

BETWEEN WOMEN: NARRATIVES OF ESTONIAN LESBIANS AND A BISEXUAL DURING THE TRANSITION FROM SOVIET TIMES

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Research interests: the doubly marginalised identities within the subcultural organisation, the subcultural ideologisation among 21st-century Estonian youth

In this article, I analyse the life narratives of three Estonian women who identify as either lesbian or bisexual. Based on three semi-structured in-depth interviews, I focus on the period when the local LGBTQ+ movement became active, during the 1980s and 1990s, after half a century of Soviet dominance that had crumbled and Estonia regained independence. The process of growing older, combined with the individual's biography, along with added depths of memory and critical reflection, are key elements in interpreting the social significance of their personal experiences. By using thematic analysis, I reveal how these personal experiences can become a shared narrative while letting us focus on the uniqueness of each life history.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ identity, post-Soviet, oral histories, lesbian, bisexual

Introduction

Estonian history is characterised by the narratives of people who belong to groups with often hidden or marginalised identities that have yet to be fully recognised. In my article, I examine the narratives of three women who identify as lesbian or bisexual. The women also played an active role in the local lesbian community during the early days of the Estonian LGBTQ+ movement between the 1980s and 1990s. This was the time when the Soviet rule was collapsing, and Estonia was regaining its independence.

I chose oral histories as the basis for my analysis because growing older, along with biography, remembering, and critical reflection, are all key elements in interpreting the social significance of personal experience.¹ Personal stories also allow for a focus on the unique aspects of each experience while revealing how individual memories intertwine when people remember the experience they shared at a certain point in time. Altogether, such personal yet socially shared experiences offer an insight into the time and space that was a turning point for Estonians, which is rarely discussed.

When analysing the narratives, I used a microhistorical approach, which offers a return to the narrative without overlooking marginalised voices in society. This allows us to grasp large-scale global processes and events as well as look at the memories of everyday life² while underscoring the importance of the local perspective.³ Additionally, this approach helps us focus on the narrative itself, as our lives are entangled in stories, and our identity and perception of reality are formed within a vast network of stories. At the same time, our deeds and words gain analytical meaning only when integrated into a larger narrative, while the latter's meaning depends upon the interpretation of individual events.⁴

Therefore, another central concept in my research is narrative, which I define as a complete unit that provides an overview of one's experience.⁵ It includes the text and its transmission and representation, which is related to the context in which events occur over time in a chronological sequence.⁶ To be a story, it must combine the elements of temporality, social context, events, and an opinionated conclusion, offering a certain coherency when combined.⁷ The narrator is the main character and an active participant in the narrative, rather than a bystander, giving them agency in the story.⁸

When thinking only about stories, it is dangerous to fail to recognise that other people's narratives are not merely the literary expression of their lived experiences.⁹ This brings into focus the concept of social history. The process of thinking with and about stories is intertwined. We all think with stories, engaging ourselves in a moral dialogue with them and noticing the historical and social details

1 Bennett 2010, 245.

2 Paul 2018, 64.

3 Walton et al. 2008, 4.

4 Väljataga 2011, 250–253.

5 McAlpin 2016, 3.

6 Väljataga 2011, 241–246.

7 McAlpin 2016, 7.

8 Elliott 2005.

9 Frank 2004, 209.

that demand recording. In my article, I aim to navigate between different registers, as a historian and as an empathetic friend,¹⁰ finding support in social history, which offers tools to think *with* and about the stories. I position these narratives in social, cultural, and political contexts to document significant structural changes, reconstruct people's experiences during those changes, and connect those two.¹¹

The research participants, methods, and limitations

In this chapter, I analyse the life stories of three Estonian women who identify as bisexual or lesbian. I found these women through personal contacts and gathered their narratives through semi-structured in-depth interviews. One of the interviewees, Sirts (1955–2022), was a well-known member of the LGBTQ+ community, and her interview has already been published.¹² Therefore, I use her real name and exact year of birth. I had known Sirts for many years, as she was a legendary barmaid at the oldest Estonian LGBTQ+ bar, *X-baar*. We met repeatedly during the interview process, which took place in several instalments, and she added retrospective moments, which she deemed essential. Sirts also brought me the photos and reviewed the transcript for accuracy. The interview, which lasted approximately two hours, was conducted by myself and my colleague, Silja Oja, in June 2021 and was later transcribed by me. Unfortunately, our last planned meeting was cancelled because Sirts passed away due to an illness.

In two other cases, I use pseudonyms to protect the interviewees' privacy and will not reveal their exact birth year. Riina (1961) is a well-known figure in both her professional community, where I initially met her when I was thirteen years old, and within the LGBTQ+ community. I interviewed Riina in 2015 for approximately two hours. As for Kristi (1971), it was her partner, whom I have known for twenty years, who informed me via Facebook chat after the publication of the interview with Sirts, that Kristi also has memories of the period between the 1980s and 1990s. I contacted Kristi for an interview, which she agreed to. The three of us met at a restaurant, and I interviewed Kristi in 2022, which lasted approximately two hours.

To convey each individual's story in the most comprehensive way possible and to explore the microworld of a particular story,¹³ I analysed each narrative in

10 Skultans 2012, 31.

11 Tilly 1985, 31; Väljataga 2011, 256.

12 Davidjants 2022.

13 McAlpin 2016, 18.

its entirety rather than focusing on common themes across all life stories. I then grouped the material according to themes that emerged across all the interviews. I also examined the structure and components of the narratives and how each story was told.¹⁴ I acknowledge that the small number of interviewees makes it challenging to see diverse patterns of shared experiences. However, I hope that this sample will equally highlight each of the narratives involved.

Throughout my research, I was writing about people with whom I belong in the same community. For the most part, they knew me, and we had strong elements of dialogue and shared experience in our conversations. Therefore, my research also contained aspects of at-home ethnography or autoethnography. Such an approach had its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, I had a deep knowledge of the socio-cultural context in which my fieldwork was positioned, and the insider role helped me access the community members.¹⁵ At the same time, knowing the interviewees involved a risk of interpretative bias. To mitigate this risk, I followed the feminist principle, which emphasises the connection between me as a researcher and the interviewee as a research participant, who discusses the general human experience that unites us.¹⁶ I considered data collection a collaboration between the researcher and the research participant,¹⁷ with both of us jointly creating the story.¹⁸ Later, while analysing the interviews, I used a bottom-up approach to remain grounded in the interviewees' perspectives and focus on how they perceived their experiences as much as possible.

Socio-historical background

All of the narratives were highly individual and, at the same time, situated within a similar political and cultural framework of late socialism. The Soviet Union consistently violated human rights, even if the severity of the oppression varied over decades. For example, people who expressed themselves differently from the mainstream, such as those involved in subcultures, ethnic minority organisations, etc., were subjected to discrimination. In addition, male homosexuality was criminalised.¹⁹ The interviews were conducted in the context of

14 Linno, Strömpl 2012, 56–57.

15 Hodkinson 2005, 146.

16 Oras 2008, 17.

17 Sfard, Prusak 2005.

18 McAlpin 2016, 15.

19 Talalaev 2010, 112.

the changes that occurred in the second half of the 1980s, which marked the end of deepening censorship and economic stagnation in the USSR. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev was appointed as the general secretary of the Soviet Union. In 1987, he announced *perestroika* as the country's new political direction. Gorbachev hoped to pull the country out of stagnation and economic crisis through this new direction, which included *glasnost*, the softening of censorship rules, the reduction of secrecy, and more freedom of expression in society.²⁰

Due to those reforms, the opportunity to express minority or underrepresented identities emerged. For example, when the reform-based changes began in the 1980s, people across the Soviet Union, including Estonia, took advantage of the chance to start their own national movements. Additionally, local ethnic minorities started to organise themselves culturally.²¹ Similarly, dispersing ideological restrictions sparked the local LGBTQ+ movement, and freely expressing an identity which was different than heterosexuality became possible. These conditions brought together my interviewees, who became socially active after Gorbachev's introduction of *perestroika*, and Estonia's subsequent return to independence in 1991.

Benedict Anderson has emphasised how the development of print media contributes to people's self-awareness²² and helps large groups of anonymous individuals imagine themselves as one nation with a shared set of values. This highlights the impact of the written word in forming communities. Similar processes took place in Estonia, where many people used print media to find each other and organise into groups. For example, this includes Armenians in 1986 as an ethnic minority²³ or subcultures, such as the Depeche Mode Fan Club in 1992.²⁴ The emergence of an independent press has given voice to the LGBTQ+ community, allowing them to connect with each other and express themselves. As a result of the first gay and lesbian personal ads being published, the foundation for future organisations was established. Since that time, the landscape of LGBTQ+ organisations has become highly diverse. One local peculiarity has been a lively lesbian movement. *Eesti Lesbiliit* (the Estonian Lesbian Union) became the first sexual minority organisation in Estonia established in 1990,²⁵ and my interviewees were actively involved in the organisation. Following Estonian

20 Made 2011, 152–153.

21 Davidjants 2016.

22 Anderson 2006.

23 Davidjants 2016.

24 Davidjants 2024.

25 Talalaev 2010, 112–113.

independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, society became even more open. The state censorship disappeared, and an almost unregulated free-market economy replaced the former totalitarian state. Public expressions of LGBTQ+ identity, including activism, became common, and subsequent decades witnessed the breakout of a good many LGBTQ+ organisations and movements.

Analysis of narratives of Sirts, Riina, and Kristi: love, activism

The article offers a qualitative thematic analysis of the life narratives during the late 1980s and early 1990s, of three Estonian women – Sirts, Riina, and Kristi – who identify as lesbian or bisexual. The preliminary interview's structure could determine the similarity in the progression. However, during the actual interviews, I allowed the interviewees to go beyond the questions and expand on topics that emerged organically from their dialogue. This led to a more unique difference in style and less in the exact content of the conversations, as the three participants proceeded somewhat similarly in their topics.



Fig. 1. Sirts around 1991.
Photo from a private collection
1. att. Sirtsa ap 1991. gadu.
Foto no privātkolekcijas



Fig. 2. Sirts at the X-baar, summer 2021.
Photo by Silja Oja
2. att. Sirtsa bārā X-baar, 2021. gada vasara.
Foto: Silja Oja

Sirts, Riina, and Kristi started their life stories from childhood and youth, acknowledging their non-normative identity rather early, despite the closed society of the Soviet Union era, and quickly mentioned their first relationship. They then delved into the social life and lesbian activism at the turn of the decade. They reflected upon current developments for LGBTQ+ people, including their private lives and concerns. During analysis, three main categories emerged that I discuss in detail in this article: participation in lesbian activism and social life during the transition from the Soviet to the post-Soviet period in Estonia, love relationships, and family and parenting.

Lesbian activism and social life

“I guess the aim at the very beginning was to map how many of us there are. Rights and stuff came later.” – Kristi

“I think there are about eight hundred such women [in Estonia]. I also know those who are married – with husbands and children – everything very decent. But then they come [to X-baar] later, and there they are.” – Sirts

All the interviewees were born during different decades, ranging from the 1950s to the 1970s. However, they all belonged to the same sociocultural context, as they were part of the early days of the lesbian movement in Estonia that began at the turn of the decade. As they all were active in the Estonian Lesbian Union, one of the first emerging themes during interviews was participation in the first wave of lesbian activism during the transition from the Soviet to post-Soviet times. This was intrinsically related to the creation of one's own social life. During that short period, which was marked by the destabilisation and subsequent collapse of (Soviet) socialism, people were driven by enthusiasm to undertake the creation of society as free and active individuals.²⁶ The stories focused heavily on this time, which was the densest part of the narrative.

The interviewees belonged to the pre-internet generation and relied mostly on writing letters or direct contacts to organise themselves into a community, whereas the following generation of activists focused mainly on internet interactions. The lesbian activist and historian Lilian Kotter initiated the activist movement by placing a newspaper ad in *Eesti Ekspress* on 2 March 1990, which stated: “Young woman wants to meet older lesbian women.”²⁷ All three members

26 Aareleid-Tart 2012, 2–11.

27 Kotter 2023.

remembered the ad – two of them responded to it, and one heard about it from her girlfriend at the time. Being active in the Lesbian Union also meant taking on duties. Riina recalls: “I remember meeting someone under that tree on Freedom Square. The goal was to get to know all of these people and to create a community circle. Everyone took someone under their wing.” Kristi, too, occasionally recalls the tasks she undertook in the Estonian Lesbian Union: “For a while, I even dealt with letters which came to me via the *Eesti Ekspress* mailbox. I had a small child, so I invited everyone who wrote to my place.”

The lives of the women intersected to some extent as well. They casually mentioned each other and referred to the same events, even though the period between the first and last interview was seven years. All three talked about the places in Tallinn that were the first to embrace the LGBTQ+ community. Some of the establishments were *Vase kelder*, *Enke kelder*, and *X-baar*, among others. The relationship with the Finnish lesbian community, who – according to all of them – brought the masculine style to the scene and with whom professional contacts have existed since 1990, was also discussed.²⁸ The DIY (do-it-yourself) aspect of events emphasised the community spirit of the era. For example, the bar counters were made from old doors, and the music came from cassettes, and people brought their own drinks and food. The theme days were organised, including BDSM Day (BDSM – sexual practices involving physical restraints: bondage, discipline, sadism and masochism) on Tuesday and Women’s Day on Wednesday. At least in retrospect, the act of partying was never just partying in itself but was instead a form of activism. According to Sirts: “It wasn’t just a party after the party. There was indoor hockey and basketball. We had halls booked on Ujula Street. We played sand football at Vösu, along with other games and a tug-of-war. It wasn’t the case that we were all simply nice, drunk fools.”

It is essential to note that before the internet era, it was crucial to actively participate in the union’s activities because there was no other way of recognising LGBTQ+ people in the city and meeting other women. Also, according to the interviewees, the generally feminine style of those involved was not so different from that of straight women. Under those conditions, age and profession did not play a role in shaping the community’s social life. There were people from various occupations, such as teachers, doctors, builders, historians, social workers, construction painters, and so on. Additionally, women of all ages were present, ranging from under 20 to those in their late 60s and born during the First Estonian Republic.

28 Taavetti 2018, 27–28.

In retrospect, when discussing activism, there was a subtle difference in emphasis – Sirts was building a professional life through activism and dug much deeper into the topic. On the other hand, Kristi and Riina emphasised building their personal lives through it. In all cases, social activism was intertwined with stories of relationships. The reason probably lies in that Riina defined herself through her professional identity, which lay outside of the LGBTQ+ movement. Meanwhile, Kristi's perception of narrative creation was mainly based on her private relationships. At the same time, Sirts remained professionally connected to the community until the very end, working at the *X-baar*.

Based on those three interviews conducted, it can be deduced that several beginnings coincided for this generation of LGBTQ+ activists in Estonia. Activism intertwined with love and relations, and the dawn of an independent Estonia together with its criminality. For instance, interviewees recalled shootings by local gangsters in the first lesbian bar. The borders, both actual and metaphoric and the atmosphere surrounding the LGBTQ+ community is aptly summed up through the carousel metaphor used by Sirts. The keywords were openness, curiosity, and a commitment to build up one's own community. At the same time, all the interviewees acknowledged how times have changed since then, including the way people meet and spend their time. Sirts commented on this from the perspective of working in a bar, saying, "Physically, people look the same, but the way they are and party is different. The feeling is gone." Meanwhile, Riina discussed the challenges from the point of view of finding a date in the new era.

Maybe people are a bit more tolerant in society now, but for me, personally, nothing much has changed. It's not easy for me to find a partner now at this stage of my life. (...) I could start writing to someone, but writing for a long time is pretty pointless, and I don't need an imaginary pen pal. I want to meet a person and see if I like them and whether they are likeable. I've been to *X-baar* a few times in six months. But you have to go there after midnight, or there will be no one there. Personally, I'd rather be at home and asleep by then. And if I go there, at my age, what would I talk about? The girls are sitting there around their table. I can't swing in there and start talking... But at that time [at the crossover between the 1980s and 1990s], there was really nothing more than a single newspaper ad that Lillian [Kotter] had put up. And, indeed, people simply recognised each other somehow and fell in love. People like us.

Love relations

“We had kittens in the attic at work, and then we climbed up there thinking we would feed them. Then we sat there in silence and darkness for half an hour, not saying a word. Well, I guess no one goes to sit in the attic with someone in silence.” – Riina

The second category was love relationships, which played the most prominent role in narratives. The main themes in this category were the acknowledgment of the lesbian or bisexual identity from an early age, the stories about feeling affectionate towards women, and the possibility of such relations in the Soviet times. For example, while dwelling on her childhood, Sirts recalls her first crushes and school-age platonic affections: “I personally started thinking in this way when I was around seven. I really liked my sister-in-law. She came here from somewhere in Russia, and when she left, I remember sniffing her pillow.” Riina also mentions how information about LGBTQ+ relationships was obtained in the mid-1970s, during the Soviet period, from a book entitled *Avameelselt abielust (Openly about marriage)*, which provided an early recognition of her non-normative identity, albeit in the section of perversions. She recalls: “I read there that it’s called like this when you are of the same sex, and I thought, well, probably it is with me like this. (...) I was platonically in love with one of my relatives, someone who was eight years older than me. I was about twelve years old then.” Similarly, Kristi remembers an awareness at the age of 11 when she saw a film on Finnish television showing two women intimately close.

The biggest difference between the interviewees was that Sirts focused on one relationship, while Riina and Kristi discussed several. In the whirlwind of adventures in Sirts’ life, there was one constant topic: the love of her life and a friend called Taimi (who passed away a few months before the interview with Sirts took place). Sirts repeatedly returned to mentioning Taimi during the interview, whom she met in the erotic dance troupe *Essex* and with whom she later opened the *X-baar*. The prominence of that relationship in Sirts’ life is summed up metaphorically in the following commentary, showing how a relationship can continue for years, even if only in a latent form:

Taimi and I were together for a very short time. We were not actually together. But I was with her all my life, just like an old married couple. We couldn’t be together, and we couldn’t be apart either. Thirty-two years until the end. Then, there were all kinds of quarrels. I realized that Taimi was looking for something else and I didn’t belong there. But at the same time, she was always there for me, and I was there for her.

We were a couple at the very beginning. It was 1990 when we were in *Essex*. We were *podrugas* ['girlfriends' in Russian] of the war front, as they say. I was thirty-five at the time, and she was twenty. We had to go to Yugoslavia [with the dance troupe] a few days after my birthday, and Taimi dared to approach me and send me a letter on paper. She realised, somehow (...). Let's be honest, I didn't take her seriously because she had just married. She was such a man's woman, beautiful and everything. But at some point, we were in some hotel, and then she had a fight with her guy who was there with her the whole time. And then she ran into my room. I was all alone, and she grabbed my neck, and I understood how bad she felt. And I realized, my God, how vile am I? She really had feelings for me, and I had been so superficial. That's when I suddenly felt – I had never been in love with her as such – but I love her. We had already known each other for a few years by this point. Our relationship had been ticking over like this for a few years but at that moment, I realized it was the right thing, and that right thing continues to this day.

Much of Riina's conversation was also about relationships, but she prioritised them in order of importance rather than their chronological order. Unlike Sirts, who focused on one love story, Riina recalled relationships from different decades, relating them wittily to the social situation during the turn of the 1970s that carried over to the 1980s. Like Sirts and Kristi, Riina did not acknowledge the issue of homophobia during both the Soviet and post-Soviet years. Instead, she considered her heterosexual friends to be tolerant. Riina painted a picture of reality in which loving same-sex relationships were accepted, even in a stagnant society, by the more bohemian part of the hetero(normative) society. While discussing what it meant to discover one's LGBTQ+ identity during the Soviet period, she also reflected that lesbian relationships were perfectly possible and did not necessarily cause internal anguish to the women because "If you love someone, this love seems natural." Riina's relationships were longer than usual for someone her age, often lasting for several years, but sometimes ending sadly:

Then she stopped loving me. She wanted a husband and children, I guess. I hitchhiked to see her [once]; she was sent to work in the countryside. This is when I found out that a man had been brought into the house, and I was told that I had to leave now. It was a terrible moment, and then I hitchhiked back.

In Kristi's narrative, too, the most coherent part is her relationships and flings with other women. What makes her story unique is the way it reflects her personal development over the years through the evolution of different

relationships. It paints a picture of a young and somewhat naive girl who nevertheless roots her sexual identity in the LGBTQ+ field. In her narrative, the private and public spheres intersect – the scenes are parties, such as those of the lesbian union and the apartments. As a storyteller, Kristi recalls colourful details from her extensive dating history:

We were young, and my girlfriend lived in Mustamäe [a suburb of Tallinn]. We hung out there all night and got into a fight. I left and slammed the door, of course. At six in the morning, I'm walking across the yard, the sun is rising in Mustamäe, and then I hear Tina Turner's "I don't wanna lose you." She quickly found the tape, and it was just so sweet.

During the interviews, I focused on understanding the interviewees' perspectives and also allowed them to bring up topics they felt were important. As a result, an unexpected theme emerged regarding relations with men. In addition to being involved romantically with women, the interviewees talked about romantic involvement with men. They all contested the common stereotype that a woman who defines herself as a lesbian can only have an authentic identity when she is in relationships exclusively with women. In both cases of lesbian identifying interviewees, relationships with men were clearly not seen as a threat to their lesbian identity. They also mentioned the invisibility of bisexual women. This reality, which was likely not unique among women who identified as lesbian or bisexual, was poetically expressed by Riina:

I have actually loved my husband. Our child was born out of love. That time was dedicated to him, and I loved him. But something pricked at my soul. There was still a desire to meet someone. And I had some experience... I met someone on the street. I guess the need to find someone had become so deep. I was out with a gay friend, a young person, in front of the café, *Moskva*. I was talking to someone who looked interesting, who had short hair and a sailor's shirt, and I thought she was someone else until my friend exclaimed: 'Well, that's an old lesbian!'. I said: 'Really? Let's turn back!' Immediately I approached her... We went to visit her [at her place], and since the front doors were not locked then, I simply returned the next day. Then suddenly everything happened... Soon I had already broken my marriage. I came home in the morning to find my husband crying in our bed. That was terrifying, very sad... I asked him, what do we have to do now? Do we have to divorce now? He said yes, we have to divorce now.

Queer children and parenting as queer

Once, when he was eight, I mumbled something, to which he shouted: ‘Mum!’ I didn’t understand and even flinched, but now he calls me *emps* [‘mum’ in everyday Estonian], and I don’t mind. Today he has become my son. He is a very good boy, even looks like me by now. – Sirts

Another unexpected theme occurring in the interviews was parenting. A large part of the discussion concerned the role of children in the LGBTQ+ community, both those born from previous relationships with men and those born to female couples with gay friends or anonymous donors around the turn of the century. Becoming a parent through IVF (*in vitro* fertilisation) or with the help of gay friends was organically linked to the growth and development of the community, as Kristi’s reasoning suggests: “In the beginning, when I started going to the events, [having a baby] was rather exceptional. But at a certain point, there was a baby bom in our lesbian union because everybody started having babies. People got together at these events.” Sirts confirms Kristi’s opinion which shatters the stereotypical assumption that there were no children born among LGBTQ+ couples before the turn of the century: “There were indeed children already in the 1990s. Somehow they came, and we did not ask too much about it.”

Concerning the parenthood of the interviewees, all the narratives revealed a non-normative approach to mothering, which is still relevant today during a very different style of governance. They all avoided the traditional approach to family, showing three very different paths and motivations for becoming a parent.²⁹ Sirts, for example, showed her path to motherhood and affection towards a child caringly by telling the story of raising a son. Her son had been abandoned by his biological parent and her partner:

I don’t have children myself. I’ve done all kinds of things, but I’ve never become pregnant. But if it had happened, there was no way I would have gotten rid of it. But I have raised a child. That child came to me at the age of three. At first, he was waiting with me for his mother. We watched a Canadian film in which the mother bear died, and the little bear wandered around. I lied to the child by saying that mummy would come back soon, mummy’s at work, and so on. And then he sniffed and said: ‘What are you telling me? My mummy won’t come. My mummy left me, just like this little bear was left to walk around on his own in the film’. And then I realised, my God, what a stupid thing it is that I’m saying to this kid! Children don’t need lies, so from that moment, I never lied to him again.

29 Fish et al. 2019.

A significant portion of the conversation, also concerned in Riina's case, was parenting and the position of bisexual women in male and female relationships. This probably was one of the reasons why Riina repeatedly mentioned marriage. Compared to Sirts, she showed a more traditional path of becoming a mother. Her reflection echoed heteronormative presumptions prevalent in Soviet Estonia around the 1970s to 1980s, which linked motherhood directly to heterosexual relationships. Thus, Riina talked about her early marriage and proposing to her husband, which she associated with her desire for children at the time. According to Riina, "We all have a woman programmed into us. As a part of nature, we all want children, or at least most of us."

Riina also felt the need to explicitly discuss the realms and problems involved in being a bisexual woman. Her queer approach to parenthood emerged as she considered what family life and parenting means for women in lesbian relationships, as well as for women who have had children from a previous relationship with a man. She discussed her son at length, growing up with a mother in a lesbian relationship, and the need for honesty with children. She reflected on how "he figured it out and asked me about it when he was of school age, five or six years old. I should have told him nicely, but I couldn't." Here lies the beauty and essence of Riina's narrative. Bisexual women often do not feel themselves to be at home in lesbian or LGBTQ+ communities, and also in a heteronormative society – a feeling which tends to reflect the marginalisation of a bi identity.³⁰ One of the reasons for this alienation is that self-identified heterosexual and homosexual people may have overlapping interests in terms of the erasure of bisexuality. These, perhaps not always conscious, interests led them into an epistemic contract regarding the stabilisation of exclusive sexual orientation categories.³¹ Riina opposes such a binary by not only talking about her own experiences but also those of her friends, interweaving literary examples such as Virginia Woolf. Altogether, she articulates her experience as a bisexual woman. Riina's narrative offers bi-identified women the agency to be included in the lesbian community.

Unlike the other interviewees, Kristi mentions her child only occasionally: "My mother largely raised him. [There was] a new exciting world [around me]. It was necessary to fly." Perhaps having a child at the age of seventeen also plays a role here. Kristi intrinsically relates having a child to her heterosexual relationship and the beginning of her social and private lesbian life. While reminiscing, she merges all those different layers together:

30 Hayfield et al. 2014.

31 Yoshino 2000.

I remember my thoughts so well about having a baby, either now or never. By then, I already had a clear picture of what or who [interested me, i.e. women]. It was a deliberate decision. I thought that if I didn't do it now, I never would. We had already been living together since I was fourteen. He went into the army when he was eighteen, and I was sixteen, and then I followed other paths. I don't remember where it came from. There was probably a moment of recognition. [When he returned] I already had a girlfriend.

As Kristi's words vividly illustrate, the pressures of late socialism and national awakening on the proper way of mothering were also crucial, forcing a woman into a domestic role after childbirth:

At that time, apartments were still distributed by the state, so he [the boyfriend] got an apartment from the municipality [about 50 kilometres from the capital] and came to me saying: 'Of course, come here with the child – I even have a washing machine.' That washing machine was the word that made me want to vomit – that I would come for the washing machine? It somehow symbolised housewifery for me.

In Kristi's case, the parent-child relationship reveals itself from a slightly different angle, and the emphasis shifts from queer parenting to queer children. The significant topic is related to Kristi's relationship with her own parents. Her father brags to his girlfriends about his lesbian daughter. Whereas Kristi's mother – a product of a closed society – appears extremely intolerant of her daughter's identity. Kristi's closest relationship in the family is with her grandmother, about whom she talks very warmly. Such an experience resonates broadly with existing research about the role of grandparents in the lives of their LGBTQ+ grandchildren. According to studies, female grandparents who know about their LGBTQ+ grandchildren are likely to become important family members when young adults come out.³² Also, findings indicate that grandparents who learn about their grandchildren's LGBTQ sexuality may have surprisingly supportive reactions, even in comparison to other family members.³³ Kristi takes it somewhat further:

My dad's mum was the first to know. We were 'besties', always the closest to each other. I knew her and trusted her. Afterwards, she befriended the gay guys, being such a fan of them. All my gay friends

32 Scherrer 2016.

33 Scherrer 2011.

went to her to discuss their relationship dramas and also to gossip about me. She was a real lady, always having red painted nails, smoking a fancy cigarette. She was the only person in my family whom I really loved. We were so alike. When she died, she was around sixty. There was a party in Enke's basement, and grandma said she wanted to come, too. I told everyone that my grandma would come with me, and then she died a week before the party took place.

Conclusion and discussion

I have had an awesome life. Happy? I am not sure how big the happiness has been. All that has been done – I don't regret a single thing. I rather regret what I haven't done yet. I have had a very colourful and quite impulsive life. Awesome life. Every trick has been done. – Sirts

All three interviewees belonged to the same socio-cultural context and were part of the early days of the first wave of the late or post-Soviet lesbian movement in Estonia during the 1980s and 1990s. The movement organised itself into a community mainly through letter writing and later through meetings. The interviews revealed three main categories: participation in lesbian activism and social life, romantic relationships, and family relationships.

While the social context was evident in Sirts's story, it was less explicit in Riina's and Kristi's, with the social meanings being more implicit. All three talked very little about the totalitarian Soviet conditions, and their realisation of their non-normative identities in those circumstances did not seem to cause them any pain, at least not retrospectively. None of them recalled the homophobia prevalent in the society during that time. They profoundly remembered participating in the activities of the newly formed Estonian Lesbian Union in the context of the lawless 1990s. Although they did not say much about the remarkable social changes, the notion was implicitly present in the narrative, as all these changes made early lesbian activism possible. From a community-building perspective, an interesting aspect of the transition period emerged from all three interviews: social boundaries, whether of age, occupation or education, were much less strict in creating a community than today.

As the interviewer, I welcomed Sirts, Riina, and Kristi to deviate from the original structure of the interview. Nevertheless, they chose to focus mainly on the context of their sexual identity. Another aspect of the retrospective was that the stories shared were clearly from within the LGBTQ+ community, and

predominantly, the main characters were all members of the community, mainly women. Despite the similar context and process of storytelling, the three women had very different narrating styles. Sirts offered a precise sequence of events, and she was strongly present throughout her story. The narration style was emotionally charged and direct, focusing on the events rather than self-reflection. Her story formed a cohesive whole, providing a clear overview of the events that she considered essential. Riina's story was more fragmented, with the interviewee and interviewer as two members of the community, engaging in dialogue and exchanging experiences. During some parts of the interview with Riina, the storytelling became secondary. The descriptions of events alternated with philosophical and very personal discussions about sexual identity and its meaning, about the role of love and relationships over the lifespan, and about the challenges being posed by the new era for women loving women. Riina did not follow a clear progression from one point to another but repeatedly returned to specific moments that were important to her. Of all the three interviews, Kristi's story was the most fragmented but also contained many colourful, even anecdotic memory pictures and specific episodes. Kristi, a vivid and funny storyteller, was very present in her narrative. She talked expressively, sometimes imitating people and their voices, making them recognisable.

Love played a crucial role among all the motives and was more significant than activism or social life. While the story of activism was quite comparable to the different groups organising in Estonia at the time of the change of power,³⁴ the narratives about love between women were each beautiful and unique in terms of storytelling. A series of stories unfolded, describing the discovery and expression of feelings from a very young to an older age, from a closed society to a more open one. The theme of romantic involvement with women was not the only focus; two unexpected themes emerged: relationships with men and parenthood. Through these themes, the women challenged the common stereotype that lesbian identity is only authentic in relationships with women, while also touching upon the invisibility of bisexual women. The narratives also offered a queer approach to motherhood, which remains relevant today in a very different style of governance. Overall, they all avoided the traditional approach to family, showing three distinct paths to and motivations for parenthood.³⁵

Finally, from the viewpoint of at-home ethnography, it was easy for me to relate to the narratives. Also, as a member of a post-Soviet generation that went through similar phases in the 21st century, my impression was that the focuses

34 Davidjants 2016; 2024.

35 Fish et al. 2019.

and emphases were not so different from those of the previous generations. Both generations would have encountered similar paths toward self-discovery, social life, and activism, as well as fatigue. The narratives illuminated all these very different paths into queer parenthood, which are visible many decades later.

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STARP MUMS, IGAUNIETĒM: LESBIEŠU UN BISEKSUĀLAS SIEVIETES NARATĪVI PAR PADOMJU UN PĒCPADOMJU PĀREJAS LAIKU

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Zinātniskās intereses: divkārt marginalizētās identitātes subkultūras organizācijā, subkultūras ideoloģizācija 21. gadsimta Igaunijas jauniešu vidū

Rakstā ir analizēti trīs igauņu sieviešu dzīvesstāsti, kuras identificējas kā lesbietes vai biseksuāles. Balstoties uz trim daļēji strukturētām padziļinātām intervijām, autore koncentrējas uz laiku, kad vietējā LGBT+ kustība aktivizējās 20. gadsimta 80. un 90. gados, pēc pusgadsimtu ilgušās padomju varas sabrukšanas un Igaunijas neatkarības atgūšanas. Gadu gājums apvienojumā ar indivīda biogrāfiju, atmiņu dzīles un vērtējošs atskats uz savu dzīvi ir izšķirošās sastāvdaļas, interpretējot personīgās pieredzes sociālo vērtību. Lietojot tematisko analīzi, autore atsedz, kā personīgās pieredzes var kļūt par kopīgu stāstījumu, vienlaikus atklājot katra dzīvesstāsta neatkarotjamību.

Atslēgas vārdi: LGBT+ identitāte, pēcpadomju, mutiskā vēsture, lesbiete, biseksuāle

Kopsavilkums

Igaunijas vēsturi raksturo apslēptu un marginalizētu identitāšu naratīvi, kuri gaida uzklauššanu. Rakstā analizēti trīs sieviešu dzīvesstāsti, kuras identificējās kā lesbietes vai biseksuāles un kuras aktīvi piedalījās Igaunijas LGBT+ kustības pirmsākumos, aptuveni no 20. gadsimta 80. līdz 90. gadiem, kad padomju vara sabruka un Igaunija atguva neatkarību.

Stāstījumu analīzei autore lietoja mutvārdu vēsturi, jo gadu gājums, autobiogrāfija, atmiņas un vērtējošs atskats uz dzīvi ir svarīgas sastāvdaļas, interpretējot sociālo un kulturālo faktoru nozīmi personiskajā pieredzē. Dzīvesstāsti izceļ katras personīgās pieredzes unikalitāti, vienlaikus parādot, kā individuālās un kolektīvās atmiņas savijas, kad cilvēki atceras pieredzi, kas viņiem bija kopīga noteiktā laika posmā. Kopumā personīgā pieredze kļūst par sociālās grupas pieredzi, veidojot vēsturisku fenomenu, tādējādi piedāvājot ne tik bieži apspriestu skatpunktu uz laika periodu, kas igauņiem bija pavērsiena punkts. Analizējot naratīvus, mikrovēsturiska pieeja ļāva autorei atkārtoti atgriezties pie stāstījuma, vienmēr saredzot sabiedrības marginalizētās balsis.

Naratīvi tika veidoti no daļēji strukturētām padziļinātām intervijām. Tā kā viena no intervētajām, Sirtsas (1955–2022), bija labi zināma LGBT+ kopienā, tika lietots viņas īstais vārds un uzrādīti dzīves dati. Savukārt abām pārējām – Rīnai (1961) un Kristi (1971)

izmantoti pseidonīmi un netika norādīts precīzs vecums. Lai pētītu katra naratīva mikropasauli, katrs stāstījums analizēts atsevišķi, nevis pēc kopējām tēmām, kas sastopamas trijos dzīvesstāstos. Balstoties uz intervijās teikto, detalizēti aprakstīts stāstu saturs un sastādīts kopsavilkums. Aplūkota katra stāstījuma struktūra un sastāvdaļas, kā arī stāstīšanas veids. Analizējot intervijas, izmantota pieceja “no apakšas”, lai būtu pēc iespējas tuvāk intervējamo perspektīvām un koncentrētos uz to, kā viņas izjuta savu pieredzi.

Visas respondentes piederēja vienam un tam pašam sociokulturālajam kontekstam, piedaloties lesbiešu kustības pirmsākumos Igaunijā, aptuveni 20. gadsimta 80. un 90. gados. Stāstu esence koncentrējās uz šo īso laika periodu, kuru raksturoja (padomju) sociālisma destabilizācija un tai sekojošais sabrukums. Šis laiks atspoguļoja entuziasmu, mudinot cilvēkus pārveidot sabiedrību kā brīvām un aktīvām personām. Šo sieviešu dzīves takas arī zināmā mērā krustojās, viņām gan vienai otru nejauši pieminot, gan atsaucoties uz vieniem un tiem pašiem notikumiem.

Interesantākais atklājums bija tas, ka šajos diezgan līdzīgos apstākļos parādījās trīs ļoti atšķirīgi stāstīšanas veidi, pat ja temats, par ko intervējamās runāja, kopumā bija līdzīgs. Sirtsas stāstījums piedāvāja ļoti skaidru lineāru notikumu secību. Rīnas stāsts bija fragmentārāks, mijoties dialogam un pieredzes atstāstījumam starp divām intervijā klātesošajām kopienas locekļēm – intervējamo un autori – un tādējādi dažviet stāstīšana kļuva sekundāra. Arī Kristi stāstījums bija fragmentārs, ietverot daudz krāsainu, pat anekdotisku atmiņu tēlojumu.

Respondentes sāka savus stāstus no bērnības un jaunības, diezgan agri apjaušot savu nenormatīvo identitāti, neskatoties uz Padomju Savienības laika slēgto sabiedrību. Viņas ātri vien pieminēja savas pirmās attiecības un pēc tam pārgāja uz lesbiešu aktīvisma un sabiedriskās dzīves sākumu. Lai gan visas trīs bija aktīvas LGBT+ kustībā, Sirtsas šajā tēmā iedziļinājās vairāk nekā Rīna vai Kristi. Iemesls tam, iespējams, slēpjas apstākļi, ka Rīna vairāk identificējās ar savu profesiju, kas nesaistījās LGBT+ kustību, savukārt Kristi stāstījums galvenokārt balstījās uz viņas privātajām attiecībām. Tajā pašā laikā Sirtsas, kura līdz mūža beigām strādāja X-bārā, vienmēr saglabāja profesionālo saikni ar kopieni.

Sirtsas stāstījumā sociālais konteksts bija ļoti klātesošs, savukārt Rīnas un Kristi stāstos tas nebija tik izteikts, jo viņu naratīvos plašākas sociālās nozīmes bija netiešas. Visas trīs ļoti maz runāja par totalitārajiem padomju apstākļiem, un savas nenormatīvās identitātes atjausana tajos apstākļos viņas nesāpināja, vismaz ne retrospektīvi. Viņas atcerējās savu dalību Igaunijas Lesbiešu savienības veidošanā un darbībā, kas kļuva iespējama režīma maiņas dēļ.

Starp stāstu virzošajām tēmām būtiska loma bija mīlestībai. Mīlestība iekļāva ne tikai romantiskas attiecības ar sievietēm. Viens no autores mērķiem bija atstāt vietu tēmām, ko intervējamās pašas varētu izvirzīt. Rezultātā atklājās divas neparedzētas tēmas – viena par attiecībām ar vīriešiem un otra par bērnu audzināšanu. Intervējamās noliedza to, ka biseksuālas sievietes neeksistē. Sakarā ar sieviešu neheteroseksuālām identitātēm stāstījumi attēloja kvīru pieeju bērnu audzināšanā, kas joprojām ir aktuāli

mūsdienās pat ļoti atšķirīgas valsts pārvaldes laikā. Viņas izvairījās no tradicionālā ģimenes modeļa, rādot trīs dažādas pieejas un motivācijas, lai kļūtu par māti.

Kopumā intervijas parādīja, ka, neskatoties uz padomju laika autoritārismu, lesbiešu attiecības ir pastāvējušas vienmēr. Raugoties caur vietējās etnogrāfijas skatpunktu, autorei bija viegli uztvert šos naratīvus, un, pārstāvēt pēcpadomju paaudzi, kura jaunajā gadsimtā piedzīvojusi līdzīgus posmus, viņa pieļauj, ka šīs paaudzes uzmanības fokuss un uzsvāri daudz neatšķirās no iepriekšējās paaudzes. Abas paaudzes varētu būt gājušas līdzīgus ceļus gan sevis izzināšanā, gan sociālās dzīves veidošanā un aktīvismā (un ar to saistītajā nogurumā). Visbeidzot, šie dažādie veidi, kā kvīri kļūst par vecākiem un veido ģimeni, ir redzami arī daudzus gadu desmitus vēlāk.

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