

MEMOIRS RECORDED BY BALTIC GERMAN WOMEN: AMBIVALENT LIVES AND TIMES

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Abstract:

This paper examines memoirs of Baltic German women through the light of theories of postcolonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha. The article focuses on reconstruction of Baltic German identity after significant political changes in the beginning of the 20th century.

The Baltic German history of that period is the story of disappointments and adjustments. The Germans had to face numerous losses, both moral and material. Under the circumstances, the preservation of self-esteem and self-identity were a key issue. The authors perceive the schizophrenic ambivalence of their position, the incompatibility of the past and the future growing ever more distinct, and they clarify their position through the text, overcoming the contradictions by writing. The textual smoothing of ambivalence helps the authors reject in their minds the uneasy sense of unhomeliness. The authors under review in this article - Natalie von Maydell and Agnes von Baranow – make use of different strategies, beginning with the declaration of superiority and evasion of painful topics up to the employment of the rhetorical devices of political propaganda.

Key Words: Estonia, colonialism, Baltic Germans, memoirs

Introduction:

Ambivalence is a term widely used nowadays. Originally, this term is derived from psychoanalytic terminology, but we commonly use the word “ambivalent” to describe something that cannot be clearly understood. In this article the concept of ambivalence will be viewed in a colonial context, where it can be used to describe the relationship between the lord and the serf. In this article I will demonstrate different ways that two Baltic German women use to textualize ambivalence in their memoirs.

The early German colonization of the areas in Eastern Europe is a topic which remains on the periphery of postcolonial studies. With regard to the definition given by Ashcroft of the term postcolonialism “being now used in wide and diverse ways to include the study and analysis of European territorial conquests” (Ashcroft, 1998: 187), we may question whether the German eastward expansion before the 15th century should be treated as colonial. The Baltic cultural space has received little attention in postcolonial studies, both at international level and in German studies (Lützel, 2005: 94). Besides the inapplicability of time and place, there is a fear that expanding the theoretical framework of postcolonialism would lead to arbitrariness. (Dürbeck/ Dunker, 2011: 18).

At the same time, there are solid reasons for implementing the theoretical framework of postcolonialism in the Baltic region. The Baltic Germans living in the territories of present-day Estonia and Latvia were local power holders for about 700 years. There was no Baltic German peasantry; all the Germans in Estonia and Latvia had high social status. They were either landlords in the countryside, or merchants and craftsmen in towns. Hence, their influence on the cultural history of these areas cannot be underestimated. It is also worth mentioning that in the 18th century the Baltic Germans themselves started to use the word “colony” to denote their activities in the Baltic, although the direct colonial bond between this region and the motherland had ended already in the 16th century. It was a “colony without empire” (Annus, 2007: 70). So a question can be raised: to what extent is it reasonable (considering all the constraints) to apply the descriptive models used in postcolonial theory to account for the past of the territories of Estonia and Latvia? The history of the Baltic States has witnessed several periods of colonial rule. Baltic scholars have examined two periods from the postcolonial perspective. Postcolonial discourse has been used in Estonia for the study of Estonian literature produced during the Soviet era in particular (cf. Kirss, 2006a, 2006b; Jaanus, 2006a, 2006b;

Salumets, 2006; Annus, 2007); but the works of Lydia Koidula (Peiker, 2006) and the ideas of the Noor-Eesti (Young Estonia) literary movement (Hennoste, 2006; Kirss, 2008) have also been examined. Tiina Kirss (2001), Tiit Hennoste (2003), Epp Annus (2007), Ene-Reet Soovik (2006) and Cornelius Hasselblatt (2008) have explored the general advantages and disadvantages of using postcolonial discourse in an Estonian context. Ulrike Plath (2008) has studied the reflections of German colonial discourse in the texts written by the Baltic Germans in 1770-1870. Over the past two decades, a lot of fruitful research into Baltic German literature has been carried out.

The analysis of Baltic German literature within the framework of postcolonial theory, narrative (Meier, 2000) or ideology (cf. Hennoste, 2006: 36) provides us with a number of concepts (e.g. hybridity, ambivalence, unhomeliness, other-ness, mimicry/mimicking, self-colonisation) which are worth testing for their applicability in Estonian and Baltic German contexts and which can give us important information about the prevalent cultural codes. The combative-political trend of post-colonialism is not relevant in the Baltic German context in today's Estonia, as it has no significant social bearing any more.

1. Autobiographical writing and ambivalence

Ambivalence refers to a state of being in-between. Within the framework of postcolonial discourse, it has generally been viewed from the perspective of the colonized subject, in order to let the silenced voice speak. According to Frantz Fanon the colonized person thinks every day about what he would do, how he would be if he were the one who had the power: "When their glances meet he [the settler] ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive: "They want to take our place.'" (Fanon in Bhabha, 1994: 44) In his dreams, the subordinate would wish to be like his lord whom he fears and hates at the same time. From the point of view of the colonizer, the subaltern other is an on-going project, the object of everyday efforts and endeavours. The subordinate is incomplete, still in need of shaping and moulding. Even when exercising power over his subordinates, irrespective of means, the lord advocates Christian forgiveness and charity at the same time. Deep inside he hopes for acknowledgement or even love for his efforts. The schizophrenic wish of the lord to be feared and accepted simultaneously is inevitable. "Ambivalence disrupts the clear-cut authority of colonial domination because it disturbs the simple relationship between colonizer and colonized." (Ashcroft, 1998: 13).

The subject of this analysis is the memoirs written by Baltic German women, in which the authors recount the critical moments in their lives. Both women come from noble families. The position of a Baltic German woman in a colonial society is harder to describe than that of a Baltic German man. If a Baltic German man embodies the sexual, political and economic lines of authority, which establishes him as a hegemonic institution, the status of a Baltic German woman is more multi-layered, more ambivalent. Although enjoying a hegemonic position of a Baltic-German lady on the one hand, she represented *otherness* on the other hand, because she was a woman and being subordinated to the social norms created and dominated by men.

The critical moments under discussion include the establishment of the Republic of Estonia in 1918 recounted in the text of Natascha von Maydell (1878-1970) and the resettlement of 1939 recounted in the text of Agnes von Baranow (1877-1968). By taking the perspective of the Baltic Germans and using a term by Hasso Krull, both events should be viewed as *biographical disruption* in the lives of these authors.⁴⁶⁴ The entire value system accepted in Estonia that determined the functioning of the community and of the individual was shaken. The events of the year 1918 served as the final stage of the patriarchal relationship between the lord of the manor and the peasants, while the events of 1939 marked the dissolution of the Baltic German community as such.

If a person loses the opportunity to live his usual life, some kind of reaction will take place in him. One result may be external adaptation in a new environment. The person will learn the skills and customs required in the new surroundings and construct a new routine in daily life. At the same time, he sees it as a forced change in which he has no choice. Adaptation implies that the old body gives up

⁴⁶⁴ Ene Kõresaar uses the term "disruption" in the biographical context in her analysis of memoirs written by Estonians. See Kõresaar 2005, in particular the chapter "*Katkestus kui kogemus ja kultuur*" (Disruption as an experience and culture), pp. 69-110.

a part of itself, the integrity of the body is attacked. The modification of identity takes place through a conflict, through the impact from new surroundings and through the reflection of the personality in these surroundings.

The events relating to the inception of the Republic of Estonia as well as the resettlement changed the principles and mechanisms underlying the functioning of society. Yesterday's real and authentic life was not the same today. There was the question about the justice or fairness of altered circumstances. In the following analysis it will be explored whether and how the texts reveal the ambivalent nature of the surroundings that shaped the self-concept and the group identity of the authors describing the dramatic events.

But first of all, it is important to explain the potential of autobiographical texts for this kind of analysis. Memoirs convey a filtered account of events and emotions. The linearity of memoirs as narrated stories is in contradiction with the ambivalence of the political events and the status of individuals that will be examined in the article. Furthermore, memoirs do not enable observation of changes in the author's attitudes during the progress of a certain event, as the genre of diaries does. The memoirs expose the identity of the writer at the moment of writing. Possible transformations of the identity during life are not regarded. What can be analysed is how the authors depict their life and what means they use to convert life into a text. The authentic feelings of a certain moment are out of reach for the author because of the filter of his or her later experiences.

Memoirs also contain the author's evaluations of the era, which in comparison with fictional texts are far more immediate. An important driving force in memoir writing is the wish of the authors to tell their story and the story of their community. The authors feel that in the new environment, people cannot fully understand the era, principles and attitudes represented by the authors and their ethnic group and generation. Autobiographical writing enables the authors to "set things in order", to smooth out ambivalence.

2. Natalie von Maydell (1878-1970)

Natalie (Natascha) Johanna von Weiss, the later von Maydell, was born in Strelna near St. Petersburg on 19 December 1878 into the family of Alexander and Alexandrine von Weiss. After marrying Baron Moritz Alexander (Axel) von Maydell (1869-1945) in 1899, she moved to Paasvere in Estonia, where her husband owned a manor.

The author wrote her memoirs "Ein reiches Leben"⁴⁶⁵ ("A rich life") in 1947, after the end of an extremely difficult period of life. In the last year of World War II, she fled from the Soviet troops together with her sick husband. Her husband died in 1946 and Natascha von Maydell was also in poor health while she was writing, as she mentions in the introduction. However, she recovered from her illness and lived for several more decades. Baroness von Maydell died in 1970 in Bad Godesberg.

The year 1918 was traumatic for the Maydell family. The author's husband was deported to Siberia during the war, but he returned in the spring of 1918. The summer was spent at home in Paasvere manor, but in the autumn the family went to Tallinn and at the onset of winter they fled to Helsinki in fear of the Bolsheviks. However, at the beginning of February 1919, the family was able to return to Estonia and to their manor. As the Bolsheviks had occupied Paasvere manor in the meantime, the writer describes the devastation by the Bolsheviks, the burnt books and the spoilt furniture:

Lulla and others had tried to clean and tidy the mansion in Paasvere more or less, but it still looked horrible. The Red had slaughtered pigs and hens on our nicely polished tables. The library! All books found in the house had been piled up in one of the rooms and set alight. Oddly enough the wooden house wouldn't catch fire. They had held big parties in our house and entered their names in our guestbook. (Maydell 1947: 38)

But the changes were not only external: "We did not feel comfortable in our lovely Paasvere anymore." (Maydell, 1947: 38) Such an evaluative opinion can often be met in the texts of Baltic German authors of the period. Home had become unhomey in direct and indirect meaning. The

⁴⁶⁵ The original manuscript is with the family.

immediately apparent characteristics were outward damage, lost or spoilt commodities, violent intrusion into secure surroundings. Furthermore, an uneasy sense of anxiety lingered over the homestead, due to what had happened and what kind of people had been there. Even if all this could somehow be forgotten, the mess cleaned up and the rooms aired, there was something else in the air, something that was more difficult to perceive and that was getting out of control. The times and circumstances had changed people's attitude to Germans, it was painful and difficult to tolerate, and it deepened the feeling that the sense of home and homeliness had been lost: "Our people had changed. They avoided us because they feared that if the Red were to return, their enemies could report them for being friends of "barons"⁴⁶⁶." (Ibid: 38). And the writer adds: "So they would come only in the night, covertly, and bare their souls to Apa"⁴⁶⁷." (Ibid). With this sentence the writer smoothes out the unhomeliness⁴⁶⁸; the features of the former paternalistic way of life are references to the former and better times. Everyday life may have looked the same from a certain angle, but in the next moment the changed realities would manifest themselves one way or another. It seems worth pointing out that, under the circumstances, the fragility and inherent ambivalence of the Baltic Germans' position was not a merely transient phenomenon. Ambivalence had become a part of their lives. However, in most cases the reaction of Baltic German authors was not a true examination of the past but stubborn adherence to their argument of historical right (cf. Saagpakk, 2008: 955).

The description of the events of 1918-1919 in Maydell's text is inconsistent: the author describes the historical events and her husband's participation in these events and at the same time she also reports the details of everyday life. Mushroom picking, walks, children's parties and gossip alternate with descriptions of political history. Daily life issues that the lady could handle herself form a background to political events, but they do not interrelate. It is like a collage: on the one hand, the author continues the previous pattern of writing about mutual visits and pleasant meetings; on the other hand, "the great history" with its disruptions proceeds of its own accord. An example of such a transfer:

The girls attended dancing classes with their friends, once they all came to Paasvere together. A joyful company, there was a lot of dancing, music and singing.

Eduard von Dellingshausen was in Germany: he was not allowed to return, he had promoted German nationalism in our homeland too much. Hence, other men had to be found, who were to save what was there to be saved, and one of them was Apa; and they used all their strength for the benefit of our homeland. (Ibid: 41)

The author mentions the decision made by the Knighthoods of the Baltic provinces on the 9 November, 1918 concerning the establishment of the Baltic State, subjected to the rule of Kaiser Wilhelm II. However, the latter could not acknowledge the gesture anymore, because he abdicated and fled: "In these days the emperor abdicated, the German state collapsed. Instead of a German Baltic State "Estonia" and "Latwia" emerged; these countries decided because of their hatred of Germans to dissolve all knighthoods and expropriate all manors" (Maydell, 1947: 41). These sentences reveal the essence of the changes taking place in those days from the perspective of the Baltic Germans.

As concern for the manors was a vital interest for the family, Maydell deals with it at length. She writes that the press has started a slander campaign against Germans: "Time and again it was demanded that the "barons", who were said to have enslaved the poor people for 700 years, must be dispossessed of their manors." (Ibid: 42).

In Baltic German memoirs, the evaluations of Estonians are often given as quotations from the press, not as expressed by the Estonians themselves. Citations from magazines are more

⁴⁶⁶ Maydell uses here the Estonian word "parun" (baron), which is a general term used by Estonians until today to denote a Baltic German; however, the ending is grammatically wrong, which was common in Baltic German memoirs and quite often in fictional texts too, as the Baltic Germans generally knew only spoken, not written Estonian.

⁴⁶⁷ In the text the writer calls her husband Apa, as he was called by the children, since the text has been written for children and grandchildren.

⁴⁶⁸ Homi K. Bhabha's *Unheimlichkeit* Or Unhomeliness Denotes A Situation Where The Concept And Feeling Of "Home" And "Surroundings" Must Be Created Anew Because They Have Changed Due To A Colonial Situation (Bhabha, 2007: 13).

anonymous and remote, allowing writers to distance themselves from blame. Furthermore, the Germans that belonged to high nobility usually did not have Estonian friends whom they would consider as equal partners for discussing politics. Hence, the opinions of Estonians remain distant and undetermined, it is seen as something that the crowd demands.

When describing her husband, the author emphasizes his selflessness: “He was born with a sense of duty beside which his own personality remained in the background, and with a sincere interest in everyone whom he had to take care of.” (Ibid: 43). The description corresponds with the self-identity of a Baltic German man as a lord, who would always stress the priority of obligations (*Pflichten*) over rights (*Rechte*). Susanne Zantop has convincingly demonstrated that after the end of the 18th century German-language colonial discourse was imbued with a faith that if the relations of the colonizer and the colonized are determined by a paternalistic order, the subordinates will voluntarily accept such a relationship. A serf acknowledges the intellectual supremacy of the lord (cf. Zantop, 1997: 149-154). In the drama of August von Kotzebue “Die Negersklaven” (1796), serf Zameo tells his lord: “You have set me free and (therefore) I will always be your slave; I would have run away with bound hands, but you have captivated my heart – I will never leave you.” (Kotzebue, 1840: 229).

However, the political developments of the early 20th century showed that the era of the paternalistic order had ended; the supremacy of the lord was no longer accepted by the peasants. Such a change was hard to understand for Baltic German landowners because of their self-image as a “good lord”. The wish of former subordinates to become independent was seen as betrayal. The entire system of relationships underwent a profound change and the Baltic German lords became aware of the fragility of their position.

It is interesting to point out that after the change of circumstances the motive of the *caring father* retains its vitality as can be seen in the description of the peasants who would come to talk to the lord in the night. Bearing responsibility for other lives was not a mere need caused by the circumstances, it was a way of thinking of oneself and one’s status: it was part of the self concept and the group identity that had to be maintained by all means.

3. Agnes von Baranow (1877-1968)

Agnes von Baranow was born in Lehtse Manor in 1877 into the family of Freiherr (Baron) Friedrich Hoyningen von Huene. The Hoyningen-Huenees were not amongst the oldest families, but they certainly were one of the most numerous and wide-spread of Baltic noble families (cf. Hoyningen-Huene, 2001). After Agnes married Alexis von Baranow⁴⁶⁹, they had six children. In 1914, he bought Roosna (Sonorm) manor in Järvamaa where the family settled.

Agnes von Baranow left Estonia in the course of the resettlement of 1939. She lived in Warthegau, fled from there in 1945 and lived after that in various places, even in Brazil. Towards the end of her life she moved to live in Bad-Pyrmont in Lower Saxony, where she died on 7 November, 1968.

Agnes von Baranow’s “Mein Baltenland” was written in Grumbach in 1940, immediately after the resettlement (it was published in 1941) and it bears the character of the time. Describing the reasons for leaving the homeland, Baranow uses political propagandistic rhetoric. For instance, the author uses the word *Baltendeutsche* (Baranow, 1941: 265) that was later not used among the Baltic Germans at all, due to the national socialist background of the term. Hitler in her text is Führer who wants to save the Baltic Germans not from the Bolsheviks but from Estonians and Latvians. The latter are said to have satisfied “their desire for destruction with surprising persistence” (Ibid: 263). The Führer, however, is said to have set a new perspective and new goals in the life of Germans (Ibid: 263). The use of words by the author is almost militaristic. She describes the status of Germans in free Estonia using expressions like *deutscher Vorposten* (German picket) and *ausharren* (to hold out) (Ibid: 262). In this way the author emphasizes the notion of the struggle for life or *Lebens-Kampf*, which was an often-used motif in the Baltic German texts written in the first half of the 20th century (cf. Saagpakk, 2008: 962). Everyday life is described as a constant struggle for survival, which naturally adds to the value and respect for the persons fighting in the everyday frontline. However,

⁴⁶⁹ The more widespread name form of her husband’s family is Baranoff.

real pain and sorrow can be sensed behind the combative rhetoric, and Baranow describes, for example, how dearly she loved Estonia at the moment of departure, how beautiful Tallinn seemed (Baranow, 1941: 264). The homeland is compared to a dying mother, but the paragraph ends with words that look forward to new targets for Baltic Germans. The national socialist rhetoric provides the author with ready-made solutions; it helps to create the will to adapt to new circumstances.

While the above reasoning can simply be regarded as a direct impact from the prevailing ideology; it is worth taking a glimpse of the more refined efforts for describing the self and the world in the text of Baranow. In her text the author discusses reasons for the necessity of resettlement as such and describes the position of the Baltic Germans in the period of the Republic of Estonia. Upon discussing the topic of *historisches Recht* (historical right) of the Baltic Germans, the author uses the technique of diminishing the traditionally hegemonic power of the Baltic Germans. Perceiving the negative implication of the status of the lord in the new times, the noble-born woman says that a Baltic lord of the manor is in essence a peasant, whose job and aims are similar to those of the peasant and it is not important whether the aim has been accomplished over the centuries by muscles or by brains.

For what else was a Baltic German lord of the manor than a peasant? He had the same aims, the same job – be it done either by muscles or by brains; the same relationship to the land, the same commitment to his work. (Ibid: 263)

The Baltic German lord of the manor as a peasant is the bearer of continuity and tradition, but he was ignobly attacked by the new elite in the period of the Republic of Estonia. The background of such kind of reasoning is the political repression during the Republic of Estonia, but also the dominant rhetoric of the *Blut und Boden* (Blood and Soil) ideology, which in essence was elite-hostile and celebrated the relationship of a simple peasant with the land cultivated by him. However, within the post-colonial framework, we can identify another level. Bhabha emphasizes that a person in a hegemonic position, enjoying the status and privileges of a lord, is aware of the questionable nature of his actions and his indebtedness to the cultural other. The desire for authorization of power leads to the question: “Tell us why we are here” (Bhabha, 1994: 101). Therefore the colonizer must affirm day by day that his behaviour is right. As for Baranow, the message of the equality of the peasant and the lord is not essential; the inequality of positions has been clearly stressed in the text. Presenting the lord as a peasant with brains is a strategy of self-defence. When the author emphasizes the lord’s intimate closeness to the land, it is driven by an instinctive feeling that a closer relationship to the land may create special rights over that land. The described line of thought offers a good example of the ambivalence of the author’s self-image, as on the one hand she is extremely proud of the distinguished history and position of her family, but on the other hand she senses a need for diminishing that position conditioned by the circumstances.

The above discussion supports Bhabha’s observation of the way of thinking of persons in a superior position, which have already been addressed above. The hegemonic party thinks about how the subordinate sees him. He wants to be respected. This will explain the paragraphs that the author devotes to the image of the Baltic Germans in the eyes of Estonians. Admitting her partiality when making judgments in this field, the author uses citations from Estonian newspapers as proof: “The Baltic Germans are leaving their homeland with dignity and determination [written in Estonian newspapers].“ (Baranow, 1941: 264). It is important to point out that the Baltic Germans to be resettled were in fact not the rulers or decision makers or big landowners in 1939 anymore. Their position had been conclusively changed 20 years before, but the attitudes and descriptions in Baranow’s text sound as if wealthy and thriving manors had been left behind.

Besides this self-justifying disposition, Baranow’s descriptions of the resettlement also allude to weariness and hopelessness. The author endeavours to maintain an ideologically correct attitude in her text and displays the enthusiasm expected from her about the impeccable organisation of the resettlement by describing the friendliness of officials and the festiveness of the gathering place. However, it all has a subtext. Namely, in addition to reflecting the mental attitudes towards the resettlement there is also the physical aspect. Being outside of the usual environment because of the resettlement involves not only mental but also physical challenge. We are not talking about violence

or starvation in the context of resettlement; it was a well organized departure. But the journey, inadequate hygiene, limited moving space, forced stay among strangers, tiredness, new smells, places and tastes are but a few examples of factors influencing the physical being, forming an inseparable part of the events experienced. The discomfort sensed by the body emphasizes the yearning for (former) stability.

The author describes the situation in the lodgings for women and children, where the ill and noisy children and lack of homely environment overwhelmed the women. She describes how apathetic mothers, incapable of interfering, watched their children make wild noise by dragging chairs along the floor. According to the author, they missed “homely amenities” (Ibid: 269), which made their situation so difficult to endure. Finally a doctor is summoned: “The poor doctor assured those in charge that the condition of the children was satisfactory, but all the mothers were hysterical.” (Ibid). Although the doctor’s visit to the lodgings is presented as a mere glimpse of the setting in the memoirs, it has an intensive and memorable effect. The loss of homeland in the course of resettlement is wrapped in the rhetoric of new tasks and a better future, and as long as there are activities and arrangements to carry out, nobody realizes the actual scope of change taking place. Passive waiting in common lodgings is symbolic; by being hostage to the current political situation, the author and her companions have been deprived of the right to decide for themselves. A Baltic German woman who, in Baranow’s text, is always first a Baltic German and only then a woman with needs and expectations, loses self-control for a moment. Neurotic symptoms, according to Freud, arise from the conflict of external expectations with internal wishes and needs. Here the author ascribes primary importance to social expectation, as she distances herself from the women who could not control themselves or the situation completely. Baranow does not describe her own feelings of hopelessness and internal emptiness, but she describes similar feelings of anonymous *other women* who are unlike her. However, despair and uncertainty can be sensed in this sketch, and above all is the question – what will become of us? How viable will that new colonisation project be, how homely will the new place become?

Conclusion:

The Baltic German history of the 20th century is the story of disappointments and adjustments. The Germans had to face numerous losses, both moral and material. Under the circumstances, the preservation of self-esteem and self-identity were a key issue. The authors perceive the schizophrenic ambivalence of their position, the incompatibility of the past and the future growing ever more distinct, and they clarify their position through the text, overcoming the contradictions by writing. The textual smoothing of ambivalence helps the authors reject in their minds the uneasy sense of unhomeliness and not belonging anywhere that began to seep into their lives at a certain moment. The authors under review in this article - Natalie von Maydell and Agnes von Baranow – make use of different strategies, beginning with the declaration of superiority and evasion of painful topics up to the employment of the rhetorical devices of political propaganda. The texts show that the naturally arising question *why* is buried under self-justification, remaining without an answer. As the author writes about her life, the focal point is to give meaning for her altered life conditions. This will always be the question of power, so far as the colonial relationship is concerned. He who can make his truth dominant need not listen to the truth of the *other*. Autobiographical writing was the last resort of Baltic German authors to proclaim the superiority of their truth.

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