

2010

The Construction of Testimony: Exploring the preservation or loss of cultural identification within different post-war Lithuanian diaspora populations now settled outside their country of birth and nationality

Milena Vico

University of Notre Dame Australia, mvico1@nd.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: [http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/arts\\_conference](http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/arts_conference)



This conference paper was originally published as:

Vico, M. (2010). The Construction of Testimony: Exploring the preservation or loss of cultural identification within different post-war Lithuanian diaspora populations now settled outside their country of birth and nationality. *Eighth European Social Science History Conference*.

This conference paper is posted on ResearchOnline@ND at [http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/arts\\_conference/14](http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/arts_conference/14). For more information, please contact [researchonline@nd.edu.au](mailto:researchonline@nd.edu.au).



**Dr. MILENA VICO**

**The University of Notre Dame Australia,  
School of Arts and Sciences,  
Italian Studies Lecturer**

**19 Mouat Street, Fremantle 6959. Western Australia  
+61 8 9433 0109  
mvico1@nd.edu.au**

**Eighth European Social Science History Conference  
13 – 16 April, 2010  
Ghent, Belgium (Oral Histories and Life Stories Network)**

**Language of Presentation: English**

**TITLE:**

**The construction of testimony: Exploring the preservation or loss of cultural identification within different post-war Lithuanian diaspora populations now settled outside their country of birth and nationality.**

**ABSTRACT:**

This paper describes how ethnographic-style qualitative interviews have been used successfully to ascertain the extent to which the pre-WWII Lithuanian culture has survived among members of the post-war Lithuanian diaspora now settled in Western Australia, all of whom were in their eighties at the time of the study. For comparison purposes, the study compared the experience of the Western Australian emigres with the experiences of a comparison sample of age-matched emigre Lithuanians who had settled and remained in Siberia since the war and a comparison sample of Lithuanians of the same age who had remained in Lithuania itself under its Soviet occupation. The Lithuanian culture has always defined itself through a rural lens. Despite the desire for continuity and preservation of their original pre-war culture, Lithuanians had to confront a new environment and a different dominant culture which required them to make adjustments. In what ways and to what extent has this process of modification affected the lives of this people? What difficulties and challenges has each group encountered in its effort to maintain or adapt (rather than lose) the core markers of its original culture? Data for the investigation were obtained through a qualitative interview method aimed at understanding the subjective experiences of the individuals involved and at identifying the changes in cultural identification which have occurred as a consequence of their adaptation to their new cultural environments. First-person oral recollections of the transition experience were obtained from the study participants in the three present-day Lithuanian, Siberian and Australian study groups. Flexibly-applied descriptive, explanatory, emotive and contrast questions employed in the interviews assisted the respondents to provide extended reflective responses. Each of the interview transcripts revealed occurrences or absences of core markers of the pre-war Lithuanian culture which had previously been identified through extensive study of available scholarly Lithuanian sources. Pooling the interview data across all individuals in a sample established a profile of occurrence or non-occurrence of these pre-defined core markers for that sample. By comparing the cultural profiles generated independently for the three groups it was possible to discern the extent to which the patterns of retention, transformation or loss have been similar or different for the three groups. This paper thus offers one account of how qualitative interview data has been used effectively to derive insights into the ways the preservation of ethnic identifications of different émigré populations has been impacted by their members' adaptations to their respective new cultural environments.

**PAPER: The construction of testimony: Exploring the preservation or loss of cultural identification within different post-World War II Lithuanian diaspora populations now settled outside their country of birth and nationality.**

This paper offers one account of how qualitative interview data has been used effectively to obtain insights into the ways the preservation of ethnic identifications of *émigrés* populations has been impacted by their members' adaptations to their new cultural environments. It focuses on a study of Lithuanians who migrated to Western Australia after World War II. The study<sup>1</sup> compared the experiences of the Western Australian *émigrés* in their eighties with two age-matched samples: Lithuanians who settled in Siberia after the war and Lithuanians who had remained in Lithuania itself. Despite the desire for continuity and preservation of their original pre-war culture, Lithuanian *émigrés* had to adjust to a new environment and a different dominant culture. In what ways and to what extent did this process of modification affect their lives? What difficulties and challenges did each group encounter in their efforts to maintain or adapt (rather than lose) the core characteristics of its original culture?

Data were obtained through a qualitative interview method aimed at understanding the subjective experiences of the participants and pinpointing changes in cultural identification resulting from their adaptation to their new environments.

### **Research Strategy**

In order to effectively address the questions of interest, four hypotheses were formulated:

- Each group has retained a substantial common core of pre-war culture.
- Each group has drifted substantially away from their original culture.
- The Western Australian and Siberian groups have preserved some common *essence* of their original culture which is not shared by the present day group in Lithuania.
- Only the Lithuanian group in Lithuania maintained a substantial part of their pre-war culture.

---

<sup>1</sup> Paper 33 : <http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses/33>

And after an in-depth study of the works of authoritative Lithuanian scholars Jonas Balys, Irena Čepienė, Prane Dundulienė, Marija Gimbutas, and Rasa Račiunaitė, I selected a number of customs and traditions, values and beliefs which I deemed core characteristics of the pre-war Lithuanian culture. Subsequently, I organized them in a table of customs and traditions, values and belief (a sample of it is attached at the end of this paper) which enabled a comparison of the later findings. The first column provided a convenient base-line description against which all three samples were compared.

I then interviewed the participants to obtain first-hand recollections. The participants were recruited on criteria related to share personal characteristics and experiences which I deemed significant in the maintenance or loss of their pre-war Lithuanian culture. These criteria were *émigrés* with:

- Both parents of Lithuanian origin.
- A Lithuanian spouse and children.
- Some formal education in Lithuania prior to emigration.
- A continuing relationship with the Catholic Church.
- The willingness to devote the time required for the respondent-centred interview approach being used.
- A genuine interest in the study.

### **Confidentiality, Ethical Clearance and Language**

I contacted and described to each prospective participant the nature of the study. I outlined the interview procedure and guaranteed confidentiality and anonymity. Those who agreed to take part in the study were advised that they could withdraw at any time. Explicit signed consent forms were required for each interview, its tape recording and field note-taking. The interviews were conducted in the participant's home. Since I am fluent in Lithuanian I was able to conduct them in person and later transcribe them and translate (as necessary) without the use of interpreters, translators, or other mediators.

Additionally, I maintained a daily field notebook for recording relevant contextual details, situational nuances concerning individual interviews, and my reflective observations as the study progressed. All materials generated will be securely archived for five years beyond completion

of the study. Factual names of the participants were replaced in the transcript with codes to preserve anonymity. Contextual information that might reveal any individual's identity were modified or deleted. At all times, I alone had access to the collected data.

### **Designing and Implementing the Interview Strategy**

The majority of the data were obtained through a qualitative interview method. But I did find census data helpful in identifying patterns in their lives, their religious and group affiliation, and education levels which, in turn, contextualized the qualitative elements of the research.

Although the study was not ethnography in the formal sense I used elements of the ethnographic interview technique formalised and described by internationally recognised ethnographer, James Spradley<sup>2</sup>. The open-ended interviews in the present study incorporated Spradley's descriptive questions and contrast questions<sup>3</sup>. Of further value was his technique for sequencing questions in the interview process.

To develop the participants' accounts of their retention of elements of their Lithuanian culture, I enquired about their present family life and cultural practices, and encouraged them to talk about which (if any) of their former practices survived their pre-war Lithuanian upbringing. In addition, participants were invited to reflect on what had encouraged or facilitated the preservation or adaptation of any practices or, conversely, on what might have explained why other cultural practices had been discarded

Some participants found these forms of reflective comparison difficult. In order to assist the participants in this regard, I attempted to 'take the participants back' in a psychological sense to pre-war childhood experiences that evoked memories they were willing to share. Their memories were used as a recollected context against which the comparison between '*then*' and '*now*' were more readily drawn. Having heard the recalled accounts, I obtained a personalised context within which concrete prompts meaningful them might be framed for the contrast questions.

---

<sup>2</sup> Spradley, James P. *The Ethnographic Interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 155-168.

Although the interviews would in principle require between one-and-a-half hours and two hours, participants were permitted to set their own time limits or to spread the interview over a number of shorter sessions. From the outset it was assumed that the total interview time for most individuals would be two to four hours in aggregate, extended over two or three separate sessions. Beyond that, follow-up interviews were necessary in a number of cases for clarification or progressive refinement of the gathered data.

As I was regularly involved in the social and religious activities of the Lithuanian community in Perth, Western Australia direct observation of some participants was a significant additional means of data collection. As noted by Spradley<sup>4</sup>, researchers who have been able to enter the social environment of their participants are in a better position to observe, understand and interpret their culture. In order to develop and validate the above interview methodology, I conducted several pilot interviews among members of the Western Australian Lithuanian community. The participants included both males and females, and were interviewed at least twice, with each interview lasting an average of one-and-a-half hours. All questions were open-ended and had no time limits placed on them. Participants were asked to recall events of their childhood in pre-war Lithuania as well as to describe their present family life and cultural practices. The participants were open and spoke freely, and at no time appeared to feel uncomfortable about discussing their lives. At first the participants focused mainly on their own life stories, revealing in the process much information on their traditions and customs, but little on their beliefs and values. One early challenge was to find a way to encourage them to reveal or express these beliefs and values. After extensive trial and error and experimenting with both the interview technique and questioning format I devised three different question types – descriptive, explanatory, emotive and contrast<sup>5</sup> to be employed in the interviews.

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., pp. 48-49.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

**Descriptive questions** encouraged participants to reveal information on particular events and practices. Questions focused on *what*, *when* and *how* certain traditional customs are still practised today and which of these, if any, have ceased.

Example:

Researcher: *How do you celebrate Christmas?*

Participant: *Well, one of the things we do is to have a special traditional meal on Christmas Eve.*

The participant describes a particular practice.

**Explanatory questions** stimulated participants to give reasons for the cultural practices described, and to explain *why* particular practices have either continued or ceased.

Example:

Researcher: *Why do you have this special meal on Christmas Eve each year?*

Participant: *Because it's something that my family always did when I was a child, and also it has a religious meaning, because the meal consists of twelve different dishes, which represent the Twelve Apostles that partook in the Last Supper.*

The participant explains the particular practice, and in doing so reveals the importance of family values and religious beliefs.

**Emotive questions** stimulated participants to express *why* and *how* they feel about certain events or aspects of their culture. To the extent that these questions evoked responses born of anger, frustration, joy or sadness, they often revealed participants' underlying beliefs and values.

Example:

Researcher: *Do your children generally join in this meal?*

Participant: *No, because they are married to non-Lithuanians that are not interested in and don't really care about our traditions and religion.*

Researcher: *So how do you feel about this?*

Participant: *I'm quite sad and angry, because I know our traditions will be lost when I'm gone."*



The participant reveals her emotions – sadness and anger – surrounding the underlying value – the importance she ascribes to preservation of her culture – and through the explanation offered she highlights why the matter is of concern to her – that others to follow her will not share the same commitment to that preservation.

**Contrast questioning**, led participants to compare, or contrast, past practices with the way they express their culture today and, in doing so, to share their emotional reaction to any experienced changes. This strategy often helped to bring to the surface the participant's underlying beliefs and values, especially where the participant had not been consciously aware of these feelings and was unable to verbalise them in response to direct questions of the form *what/when/how* and *why*.

Example:

Researcher: *Are the members of the Australian families close to each other?*

Participant: *No. The Australians don't care. The children leave home early.*

*Our children stay with us until they married.*

In this answer the participant's values about the importance of the family unity is revealed.

Soon after each interview I transcribed it and culled it for references to the customs and traditions, values and beliefs under study. The pooled summary data for each sample was entered into the table. By comparing the cultural profiles provided by the table I was able to successfully discern the extent to which the patterns of retention, transformation or loss have been similar or different for the three diaspora samples. (Appendix 1)

## Summary

In brief here are the highlights of my methodology:

- Cultural investigation of the pre-war period was obtained through an in depth-study of scholarly sources.
- First –person oral recollections were extrapolated from members of three different groups of participants.
- Questions for the interviews process were based on elements of ethnographic interview technique.
- A composite table was designed to compare the data obtained by the three samples investigated against the base line description of the pre- war culture.

This methodology can be used in comparative investigations of other diasporic groups to derive insights into ways the preservation of ethnic identifications has been impacted by their members' adaptations to their respective cultural environments.

## Bibliography

Spradley, James P. *The Ethnographic Interview*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979

Vico, Milena. "Lithuanian Diaspora: An Interview Study on the Preservation or Loss of Pre-World War Two Traditional Culture among Lithuanian Catholic Émigrés in Western Australia and Siberia, in comparison with Lithuanians in their Homeland" (2008). *Theses*. Paper 33. <http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theses/33>

LITHUANIAN CULTURAL CUSTOMS AND PRACTICES

APPENDIX 1

Pre-WWII Lithuania	Post-WWII Lithuanian Diaspora in Australia	Post-WWII Lithuanian Diaspora in Siberia (in the country)	Post-WWII Lithuanian Diaspora in Siberia (in the city)	Post-WWII Lithuanians in Lithuania (in the country)	Post-WWII Lithuanians in Lithuania (in the city)
<p><b>Weddings</b></p> <p>The wedding was celebrated on Sunday in accordance to the Roman Catholic rite. The groom would wear his best suit. The bride would wear a long white dress with a small wreath of rue pinned on the veil. The parents would greet the newly weds offering bread salt and a glass of wine; festivities lasted from three to six days. <i>Raguolis</i> the traditional wedding cake was shared among the guests.</p>	<p>The wedding was celebrated in accordance to the Roman Catholic rite. Lithuanian wedding traditions have been maintained to a certain extent due to the foreign terrain. The wedding celebration would last only one day.</p>	<p>The wedding was celebrated in Lithuania before deportation in accordance to the Roman Catholic rite with the Lithuanian traditions.</p>	<p>In the city lived mainly the young Lithuanian males who married with Russian or German women. Therefore the marriage was celebrated according to the Soviet civil rites.</p>	<p>The wedding was celebrated in accordance to the Roman Catholic rite in the pre-WWII period or during German occupation. The Lithuanian wedding customs and traditions have been maintained.</p>	<p>The wedding was celebrated in accordance to the Roman Catholic rite in the pre-WWII period or during German occupation. The Lithuanian wedding traditions remained unchanged.</p>
<p><b>Name's Days and Birthdays</b></p> <p>Name's Day was celebrated every year on the day of the Saint after whom a person was named.</p> <p>Generally birthdays were celebrated only when one turned 21 years of age.</p>	<p>Name's Day was celebrated only for the elderly members of the family.</p> <p>Birthdays were celebrated for all the members of the family.</p>	<p>Name's Day was celebrated only for the elderly members of the family.</p> <p>Birthdays were celebrated for all members of the family.</p>	<p>(No data available)</p> <p>Birthdays were celebrated for all members of the family.</p>	<p>Name's Day was celebrated only for the elderly members of the family.</p> <p>Birthdays were celebrated for all members of the family.</p>	<p>Name's Day was celebrated only for the elderly members of the family.</p> <p>Birthdays were celebrated for all members of the family</p>