

Johanna Kulmala

A Narrative model of Family Letters from the 20th-century Czechoslovakia

In June I listened to Chief Commander Michael Bydén's summer speech (sommarrprat) on the Swedish radio. During his speech Bydén shared a few glimpses of his life and how he has become him. The reason why he had chosen military career had been the need to be part of something greater.

As I listened to Bydén's life story, I understood that the same is true partly of my research also. It dawned on me that I had been doing something greater than myself, much greater.

The correspondence which I have studied for my dissertation begins from the late years of Austro-Hungarian double monarch, it leads its readers through the First and the Second World War and the inter-war years, the First Czechoslovakian Republic. It ends to the Cold War.

As we know, the Cold War has also ended, and the phase which followed the Cold War has ended, too. Once again we are looking for new ways to act together globally, facing big questions, even though the situation is relatively peaceful in Europe currently.

When I started preparing my thesis in 2012, the western world was still a rather stable place. However, the world around me started to resemble the themes of these letters. I

had a great honour to interview some of the people who still remembered the Second World War, from an adult's point of view. Now most of those people are no longer among us and it is hardly a coincidence that the idea of united Europe – even the idea – began to crumble when the last personal memories of a truly broken Europe faded away.

As if it had not been enough, now we are troubled by the pandemic, which is hard to comprehend and impossible to rule. As I was fine tuning my thesis in summer, I noticed that the letters from the Sachsenhausen concentration camp where Mirek tries to convince his parents that his health is good and sends wishes that their health would also remain so, spoke to me more than ever before. Health, keeping it, the threat of losing it and losing one's life had come close.

“Stay well” became a daily greeting in our time. The state of emergency reminded us how even small restrictions to citizen's rights, even when the basis for them is well-grounded, decrease our well-being. We may not be able to even imagine the effects of a totalitarian regime on people's well-being.

This letter collection is a story about a woman called Mařenka. She has not written any of these letters herself but she and her family have been their recipients. I have studied how the classic narrative model, created by Labov and Waletzky as early as in the 1960s, functions when searching for narrations and parts of narration in this correspondence.

To put it briefly: the classic model works relatively well.

Many of these letters follow the narrative model closely and those letters that do not follow it, still contain char-

acteristics of classic narrations. For this reason Labov and Waletzky's model is an excellent tool to analyse a wide corpus like this when searching for narrations.

In my work you can find several examples of this, when it comes to single letters, but now I want to show you how the correspondence itself creates a classic narration.

Orientation (early 1900s)

František begins this story with his love letters from the early 20th century. He introduces Mařenka to us by making references to her female friends, family and school life. All this happens in Moravia. Mostly he writes about himself, as it is natural to share one's own news in letters.

František's last letter is from 1910 and we hear nothing more about him ever since. Also Mařenka's young adulthood remains a mystery, as there are no letters preserved from those years.

Evaluation (1929–1938)

In this narration, evaluation comes before the complicating action. In this respect the narration is not classical in its purest form. This is not unusual, though, in many complete and logical narrations the narrative elements may change places or one of them may be missing altogether.

Pavel continues the story. He writes from the solitude of his monastery. We learn that Mařenka has got married and she has a son called Mirek. Pavel writes to Mirek and

sometimes also to Mařenka. The theme of these letters is inter-generational friendship.

As a writer Pavel is very analytical. We learn a great deal about how he sees Mařenka and Mirek. He respects them greatly, and even though he is very eager to educate others, he is also ready to learn from his two friends.

Complicating action (1939–1942)

The story becomes grim. Mirek is incarcerated at Sachsenhausen Concentration Camp, just like about 1200 other Czech students, on 17 November 1939. As a political prisoner he has the right to write home fortnightly.

The theme of these letters is survival and returning home. The possibility to write letters has been a remarkable privilege for those who had it, despite the fact that the censorship strongly restricted the contents of the letters and the freedom of expression.

Still, these letters tell something about life in an occupied land. People exchange greetings and news, discuss rationing, postal services and so on. Also, in the middle of all this, Mařenka tries to relax a bit. She visits her family in Moravia, at least once. Mirek's letters reveal also this detail about their family life.

Result or resolution (1939–1947)

The story is heading towards its end. Mirek returns from the camp, the war ends and Pavel narrates the story fur-

ther. These letters tell about friendship over the difficult war years. Pavel also reveals to us how Mařenka's family moved forward when the peace finally arrived. He wrote these letters to Mařenka but there are references in his writing that he also wrote to Mirek during these years.

Zdenka ties the final knots of the story. Mařenka and Zdenka are two women who have a long friendship behind them. It is possible that Zdenka appears also in the older letters. František mentions Mařenka's friend called Zdenka and also Mirek refers to Zdenka when writing from the camp.

However, I could not find out if it was the one and the same person or two or possibly three different Zdenkas. This is a very typical challenge in epistolary research, letters are full of gaps, unclear lines and incoherent sentences.

Zdenka describes us the time when the availability food, clothes and other necessities is improving. She and Mařenka exchange book recommendations and plan a trip to Moravia, to the towns where they spent time in their youth.

Coda

Mirek plays the coda to us. He writes to his mother in the summer of 1968. They are planning holiday trips. Mařenka is heading to Moravia again, possibly to meet Zdenka.

Mirek is travelling to Austria in August. Mirek's son Michael has told me that the trip did happen and while they were abroad, Czechoslovakia was occupied. But the family returned.

I have been asked what I shall do if I cannot find a story in the material. Quite often in everyday language a story is understood as an epic, Hollywood-type of narration. Not all letters or letter collections contain a potential film script, but based on my experience as a researcher, I claim that they do contain a story, sometimes even a network of various stories or shorter snippets of different stories. Those incomplete narrations can often be completed from other sources. Labov and Waletzky's narrative model is an excellent tool for finding these narrations.

On the other hand, the story I just introduced starts from harmony and continues through a crisis to a new beginning. If this is not Hollywood, what is?

Ricœur: Reader's Time and Narrator's time

In my thesis, I used Paul Ricœur's idea how the text emerges from the intersection of writer's world and reader's world. In a sense the text is born over and over again each time it is read, for the new readers and new contexts.

Reader's experience creates expectations about the text. As far as letters are concerned, such expectations can be for instance family secrets or possible hidden messages in concentration camp letters. On the other hand, some readers regard letters as purely informative texts, and that is also one valid expectation.

Since I have had my expectations as a reader, I have emphasised certain aspects of the correspondence. I have done my very best to introduce a balanced view about the letters, but I have also been bound to frame my work.

In the framing process, it is important to take the ethical questions into consideration. How much can I use texts that have not been intended for my eyes? I have received

relatives' permission to use this material, but the permission has not liberated me from these questions. My personal choice as a researcher is to discuss the material honestly, to give a genuine overview. In this process, I avoid at all costs causing harm to anyone, even the ones who have died a long time ago.

Our personal background has trained us to notice certain things, and this also has an impact on the researcher making their choices. My educational background is not only in creative writing but also in linguistics and second language acquisition, which certainly have affected my decisions in the research process. Also, I am a Finn, an outsider to the Czech culture. On the other hand, this is the beauty of the research in creative writing, materials are approached from different viewpoints and educational backgrounds.

According to Paul Ricœur, the past agrees to dialogue with us to the extent we are ready to have dialogue with it. This is true when doing epistolary research also. The dialogue with the text leads to answers that need to be interpreted. To formulate the interpretation, the researcher needs to understand the context and the time when the letters were written.

I have also been asked what this letter collection tells about the past. They are snapshots from the past, they do not create remarkable new information about the events of the world history. However, to use Swedish General Bydén's words: they are part of something greater.

What would I do differently now?

In recent days I have been pondering what I would do differently if I started my research now. I would probably

advise myself to decide the themes of the thesis much earlier than what I did. The collection contains approximately 150 letters, and it is impossible to cover it all, even though I would have liked to. For this reason, for example the post-war era did not receive as much attention in my work as it would have deserved.

Now I would also be better prepared to take autobiographical aspect into consideration from the very beginning. Then the impact of these letters and the process of studying them on my own writing would be more visible in the thesis. Also, I would be better prepared for the fact that studying texts like these becomes part of the researcher's life and own autobiographical texts.

I would also give more room for the various voices of the letters. The writers in this correspondence are otherwise rather silent people: teenage lovers, a young monk in a monastery library, a concentration camp inmate, and women in the middle of a ruined Europe.

I want to return one more time to the current pandemic. A fatal virus has proved how choices of ordinary people like you and me do make a difference. Each prevented infection chain is a victory now that other ways to combat the virus are ineffective.

In a same manner, choices of ordinary people to collect and preserve even small memories, letter, photographs etc. are small victories to our collective memory. Not only the so-called remarkable people do remarkable things, we all can choose to do them.

When Mařenka hid these letters in the basement of a townhouse in Prague, allegedly in August 1968, when her home country was being occupied, she hardly gave any

thought to the collective memory. But she wanted to remember and she wanted others to remember too.

Thanks to her, this thesis has now come into being.

Johanna Kulmala's lectio praecursoria 27 August 2020. Dissertation by approved by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in the University of Jyväskylä.

Johanna Kulmala: “*The letter is only a poor expression of what the heart over-flows: Family Letters from the 20th-century Czechoslovakia*” (2020) <https://jyx.jyu.fi/handle/123456789/71480>