

## L'Homme extra

### **Telling Women's Lives: Ideology and Practice\***

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The aptness of oral history for the study of women's lives has long been recognised. Making women 'visible', studying their experience, giving voice, empowering, consciousness-raising, collaboration, etc. have been among the goals of scores of feminist projects. Furthermore, feminist research has contributed to recent reassessments of the potential of oral history and to redefinitions of its research agenda. Its position on the borders of established academic fields and the attempt to step beyond disciplinary boundaries and methodological conventions are to be highlighted in this respect. No less important is the guiding principle of avoiding the separation of 'the personal' and 'the socio-cultural'. The project from which this study stems was not initially conceived as a feminist one. It was rather an attempt at 'rescuing' ways of thinking and acting that had looked only natural, but were beginning to disappear by the early 1990s, in the period of rapid and profound changes in Eastern Europe. An archivist impulse rather than a specific research objective started the initiative to collect the life stories of elderly persons from various milieus in Bulgaria. From its onset, the project has dealt with sources that were both 'oral' and 'biographical' but their potential for the study of women's lives has become evident only gradually. First, I shall briefly describe the archive of life stories collected since the mid-1990s at the *Department for History and Theory of Culture, University of Sofia* focussing on women's narratives. Then I will examine more closely two women's stories included in a published volume of

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26 narrative interviews.<sup>1</sup> I will pay special attention to how the narrators edited the transcripts of their own stories for publication, and will hypothesize reasons for this type of editing. Far from attempting any definite answers, I hope to at least raise some relevant questions. On the one hand, these are questions about the ways in which life stories are guided by the 'rules of genre', that is by ideas of what constitutes a good story. On the other hand, I think that the examples offer an opportunity to ask questions about the relationship between ideology (normative ideas of 'womanness', notions of what is normal or appropriate for a woman) and practice (actual life strategies) in women's lives.

## I

My observations are based upon the life stories of about two hundred Bulgarian women and men most of whom were born in the 1920s and 1930s. The stories were elicited in the course of open biographical interviews lasting from one to three hours. The narrators were free to tell their stories the way they chose, with minimum control by the interviewer. No specific group or social category was targeted. Participation depended solely on the consent of the interviewees to have their life stories recorded. Thus, our conversation partners were persons whose lives were exceptional in no other way but that in which every individual life can be regarded as exceptional. Unique as they are, our interviewees' life narratives seem to share some characteristics related to structure, style and language. They also are gendered in ways that have been noticed by many researchers in attempts to show how 'masculine' and 'feminine' appear as constructions produced through style and language.<sup>2</sup> I am aware of the risks of essentialisation and glossing over varieties of women's experience inherent to an overestimation of gender differences. My brief observations on the rhetorical construction of femininity and masculinity in life stories aim only at sketching out a pattern that is going to be relativised in the second part of this paper.

Most stories tend to be structured around one main topic – work. Women, however, usually add family as another main topic. Men (except the oldest rural residents) understand work as their occupation. In most cases, so do women – particularly educated professional women. However, women's stories give an idea of the necessity (and difficulty) to combine different types of work: occupation, housework, caring for children and old

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1 Daniela Koleva, Rayna Gavriloova and Vanya Elenkova eds., *Slantseto na zalez pak sreshtu men. Zhiteiski razkazi* [The Setting Sun in Front of Me Again. Life Stories], Sofia 1999.

2 Cf. Personal Narratives Group ed., *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives*, Bloomington, IN 1989; Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai eds., *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, New York/London 1991; Selma Leydesdorff, Luisa Passerini and Paul Thompson eds., *Gender and Memory. International Yearbook of Oral History and Life Stories*, 4 (1996).

parents. Therefore family, children and home are the topics conspicuously present in women's stories, while marginal or totally absent from those of men. Female interviewees told about their experiences as working mothers having to place their children in kindergartens or leave them with their retired parents. Therefore, work is often represented in their stories as a necessity, even a burden, rather than a way of self-fulfilment. This is probably one of the reasons why the female narrators – especially the older and less educated among them – often appear passive and depending on others' choices and decisions.

Whatever their way of presenting their work life, women tend to reflect more on their attitudes, on interpersonal relations at the workplace, etc. rather than emphasize their own achievements. For example, a male anesthesiologist told in detail six cases from his practice, all successfully treated by himself, specifying the diagnoses, the therapies he had chosen, etc. A female anesthesiologist referred rather to the responsibility associated with her work: "And we work on serious cases. Dead people, dying people, anesthesia, special cases ... You can't look away for a second. You can't afford not to be in shape. You can't afford not to do your best ..." and to how she felt about it: "Actually it is terrible, terrible ... Most women dress up, put on some perfume, and they go somewhere and they talk about interesting and pleasant things ... And I go to the smell, the stench, the suffering. To everything you wouldn't enjoy seeing and experiencing and neither do I."<sup>3</sup>

The differences in these accounts can certainly stem (partly at least) from specific personality traits of the narrators or from the interview situations but they are quite coherent with the tendencies in other work narratives. As narrators, the interviewed women seem more often to engage in sharing their experience,<sup>4</sup> the men in documenting it. This may be due to the fact that most interviewers were women. Another explanation is offered by psychologists: it has been noticed that women generally provide more elaborate and emotionally evaluative narratives of their past than men do, which can be accounted for by gendered socialization based on the assumption that, at least in European cultures, reminiscing is valued more for women than men, and emotionality befits women rather than men.<sup>5</sup>

Some differences in the style and the structure of the stories can be observed as well. Women's time references seem to be more often anchored in the chronology of the family ("after my daughter was born", "we still lived in the old house", "when my husband

3 Krassimira Daskalova ed., *Voices of Their Own: Oral History Interviews of Women*, Sofia 2004, 36f.

4 Cf. Kristina Minister, *A Feminist Frame for the Oral History Interview*, in: Gluck/Patai, *Words*, see note 2, 30; cf. also: Richard Ely and Allyssa McCabe, *Gender Differences in Memories for Speech*, in: Leydesdorff/Passerini/Thompson, *Gender*, see note 2, 28.

5 Cf. Robin Fivush and Elaine Reese, *Reminiscing and Relating: The Development of Parent-Child Talk About the Past*, in: Jeffrey Dean Webster and Barbara K. Haight eds., *Critical Advances in Reminiscence Work. From Theory to Application*, New York 2002, 114–117.

fell ill”), while men tend to borrow their time markers from the ‘larger history’, for example “after the setting up of the collective”, “during the *Perestroika*”, or: “I was born before 9<sup>th</sup> of September 1944”.<sup>6</sup> The interviewed women born in the 1920s and 1930s and predominantly socialised in patriarchal families, seem more often to abide in “family time”, men in “industrial time” (to use the title of Tamara Hareven’s celebrated book<sup>7</sup>).

It is obvious that in telling their life stories the interviewees unconsciously resort to a pool of models provided by their culture and readily available to them. Some of those models pertain to the mode of telling, to the ‘rules of genre’; that is, they pertain to the ideas of what a story – and a life story in particular – is expected to be like. Others refer rather to ideas of what a *life* is expected to be like. No doubt the latter relate to gender in a number of significant ways. As for the former, it is not hard to suggest that gendered narratives would stem from gendered lives. However, I would like to be cautious in suggesting that:

1) Gender is not the only defining axis of a life – education, residence and other factors can be no less important. However, gender boundaries seem to be less permeable than those set by age, education or social group. That is why gender tends to be naturalised most often;

2) life stories reflect certain institutional structures and conditionings related to gender (not gender per se). For instance, some of the older interviewees have experienced gender segregation at school in terms of both curricula and organisation of classes, which was no longer the case from the 1940s on. Consequently, gender differences will certainly be less significant in the stories of younger individuals;

3) the features of women’s narratives noted above are not to be found in each and every woman’s story, and some may occur in men’s narratives as well.

Therefore, it is clear that gender identity is not something innate; it is produced through a myriad of relations, including narrative practices. To put it in Luisa Passerini’s words:

Far from being a causal determinant, [gender] acts as a pole of reference along a continuum, where male and female stereotypes can be chosen and combined. The choice is influenced by personal experience and imagination, collective pressures, social conventions and values, past and present interests and desires’.<sup>8</sup>

It is the “social conventions and values” that I would like to tackle here and their impact on the ways in which individuals (women in particular) view their own lives. Therefore

6 The date of the communist *coup d’etat* in Bulgaria.

7 Tamara Hareven, *Family Time and Industrial Time. The relationship between the family and work in a New England industrial community*, Cambridge, MA 1982.

8 Luisa Passerini, *Women’s Personal Narratives: Myths, Experiences, and Emotions*, in: *Personal Narratives Group, Interpreting*, see note 2, 197.

these sketchy observations on gendered narratives do not aim at claiming an essentialist narrative femininity, but rather at setting the stage for the two stories that follow.

## II

Mrs. Petrova<sup>9</sup> was born in 1940 into a family of well-to-do peasants who joined the collective rather late, after long hesitations and considerable pressure: “They used to shout ‘*Koulaks!*’<sup>10</sup> in front of our gate.” When she was thirteen, her mother fell ill with heart disease and was virtually confined to bed for the next seven years till her death. But “the worst” was that the interviewee received negative references<sup>11</sup> as a *Koulak*’s daughter and could not go to high school. Meanwhile the family impoverished as a result of giving their property to the collective and due to increasing medical expenses for her chronically ill mother. “It was clear already that we could hardly make ends meet: my mother didn’t work, my father often visited her in the hospital when she stayed there.” After a “hard struggle” the interviewee managed to enrol in a pharmaceutical professional school in the capital. She received a grant for her excellent performance there, and was thus able to support herself: “I never asked my parents for money because I knew they didn’t have any.” After graduation she was sent to work far from her native village. Her dream, however, was to go to the university: “When I finished school, I gave my last money for a lottery ticket, and I very much hoped to win some money from the lottery to go on with my education.” Having spent a couple of years at work, she won for herself the reputation of a conscientious worker and active member of the Young Communists’ League.<sup>12</sup> Thus she was able to obtain good references from her place of work and, though already having a family of her own, enrolled at the university as a part-time student “with my child and with my work”. At this point the story practically ended. The following thirty years were compressed in a six or seven minute talk prompted by

9 Her life story was published in: Koleva/Gavrilova/Elenkova, *Slantseto*, see note 1, 224–233.

10 *Koulak* – pejorative term for well-to-do agriculturalists stigmatised as representatives of the rural bourgeoisie and therefore class enemies by definition. The word was adopted in late 1940s from the early Soviet political vocabulary (original meanings in Russian: “fist”, “tight-fisted”). Formally, the category of *Koulaks* comprised farmers who used hired labour (which in most cases happened for harvesting only) but the word was also used by the propaganda to brand all those who were reluctant to join the newly established collectives.

11 A letter of reference from the local authorities was an indispensable part of any application for high school or university. The interviewees often refer to it as ‘certificate of trustworthiness’ because it had to testify that the applicants and their parents supported the new communist authorities or at least that none of them was an ‘enemy of the people’.

12 *Komsomol* – mass youth organization affiliated with the communist party. Membership in it was practically mandatory at that time.

my questions. Then Mrs. Petrova returned to her main theme and ended the conversation with the words:

Going back [to my past], I can say there were many moments when I was satisfied with my work. But there were also moments when I was not because I had thought of full-time study, of [studying] medicine ... But while working, it [the work] used to absorb me. While communicating with people, when I saw that they trusted me, when they came to ask for advice and I managed to help – I used to feel good.

Mrs. Gatova<sup>13</sup> was born in 1933 and to this day lives in the village of her birth. My colleague Vanya Elenkova who interviewed her started the conversation by asking her to introduce herself. Immediately the question followed: “How? According to the papers or as they know me in the village?” She was known by her maiden name and not, as usually the case, by her husband’s. During a fortnight’s stay in her village in the summer of 1998, we became aware that she was known and held in high esteem by everybody, including the men. Work and children were the two main themes of her story. “I like work very much, you understand, I don’t get bored by it; I can dig all day long, all day, but stay in bed [all day] – that I can’t do.” She had married in 1951 and because of a miscarriage could not have children for more than ten years. After long hesitation, the family decided to adopt a child. The comments of kin and neighbours were far from encouraging: “My father-in-law, God bless him, said nothing [against it]. But my sisters-in-law<sup>14</sup> were angry because my brother-in-law wanted us to adopt a daughter of his.” The family moved in with her parents as soon as that became possible. Their days were filled with hard work at the collective farm and at home:

We get up at four in the morning, look after the cattle at home, we go [to the farm], settle everything [there], at ten we are back home, we cook a lunch, have lunch and go back to the farm; evenings are spent at home. Year in, year out, that was the routine. And we’ve managed to achieve a lot of things.

In 1963 she gave birth to a child and again became the object of gossip:

And then the people – curiosity, you know – said: ‘What will happen? She now has a child of her own and will send the other one away ...’ Look at how stupid people are! And everybody thought: What will happen? What is to happen?! It just happened the way it should, the only way that’s normal for me – I brought up both of them.

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<sup>13</sup> Her story was published in: Koleva/Gavrilova/Elenkova, *Slantseto*, see note 1, 53–62.

<sup>14</sup> Husband’s sister and husband’s brother’s wife.

Being an activist and member of the board of the collective, she often came home late at night, to which her husband never objected. At the age of sixty-five she received one of the largest pensions in the village, went on working at the farm, and took part in the women's folklore group. The only moment during the interview when she was hesitant in her talk and burst into tears was when she told the story of her first son's divorce.

These two stories differ from many women's narratives described in the first section but are not exceptional. They are not the only ones that seem to challenge gender stereotypes: it is not so unusual for women-narrators to appear as agents rather than witnesses in their stories, to speak primarily in the first-person singular and to talk of themselves rather than their families. The first interviewee's husband was only introduced as the one who told her of the newly established part-time degree courses where she enrolled. The second interviewee, even when she told of her children, spoke of how *she* felt, of *her own* experiences and thoughts. The lives of both women were not confined to children, caretaking and the domestic sphere, which is again not exceptional – most women in socialist Bulgaria indeed used to work outside their homes. From one third of the total labour force in 1960, the share of women reached 50 percent and even slightly more in the 1980s. As noted in the first section, many women's life narratives testify to the necessity to combine the roles of worker in the public sector and of mother and homemaker. But unlike many other women who saw their work as only a means to secure income and pension, to conform to the norms, for these two women occupational work and public activities meant self-fulfilment. They turned to their past in a way which suggests that they had really appropriated their lives and were to a great extent in control of them; they presented themselves in their stories as independent, self-confident, conscious of the choices they had to make and feeling responsible for those choices. Thus they seemed to be among the most emancipated women of their generation whom we interviewed.

However, the two women turned out to be something of an exception in a different way. It was surprising that when they were invited to review the transcripts of their stories and give permission for publication, both women, who had never met and did not know each other's story, edited them in exactly the same way: they both added a couple of sentences to the end with almost identical meaning stating that their children and grandchildren have always been the most important thing in their lives, nay, the *meaning* of their lives. The two cases are even more noteworthy in that the remaining twenty-four persons whose stories were included in the volume either did not edit their texts at all or made only minor corrections in which they would delete a word or a phrase rather than add one. No one else went as far as adding a sentence. So the two women who seemed to control their lives, tried to control their stories as well, but they did it in a way that appears very traditional, much more conventional than and somehow inconsistent with their self-presentations in the rest of their narratives. It is not uncommon that interviewees make statements about themselves that are at odds with the descriptions of their selves in the rest of their stories. While telling of their lives, they also set

to present themselves in a desirable way, to create a vindicated identity. Therefore the stories are selective and the selection is guided by the idea of self-presentation or, to use Liz Stanley's phrase, they put together facts that would "add up to a 'thesis'".<sup>15</sup> No doubt, the presented self should be exemplary and monumental – an archetype on which the 'mundane' self has been modelled insofar as the circumstances have allowed it. For instance, some of Luisa Passerini's female interviewees, as she noted, claimed to have been rebels but had actually led fairly quiet lives.<sup>16</sup> Quite contrary to them, our two interviewees edited their statements about themselves in a way that tended to reduce the singularity of their actual lives to the most common stereotypes – or at least so it seemed to me. I saw in the final editing of the two stories an all too easy giving up of what had looked as their feminist potential.

I had a long discussion with Mrs. Petrova when I visited her to get back her edited transcript. She seemed disappointed with her story because it lacked the sophistication of a written literary text. She felt misrepresented in a way: she was afraid that she appeared "too simple", that is uneducated, in her text. She wished to rewrite (in fact – to write rather than tell) her story and had even begun doing so. She tried to persuade me that the text would become much better if she cleared the redundancies, edited the unfinished sentences and amended the structure of some phrases to conform to the norms of the standard language rather than to the practice of everyday speech. That is, she was not concerned about the referential aspects of her story but rather about the literary ones – the style and the coherence of the text. She found that 'orality' was out of place in the written text. I did my best to persuade her that retaining the specificity of everyday speech in this particular publication implied no profanation or vulgarisation. Finally, though not entirely convinced, she agreed to submit her interview for the publication but she insisted to have the last paragraph the way she had edited it with the sentences she had added. Without them she felt that the story looked "unfinished", that it lacked a "conclusion". Here is how the end of her story appeared in the book:

My work used to absorb me; communicating with people, when I saw that they trusted me, when they came to ask for advice and I managed to help – I used to feel good. I am grateful that I have wonderful children and grandchildren. I gave up many dreams, they remained only dreams, but I am a happy mother and grandmother. It is worth, if only for that, to go on struggling with this "sulky, dirty, evil life".<sup>17</sup>

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15 Cf. Liz Stanley, *The Auto/biographical I*, Manchester 1995, 51. Although Stanley refers to written auto/biographies, I find her observations about the constructed character of biographical texts, as well as her remarks on the selectivity of memory (*ibid.*, 128) quite relevant for oral ones as well.

16 Cf. Luisa Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience of the Turin Working Class*, Cambridge, MA/Paris 1987, 25–28.

17 Koleva/Gavrilova/Elenkova, *Slantseto*, see note 1, 233. The last phrase is a quotation from a poem by Nikola Vaptsarov (1909–1942) mentioned earlier in the interview.



## III

My interviewee's disappointment and her efforts to improve her text came from what she imagined as her failure to comply with the rules of the genre, as she imagined it. According to these 'rules' (the social expectations related to storytelling), a narrative should have a beginning, a plot and an end; if it is a narrative about a life, then it should view that life in the perspective of its "purpose and meaning"<sup>18</sup>. Therefore she was convinced that a conclusion of her own narrative was also necessary, a coda that would summarize the story and bring out its message. The problem I saw with the interviewee's editing was that the coda she wrote did not summarize the story she had told; it could have been the conclusion to another story – one of motherhood – but not to this one, which was about the winning of quite another struggle in her life. If, following the Russian formalists,<sup>19</sup> we distinguish between *fabula* (story) and *syuzhet* (plot), with the former being the 'raw' sequence of the events in a story and the latter being their meaningful organization, then we must recognize that the same biographical 'raw material' lends itself to different emplotments depending on the teleology imposed by the narrator and on the 'thesis' she wants to 'add up to' – that is, the message she is trying to convey. In Mrs. Petrova's story, we can see the social and institutional conditions that defined the scope of roles available for a woman in Bulgaria of the late 1950s and the 1960s and we can see how the narrator navigated among them. She left her birthplace, found her in situations where she could rely only on herself, and became independent. That is very clearly visible in the development of her narrative relation to her parents' family, with which she gradually ceases to identify as the story goes on (the familial 'we' very soon turns into 'I'). The plot develops from the successful life strategy of the parents being brought to an end by collectivization, through the struggle with multiple hardships, to the discovery and implementation of a life strategy of her own which is very different from that of her parents. And all that happens in the public sphere, framed by the institutional order, which obtrudes on the private space of the actors and sets constraints to their actions. Nevertheless, it is in this situation that personal choice, and the setting and implementation of personal goals seem to have been possible. A convincing example is the way the narrator provided a 'clean' biography for herself: she became a hard-working and conscientious *Komsomol* member to wipe out her past of a *Koulak's* daughter. Furthermore, she was persistent in pursuing her goal to obtain a university degree despite having a family, while many other women pointed

18 Wilhelm Dilthey, Nabroski k kritike istorichskogo razuma [Entwürfe zur Kritik der historischen Vernunft], in: *Voprosy filosofii*, 4 (1988); see the original in: Wilhelm Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. VII, Stuttgart/Tübingen 1973, 191–227.

19 Primarily Victor Shklovsky (1893–1984) who formulated the dichotomy of *fabula* and *syuzhet* and Vladimir Propp (1895–1970) who developed the formalist approach to the study of narrative structure.

out that establishing a family of their own impeded their further education. Education, migration and professional work entirely changed Mrs. Petrova's life situation and helped her become the person she was in her story.

The discrepancy between story and coda is less obvious in Mrs. Gatova's narrative, where motherhood is definitely one of the main themes. Still, I would argue that the position of the narrator makes for a difference here. Hers is quite unlike many other stories where women tell of their children rather than of themselves. It is definitely *her* story, in which she is the protagonist and not her sons, of whom we learn next to nothing (except for the divorce of the elder one, a trauma from which she seemed not to have fully recovered). She was the one who flew in the face of traditional ways by adopting a strange child rather than that of kin, by bringing her husband to her parents' home, and by engaging in the public life of the village. Being a member of the board of the collective and an activist in a mass political organization,<sup>20</sup> she spent her life 'in public' often engaging in institutional interactions and decision-making concerning not only herself and her family but also a larger circle. Even her motherhood was institutionally mediated (the orphanage, the court) and publicly discussed without much sympathy and understanding in the very traditional settings where she lived. These factors significantly 'de-banalize' what would otherwise appear a very typical for her generation life trajectory.

That I see a discrepancy – or, to put it mildly, an incoherence – between the 'theses' which the two women put forward in their life stories, on the one hand, and the statements they later added, on the other, may well be the result of my own interpretive bias. Mine may well be a case similar to that of Katherine Borland who interpreted a story of her grandmother's from a feminist perspective that met the objections of the grandmother herself.<sup>21</sup> Obviously our two women do not think of themselves as 'having it their own way'; maybe they do not even see their own choices as such – as is often the case – and are convinced that each time they have acted in the only possible way. In fact, most of their choices were made in compliance with the standards set by the socialist emancipation in Bulgaria, which granted equal rights to women and required women's participation in the public sector while leaving the burden of their traditional roles unchanged. Though it placed the highest value on women's participation in the labour force, the socialist emancipation did not imply any relief from the responsibilities of motherhood, family, housework, etc. On the contrary, it set even greater demands for women. In 1961, when Mrs. Petrova (then aged 21) and Mrs. Gatova (then 28) had their first children, they both were among those 41.2 percent of Bulgarian

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20 The *Otechestven Front* (Fatherland Front). It was initially (mid 1940s) a coalition of anti-fascist parties, and later a mass organization in service of the ruling communist party. The interviewee took part in one of its national congresses held once every five years.

21 Cf. Katherine Borland, "That's not what I said": Interpretive Conflict in Oral Narrative Research, in: Gluck/Patai, *Women's Words*, see note 2, 63–75.

women who had joined the labour force, and were entitled to three months of maternity leave. Afterwards, they had to return to work and leave their babies to the elder women in their households. For a few months, Mrs. Petrova ran home every day during the lunch break to nurse her child. There were also other conspicuous ways they were made to understand that women were valued by the society as “working mothers” and not just as mothers. Even when the communist party undertook special measures to stimulate fertility from the late 1960s onwards, these remained quite ambivalent<sup>22</sup> with the glorification of the “mother-worker” who successfully combined her roles of mother and wife with the fulfilment of her duties to the society. At the same time, the notion of ‘housewife’ almost disappeared, and insofar as it existed, it seemed to carry the negative connotation of an unfulfilled life. Very few among the interviewed women decided to stay home to raise their children: it was seldom possible to keep a home on the husband’s salary only; furthermore, by the glorification of the “working mother” the propaganda marginalised the position of a housewife.<sup>23</sup> By the early 1970s Mrs. Petrova and Mrs. Gatova had heard their children – already at school – sing at the celebrations of Woman’s Day (8<sup>th</sup> March): “Your little girl/picked a bunch of white snowdrops for you./Pin the flowers with your gold medal/to make it seen from afar/how noble, mummy, you are.” They knew that “nobility” could only be aspired for on the grounds of “labour to the benefit of society”. With more than 90 percent of the women of their age engaged in that kind of labour, they hardly ever imagined an alternative for themselves. Neither did the other interviewed women of their generation, for none of them ever spelled out and dwelled upon the conflictual character of their situation of working mothers. The point is, however, that while many interviewed women regarded work from the perspective of this lack of alternatives as an additional burden, these two took pride in theirs: Mrs. Gatova referred to images from the folklore placing the highest value on hard work and industriousness while Mrs. Petrova emphasized education, expertise and responsibility. Both women stressed the recognition of others as the ground of their self-esteem and turned their achievements in the world of work into the central theme of their stories – till the final editing, at least. With regard to that, let us remember that Mrs. Petrova wanted to edit her story because she felt she appeared too ‘simple’ in the text; she didn’t feel she appeared too much of a worker and too little of a mother. That is, she felt misrepresented in terms of the literary quality of her talk and not in terms of the social roles fulfilled during her life.

22 More on this topic see in: Ulf Brunnbauer and Karin Taylor, Creating a ‘Socialist Way of Life’: family and Reproduction Policies in Bulgaria, 1944–1989, in: *Continuity and Change*, 19, 2 (2004), 283–319.

23 Cf. Rayna Gavrilova, *Zheni v gradovete, detsa v selata* [Women in towns, children in villages], in: Elena Tacheva and Ilia Nedin eds., *Tya na Balkanite* [She on the Balkans], Blagoevgrad 2001, 261–266. An indirect proof of this marginalisation is the fact that the few women among our interviewees who preferred to stay home and raise their children exclusively, later worked on low-paid and non-prestigious jobs: cleaner, usher in a cinema, cloakroom attendant.

Certainly, if as interviewers we had pressed the two women on their everyday lives, we could have derived a different picture, one less incongruent with their final statements. What we do have however is largely the result of our strategy to exert as little control as possible during the interview and therefore the result of the narrators' own choices regarding their self-presentation. My intention here is not to intrude on the stories. But I hope that exaggerating the incoherence – and seeing a discrepancy where maybe none in fact exists – can be a way of broaching certain questions.

First the questions of genre: As already hinted, I understand genre less in terms of 'literary form' (even if to some extent it might be applicable to oral narratives if due attention is to be paid to the speakers' rhetorical skills) but rather as conventions of discourse signalling to the audiences how a story should be interpreted. This understanding comes primarily from reflections on anthropological and oral-historical research,<sup>24</sup> but it also complies with Philippe Lejeune's idea of autobiography as a type of reading rather than a way of writing.<sup>25</sup> Obviously then, genres not only direct readers'/listeners' understandings but also shape the narratives themselves. This is all the more true in the situation of an autobiographical interview where the speaker immediately reacts to the presence and the prompts of the interviewer. Therefore, questions arise about what constraints are imposed by 'the rules of genre' on the process of story telling and how they operate. It is widely acknowledged that life stories cannot be regarded as objective accounts of actual lives. They do not merely present the facts but are already an *interpretation* of the facts within the specific context of communication between interviewer and interviewee, whereby the latter presents herself, constructs a certain image of herself. It is only natural that this image be a desirable one, or at least one that the narrator can live with. So the autobiographer orders the episodes of an ongoing life like the pieces of a puzzle to create a self-portrait that she finds to be reasonably accurate. To convince the others that it is reasonably accurate, the narrator has to (at least, in our culture she is expected to) produce a story, which is a coherent whole with a beginning and an end. That is, she has to exercise some kind of symbolic control over the discontinuities in her life. To do that in a way that will be understandable and acceptable for the audience means to conform to audience expectations as to what a life story should be like by employing recognizable narrative techniques, sticking to conventions, and making use of familiar ready-made images as well as narrative stereotypes. However, these can all be manipulated, subverted by irony or tailored to one's own experience. Thus the constraints of genre leave a wide margin for the work of personal imagination and for the expression of personal attitudes. That is why I think there may be more

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24 Elisabeth Tonkin, *Narrating Our Pasts. The Social Construction of Oral History*, Cambridge, MA 1992; Mary Chamberlain and Paul Thompson eds. *Narrative and Genre*, Oxford 1998.

25 Cf. Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique*, Paris 1996, 45; cf. also Liz Stanley on auto/biographical selves as "interpretations within the convention" and on "guiding" the reading through "appropriate language"; Stanley, *Auto/biographical I*, see note 15, 61f, 127.

profound reasons for the type of self-presentation in the edited versions of the two stories, reasons that go beyond the concerns with style and literary quality. In my opinion, adding this type of conclusion amounts to following social rather than narrative conventions.

This leads us to a second set of questions, which goes a step further in the direction of interpretation of experience and refers to the relation between – to use Pierre Bourdieu's concepts – “objective structures” and “cognitive forms”.<sup>26</sup> It seems that in our case objective structures are to be found in the social milieus and institutions that defined the possible range of social roles and statuses of women; and cognitive forms would be the ways of legitimizing those statuses and roles, the notions of what is appropriate, desirable or permissible to a woman, of what women ought to do and how they ought to feel – notions deeply grounded in culture and therefore even less prone to change than social structures. To quote Bourdieu at some length:

“Collective expectations”, positive or negative, through the subjective expectations that they impose, tend to inscribe themselves in bodies in the form of permanent dispositions. Thus, by virtue of the universal law of the adjustment of expectations to chances, aspirations to possibilities, prolonged and invisibly diminished experience that is sexually characterized through and through tends, by discouraging it, to undermine even the inclination to perform acts that are not expected of women – without even being denied to them.<sup>27</sup>

As a result, women whose actual experience has gone far beyond the traditional ‘women's sphere’ may happen to perceive it and relate to it in quite traditional ways because they are unfamiliar with or unaccustomed to others. If experience does not fit into accepted concepts, it is either tailored to them or muted. I do not really think that all women have been only dominated, excluded or marginalized, unable to manage their own lives. However, it turns out that many women, who in practice may have considerable though unacknowledged power, share an ideology, which trivializes that power. Even when they act beyond their culturally constructed ‘nature’, they opt for what they see as ‘normality’ as soon as their actions are solidified in texts meant to last and to be witnessed by an anonymous audience – the future readers of the book. In such cases, gender discourses seem to provide a powerful and readily available means to achieve coherent self-perception and self-presentation within the scope of ‘normality’.<sup>28</sup> This is just another illustration of the so-called paradox of *doxa* – the transformation of history into nature. *Doxa*, or what I termed ideology, defining it at the beginning as notions

26 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, Cambridge 2001.

27 Bourdieu, *Domination*, see note 26, 61.

28 Recent research on written (auto-)biographies has shown however that such self-perceptions can also be fragile and problematic; cf. L'HOMME. Z. F. G., 14, 2 (2003).

about 'womanness' indeed turns out to be ideology in that stronger sense of the word, identifying it with false consciousness – in this case, with an internalized concept of femininity elaborated by a male order. Thus our two cases can be regarded as illustrations of what Luisa Passerini<sup>29</sup> has termed the 'doubleness' of subjectivity, that is the tension between independence and 'typicality' imposed by institutionalised readings of gender roles with their normalising power.