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Steps to the Past

A Town from the Perspective of Autobiographical Memory

By Pirjo Korkiakangas

Memory is a kind of an anti-museum: it cannot be delimited or located and only fragments of it emerge through reminiscence. In reminiscence there are also gaps, in which the past dozes. Memory awakens through narratives, and although the places that are recalled are present as images and memories they are also gone. The memories bind the reminiscing person to the places that are a part of their personal history and meaningful to them in particular. The individual memories bound to a location are some kind of mental histories that unfold to others only through the narratives of the person those memories belong to (de Certeau 1984: 108).

When beginning to reminisce about our life, we tend to construct it into a chronological continuum that we experience as being real and having actually happened as such. The memory is not as straightforward as this, however; the reminisced life is composed and constructed of different recollections and images of events, sometimes strong and vivid, sometimes merely passing through our minds. As humans, however, we prefer organisation to chaos, and when reminiscing, we perceive our life as a coherent whole composed of individual details and temporal organisation, following narrative logic. Janina Bauman has outlined the characteristics of reminiscence from the point of view of an autobiographer as follows:

Writing an autobiography involves inventing, or even creating, a significant pattern of one's own personal history. It requires a selection of memories in accordance with this pattern. The selection is the first task but by no means the only one. Memories emerge as tiny pieces, with smaller or larger gaps always left in between. Tiny pieces do not constitute a narrative. In order to create a narrative, the author must fill in the gaps and

smoothly and credibly join the individual pieces together. This is where imagination comes into the picture, imagination with an idea of authenticity to it: this could have happened. No autobiography can ever be written without this fictive touch (2000: 338).

In her text, Bauman discusses authors and their ways to prepare an autobiographical work but her thoughts can more generally be applied to both the study of reminiscence and the reminiscence of one's own life without literary pressure. A person's life and life narrative consist of the endless flow of individual events, personal event memories. The events are biographically connected: the focus of the reminiscence has thus widened from the "self" to the entire event and to its consideration from an autobiographical perspective. This, of course, raises the question: what determines which individual events are preserved as memories that are consciously reminisced and that may later affect our lives us not even being aware of it. An essential feature of this kind of memories is that they are conceived as some kind of milestones or turning points in one's own course of life, and they help the reminiscing persons to understand and interpret themselves as well as their whole lives (Pillemer 1998: 1–4).

In the following I shall look at the town of Jyväskylä as a kind of discourse of steps, a mental landscape reminisced by town-dwellers.¹ The discussion does not focus on the monuments or monumental locations generally recognised by the town's residents but on the lived spaces of individual people (cf. Lefebvre 1994 [1974]; Lynch 1968: 1–4), which have (or have had) meaning as monuments of their individual course of life. As places of individual autobiographical reminiscence, these monuments

could, in principle, be located anywhere. What binds them to a certain location, and to a certain time, is the life environment of the narrator and the identification with a place that wells forth from it; the identification consists of both individual and shared mental images which characterise the place in question. The ideas, memories and experiences of identity that are connected with the place also involve locating oneself; the question “where am I?” raises the question “who am I?”. Thus, the place identities, as well as the process of locating oneself, are produced through experience and reminiscence (see Vilkkuna 1996: 8).

The tripartition of social space by Lefebvre (1994 [1974]) has been examined as interrelationships between spatiality and temporality. According to Simonsen (1991: 427–430), spatiality manifests itself in three dimensions: as institutional spatiality, which refers to the structural and shared level of the social production of space; as lived space, that is, the meanings that individuals and groups attach to the space; and as individual spatial practices, in which the spatiality refers to the physical presence of individuals and groups and their spatial interaction. The interaction between an individual and the community culminates temporally and spatially in the individual biographies and life stories. Individual conceptions and experiences of temporality and spatiality are associated with conceptions of generations, spatiality and identity. Simonsen’s (1991: 429) concept of a situated life story illustrates the temporal-spatial contextualisation of an individual person; the analysis of a situated life story focuses on examining chains of events, causing the significance of individual events to be seen as dependent on the entire “life project”.

Place Memories in the Perspective of Individual and Shared History

This article is based on material constituted of what could be called situated life stories. The places are recalled autobiographically, as belonging to the different events of life. Individual situated memories are bound to a time in the narrator’s life that he/she considers important, but besides that, also to a common, collectively experienced time and history. Individual and collective histories intertwine in a way, which causes the individual spatial experience to expand in reminiscence past the individual or even a family’s shared experience.

When the time being recalled is at a long temporal distance, as is the case when an elderly person reminisces about his/her childhood, for example, the reminiscing person finds situating him/herself very important. It is a different time and a different place, the reminiscence is very reflective and the reminiscing person situates him/herself both temporally and spatially. Although reminiscence is very individual and autobiographical, situating oneself becomes easier if the reminiscence can be joined with a collectively shared experience and history. Thus, the historical, collectively recognised and historically verifiable event frames the individual experience and its memory.

Well, we moved then to Jyväskylä and my father was, the parliament in Helsinki used to assemble in the Heimola hotel at the time, and Helsinki was back then, there was also the war going on, the war you call either the war of independence or the civil war whichever way you prefer. – Helsinki was under a red command. You couldn’t get out. My father was in hiding and they had to, they had to hide him a little there was an MP that was murdered even. So then, my father couldn’t come home, I hadn’t seen him. As a baby we had moved

to Jyväskylä and I hadn't seen my father in maybe sixteen months. And then when there was this man who came to visit – who was about the same size and, – a small slender man who wore glasses like my father. I thought it was him I ran towards him and shouted dad is here. First the joy, and then the disappointment and then the shame that I had thought a strange man was my father, and this these strong emotions made it stick in my mind it's the first memory the first thing I can remember myself. (Woman 1916; the narrator was about two years old at the time of the incident.)

This excerpt can be characterised as a personal event memory. It describes an event which took place in a certain place at a certain time and which concerns the narrator's own personal environment at the time of the event. The memory also covers a spectrum of distinct emotions, ranging from joy to disappointment and further to a strong feeling of shame. The narrator herself believes that her recollection is real and quite special even: she thinks of it as her first childhood memory. Rather typically, she makes use of her emotional experience as evidence for the reality of the event (see Pillemer 1998: 50–52). On the other hand, the personal event memory is part of a more general chain of events – the independence war of 1918 and its effects on a family in Jyväskylä.

The First and the Second World War act as important watersheds and means of outlining shared memories, especially for the Europeans (Connerton 1989: 20; Passerini 1992). Experienced individually, the historical turning points naturally intertwine with the different stages of life, different times and different places. Time, or a strictly determined moment in time, thus turns into a secondary concept. It has significance only when included in the frame of individual or collective history, where it has a

sense or a position from the point of view of experience. When experienced, time grows multilayered: the past moment is a part of our past, which we look at from the present time. Time gives a perspective for the way we interpret our individual and collective past and present. For individual memories, however, the period of life is essential in which the individually touching event, which can also be associated with the experience of collective history, has taken place. The memories of childhood experiences, in particular, are completely different and have completely different effects than the memories accumulated at other stages of life (Elder et al. 1993; Korhikangas 1996: 34; Korhikangas 1997).

Furthermore, it is understandable that upsetting childhood experiences may intermix with things that the person hears about later, like in the following citation, where the narrator reminisces about the Second World War. He was three years old at the time of the incident. In fact, Jyväskylä was bombed only during the Winter War, in the last days of 1939. In the Continuation War of 1941–1944, Jyväskylä was spared from actual enemy bombings but there were frequent air-raid alerts, especially in 1944 (Tommila 1972: 567–570), the year the narrator reminisces about. One particular air-raid alert has stuck in his mind as a traumatic memory, his only memory of the war. As regards location, the memory is mainly anchored to the working-class neighbourhood of Halssila. In spite of its traumatic nature, the memory also incorporates many features of a vivid memory (Conway 1995; see Korhikangas 1996), that is, auditory images and strong emotions, in particular – the howling sirens of air surveillance, the thunder of the bombings as-

sumed by the narrator, the crying children. The entire memory is characterised by anxiety and fear of death:

Of the war I remember clearly this one stage when in forty-four Jyväskylä was bombed, and my mother grabbed my brother put a blanket around him and took my hand and... cried that now we're going to the woods, we could hear the sirens, the sirens howling. Every woman from the Halssilanmäki hill ran with her children down to the woods. And then there was the booming noise.— Of course there was other bombings too but that one was, we got into a real panic – the planes they got so, right above us – and that crying when, the children were lugged into the woods. That's the only memory I have of the war. (Man 1941.)

The traumatic emotions remain when the narrator reminisces about the life after the war, a time when the family was lacking even in food. Their home was still in Halssila (on the Halssilanmäki hill), and the narrator went to a school that was about two miles away from the home. The narrator's school years were overshadowed by the shame he felt for his family's straits and for his own "defects". He had poor eyesight and was therefore the first person in his school to wear glasses: "They really made me suffer for that so I always came home crying. They called me four-eyes. Then little by little they, gave it up." The narrator has fond memories of his teacher, however. Apparently she was aware of the situation in the boy's family and she gave him little tasks to do after school to help them: he held the skeins of yarn while the teacher coiled them, he shook the carpets, etc. This gave yet another reason for the other children to bully him: "They bullied me about that too. Teacher's pet and that sort of thing. But I did it to get milk and buns and biscuits afterwards." However, the family's poverty

and their need to resort to the post-war social security caused the most tormenting shame, still bothering him as an adult:

But this one thing that I will also remember for the rest of my life is – after the war they gave out food at Halssila school. And I was the eldest child so I always had to go get it, with a milk churn. In the winter they always warned me don't slip, that is the family's main meal for the day. Or all there was. They gave me a two-three-litre churn and a few plates of crispbread. Halssila school was about one and a half miles away from Halssilanmäki hill. And I carry the churn and I'm scared of falling and then it happened once that, I fell and the churn flew from my hand and, it all ran to the ground. I couldn't go back home. I sat there by the side of the road cried and ate the crispbread. Then, I remember it was getting dark and I was really scared –. Then my father came walking, he had guessed. – He saw me I'm crying it's not my fault I... He said it's ok that we have some bread at home, don't cry now. All that has kind of stuck in my mind, – I still remember how the churn flew from my hand and, there it went the potato soup. (Man 1941.)

A situated life story seems to follow the same kind of pattern in reminiscence as life stories in general. The reminiscence proceeds by the different stages of life, some external change or personally significant event characterising each new stage. In change, the place may act merely as a frame, as in the previous citations. On the other hand, a change in the physical environment always brings something new and different on the level of experience, too. Different places of residence within the same town usually clearly divide into periods the reminiscence of the person's own and, more generally, the town's course of life. In the foregoing citations the narrators use the historic period, the wartime and the depression that followed it, as a background for their individual childhood events. The

memories are also connected with particular places that have been significant to the person's own life history. The spatiality is thus associated with the individual time, or the events that have taken place in the person's life. The mode of life model employed by Simonsen (1991) incorporates the idea that temporality and spatiality are closely bound together and that this bond directs the choices and the time allocation of an individual or a family. Upon reminiscence, the situated life stories tend to proceed from one dwelling to the other. The memories of the living environments of different periods may give an impression of being, and partly even are, of photograph-like precision and portray the times and the common way of life as well as the individual life story. This is the case in the following excerpt, which resumes the reminiscence of the lady born in 1916 of the Jyväskylä of her childhood days. Her remi-

niscence paints a picture of the lifestyle and goings-on of a small rural town in the early 20th century:

Well, the first place in Jyväskylä which my father had got for us before joining the parliament, that was in 6 Kalevankatu Street, a very modest flat, it was a three-family house, right by the street, and a picket fence surrounded the rather large site, the owner of the house even had a small potato patch there and a kind of a garden. On the other side of the yard there was an outhouse, where there was a privy and a shed, each tenant had their own corner in the shed and, took care of it themselves, the house was heated with wood. And then there was a tool and coach house, because the owner of the house, he had a farm too, – and he had horses there too so from time to time he would come with the horses to town, and he needed a place for the cart or the sleigh, and a small stall where he put the horse. So all these were in the outhouse that was on the other side of the yard. (Woman 1916.)

Next, the family moved to a quarter called Älylä. As its name – a place where intelligence abounds – suggests, the area was a



The map of central parts of Jyväskylä.

conglomeration of villas and gardens owned by the lecturers and professors of the Jyväskylä Teacher Training College and later those of the College of Education. Almost the entire Älylä² was built in a very short period of time between 1912 and 1914. As regards its population, the area was socially very homogenous: it was the residential area of the town's then prevailing cultural elite. There are still some representatives of the old cultured families living in Älylä at present, and it is the only one of the older residential areas of Jyväskylä that still mainly consists of wooden houses. The cultural heritage of the area is further fostered by the museums that have been built there: the Museum of Central Finland in the verdant upper part of the area in 1960 and the Alvar Aalto Museum in the site of Juho Mikkola's house, the former head of the Jyväskylä Teacher Training College, in 1972–73 (Kiskis 1976: 217, 242). The narrator, the woman born in 1916, continues her reminiscence:

Well then, the time came that my uncles' and aunts' children got old enough for secondary school, and at that time there were no secondary schools in Karstula or in any other rural commune for that matter –. The schools in Jyväskylä had a better reputation and you applied here of course, and, as they happened to have some relatives here the parents began bargaining that couldn't we take the children that they wouldn't have to send them to live with strangers. So our house became a residential home. It was, we were five, our family, and then suddenly we had four school children living with us and then two young bank clerks whose homes were outside Jyväskylä so they needed a place to stay in Jyväskylä and they worked with my sister. So suddenly we were a household of twelve people. And this flat of three rooms and a kitchen where there wasn't even, well the water came in and went out. Those were the only facilities. But there were no loos, let

alone bathrooms so we used a public sauna whenever we needed to use a sauna. But then we found, the Jussila house in Älylä. Jussila³ himself lived in a house along the street it was a kind of light greenish grey or something, and then there was, the gable facing the street – a red house – and he rented the red house to us. But it turned out to be too cramped, there was only, downstairs there was, a dining room, two other rooms and an alcove. And one room upstairs. So there wasn't really room for twelve people. We somehow managed to live there for a year, a little over a year. And then Ojala, the head of the seminar, he died, and he was replaced by Mikkola. [The family moved to Juho Mikkola's house.] – There were rooms on two floors. Downstairs there was a drawing room, a dining room, three bedrooms and a kitchen so five rooms downstairs, and upstairs there were two normal-size rooms and one smaller, like a maid's room, so there was enough room even for us. Two people were put in each room so nobody had to sleep in the drawing room. – I was the odd one out and I slept on the sofa in the dining room.

During the narrator's childhood years, the family moved to another house once again, but they still stayed in Älylä:

– we lived in three different flats, the last one was, it is still standing like the Jussila house, it was built then. I guess my mother got tired of taking care of the household for such a big lot and my sister's husband had died and my other sister had moved to Helsinki, so there was only my father, my mother and me left then. – there was no reason for us to have such a big house, there was a two-storey house being built on the opposite side of the street – and it was the first house which had, we had a bathroom and a loo. There was a loo in the two houses in Älylä but there was no bathroom instead there was a sauna in both of them. – They also had, privies even though there were loos too both of these houses in Älylä had a privy, and when it was warm the school children [who lived at home] went in there to share their secrets. Why would have one wanted to queue for the loo, with twelve people there was always a queue. (Woman 1916.)

In a few years time (in the early 1930s), after the father of the family had died, the mother and daughter moved to Helsinki. In the 1960s, the narrator returned for a few years to Jyväskylä, her childhood home. In a way, the moves followed the development of the present-day Jyväskylä University, which the narrator finds to have had a distinct effect on the town's development. She moved with her mother to Helsinki approximately four years before the Jyväskylä Teacher Training College changed into the College of Education (in 1934), when the "secondary school graduates, the studying secondary school graduates became part of the town's life". At the time she returned to Jyväskylä for the first time, the college changed into a university (in 1966) and "then the town really changed". In a few years time, the narrator moved to Tampere and back to Jyväskylä again in the early 1980s when she retired. In her old age, the narrator's reminiscence seems to concentrate on her childhood days spent with her family in the Jyväskylä of wooden houses, whose townscape began to change, however, in the 1920s and 1930s by the emergence of multi-storey stone and brick houses to complement the already existing population of small two-storey stone and brick houses. Before 1930, there were altogether nineteen two-storey houses made of stone or brick in central Jyväskylä; by the mid-1970s, more than one third of these houses had been demolished to give way to bigger high-rise buildings.⁴ The emergence of the first multi-storey houses in the 1920s and 1930s already foreshadowed the shift from a town of low wooden houses to a town of high-rise buildings made of stone and brick (Jäppinen 1976: 103–107).

The Jyväskylä Living in Memories – an Idyll of Wooden Houses

Looking at the town from the lake, you could see a beautiful, leafy park with the gables and roofs of low wooden houses appearing here and there. Today these houses are – elsewhere than in the areas of Seminaarinmäki [the University of Jyväskylä Campus] and Älylä – reduced to only a few samples of the precious cultural period that we have lost. The pleasant wooden houses that were a joy to look at, the entire integrated town of wooden houses have disappeared. Of the thousand oldest wooden houses from the turn of the century, there is left only about a twenty. Today, faceless and stiff concrete buildings leave their cold and monotonous mark on the town (Tissari 1987: 27).

Usually, when reminiscing about the old Jyväskylä, the narrator "walks" through the town of wooden houses that lives on in their memory and reminisces about the Jyväskylä that no longer exists. Up to the beginning of the 1950s, the general appearance of Jyväskylä was that of a rather small, even sleepy, rural town, the peacefulness of which was emphasised by the harmony of its low wooden houses. After the Second World War, however, at the close of the 1940s and in the 1950s, the town's unhurried lifestyle underwent a critical change of course, which was further accelerated in the 1960s and 1970s: the small town of wooden houses was transformed into a medium-sized town of stone and brick houses. The town's population increased from the little over ten thousand in the 1940s to the thirty thousand in the 1950s. This was mainly a consequence of the incorporation of Tourula, Halssila, Nisula and Lohikoski, areas outside the then existing town proper that were inhabited mostly by industrial workers, into Jyväskylä in 1941 and also by the settling of 4 000 evacuees. The new town dwellers were in



The centre of Jyväskylä in the 1930s and 1940s. Museum of Central Finland, picture archive.

desperate need of housing and this is why the low wooden houses had to give way to high blocks of flats. During the following decades the rate of growth became faster and faster, and finally in the 1960s and 1970s, the town and especially its centre had undergone a complete transformation. Culturally and historically important buildings and architecturally harmonious blocks of wooden houses were systematically and mercilessly pulled down: at the close of the 1960s no more than one fifth of all residential houses dated back to the time before the Second World War. (Ojala 1999: 27–28, 66–67; Jäppinen 1997: 278–283). Therefore, it is very understandable that the decades of upheaval do not inspire reminiscence in the town dwellers; their memories tend to go back to earlier times.

The changes in the overall appearance of Jyväskylä during the last decades naturally also draw us into comparing the lost town

living in memories with the Jyväskylä of today. The reminiscences convey regret for the destruction of all things old; the old building population has had to give way to the new, more urban one. The town administration and the decision-makers, however, prefer a completely different set of values in marketing the image of Jyväskylä – they portray the town as an example of dynamic development. Although the town dwellers largely accept this image, the Jyväskylä of the old days appears as more genuine and real in the minds of those who still remember it. The current rate of change and development remains mainly a source of astonishment.

Our constructed environment is in a circle of constant change: change is perceived exclusively as a feature of the modern times – despite the fact that this is not the first time the building population has been renewed nor the first time there has been a

need for it. Nevertheless, in Jyväskylä the development has been directed towards the destruction of old things, and it seems to be very difficult for many town dwellers to adapt to the rate of development. It is also felt that the new and the modern cannot possibly compensate for the losses:

And I remember those beautiful gates there were those board gates and the wooden houses and the beautiful carvings in the window frames, and then came all the machines and fancy equipment then all they can make is straight walls with or without holes. And bland. And then those beautiful like there where nowadays there is Gummeruksenkatu street there used to be the old wooden houses and the old pharmacy there was this lovely, I remember the, there were those beautiful diamond-shaped windows and different colour glass. (Woman 1944.)

Above all, people want to remember Jyväskylä as a town of wooden houses, characterised by low commercial and residential houses. As such, the image is collective and unites the town dwellers who remember the time in question. In the reminiscences, one can detect a touch of nostalgia, in which the people and the way of life of a small town are joined with a pleasant and controllable environment (see Davis 1979). Within the general framework, small details of individual buildings are also recalled – those in particular that are no longer part of the townscape. In the same way as the previous informant, many others, too, stopped in their reminiscence at the corner of the old pharmacy of Jyväskylä, which was situated on Gummeruksenkatu Street and built in 1861. Their attention was drawn especially to its entrance porch decorated with coloured polygon windows. The pharmacy operated in the same building for a hundred years; in

1964 that building as well as the other wooden houses on the same site were pulled down to make room for a seven-storey residential house (Kydén & Salmela 2000: 67–69).

The reminiscence of the old Jyväskylä constructed in wood serves as an answer to the need to find something stable, especially in the midst of the development which began in the 1960s and 1970s and which still continues – the development which has caused the constant change in the townscape of Jyväskylä. Characteristically to reminiscence, the past environments, which are felt to be permanent even when they are gone, are preserved as material for both individual and collective reminiscence. They are permanent as memory traces. By reminiscing about the Jyväskylä of the old days, even with a trace of nostalgia, one deliberately controls forgetting. One remembers the past as one wants to remember it, even though the positive sides of the town's current development are also acknowledged – the increased tidiness of the town centre and the facilitating effect of the pedestrian streets on walking, shopping and taking care of other errands. It seems, however, that remembering and forgetting do not go hand in hand. Instead, by remembering we emphasise the need for preservation in order to express our appreciation of the past.

Roaming the Streets

Timo Kopomaa (1997: 27–28) has described urban space as a collective commodity: it is open for many users simultaneously, an object of shared use and consumption. Each person uses the space as an individual but he/she is still dependent on the rules, norms and conventions concerning the use of the

space. In the Jyväskylä of the 1950s it was still the custom that adherence to the rules was supervised by beat policemen, who used to walk in pairs, maintaining order. Gatherings in public places were strictly regulated: in the streets, for example, it was prohibited to stay in one place even with a small group. Kopomaa refers to Michel Foucault's (1980) idea of discipline dividing people spatially. According to Kopomaa (1997: 30), the street is a totalitarian institution of society, and an element of discipline. The informants remember that in the Jyväskylä of the 1950s the groups of young people that gathered in the streets and wandered about were under particularly strict surveillance:

We wandered about in town and. And spat and. Also the only time in my life I landed in jail was when I, we were four mates and. We just walked there the usual Kauppakatu, Asemakatu, Kilpisenkatu, Väinönkatu Streets this circle round that block. In the early fifties, in fifty-five, six you were not allowed to gather like this. The police were you see, always two and they, said break up you are not allowed to gather and. We had hair pomade and these, hats on and we spat and, the first time they said now boys clear off and stop that spitting, but we didn't we were back in no time. I guess they got fed up with us then they took us into jail, they kept us in jail for three hours because we, had gathered and spat there, on Kauppakatu Street. (Man 1941.)

Wandering the streets can be regarded as a manifestation of youth culture, to which the youth of today, assembling in the centre of Jyväskylä at the weekends, is an extension. The stretch of Kauppakatu Street which is closed from traffic for pedestrian use and the shopping centres along it, in particular, serve as meeting points for people of all ages – and especially the young. In the same way as before, the gatherings of

young people are not always looked at approvingly, and some of the youngsters themselves admit being tired of loitering in the shopping centres and on the steps in front of them (Junkala & Sääskilähti 1999: 58–66). It is true, however, that there are not many other places available in the town centre which would be suitable for their daily get-togethers.

The youth walking about the streets could also be described as idlers or, as Walter Benjamin (1986: 45–49) calls them, *flâneurs*: wandering about and observing the street life, they aim at seeing and at being seen. For adolescents, being seen, making an appearance, watching others and being the object of gazes is the main motive for gathering together. Like the youth of today, the Jyväskylä youngsters of the 1920s, 1930s and 1950s – boys with hair pomade in their hair, walking around the block – also wanted to be seen, but to stand out, too. The streets and wandering about the streets are a part of the communication between the young, in which the meanings bound to both place and time are common to all the groups of young people roaming the streets. The police, on the other hand, have interpreted the stirring and gatherings of young people from their own frame of reference, and have acted accordingly in trying to break up the groups of youngsters.

The elderly town dwellers seem to think that the town centre functions quite well. The pedestrian street, almost the full length of which is kept unfrozen even in the winter by a heating system, serves as a safe passage from one shopping centre to the other. With the coming of the pedestrian street the town centre is regarded as having become tidier and better functioning in many ways. Moreover, in the summer the pedestrian

street is looked upon as an oasis, which brings a breath of international atmosphere for the passers-by to enjoy.

I was rather sceptical about the whole pedestrian street but now I have realised because there is the heating now, it stays unfrozen in the winter. So it's marvellous. I give it my blessing in that respect. What I was surprised by was that, how could they pull down all the houses along the street, make them hollow inside. They used to be full of apartments and offices. Suddenly there are no walls, just the corridor and there you zigzag your way, to the shops in different directions, it's as if they had suddenly become hollow, the old stone houses. They changed completely. (Woman 1916.)

It's true that it's a kind of an oasis in the summer, that you can go and sit there, there are those, what do you call those square things. Yes, seats –. Many people sit there, and now there are those open-air bars, pubs and there's one in front of almost every house. – It does feel nice when it's

a warm day, it feels really relaxing to walk there, you don't have to wear much clothes, watch the people there's a lot of foreign tourists. (Woman 1927.)

In the reminiscences of the elderly people, in particular, the town is an organised whole, which is defined by the memories of the old town of wooden houses, on the one hand, and by the more vaguely conceived decades of change, the 1960s and 1970s, on the other hand. Although the town is still partly transforming into something new, all new things are not condemned on the basis of memories; instead, the current situation needs to be taken under control, too. These efforts to achieve control are helped and supported by individual factors considered as having a positive effect on the town's development and general atmosphere, such as the pedestrian street.



The pedestrian street in the centre of Jyväskylä in 1999. Memory Archives of Central Finland.

People and Places

A town can be examined through the different images that it evokes in the town dwellers and in those who use the different areas and places of the town. These images can be physical, concerning buildings, spatial areas, limits or landmarks. The images may also accommodate more human, social and communal signs: in this case the above street routes could be explained by social channels and points of contact, for example (Lynch 1968: 123–139). In reminiscence, the events and places of everyday life often also involve people who have stuck in the reminiscing person's mind particularly well: they serve as social landmarks and guide him/her through the places of his/her memories. The situated life story (Simonsen 1991: 429) is bound to time and place as narratives, the principal roles of which are played by the people who come to the mind of the reminiscing person as recollections and by their then ordinary daily lives. Upon reminiscence, however, the ordinary is transformed into extraordinary because its ordinary nature has become history. I shall illustrate this process by the mental wandering of the male informant, born in 1941, quoted above: in his mind, he wanders through the alleys of Halssila in the Jyväskylä of his childhood days, and the people he "meets" guide him further in his childhood environment. The narrator's family, which in those days consisted of the parents and two sons, moved to Halssila in 1943; they became the tenants of a Russian-born shopkeeper, and lived on the upper floor of his house in a flat of one chamber and a kitchen. The shop was downstairs. According to the narrator's recollection, the shopkeeper himself was a peculiar, superstitious man:

We lived there on Halssilanmäki hill, in Siilinkuja lane, there was Varonin's house, on the upper floor of a wooden house – downstairs there was a shop, Varonin's shop. – And this Varonin had been Russia – these emigrants or emigrated from there. And a very superstitious man. He had an apple garden there were apple trees and for us Halssila kids that was one heck of a place. He thought he could, with some red pieces of string, to hold us in check, he hung them and cast those, spells so that the kids wouldn't steal the apples. But he didn't scare us off. We teased him a little because he was so that he didn't really speak Finnish that well. The big boys once decided to throw a cat in that well and so they did and then there were even the police involved because, Varonin got cross with us for casting such spells on him. He reckoned that everything people do is magic and witchcraft. The apples were good, though. (Man, 1941.)

The reminiscence proceeds along Siilinkuja Lane. Next to the narrator's house lived a smith, in the house after that a cupper and at the end of the street there was a ski shop. It was the end of the 1940s, and according to the narrator, in the town of wooden houses life was still warm and human. The neighbours were acquainted and self-sufficient in many services. For the children in the neighbourhood, watching the activities of the adults and all the comings and goings of everyday life was a kind of a school of adversity; indeed, their reminiscence often focuses on people and their affairs.

Life in the working-class neighbourhood of Halssila appears very realistic in the reminiscence of the narrator. The adults had secrets of their own, which they could not, however – perhaps did not even want to – completely hide from the children. The children naturally understood things in their own way but, watching the adults, they shared in the joint secrets of the community. The life environment embraced its own

way of life, to which outsiders had no access: thus, the community was fortified to endure the intrusions of outsiders. According to the same man's (1941) reminiscences, the self-sufficiency of the community extended even to a kind of "social security" – the community took care of its own:

When we lived there in Majavakatu Street there was, I won't mention his surname but Topi, lived with his family. When people had my mother and father had to use too, borrow money. Topi always lent it. I mean you could always get it from him. – And this Topi was one of the most well known bootleggers in Jyväskylä. – And there used to be a lot of the city fathers came there by taxi, to get the booze and then every little while came the police cars came there, to raid the place. But the way he managed to avoid being caught was, he had two sons, our age. And one that was a little bit younger. Every time the police came in the wife took the child and took him to this wooden bed where children used to. And the police never rummaged in the child's bed. And it had a false bottom and underneath were the bottles. Then they found it out. This Topi he also had a wooden leg. He had in Halssila or ... he had been run over by a freight train and lost his leg. When he was drunk, he always showed it to us children told us boys to come and see how he drove a nail into his leg and the first time when you didn't know it, when he put a nail there and hit it with a hammer... He really liked children and then he kept us there and said if you hear a police car coming let me know straight away. – Many a time we sat there on the fence and watched the police go through all the stores but they didn't find anything. (Man 1941.)

Reminiscence and the Permanence of Places

A situated life story attaches the reminiscing person to a time, a place, people and events significant to his/her course of life. The significance of events is very personal: characteristically to individual reminis-

cence, an event significant to the reminiscing person may be totally insignificant to an outsider. Moreover, a situated life story provides the reminiscence with coherence, which helps the reminiscing person to "move" in times and places and to tolerate the features of the present which are still unorganised, or which may even feel uncomfortable. Jyväskylä is an illustrative example of a town whose townscape has undergone more or less radical changes during the last decades. In a situation like this, coherence must be sought from the past, from what is physically gone. In the case of Jyväskylä, the elderly narrators find it in the period of wooden houses. Changes, especially when radical or clearly challenging the past, easily entice us into looking back nostalgically on the past times, which often are also lost. In a way, nostalgia is used to call something that no longer exists; the present, on the other hand, does not evoke nostalgic feelings. Change is always required for the nostalgic feeling to arise, and the present thus exists by way of its past.

Although the past is often seen in a nostalgic light, it does not exclude being content with the present at the same time; the present is regarded as having its own advantages. In fact, there is no other way of going back to the past than reminiscence; a part of the town of memories actually is only a town in the memories. If the object of reminiscence still existed, it would not have to be reminisced about as something that has been lost. On the other hand, if past times were to return, they would be familiar and satisfactory for some town dwellers only; the development of a town cannot be entirely based on memories, either (Forty 1999).

The development prospects of Jyväskylä are clearly future-oriented, a tendency which could be seen already in the upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s. It seems that during those decades the town was not considered to be something that should uphold the past, but the trend was rather to create new things, encouraged by the optimism of the economic boom. At that time, there was no room for reminiscing about the past – and people experienced no need for it, either. In Jyväskylä, the present and the past – the time of the wooden houses – are separated by the fact that the present time is constantly changing: it has not reached a similar degree of permanence as the Jyväskylä now reminisced about. Nevertheless, in recent years, in particular, remembering and its meaning have occasionally manifested themselves collectively: collective reminiscence has proved valuable in serving as a strategy for defending a variety of old places in the town, and in joining the town dwellers of different ages in making common cause.

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Notes

- 1 This article concerns one theme of the research programme “Town residents and their places”, financed by The Academy of Finland. The target of the project is to shed light on the question how town residents in three towns, Helsinki, Jyväskylä and Vyborg (which represents a ceded town, lost to Soviet Union as a result of the Second World War) have met
- the urban changes during the latter half of the 20th century. The project also aims at paying attention to the two other important phenomena in an individual’s devotion to a place, namely memory and feeling of loss. As material in this article, I have both personal, biographical interviews and reminiscences written by the town dwellers themselves. The material was collected during the year 2000. There are altogether eight written accounts and seven two-to-five-hour biographical interviews (one of the interviewees has also written down her recollections). All of those who have provided written reminiscences are women, born between 1913 and 1948. Three of the interviewees are men, who were born in the 1930s and 1940s; the four female interviewees were born between 1916 and 1944. The interviews, in particular, have proved not only extensive in size but also very versatile. The material, quantitatively somewhat scarce, is qualitatively rich and repeatedly brings forth collectively shared memories and similar features of reminiscence. However, recollection material, and quite especially autobiographical material that can be extremely personal, must not be analysed and used as the medium of “truth”; reminiscence is always criss-crossing between the past and the present, and therefore even the “truths” change in the flow of time and adapt to the requirements of the time. The interview citations are unedited except for the occasional elimination of repetition. The names of persons, places and streets mentioned in the citations are in their original form. The interviewees and the writers of reminiscences are referred to by their sex and year of birth. Any differences between the interviews and the written texts are left outside the discussion.
- 2 Älylä is situated in the western part of Jyväskylä, near to the University of Jyväskylä Campus.
- 3 Juho Jussila was the head teacher of the Jyväskylä Teacher Training College and later a factory owner. The factory, which mainly manufactures children’s toys, is still in operation in Jyväskylä.
- 4 The average age of the demolished stone and brick houses was no more than 55 years, whereas that of the wooden houses was 90 years. Jyväskylä has not known how to appreciate, or has not been willing to appreciate, the importance of small stone and brick houses as historical documents of an era. (Jäppinen 1976: 107.)

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