

Rob Evans*

MINSK NARRATIVES. AN EMERGING LEARNING BIOGRAPHY IN TIMES OF PROTEST

In the summer of 2020, something happened that seemed merely impossible before. Hundreds of thousands of Belarusians united to express their desire for change and to take the fate of their country into their own hands. In a historic act of civil courage, Belarusians overcame their fear and apathy. While the world was introducing the first lockdowns, an unprecedented protest movement emerged in Belarus – defying both the pandemic and authoritarianism. The pictures of the peaceful Belarusian protests went around the world. (Tsikhanouskaya, 2021a)

Я выхожу / I'm going out (Roman Bondarenko, 11.11.2020)

ABSTRACT: This paper will look at the rich narratives of a young Belarusian professional, Aleksandra, collected in audio and video narratives and interviews since the autumn and winter 2020-2021. By looking in detail at Aleksandra's experiences of the 2020 movement for democracy in Belarus, the paper will try to illuminate the work done by Aleksandra to give sense to her self-narrative, and to locate the voice she has been looking for and may have found. Connecting the usual micro interactions of conversation-like talk to the complex spaces of political and social relations, biographical narratives constructed in this kind of interview talk become an important lens through which the ongoing construction of individual/social identities and the realignment of individual meaning-making in times of harsh biographical transition can be heard.

Learning biographies, as narrative constructions, in which the layers of experience of a (being) lived life are drawn upon as resources, are situated in, and create, personalised storied spaces. Learning biographies draw upon biographical knowledge, which is the prerequisite for biographical reflexion, i.e. being able to think your own biography through anew and form it anew. In times when demands on people come as sudden and difficult, this type of knowledge serves as crucial biographical competence. The paper will show that such times of conflict entail redefinition of self, the re-drafting of biographies, the urgent need to reinvent the self in relation to others. Discursive processes hearable in such biographic narratives involve the changes imposed by civil conflict on narrators' own and on others' words, on their very narrative resources, altering radically the very language hitherto used to describe themselves and the world. They involve, too, the confrontation of past layers of experience with a difficult, yet sometimes exhilarating present. The construction of narratives of hope and solidarity can be observed. Finally, the paper explores the possibility of identifying in the interviews heard here the crucial relationships between everyday lives, the experience found in a widening of everyday sites of biographical experience, learning, and narration.

KEYWORDS: Belarus, narrative, biographicity, hope.

* **Rob Evans** – formerly Otto-von-Guericke-University Magdeburg, Germany; e-mail: rob.evans@t-online.de; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1168-4121>.

I'm going out!

The opening quote from the leader of the Belarusian democratic opposition Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya evokes in retrospect the political awakening of Belarusian civil society in 2020, the mass participation in the August 2020 presidential elections, and the ensuing autumn of mass protests and violent state repression.

The second quote which serves as heading for this section were the last reported words of Roman Bondarenko before he was beaten into a coma by plainclothes policemen and thugs in the courtyard of his own block of flats – the famously re-baptised ‘Square of Changes’ in Minsk. Bondarenko’s last words stand for a central theme of the rich narratives of a young Belarusian professional, Aleksandra, which are the focus of this paper. Aleksandra, like many of her fellow citizens of Belarus, ‘went out’ on the streets before the presidential elections in August 2020 and she ‘went out’ after the elections, too, when the results of the election were falsified and ‘stolen’ by the incumbent of 26 years, Aleksander Lukashenko (see Golos, 2020). She ‘went out’ after the protests in reaction to the falsification were met with the unprecedented violence officially documented by the OSCE Rapporteur in October 2020 (Benedek, 2020) and protocolled in graphic oral testimonies collected by the initiative *August2020* (2021). She ‘went out’ – onto the streets, to the mass demonstrations, and has remained ‘out’, to this time, as an active member of the opposition to the regime, and, in a wider sense, as a ‘relokant’, a ‘relocator’, having moved like so many other tens of thousands with her work to Poland and effectively into exile. By looking at Aleksandra’s experiences of the 2020 movement for democracy in Belarus, I wish to examine with the biographic interview the work done by Aleksandra to give sense to her self-narrative. I wish to locate the voice she has been looking for and may have found, and to consider the process of finding a voice, under the conditions of social conflict and emigration. And in so doing, I insist that the biographical interview, and the use of interview extracts, must respect first of all the intentions, desires, guesses and perplexities of the subject, the voice of the narrator.¹

In prompting, listening to, and analysing Aleksandra’s dense and often dramatic narratives, I wish to examine the pressures on her to find herself anew in the difficult times

¹ This paper was completed a month before the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine on February 24th 2022. The impact the war has had since February 2022 on the Belarusian democratic opposition is immense, difficult, and highly contradictory. The ambivalence of the Lukashenko regime’s stance to the war – no direct physical participation with troops, but complete complicity with and assistance to Russian troops operating from Belarusian territory (Tsikhanouskaya, 2022; zerkalo.io, 2022b) – threatens to compromise and menaces in the eyes of many the general narrative of Belarusian opposition. This new challenge is clearly hearable in Aleksandra’s ongoing narrative and will be addressed in further work.

she is in. The pressures on her come inevitably from ‘outside’, that is, from the very real threats of arrest, violence, or injury she was exposed to. In exile since December 2020, the pressures take the form of travel restrictions, increasing levels of repression back home and constant concern about family at home as a result of the successive waves of the COVID-19 pandemic and the toll they took and continue to take of the Belarusian health system and its patients (zerkalo.io, 2022). Pressures come from ‘within’, as well. From the separation of the *relokant/emigrée* from her home, the insecurities of a new life in a foreign, not necessarily always welcoming, country, from her fears, her regrets, and her losses. ‘Outside’ and ‘inside’ are, however, inadequate terms for the complex demands of learning and living once the spaces in which learning processes unfold are seen as fragmentary, overlapping, relational and embodied (Löw, 2001: 88, 131-132). Learning biographies, as narrative constructions in which the layers of experience of a (being) lived life are drawn upon as resources, are situated in, and create, personalised storied spaces. Learning biographies draw upon biographical knowledge. This is the prerequisite for biographical reflexion, that is, being able to think your own biography through again and again and, within limits, form it anew. In times when people face unexpected and difficult, frightening and threatening demands on them to act or decide, which can be simultaneously exciting, joyous and full of hope, this type of knowledge serves as crucial biographical competence (Alheit, 2018).

Discursive processes are hearable in biographic narratives like Aleksandra’s. The discourses we employ and live in and live by (Evans, 2020) are understood here as language in all conceivable forms or codes, linguistic or visual, symbols and practices, that in relation to one another (interdiscursively) offer or impose conceptual frameworks for everyday social life, for interpersonal relations, for cultural and political narratives, and which are “a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning” (Fairclough, 1992: 64). The discursive processes we hear in such narratives as Aleksandra’s involve:

- the changes imposed by civil conflict on narrators’ own and on others’ words, on their very narrative resources, altering radically the very language hitherto used to describe themselves and the world
- the confrontation of past layers of experience with a difficult, yet exhilarating present
- dilemmas of personal and social responsibility
- construction of narratives of hope and solidarity

Ultimately, I wish to explore the possibility of identifying in the interviews with Aleksandra the crucial relationships between everyday lives, the experience found in a rupture of everyday sites of biographical experience, and learning and narration.

Message from Minsk

Belarus, then, saw a summer of hope and mass self-organisation by hundreds of thousands of citizens across that country, tired of police state methods and stirred into action by the threat of a careless, callous regime that left the population and the medical service alone with the COVID-19 virus after its outbreak in the spring (Kaltygina, 2020). The mobilisation of Belarusians to collect money, buy equipment and make protective clothing for medical staff through the crowdfunding initiative *ByCovid*, for example, laid the foundations for the still greater mobilisations before and after the presidential elections in August 2020 (Shparaga, 2021: 110-119; Borisevich, 2020). The uniqueness of this moment in recent Belarusian history is simply recalled: after three candidates for the presidency of Belarus were successively disqualified or barred from running and imprisoned, Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, flanked by Veronika Tsepkalo and Maria Kolesnikova (respectively the wives and the campaign manager of the three barred candidates) ran for president against Aleksander Lukashenko and by all serious accounts (Golos, 2021; European Council, 2020) won outright. The announcement in the night of the 9th August that the results incredibly gave over 80% of the vote to Lukashenko drew Belarusians out onto the streets. Estimates put the participation in street protests in 2020 at one in five of a population of 9 million (Astapenia, 2020a). The stealing of the 2020 presidential election results produced a deep and powerful groundswell of peaceful civil disobedience and resistance that unleashed undreamt-of creative potential in all sections of society. Self-organisation, local mobilisation and grassroots solidarity were dramatically challenged, however, by brute force and Belarusians responded with “peaceful partisan tactics” (Shparaga, 2021: 13), including many that were light-hearted and satirical (for the new vocabulary of protest, see Perova, 2020), emotional, politically determined and stubbornly hopeful. The plethora of initiatives that arose – solidarity and aid for victims of violence, aids in all forms for prisoners and their families, human rights groups, cultural and sports solidarity initiatives, assistance for strikers, students, ‘relocators’ and so on (BySol, 2021; Astapenia, 2020b; see also Tsikhanouskaya, 2021b), functioned as the web sustaining a growing civil society and at the same time as a show of strength, working as a “horizontal watchdog” over the Lukashenko regime (Shparaga, 2021: 156).

The serendipitous contact established with Aleksandra in Minsk through another Belarusian, Mara (name altered), with whom I had been conducting a long series of zoom-interviews on her COVID experiences in Frankfurt and Minsk, initiated an equally dense set of communications from October 2020 onwards, focusing on Aleksandra’s experiences in, and reactions to, the unfolding events. Aleksandra volunteered to

communicate with me through voice-recorded accounts, following prompts and questions I put to her via email.

Aleksandra was clearly willing to tell her stories, even though it was not clear to her what purpose exactly they were to serve. Essentially, the meaning of the research encounter has to be worked out *in loco*. Aleksandra, too, would grapple with the direction her narrative could or 'should' take. From mid-October 2020 on and now into 2022 she has spoken 11 long audio files. Her intention from the first was to present an increasingly structured account of her experiences in the Belarusian autumn.²

COVID-19, new interview methods and methodological questions

I saw the distance-interview or distance narrative that the COVID-19 lockdown had made necessary for a project centred on 'COVID stories' I initiated in 2020 as a form of intimate distance-interview of an essentially auto/biographical narrative type. Joint video dialogues, via Zoom (and some via WhatsApp) were later added to the repertoire of research methods.

A smooth narrative flow?

I proposed Aleksandra speak Russian for a natural stream of narrative, stemming as she does from a family of Russian speakers like so many with family links in Russia. Gratifyingly, in the 11 recorded interviews to date, Aleksandra has in fact woven an idiosyncratic pattern of language choice between English and Russian, as she moves between the two languages, evidently and declaredly seeking the language code most suited to the narrative work in hand.

She said at the outset:

Extract 1

hi Rob so I'm going to record the audio about the events that's going on here in Belarus I just came home 2 hours ago from the protest that took place today on Sunday in Minsk (.) yeah I think I will start in English because I tried to record uhm audio yesterday and (hhh) it didn't work out for me for some reasons I don't know I think because I'm not really used to give speeches about myself in Russian. (5.10.20)

(.) = short pause; (hhh) = outbreath or laughing; uhm = pause, false start/restart

In an e-mail sent at the start of 2021 when Aleksandra had already been in Poland for 2 months, Aleksandra's hedging against incorrectness or imperfection even, can be heard in her words when she writes:

² Aleksandra's most recent audio narratives, in March 2022, are framed now by the war and the millions-strong tide of refugees as seen and felt from within Poland's borders.

Extract 2

I have uploaded a record. I'm not really glad about it, I think my narration was awkward and choppy. It brought many memories and some philosophical questions so it was hard to stay focused and it probably sounds poor. (E-mail: 16.01.21)

The use of English, of course, as Anna Duszak (2002) points out, makes it possible for non-native speakers to “temporarily refocus, upgrade or downplay certain aspects of one’s social image” and it is certainly at least double-edged in its effects, enhancing complicity or projecting power according to the context (Duszak, 2002: 219-220). This is an immensely important resource in an uncertain relationship, a relationship marked by asymmetries – age, gender, status, language, nationality. Elsewhere I have discussed how the (prestigious) foreign language effects ‘self-authoring’ and ‘othering’, allowing forays into forbidden, risqué or taboo subjects and affording momentary freedom from the narrow conservatism of the uninitiated (Evans, 2004, 2016).

The language of the interview talk (and in these cases the accompanying e-mail conversation) is thus a sensitive space for code-switching both at will and of necessity; a space for the relationship between researcher and participant to be tested and tried; a space in which the language context of events (Minsk, Poland) and the language context of the telling of events (‘blind’ audio monologue, imaginary dialogue, zoom conversation, e-mail) overlap and blend. In this shifting space, language choice can thus reflect relations of power/inequality in this as in any interaction, yet, as Peter Auer points out, the local, consensual choice of language code arises in the interaction and close attention must be given to the place “within the interactional episode in which languages alternate” if the change of code is to be more fully understood (Auer, 1998: 3).

I see it as a keystone of careful listening and cautious interview work that all analysis and discussion of language ‘data’ resulting from a context of spoken interaction (though this holds, too, for the written language) refers *at all times* to the language actually used in the interview interaction. An approach that understands talk as evidence of the joint generation by interviewer and interviewees of plausible accounts of the world, is able to see the interview talk less as *simply descriptions of facts* or objective data that a ‘realist’ view assumes to be ‘out there’, than as a *sensitive space*, in which the linguistic repertoires or methods which people draw upon in constructing accounts in interactive encounters can unfold (Seale, 1998: 215).

Transcription of interview language is kept ‘simple’: it remains entirely free of punctuation, no attempt is made to ‘clean up’ the language, and any translations, which are normally provided out of convenience for readers (but *only* for simple convenience, not as any attempt to render the talk ‘interculturally’ or otherwise comprehensible), are parsimonious and consciously free of any claim to literary translation standards.

Naturally, this is a methodological decision, and it represents a first inescapable level of analysis of the spoken interaction of the interviews (Ochs, 1979). Features of spoken discourse, prosody, hedging, etc., are indicated beneath each extract.

Pressure to account for things

“The self-story is made up as it is told. It does not exist as a story independent of its telling; although, after it has been told, it can take on the status of a story that can be retold.” (Denzin, 1989: 43). Denzin’s candidly straightforward description of the oral communication of personal experience seems almost to omit the central element of interaction. For, though ‘self-stories’ or biographical narratives are presumably told by people to themselves in internal dialogues – the Belarusian Nobel laureate Svetlana Alekseivich talks of “inner conversations” (Alekseivich, 2013) – very much more frequently than they are given the chance to be told to others, when they *are* then opened up to another, in Anna De Fina’s words, they “represent interactional achievements that reflect the work of the people involved in social encounters.” (De Fina, 2009: 238). Aleksandra’s talk is for this reason generous from the very first moment precisely because she opens herself to the assessment and questions of a critical listener.

She is constrained in the shaping of her account of active participation in the protests of the late summer of 2020 because of the “irony” as she calls it, that at the moment of recording the first audio testimony about her very real commitment to the protests, she is on the verge of *leaving* the country, to ‘relocate’ (an exquisitely harmless expression for the need to move your existence to another country) abroad, to leave the protests and to leave everyone else behind, in a sense, to do her work. This awkward fact must be stressed, and Aleksandra is unable to avoid this issue and she faces it squarely. Yet it gnaws at her self-assurance. As a genre, De Fina argues, interview narratives formed as ‘accounts’ are “told as responses to specific or implied evaluative questions, they are recipient-oriented and they are designed to try to answer those questions.” (De Fina, 2009: 240). The largely implicit questions ‘in the air’ as a result of the original e-mail questions I posed and suggested, as well as questions that Aleksandra plausibly assumes may be asked or which may be ‘in the air’ too, exert pressure on the telling. Given the dilemma between active protest and departure, the narrative she is about to construct is massively influenced by this radical cut of her impending relocation. On the 5th of October 2020, when her audio appears in my in-tray, the protests in Belarus are going strong and their immediate outcome cannot be predicted. In addition to the uncertainty governing the course of events, the micro-events minute by minute in the narrative as well as the historical macro perspective, there is the added yeast of hope. Hope, optimism, and dreams also steer the course of the narrative. Instead of only

letting description and account dictate the overall tone, the narrative also sets its sights high from the beginning and remains driven by an intermittent and often breathless message of hope. This is why our interest must be directed, as De Fina suggests, when talking about context of interaction in the narrative, towards how context “shapes and ... is shaped by the narrative event.” (De Fina, 2009: 234). In other words, what is at stake in the telling, for the listener and for the speaker?

Extract 3

I do what I do I go to the streets and protest actively because I DO think we deserve better and maybe subconsciously I'm trying to make up for for kind of lost time when I didn't have that much belief in my nation my country maybe subconsciously I feel guilt for finally seeing these things happening here that late anyway I'm just going to proceed as long as I'm here in Belarus. (5.10.20)

CAPITALS = louder volume/louder stress

She continues:

Extract 4

I will try to switch in Russian and tell you about some events that happened this year before the elections like WAY before the elections because I think it's important it uhm IMPACTED the events that are going on right now because people got really united this year and (.) consolidation grew drastically uhm yeah let me try to switch and to tell you about about these events (05.10.20). CAPITALS = louder volume/louder stress; (.) = hearable pause

Aleksandra's narratives during the autumn and winter of 2020-2021 are thus freely developed by her in a series of audio recordings. They are shaped by an overwhelming mass of information, events and experiences, feelings, places and people, the majority of which she knows little or nothing. They are shaped by the mass of biographical resources she brings to this task, much of which, too, she is half-aware or wholly unaware of. Much she has forgotten, much she experienced only tangentially. Some things she has banished from view. Much she considers to be her very own. What she knows and has experienced, she works hard to tie into her narratives in language that speaks to her and should be able to speak intelligibly to others. As she unfolds her at times meandering, at times taut stories, she shapes the overlapping contexts of her biographical experience to an increasingly idiosyncratic and personal whole. In so doing, her hitherto ordered biographical resources are vigorously re-shuffled and re-organised. Prior certainties are challenged by the unimaginably shocking impact of social conflict and state violence. The next section will continue by considering her narratives from the point of view of the relative role that facts play in them, the altered trajectory of the life perspective and the tensions shaping the narratives as they emerge.

A biography under construction

The biographical narratives told by Aleksandra are narratives caught in ‘mid-stream’, so to speak. By this I mean that they are naturally unfinished narratives, they are necessarily incomplete (Linde, 1993: 4). Biographic experiences are rooted in context, and new experience is worked and reworked into the former life story:

Biographical experiences and the biographical knowledge that arises from them are not merely the laying down of a stratum of things experienced but also the continuous re-working of all that is experienced (Hoerning, 1989: 154; author’s translation).

Beyond the emergent, contingent nature of all life stories, particularly first stories, as many of these are, the narratives of Aleksandra are both under construction and extemporized, hastily rehearsed and subject to revision. Events, places, situations, and people that were wholly unfamiliar before, could not have been known, that could not be imagined, demand the narrator’s attention in mid-sentence. Aleksandra relates, for example, how after one of the large Sunday protests she had hidden with others in an entrance to a block of flats until the police went away. After, she needed to make her way home, with the metro closed, traffic jams everywhere, and the police still rounding up people all over.

Extract 5

мы спрятались в подвезде и ждали когда они уедут и потом так получилось что когда пыталась добраться домой транспорт уже не ходила. (16.10.20)

we hid in an entrance and waited till they went away and then it was necessary to get home and there was no public transport.

Her choice of Russian to relate this experience is interesting. On this day Aleksandra talks at length about the use of Russian and Belarusian, about Minsk and how the protests are changing it, and about the inspiring experiences of solidarity in the mass protest marches around the districts of the city. While English seems more the choice for knowing, ironic anecdotes or longer accounts of facts from history or politics, the Russian narrative sequences are notably more introspective and personal, more detailed, considerably more ‘micro-analytical’ than anything else in English.

Thus, she continues, telling how shortly afterwards, she found herself alone in a district that was not her own and for the first time in her life found the city she had grown up in, the streets she had used for years, hostile, threatening, frightening:

Extract 6

было уже темно было уже 10:00 вечера я была одна и это наверное один из таких самых страшных моментов потому что я в том моменте ещё не была к этому готова и я не ожи-

дала нигде в центре города где обычно происходит протест (###) в микрорайоне куда ходила в школу где очень часто бывала в детстве в подростковом возрасте я не ожидала почувствую себя в такое небезопасности и особенно испугалась когда начали взрываться светошумовые гранаты потому что это было первый раз когда я своей жизни не видел по-настоящему услышала увидела это и было ощущение что как-будто началась война я шла не надо было для того чтобы вернуться домой в ту сторону где они взрываются и казалось что началась просто война не (###) с такими вспышками. (16.10.20)

it was already dark already 10 at night I was alone and that was really one of the most frightening moments because I wasn't ready for that in that moment and I didn't expect that in the centre where protests happen in the locality I used to go to school in was often there in my childhood in my teens I didn't expect that I would ever feel myself in such danger and I really got scared when stun grenades started going off because that was the first time in my life I ever saw for real heard saw that and it was a feeling like a war had begun I walked I couldn't go home that way because of that where they were exploding and it seemed that a war had just begun with these explosions.

Aleksandra returns to this crucial incident again in a subsequent audio narrative, but this time as the frame for an entirely different account. Having had to stay at home in quarantine for a COVID-19 infection, she was forced to miss a whole series of smaller and larger protest marches in October 2020. She expressed her frustration at having to forego a march in a district much closer to home than was usual, in the Serebryanka district:

Extract 7

we stayed home and then this march even changed direction even close to us to Serebryanka district the one that I told you about my first experience on the 11th of August when I hid in one of the houses and when I tried to get home with all these stun grenades alone dark it's this place so yeah I was upset because it was really close in my district and I really wanted like for a long time to go somewhere here and finally when we got this opportunity to go yes so annoying but yeah hopefully we'll have other marches here somewhere nearby. (20.10.20)

The same micro-narrative of sheltering in a house entrance is thus used first (16th of October) with numerous examples of prosodic heightening: repetition (war, explosions, hearing, seeing); diachrony (now, childhood, teens); affective frames (fear, fright, childhood and school); juxtaposition of security and danger. The language lingers on the dramatic detail, drawing out the experience to the full. In the second pithily brief recapitulation (20th of October), it serves as a 'first story' the listener/other is expected to know (with all its detail and connotations) in order to better understand this 'second story' not triggered by the first but framed and rendered meaningful (for first and second stories, see Sacks, 1992: 19-21). Additional strata of complexity are worked into the narrative and further the joint work of contextualisation and interpretation.

Experience, events, facts

An enormous amount of explanation, of information is being offered in Aleksandra's talk. In her first audio – taking her cue from my prompt questions in the original e-mail – she covers a lot of ground: Russian and Belarusian, the COVID-19 situation in 2020 in Belarus, the water shortage in the early summer of that year, the run-up to the presidential elections and the situation after the polls in August, the stealing of the result by Lukashenko and the ensuing protests and state violence. This is, of course, still only a small part of 'what happened'. Events, checked and cross-checked, firmly established, reported upon, recorded and accepted rarely play a decisive role in the telling of a life history (though see, for another view Fischer and Goblirsch, 2006). And should they, in fact, be central, then they are occupied and re-told or re-framed. Holocaust narratives are an acknowledged instance of this relation between historical fact and the intensely personal telling of the eyewitness, the survivor, the perpetrator. Events and facts become a part of the life story, but only a part (see Schiffrin, 2006: 201-205). Indeed, the attempt, or in dramatic or traumatic circumstances like those being considered in Aleksandra's narratives, the *obligation* to give a fullest account, may, in fact, be impossible, Judith Butler suggests, because "language falters" before the task and "it may not be possible to give a seamless narrative account" (Butler, 2012: 182-183). She believes that narrative testimony "has to be something other than securing a verifiable sequence of events" even though communicating some reality. An account of that reality will arguably only be able to fulfil its aim – to be communicated to some, any kind of audience whatsoever – if it resorts to language "to convey *the emotional reality* that runs counter to the positivist demand that language act only and always transparently to convey the facts" (183, italics in original).

Facts, then, are a subordinate element of interest in understanding biographical narratives generally. The constraints on the speaker to 'stick to the facts' – the *Zugzwang* central to Fritz Schütze's theory of biographical narrative (Schütze, 1976) – play an important role, of course, as they do in all everyday intercourse. Clive Seale also remarks that as a rule speakers will stay close to a core of plausible 'facts' in the usual course of talk (Seale, 1998: 216). It may be helpful here to accept the help offered more than 30 years ago by Norman Denzin, who proposed the distinction between 'self-stories' and 'personal experience stories' (Denzin, 1989: 43-44). He sees the main differences between these two forms of personal experience narratives in the (self-) positioning of the narrator. While the self-story puts the self of the narrator at the heart of the account and is arranged around critical life events purportedly affecting and changing the self, the more common-sense, fact-based, anecdotal or discursive personal experience story is intent on achieving shared understanding. Denzin sees a further salient difference

in the more general structuredness of the experience story, while self-stories “need not be coherent, linear accounts” (1989: 44). Aleksandra’s narratives can be heard as alternating between these two broad formats. The shared personal experience story relies certainly more on accepted dates, events, and facts, and where they can be assumed by the speaker to be missing, they are abundantly provided. The events of 2020 themselves, but equally, extensive digressions into more distant social and political history, cannot be avoided, all the less so as they assume symbolic importance within the personal narrative, and *must* be told:

Extract 8

and there are two historical moments it’s ones that I think I should tell you about then I can connect it to this Sunday ... yeah, but first things first. (23.10.20)

Thus, Aleksandra talks in English in her very first audio narrative (5 October 2020) by way of introduction about the Belarusian language, attempting a socio-historical explanation for her own late awareness of the importance of the national language. She returns to this theme again, this time in Russian in her third audio narrative (23 October 2020). In similar vein she will cover the history of the opposition, for example, and the background to the Kuropaty protest in memory of the thousands of victims murdered by the Soviet NKVD in 1937-41. These discursive accounts are evidently prepared in her mind in advance and she is concerned to get things ‘right’. On the 17th of October she writes to me:

Extract 9

I’m so glad that you like my narration! with no proper training I worry about how my speech sounds but anyway it’s a good practice I’ll be waiting for your questions. (E-mail: 17.10.20)

And on the 22nd of October:

Extract 10

I’m keeping in mind your questions and thinking about the situation when I do some routine I’m just playing it in my head to get it all together. (E-mail: 22.10.20)

Compasses, maps and destinations

It is of crucial importance – and this renders the narratives precarious *and* productive for their tellers – that these stories are stories of someone who is definitely adrift, with a compass and half a map, but the rudder is in the hands of others. The narrative and the voice which the narrator is trying to find and establish with some clarity and certainty is in need of an overarching sense of purpose.

The ignition of the narrative lies, however, in a set of wholly unexpected events. Accordingly, Aleksandra’s narrative offered to me commences as a clear rupture with

her former life, but we can assume, even more so as a rupture with hitherto everyday discourse. On 12th of November 2020, for example, Aleksandra forwards to me an hour-long 'report'. The first 30 minutes are taken up with internet closures by the security forces during marches, messenger chats and their role in directing masses of people to gathering points around Minsk, data blockages, state security hacking of personal data, endless discussions with work colleagues and family and friends about the dangers or the irrelevance of such data theft, thoughts about the banality and stupidity of the police in trying to intimidate people by showing they know which chats are used, etc. It is safe to assume that the topics of discussions around thousands of kitchen tables (see Aleksievich, 2013), around coffee machines at work, or in queues at the tram stops of a score of cities and in countless small towns and villages changed drastically from the spring of 2020 onwards. As Peter Alheit pointed out many years ago: "Departing from routine situations seems to set off backward-looking and forward-looking biographical 'analysis'" (Alheit, 1983: 191). New phases in our lives require us to align the new with the 'old' and familiar. Usually this is, too, a routine operation of bringing things into some order (p. 192) When, however,

everyday routines are not simply put on hold, but when their resumption at all is in doubt [...] we are forced to step out of the daily frame of things in order to bring order into our life. This demands sometimes a dramatic revision of our life perspective which involves explicit biographical questioning. Crises of this sort always attack the very substance of our biography... (Alheit, 1983: 193, author's translation)

Aleksandra is able to take stock from her Polish 'exile' in 2021 and can sketch in a possible new course for the protest movement. After dwelling with some uncertainty on the question whether she should be worried that her personal data and those of colleagues had been recently hacked and spread all over the social media, she adopts a first-person position which merges her entirely with a plurality of others. One can perhaps hear in Aleksandra's words ("more a sprint than a marathon") the endless conversations and posts rushing between people in these hectic, frightening, exhilarating days and her voice in these interchanges:

Extract 11

so we do speak about how it will end I think because I WAS? kind of skeptical in August especially in the first few weeks because no one knew that it would go so far so for three months and it's not it's not ending yet it's going on back then it felt like if something would change it would change in a week or two like if we wouldn't win in the first two weeks it would END but it appeared to be not some kind of sprint more like a marathon which we are still going through but right now I think everyone I speak to like (.) 95% of my friends my fellows and colleagues think that Lukashenko will go away that society is at that point we reached the point of no return we can't go back no matter what we kind of found each other this summer we understood that we

are united we should help each other yeah and the only question is WHEN Lukashenko will go WHAT will be next. (12.11.20)

CAPITALS = emphasis, rise in volume; (.) = hearable pause, hesitation; ? = rising tone

Narrative resources under pressure

The challenge to narrative resources that comes with severe social conflict expresses itself in bare questions: what has changed? How can I describe it? Can I risk describing it? Uncertainty, fear, anger, pride, disgust and hate, even, may have assumed central roles in what was previously a more indifferently developing life story. The physical and emotional spaces in which life increasingly gets caught up are new (discovering the city differently through the marches), fascinating, exhilarating (the slogans, the shouting, the solidarity) but also menacing and frightening (men in balaclavas, stun grenades, explosions, running, hiding, being chased). An everyday shareable and knowable world of family and work, bus stops and metro stations is invaded by ominous places whose names alone generate new continents of experience: the *Okhrestina*, the *SIZU*, *Volodarka*, names that stand for the entire new urban gulag archipelago of detention centres, KGB prisons and dilapidated jails which become the routine subject of discussions everywhere for everyone, it seems, garnished frequently with brutal stories and brought into daily focus by civil society initiatives (e.g. August2020.info). However, these frightful stories become, via this very invasion, commonplace matters, the new routine. For example, after the arrest and sentence to 10 days in the detention centre of a colleague of Aleksandra's for distributing leaflets before the August 2020 election, Aleksandra says:

Extract 12

Uhm yeah I mean it was a SHOCK? to me because (.) uhm AFTER? the elections I mean arrests are a kind of common thing and you kind of exPECT it to happen but back then? uhm (.) it was uhm yeah a big shock to hear about some of your friends to be arrested (.) colleagues especially for a thing like this not even some protest or action just for putting leaflets on an information desk like (.) what the HELL? and uhm uhm yeah nowadays it's not like (hahahh) it's not some shock news anymore for example I've just heard an hour ago my boss from my previous place of work he was caught ... and they are having trials today ... it's kind of news you hear every week especially after Sunday. (5.10.20)

CAPITALS = emphasis, raised volume; ? = rising tone; (.) = hearable pause or break in flow

Elsewhere in her narratives, as here (what the HELL?) pride and satisfaction can be heard, mixed with derision for the state and its thugs, doubtless because Aleksandra has, in fact, crossed the threshold from passive onlooker to active critic and has learnt a new habitus, that of the protester. She has crossed over into a different emotional and intellectual territory and in this radically new learning space she rehearses the voice to tell her story. In the extract above, Aleksandra passes in the space of few words through

a learning trajectory that reduces the passage of real time once again to a hazy ‘back then’ and fast-forwards to ‘after the election’. Both expressions are signposts for – it is understood – wholly and radically diverse life-worlds. And along with time, embodied experience evolves in exponential fashion. Alheit (2018: 15) points out in this regard that although the logic of “the *already formed biographical sense* structures subsequent actions and interpretations of a subject”, that is, biographical sense determines to some extent how someone will respond to experiences, biographical resources – *biographicity* – are *not* merely the sum of things learnt. The addition of street violence and repression are not simply addable to a life of routine tranquillity. At least, not without some drastic reassessment of self and relationships to things and people. Alheit suggests that the already existing biographical resources impact “reflexively back on the same learning process” and that “there exists a creative potential to newly create a specific, individual construction from the general possibilities, even to the surprise of the producer” (Alheit, 2018: 15). Narratives of learning and their relationship to their own recent well-trodden paths and the increasingly problematic personal knowledge they are required to process and consume are caught up, too, in a mesh of new and disruptive discourses, of power, of personal agency, as well as personal defeat. Aleksandra’s narratives, then, are under pressure to make (new) sense of the experiences they communicate.

Conclusion: an emerging learning biography

I like to think of Aleksandra as a young Belarusian Penelope. She has a heavy responsibility to bear. When asked to talk about her life and where it is going, she feels the weight of saying the last word, ending her narrative. All the more so as the direction she should go is far from clear. As she starts each narrative, she takes it where it has to go: her childhood, language questions, arrests and torture, hectic discussions and joyous tea parties, decorated synagogues and stun grenades, and so on, as it must be. And when she starts again, the narrative departs from somewhere completely different or goes over familiar ground but in a wholly new way. And so on. Like Penelope in the story, she weaves her tapestry patiently, skilfully, diligently. And she then unravels the previous narrative and alters the pattern, tightens the skein, settles for a simpler form or starts off on an image incomparably more intricate. The story is done, undone and done again. And there are hope and a voice in there, driving it forward and waiting on her with patience.

The extent of the calamity that unfolded in Belarus with the onset of COVID in April 2020, the trauma of the political repression after August 2020, and the deepening crisis ushered in by Belarus’ undeclared participation in Russia’s invasion of Ukraine separately and together cannot be measured, and this uncertainty leaves its mark on

the narratives of the young adult interviewed for this research. Belarusian society remains fragmented, so much so that parallel realities may be assumed, so extreme are the supposed contradictions, according to recent surveys (Krawatzek, 2021). This fragmentation must of necessity be reproduced in biographical narratives. Yet, as I have attempted to show, along with fragmentation and disruption, there is abundant evidence of biographical work, work of creation and work of hope, too.

A few initial observations can be made about Aleksandra's narratives. They must be heard as words in a great flood of stories and accounts that are told by an endless number of other individuals also caught up in this historical conflict. What makes them incredibly valuable is that she was able to tell them, she had the chance to find and choose her words. Given the vortex of events which is the context of this biographical learning process, she does not and cannot know where she is in the narrative that is unfolding around her. She does not and cannot know what is the end of her narrative. And as in all narratives, current endings are used as resources in the telling, but beyond and after every successive ending there is something like a yawning gulf. The next telling starts on the edge of this empty space. As well, her biography has been broken and her narratives work on putting it together anew, though altered.

Biographicity and revising the life story

The destabilization involved threatens routine and current portrayals of self, entails re-casting and redefinition of past identity positions and urges the construction of prospective or projective future identities (Baynham, 2006: 376). The outcome is naturally difficult to predict. How the individual reacts to the new situation is equally uncertain. The result, that is, the urgent need to realign local experience with global experience, to re-attach the 'ends' of the narrative thread, so to speak, can be a creative experience. Much will depend on the robustness and "biographical competence" (Rabe-Kleberg, 1995: 36-37) of the individual and their sense of self, their self-reflexivity, their ability or willingness to interact with the new rather than self-defend. In this new situation, the layers of experience of accreted and consciously accessed biographical resources can be looked upon as a new form of (potential) knowledge or as Alheit calls it, 'biographicity' (Alheit, 2018: 15).

The temporal organization of narrative discourse, too, involves multiple and changing time-planes. Thus, Mishler points out that if we wish to understand how individuals learn, change, and develop then we "must have an alternative to the linear temporal-order causal model, one that allows for their acting in the present toward a desirable or away from an undesirable future state of affairs". And – of particular relevance for the texture of Aleksandra's narratives in the turmoil of experience sketched in above – he

continues: “it must also allow for their ways of reinterpreting the meaning of past events in terms of later consequences, through which they redefine who they are and revise the plots of their life stories” (Mishler, 2006: 36; see also Ricoeur, 1983: 131-132).

In this next, and final, section, I shall turn to the question of how the “complex biographical structure of experiences” – biographicity – “that is formed in the past and relates to the future” (Alheit, 2018: 15) allows Aleksandra to make (new) sense of the experiences she encounters despite and thanks to the extraordinary circumstances in which she weaves her story.

Hope abounds as the narrative emerges

Aleksandra is working on her experiences: a future completely re-drawn by the autumn of protest, her job, her colleagues, her friends, COVID, arrests, the necessity to ‘relocate’ abroad. The path ahead as good as scrubbed out, gone. Ahead only uncertainty. The new country, new language, new job, find a flat, earn money, leave her family behind, avoid COVID, worry about her parents. She wonders whether she is doing the right thing if she leaves the country? Would that not be a betrayal of what she believes in now and of everyone else?

Extract 13

I would like my own country to be a good place with what we can see now people helping each other fighting together standing up for their rights for people that have been arrested and it’s really great I do understand that when it’s all over when Lukashenko leaves I guess we’ll have the same destiny as Poland all the solidarity and unity will be I mean (.) in some way divided because right now we have got one sort of goal everyone agrees on after it’s (.) accomplished uhm I think many people will see the future for our country in many different ways staying closer to Russia or integration with Europe or having our own way lots of things so it will definitely in some way you know divide people but I mean it would be good to help to make Belarus a better place so I’ve been thinking a lot obviously like do I have to the right to leave right now should I like does it make me sort of a betrayer? like NOT a DEcent person and so the past uhm few months I’ve been thinking a lot about it though I didn’t know if I would leave or not uhm we still don’t but (hhh) I made up my mind and I’ve decided that I did what I had to do and I I gave all I could at this point uhm I helped to distribute information in my district I mean like putting leaflets around the houses and getting signatures for our deputy going to the marches going to the solidarity chains around my district in the evenings (.) and I don’t regret it I mean that’s what I wanted to do and I’m still willing to do because I think it is a form of protest and from the government actions we see it works. (12.11.20)

CAPITALS = emphasis, raised volume; (.) = hearable pause, hedge; (hhhh) = outbreath, sigh

Even if, in the end, Aleksandra’s statement is more hesitant than sure of itself – all the repeated uses of hedges like “I mean”, “like”, “sort of”, and pauses and “uhm” fillers are unmistakable – is that not wholly comprehensible? Given the weight of fear and worry that has throughout been mixed with exhilaration and hope, it seems more than justified

to ask whether it is not *more* surprising that Aleksandra actually remains hopeful? If this is indeed hope, how can the hope she expresses be accounted for as it emerges in her narratives? Where is hope to come from? And can we hear in Aleksandra's hope for the future a turning point in her learning biography?

If we accept that the narrative allows for ways of reinterpreting the meaning of past events in terms of later and future consequences, then we redefine who we and others are and revise the plots of our life stories according to what deep experience in the mesh of space, place, time, and body demands. Of course, the biographical narrative does not simply account for and deliver rationales of experiences lived and celebrated – or denied and buried. The narrative is told, all the time, in the present, as the time slips away. And, as Ochs and Capps remind us, “we can't credibly reflect upon ourselves, in the present, as we experience the moment. Rather, the non-present – the past and the *possible* – is the context for self-making” (Ochs and Capps, 2001: 289, author's italics). The past and its place in the narrative is uncontested, even if the version of the past that is constructed, is. The *possible*, however, may be infinitely more controversial and will, in fact, be pieced together out of “our own and others' ambiguous emotions and events” (290) which, in Jerome Bruner's words, mesh as life stories “within a community of life stories” (Bruner, 2004: 699). If we follow Bruner a little more in his attempt to understand the workings of life as narrative, it is helpful to consider to what extent Aleksandra in her narratives of 2020 and beyond achieves a transition from narrative focused on actuality or facts and events, to a narrative flow dedicated more and more to an evocation of possibility. This language of possibility, to borrow Bruner's idea, is in Aleksandra's case capable of ‘breaching’ the hegemonic legitimacy of the monological narrative of the Lukashenko years and the life lived – by Aleksandra too – according to its *topoi* and commonplaces (see Bruner, 2004: 699).

What we hear, then, are resources of hope, voiced and heard in Aleksandra's telling, stories which attempt to achieve a freer narrative of the present and possible future, which attempt to recognize as a shared and sharable resource the ‘happy memory’ (Ricoeur, 2000: 643-646) however much it may in fact be compromised by painful, frightening, or ugly elements. This narrated ‘happy memory’ is an uncompromisingly honest memory that dares to propose a fiercely claimed reinterpretation of memory in the face of, and challenging, the monological memory of the regime, which buries and stifles freedoms – the ‘forgetful memory’ (*oublieuse mémoire*). In the mesh of narratives out of which Aleksandra's emerge, the claim to happiness is formed of necessity in a difficult embrace with an unrelenting, unforgiving and unforgetting memory (*inoublieuse mémoire*) that refuses to go away (Ricoeur, 2000: 650-651).

Aleksandra expresses this difficult union of possibility, denial and responsibility thus:

Extract 14 THERE'S NO WAY BACK!

yeah but altogether the past two months were like emotional swings? because you feel the good things and you feel something good is going to change there is no way back we can't go back where we are now but then you see these and how people are attacked and the interviews of how people are treated (.) and that no-one is punished (.) for this and it brings you down ... and you kind of live in these two states when you feel very inspirational then you feel upset and brought down. (16.10.20)

And she then goes back to my questions again, and starts working her way through the anecdotes, the stories, the history, the reports, the chats, the posts, and the anger, the fears, the obstinacy, the expectations, the excitement, the thrills and the happy returns to her flat after 'going out'.

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