

Individual Memories on the Background of Historical Events in Astrid Lindgren's *War Diaries*

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Abstract Autobiographical diaries, as the representation of the memory culture, record the individual emotional experiences and thoughts of the authors and thereby contribute to the preservation of individual memories. They reflect the social and cultural contexts in which they were created while providing access to individual perspectives and experiences and can become part of the collective memory culture. Testimonies of World War II have survived to the present day not only in the form of documents and chronicles but also through the many autobiographical diaries of that time. The aim of the research presented here was to analyze the role and the function of individual memories on the background of World War II in the diaries of Swedish writer Astrid Lindgren, in order to form, maintain and reconstruct memories of the World War II period. Textual analysis, analysis of historical context and the hermeneutics approach have been applied in doing the research. The theoretical basis of the research lies in the concepts of cultural memory, time and existence, autobiographical memory and subjectivity, as well as life stories and self-expression.

Keywords memory; diaries; life writing; an individual.

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Introduction

Life writing, such as diaries and personal narratives, serves as an essential reservoir of cultural memory, capturing individual perspectives and experiences that offer personal insight into historical events. World War II diaries are particularly relevant in this context, as they not only document the harsh realities of war but also preserve the personal reflections, emotions and struggles of those who lived through it. These writings transform individual memories into durable records that help us understand the past.

The war diaries of Swedish writer Astrid Lindgren reflect the experiences, emotions and opinions of the people during the war. The availability or inaccessibility of information not to mention disinformation, affects how the people perceive the war. Fear, hope, and survival reflect human war perception through the prism of the woman's vision. Fear, survival, and spiritual resistance depict people's emotions, and experiences and strive for spiritual values. Nature is as the reflection background of human emotions: the sun and the warmth reflect positive human emotions. An individual has been researched on the background of the World War II.

Diaries as a Literary Genre of Life Writing

Diaries are also known as memoirs and life writing. They describe various ideas in the moment so as not to lose them. Writing diaries sometimes becomes second nature to the writer. Diaries might be used to describe how life changes or to describe just-noticed details. They are individual reminiscences.

Life writing texts can act as sources for cultural memory. Patricia Smart suggests that life writing as a literary genre began at the moment when the concept of the individual appeared in Western culture (Patricia Smart, *Writing Herself into Being: Quebec Women's Autobiographical Writings from Marie de l'Incarnation to Nelly Arcan* 193).

Life writing is an ancient and common practice. Autobiographies and diaries have been widespread since the 18th century. Margaretta Jolly emphasizes that in the 20th century life writing required a new explanation. As the capitalism brought individualism to the fore and globalization led to new ways of communication, life-writing texts started focusing more on the anxieties of the age (Margaretta Jolly, *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* 1). Today, a wide variety of scientific fields explore life writing in order to investigate the reflection of life in the text. There is a strong and clear link between life writing and history. People are more likely to write diaries during crucial points of their lives and important historical events.

One common feature of diaries is the attempt to record experiences in time. The concept of time underpins the writing of a diary. Paul Ricoeur points out that time, as experienced by people exists as complex structures understood through language. Language structures narrative, which in turn structures time. Time and narrative are thus inseparable (Hayden White, *Ricoeur's Philosophy of History. The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* 169-184). People often start writing diaries when something extraordinary happens in their lives or in the world, marking a transition from a previously well-arranged social situation with clear social norms and a new, extraordinary situation. According to Jacek Leociak, war time diaries certainly fit into that category, but their writers had additional goals: to bear witness, to sound the alarm to the world, to set down the basis for future revenge, or to leave traces of their existence (Jacek Leociak, *Why Did They Write? Text in the Face of Destruction: Accounts from the Warsaw Ghetto Reconsidered* 77-104). Alexandra Garbarini points out that diary writers employ various literary models, including fiction, confession, lamentation, journalism, jurisprudence and correspondence (Alexandra Garbarini, *Numbered Days: Diaries and the Holocaust* 11-12).

Two main types of diaries can be distinguished: chronicles and personal diaries. Chronicles recorded daily external events—such as essential statistics, issues relating to daily duties, etc.—and exclude personal topics. Personal, or intimate, diaries include details of the writer's private life as well as events relating to historical or the wider community. Lindgren's diaries belong to the second group.

In the 1980s, James Young applied a critical approach to analyze diaries not as documents containing objective facts but rather as reflections of the writers' subjective perceptions of the world and their experiences, mediated by language, culture, religion, political views and even the tropes and structures of the narrative style applied (James Young, *On Reading Holocaust Diaries and Memoir Writing and rewriting the Holocaust, Narrative and the Consequences of Interpretation* 15-39)

According to Philippe Lejeune, the author acts as a witness: their point of view is individual, but the object of their topic goes far beyond the individual; it is the story of the social and historical groups to which they belong (Philippe Lejeune, *On Diary* 63). Gender also influences life writing style, as Ruth Hoberman points out:

Drawing upon psychoanalytic theories of women's development, feminist critics have shown how women often have a far more rational sense of selfhood, in which their identity is felt to be intertwined with that of others: mothers, friends, lovers or children. Similarly, women's identity may be experienced collectively,

concerning a whole community (Helena Grice, *Gender and Life Writing: Encyclopedia of Life Writing* 359).

The issue of identity is also essential in life writing. It is a topic that runs through all life, including its most crucial moments. Writing a diary is a self-referential experience in which the writers try to find answers to questions about the essence of their identity.

Memories in Literature

Latvian Literary theorist Guntis Berelis notes that literature represents, in its own way, self-awareness of history. He emphasizes that literature also recognizes the present, or at least attempts to do so (Guntis Berelis *Latvijas literatūras vēsture* 204).

The issue of the reliability of memory is always topical. Agatha Christie wrote in the preface to her autobiography that it cannot be fully relied upon, as people remember only what they want to remember (Agatha, Christie *Autobiography* x). Life writing relies on historical, cultural and personal memory. Memory gathers, preserves and compiles a lot of autobiographical narratives. It cures pains and heals losses. It restores the eternal continuity of life. Time passes by, but memories are timeless and permanent. Vladimir Nabokov, in his work *Speak, Memory*, refers to the power of memory and “the masterly use it makes of innate harmonies when gathering to its fold the suspended and wandering tonalities of the past” (Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited* 286).

All forms of life writing are dependent on memory. Life writing texts are unthinkable without experience and encouragement of personal memory. Pain, difficulties, and disobedience—characterize the Western autobiographical tradition. Jean-Jacques Rousseau notes that there is a disparity between the author’s formal line on memory and the real process the reader may see in his works. He claims that the essential issue in life writing texts—the selectivity of memory—is not a problem for him because anything he forgets is unimportant. He credits memory with a positive editorial role that keeps what is crucial and discards the rest (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions* 67). One of the advantages of life writing is its ability to make the reader privy to the writer’s relationship with his/her memory.

Different types of community—families, nations—construct their identities through cultural memories, manifested through artifacts, monuments, traditions, documents, and so on. Every story belongs to its place and time. The development of cross-cultural links between life writing, history, anthropology, psychology, and many other disciplines has led to the greater inclusion of documentary material into

the life writing quest. Memory nevertheless retains its central place in life writing. The diversification of memory forms has generated new possibilities for researching the individual and communal past.

Creation of *War Diaries* by Astrid Lindgren

Astrid Lindgren has written 34 books and 41 picture books. Her books have been translated into more than 100 languages and more than 170 million copies have been sold all over the world. Using a language style that is easily understandable to children, she covers topics such as a loving upbringing without violence, children's rights, and humanism. *Pippi Longstocking*, *The Brothers Lionheart* and *Ronja, The Robber's Daughter* are among her most outstanding publications. Between 1944 and 2003, Lindgren was awarded 76 literary prizes, including the Right Livelihood Award, sometimes called the “alternative Nobel Prize.”

As academics such as Edström and Metcalf describe, Astrid Lindgren's work broadened awareness in both the academic community and the general public of the opportunities offered by children's literature (Vivi Edström, *Astrid Lindgren: A Critical Study*; Eva-Maria Metcalf, *Astrid Lindgren*).

Before the world knew Astrid Lindgren as a writer of outstanding books, she was living in Stockholm with her family and making her first steps into the world of writing. When World War II broke out, Lindgren wrote diaries in which she recorded the horrors of the war. These diaries reveal the daily experiences and emotions of an ordinary Stockholm resident who was both a young writer and mother.

The book reflects Lindgren's perceptive, serious and wise vision. The motto of the book is that “Our poor planet in the grip of this madness!” (Astrid Lindgren, *War Diaries*, 15). As the title indicates, the book is about the war. From the point of view of a modern reader, it highlights how nothing has changed in politics and human thinking and deeds since the wars of the mid-20th century. Lindgren's diaries are both emotional and precise reflections of life during the war period and represents the sequence of historical events very precisely.

Although the topic is deeply tragic, Lindgren's narrative style is not depressing—rather, it vividly expresses the optimistic and bright personality of the future professional writer. Lindgren's characteristic sense of irony can already be found in the diary:

In England, Churchill has announced that intelligence has reached them about German intentions to use gas on the eastern front. Churchill is preparing the Germans for the fact that if this is true, gas will immediately be released over

German port cities and war-related industrial sites. This is going to be a lovely spring and no mistake (Astrid Lindgren, *War Diaries* 135).

She demonstrates an amazing clairvoyance about the Baltic states: “Russia’s making a whole series of demands in the Baltic states—and getting what it wants” (Astrid Lindgren, *War Diaries* 20). She also describes the cruelty of Russians in the Baltic States:

From time to time we get appalling reports of Russian rampages in the Baltic during the year they were in control there. Eighty thousand people were sent to Siberia and God knows where. Had a letter from Riga today, smuggled here. The writer said we presumably wouldn’t believe the accounts from there—but he swore they were true. Even women and children were shoved into cattle trucks and carried off; children were separated from their mothers, husbands, and wives from each other, and so on (Astrid Lindgren, *War Diaries* 131).

She also foresees the future occupation of small countries by the Soviet Union. Lindgren criticizes war and violence and observes world events carefully. Events in her private life are intertwined with public ones: the diaries describe everything from her horror at the deportation of 1,000 Norwegian Jews to Poland to her heartbreak after a crisis in her marriage. Descriptions of the war are followed by descriptions of daily life and family events: moving to better place of residence, visiting relatives, celebrating Christmas and birthdays, and going to the countryside. Her role as a mother, caring for her children, is intertwined with her despair about the disaster of war in the world. She was a humanist though and through, and presents her opinions with courage, love and humor. She documents the events of the war with the help of newspaper articles and letters.

In 1940, Lindgren started a new job as an employee of the Swedish Mail Censorship Office. She had to read German letters for the Swedish Intelligence service, which gave her a deeper insight into the war which is reflected in her diary. Although it was forbidden to do so, she copied a few letters to go in her diary. During this terrible period she was also starting to write her book about Pippi Longstocking, one of the most widely translated children's books of the twentieth century.

An Individual on the Background of Historical Events in Astrid Lindgren's *War Diaries*

The individual is a central component of any world model. The most essential principles in the conception of the individual are personality harmony, integrity or contradictoriness, and disintegrity. Different conceptions of an individual have

been topical at different periods. Modern literature offers up a variety of such conceptions of the individual, and the depiction of an individual's personality becomes more complex in it. In literature, as its history testifies, a human has been described in a close context with the world around him/her. The external, practical deeds of individuals provide their material existence, but the internal - their mental awareness. In realism literature, the postulates of historicism and determinism form the basis of an individual's conception. An individual is a part of history's flow, he/she depends on political, social, and economic reality. Protagonists tend to be like real-life individuals. Bringing to the fore of daily life deeds and typification of reality characterize realism literature.

Lindgren starts writing the diary on the first day of the war. She and other people cannot believe it is happening. People hate and curse Hitler. Many people consider the war as "the fall of the white race and of civilization" (Astrid Lindgren, *War Diaries 1939-1945* 16). She praises British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain's attempts to prevent war up to the last possible moment. She expresses her terror that 1,500 people have been killed during the first two days of the war. Tragic information is received almost every day. The Germans sink a British passenger steamer with 1,400 people on board; 128 of them die. The first bomb is dropped on Denmark. All Swedish ships are looted and sunk. When Germany invades and occupies Poland, it causes her deep sorrow. She expresses her strong hatred for Hitler: "It's a shame nobody's shot Hitler" (Astrid Lindgren, *War Diaries* 20).

Social and emotional problems emerge immediately. People start stockpiling food and other necessary goods. But people also become more communicative—particularly about war. Public transport is limited and it is forbidden to use cars, so the streets are empty. The female point-of-view is evident—she comments that it is not possible to buy white cotton thread for mending clothes anywhere. The unemployment rate rises. They go to a restaurant for dinner but there are few people there; the empty restaurant feels uncomfortable.

She describes severe emotional problems—she experiences depression and every day she is gloomy about everything and everybody. As she notes, people all over the world desire peace, but the violent events continue. Sometimes she does not even want to live: "Eli, Eli, lemi sabachtani! Who'd want to live in this world! Today the Russians bombarded Helsinki and several other places in Finland" (Astrid Lindgren, *War Diaries* 23). She is very emotional and cries a lot when she hears that the men will be mobilized.

She describes the wartime policies of various countries. The English drop

leaflets instead of bombs from their airplanes, stating that their fight is with fascism, not with the German people. She writes about allies' opinions—the English hope that a revolution will take place in Germany, since Hitler also terrorizes his opponents in Germany. She notes the paradox that Chamberlain addresses the German nation but it is forbidden for them to listen.

She expresses happiness that the Polish fight, that they do not give in to Germany. Lindgren's language is emotional, she adopts a conversational style, sometimes using jargon. The leaders of Nordic countries visit King Gustav V of Sweden. People have high hopes of this visit and it is supported by sunny weather. But paradoxes are frequent; it is spring but people are killing each other.

Lindgren hears various rumors, but she deals with them critically. She trusts information from the newspapers. She listens to a lot of lies. Lindgren links positive emotions with nature and sunshine. The morning is beautiful and England and France declare war on Germany. Social activities continue. Her friend comes to visit and wants to talk about something but cannot; instead they drink cognac. It does not help much. But despite everything, life continues: Princess Juliana is expecting her third child. Lindgren's family celebrate Christmas, their daughter's birthday and Mother's day. They have enough good food and their daughter receives birthday presents. They start becoming accustomed to war: "Today it's been a year since the beginning of war. We're starting to get used to it. At least those of us who live in a place where it isn't exactly raining bombs all the time" (Astrid Lindgren, *War Diaries*, 23). She describes historical celebrities and events are described, for example, Chamberlain's speech to Parliament.

Conclusion

Lindgren's diaries demonstrate a clear identification between protagonist, author, and narrator. She often speaks of herself indirectly through her different roles: as a mother, wife, daughter or resident of Stockholm. She describes having to subordinate her own needs and desires for others. Lindgren's war diaries represent a valuable piece of contemporary history and offer a perspective on the Second World War that is unusual for Scandinavia. Astrid Lindgren's wartime diaries mainly focus on the war and its impact on her and her family. She praises the qualities of courage, hope, love and resistance. The diaries show that her preoccupation with these qualities was already in evidence long before she achieved fame after the war.

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