⁷⁹ See Sirovátka 1963: 115-116; 1975: 665; 1977: 268-269; Šramková 1977: 297; Michálek 1971: 126; Kravcov 1971(a): 135-136.

⁸⁰ Dobos 1978: 198-199.

⁸¹ Stahl 1977 (a): 39.

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Telling about life is different in many respects from the other folklore genres, and yet it is connected to them by the essential features of oral literature. Propp tends to include it in folklore, but nonetheless avoids a decisive statement. He notes that, strictly speaking, these narratives lack certain features of folklore, i.e. "general folk, broadly distributed versions" and thus concludes rather cautiously: "Whether these stories belong to folklore in the specific meaning of the word or not, the folklore researcher must study them".⁸² After Propp's text (first published in 1964), modern research into telling about life and modern concepts on the notion of folklore and oral literature have made so much progress that such a cautious approach has become unnecessary.

As we have already said, the broad distribution of versions and traditions in the customary meaning are replaced in this genre with the duration of individual stories in the oral repertoire of individual narrators, and with adoption of its parts in the briefer tradition of members of the immediate environment. This simultaneously signifies two basic modes for the existence of telling about life in regards to tradition: a) personal repertoire (single or repeated narration), and b) narration taken from someone else (acquaintance-peer or close relatives: parents or grandparents). In terms of content, narratives about personal, subjective experiences are different from those about objective events where the narrator was a witness; these may be current news or reminiscence of relatively recent events.⁸³

In telling about life, one can find analogy not only to traditional transmission, but also to traditional plots and motifs: these are its typified thematic circles. Although they are based on a concrete event, on fact, such narratives do not include everything that happens in life, rather they cluster around certain thematic focal points, ones which are important to the narrators and interesting to the listeners, ones which have their function in the life of the community. Sirovátka grouped the basic thematic cycles as follows: "Childhood and young adulthood, travel and the foreign world, local tragic and unusual events (death, murder, accident, theft, natural catastrophe, etc.) the work environment, life and events from the past, joyful events from local life, important personalities, "*oridinali*" (eccentrics) with particular physical and mental properties, etc."⁸⁴ He pointed to the interconnection of themes and narrative groups, to the favorite motifs of the army and war among men, and of love and marriage among women. Bausinger points to a central theme that clusters around working and family reminiscences, stories about sickness, travel, war or the army.⁸⁵ W. Woeller connects the thematic cycles with functions in the community, showing narrative on sickness, narrative with the phrase "and can you still recall" during meetings of family, friends, neighbors, students, when past recollections are brought to life; she made special analysis of narrative in the family circle and about travel.⁸⁶

⁸² Propp 1976: 52 (article: *Žanrovij sostav russkogo fol'klora*).

⁸³ On modes of existence with regards to the extent to which it entered the mainstream of tradition, we spoke in relation to terms (see article section with notes # 27, 28 and 29); also see Jech, 1956: 202. Sirovátka has dealt with these questions in more depth - 1975: 666-667; 1977: 271-272; Leščák and Sirovátka 1982: 173-174.

⁸⁴ Sirovátka 1977: 271-272; also see Leščák and Sirovátka 1982: 173.

⁸⁵ Bausinger 1975, column 327.

⁸⁶ Woeller 1968-1969.

The material from empirical research into telling about life has made this synthetic overview of the subject possible, for example in Hungarian, Lusatian Serbian and Estonian communities where thematic cycles are described in detail.⁸⁷ Certain researchers have considered individual thematic points and found more narrow clusters as constant motifs for the narrative, such as telling about family life⁸⁸, about work⁸⁹, about war, occupation and the war for liberation⁹⁰ and others.

11

We have tried to shed light on telling about life as an elementary and oral literary form, but such narratives also provide a picture of history, they comprise what is called oral history, history from the mouth of the people. "This experience of individuals and of many people are parts of 'great history', which without these details from below would remain nothing but a bare skeleton".⁹¹ There are entire books with oral autobiographies of little people, such as the life story of working woman Karolina Štiková.⁹²

Written forms of autobiographical reminiscences and testimony about events join with telling about life. The comparison of the mutual similarities and differences of written and oral telling about life could be the subject of a separate study.⁹³

Oral telling about life, growing out of conversation, a spontaneous yet formalized performance, is different from the oral narrative we listen to over the radio and television: individuals bring forth their memories of deceased personalities, of important and moving events, or they talk about their life. These are usually answers to given themes. Beneš has happily designated such narrative as "another existence of folk narrative, which is torn from its original narrative environment".⁹⁴ The scope of such narratives ranges from rigid standardized reporting in the style of daily political phraseology, to living picturesque narratives when the narrator speaks as if he or she has forgotten the mass medium that his speech is directed towards. Such narratives certainly belong to the broader domain of telling about life, but they should not be identified with forms of telling that go on in a natural milieu.

Telling about life in its natural milieu, in its own little group, with its characteristic properties - subjectivity and personal character, brief duration, with an orientation towards expressing a segment of real life, though without real, objective documentary quality, with a possible germ of fiction, with elements of literary structure, with a certain analogy, though not complete equality to tradition and the motifs of "classic" oral literature genres - such telling about life comprises an independent category of contemporary oral literary prose. This article is an attempt at describing it.

⁸⁷ Dobos 1978; Gardoš 1968-1969 and 1972; Proodel 1969.

⁸⁸ Dobos 1978: 180-182; Woeller 1968-1969: 309-311; Horn 1983: 825-826; Lehmann 1983.

⁸⁹ Neumann 1966.

⁹⁰ Domanovskij 1964; Michálek 1971; Šramková 1975; Gašpariková 1977.

⁹¹ Schenda 1981: 87.

⁹² Spilka 1964; also see the book Brednich and Lixfeld (editors) 1982. (Unfortunately it arrived when this article had already been completed).

⁹³ See Šramková 1975: 12-13; Röhrich 1976, columns 1081-1082; Münchow 1979; Griepentrog 1980; Schenda 1981; Schenda and Böckli 1982. See further references in the above works.

⁹⁴ Beneš 1973: 110.

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