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The Meaning of "Work" in the Life Stories of Women

In pursuing a special research project at the Sorbian Institute about the connection between "Ethnicity" and "Gender", I used the opportunity to collect biographical sketches from mothers and grandmothers in Lusatia, a region located within the former German Democratic Republic. While recording stories about motherhood, I explored how women express the meaning of careers in their life stories. Like masculine biographies the period of employment stands in the center of their reflections and seems to be typical for female biographies in the East. The following paper explores how memory constructs personal identity in the same way that "collective memory" (Halbwachs 1950) forms the identity of a community. It demonstrates how individual experiences, memories, and stories are interconnected with outside cultural conditions.

1. The Background

Several years ago I acquired from a photographer five pictures; I had stood rooted before them at his exhibition. They were images of women, large format portraits of seventy- to eighty-year-old Sorbian women who were posed with dignity in their own apartments, in the "good parlor" or in the kitchen. The exhibition and accompanying catalogue were both titled "Doma"[1] (Matschie 1995). The objects seen in the background of the pictures reminded me of my grandmother's private spaces: the twin rolls saved for afternoon coffee on the carefully laid kitchen table covered with an oilcloth; the long-necked bottle filled with condensed milk standing on the kitchen cabinet whose glazed doors were covered with curtains; the thin sunbeam that came through the small window which was nonetheless large enough to allow a view of the birds in the nearby tree. My grandmother sat at that window for many hours, gazing out and noting everything that happened outside – similar to the old woman wearing a bonnet in the photographs. However it was not only the joy of seeing familiar things from my childhood that created my connection with the pictures. The self-confident faces fascinated me: the kindly yet determined eyes which rested calmly on the viewer. Oh, the dignity that streamed from the faces and the attitude they celebrated! Were these really the faces of an unemancipated generation, of an oppressed gender, such as I had read about in the literature associated with the field of Women's Studies? I caught myself trying to find clues in the wrinkles of their cheeks left by long years of life. I hoped to find a more complete truth about the hard-to-recognize "hidden culture" of these women (see Nadig 1986).

My career as folklorist at the Sorbian Institute in Bautzen, in addition to the numerous lectures given to various local history societies, senior citizen's clubs, and Domowina groups[2], led me to concentrate on the villages in central Lusatia. In subsequent in-

[1] "Doma" means "at home".

[2] The Domowina is the umbrella organization for all Sorbian societies and understands itself to be the representative of the national and political interests of the Sorbian people.

terviews, I met women who reminded me of my pictures, women who generated an aura that I had until then never encountered. I most likely registered this because as an urban working woman, I have little contact with elderly people outside my family and those of my friends. In contrast, my female peers in rural areas are obviously accustomed to frequent association with grandmothers and grandfathers. For them the radiance was so ordinary that they no longer noticed it. Yet it seemed to me to be mysterious.

The experience with the pictures and my direct observations inspired the idea for a research project at the Sorbian Institute, which I have worked on sporadically over several years. The interruptions not only occurred because of occasional unexpected research projects, but it was also necessary to step away from the collected materials and interviewees to keep my perspective fresh. In addition, I had to establish an acceptable biographical method that would be accepted within the social sciences and that would help to clarify the questions and issues that particularly interested me. The conflicting opinions present in the scholarly literature, especially concerning oral history methods and autobiographical research, made me aware of the degree to which biographical research can diminish an individual's dignity. This exists when researchers analyze and interpret the motivations behind decisions and attitudes of the interviewees from the current political situation. The reason and justification for biographical research is not to demand the revelation of all personal secrets, mistakes, and misconceptions and to "correct" them if possible. Instead research should reveal the whole prism of personal experiences and perspectives. Even in the social sciences, the individual is the measure of all things; therefore humanity should never become an afterthought in light of personal research and interpretation goals. Culture is the product of individual efforts among which we find ourselves on a daily basis. Our scholarly curiosity qualifies as one of the activities from the past as well as the present, whose effect deserves to be analyzed for its usefulness for future developments. However, we do not have the right to raise ourselves to the level of God and to censure human efforts.

My goal for this project is to use the means and methods that are available to me as a narrative researcher and to paint a portrait of people, a portrait of women from Lusatia, which will allow us to see how they live in and with "their" culture and how they along with their needs and their work change this culture. All of this is reflected in their life stories. In them we can read about the ideas and claims of people of their epoch. We recognize the complexity related to the roles assigned to them by the larger society, but we also see with what strength these roles can be altered.

What role does motherhood play in the life of a woman? With this question in the back of my mind, I went out into the field to ask women to tell me about their lives. Because the portraits of the old women had awakened this curiosity in me, I turned to the older generation. They could look back over a long life rich with experiences in which motherhood was only one phase of life among others. I had already been able to examine to my content the tendency of young mothers, such as myself and my friends and colleagues, to concentrate on their birth experiences and daily life with children. If at this point a folklorist asked us about our existence as mothers, we would assert unanimously that this particular role with all of its peaks and valleys was the most important experience of our lives. This role introduces us to a completely new set of demands which are not comparable to the previous phases of school, job training, and work. However we would not be able to cope with most of these new experiences without the lessons we learned from the earlier ones. In my research work, I make the as-

sumption that although motherhood is an important factor in the lives of women in the late twentieth century, it does not represent the only chapter.

2. A Case Study

Magdalena K. (*1927, farm worker, mother of four children, one son died in infancy, a second died in a traffic accident in his youth): "I met my husband when I was 20, perhaps 21. Once again there were dances in Sch.[3] My mother always said: ‚Behave yourselves!' That was all. Who had ever explained anything to us about love? That was never discussed. Later someone told me: ‚My God! I never knew how a child was born. Only when it was so far along did I realize how it worked.' Of course, there was one midwife here, but she first spoke with the girls when it was too far along.

We got married in 1950. R. [a daughter] was born in 1951, I had the second [a son] in '59, M. [a daughter] was born in 1960, and A. [a son] in '64. At the first time, there were still a few rules. During my time, it was still said: Do not hang up too much laundry, and do not walk under the clothesline or it will wrap itself around your neck. That was to keep one from becoming contorted.[4] My mother told me: ‚When you bathe the child in the tub, say: God bless your bath, your little body, and your soul.' I liked that so much. And as a mother you also pray much. A mother does this constantly. The rosary always lies on the bed. … Earlier it was said that you had to observe the weeks during which the threshold of the house could not be crossed. You could not go to the neighbors nor should you converse through the window, otherwise your child would become stubborn. – I had to start working immediately. Such was the case in farming. My husband could not milk the cows. Thus, you had to start up again after nine days. At that time, we still stayed in bed for nine days after giving birth. Of course, you could not lift anything heavy. And sometimes everything was rather difficult. By nursing you found a little time for yourself and the child. That is how we survived then. Some got pregnant again within a few weeks. I always left myself a quarter of a year. The doctor also said that this was how a person recovered. Otherwise we had a day full of work. The childcare and upbringing and the school things – all of this fell to the women. We woke up shortly after 5:00. The cows were milked, then the milk cooled and mixed with that from the previous evening. The cream had already separated from the older milk. Then the milk had to be taken to the loading platform. It was picked up at 6:00. Back at the house, you had to feed the pigs and get the children ready for school. Then out to the field, back to the house to fix lunch. And in the evening, one had to pinch the shoots off the potatoes. Around 10:00 pm one went to bed. But before then the children's homework had to be checked. Sometimes there was also mending or darning to do. Then you laid down and fell asleep right away. The next morning you got up early again and so it happened over and over again. You had no time. When I went to church – the morning mass was at 6:00 – I had to have the milk at the platform by 5:30. So, I had to get up even earlier. And then I had to ride my bicycle fast to morning mass in R.[5] and then quickly back to the house so that the children could arrive punctually for mass at 7:30. My husband did not drive to R. until 9:00. First with the bicycle, then later he

[3] After World War II.
[4] This means, so that women did not strain their abdominal muscles.
[5] The Catholic church is located two kilometers away in a neighboring village.

had a motor scooter. But I had to be out early because of the milk. That was our money!"

3. The Power of Memory

Life stories document the human existence. Told in retrospect, they tie together experiences from the course of life. And each story is told with consideration for these experiences. Thus, they distinguish a very personal view of the things which in return demand a corresponding sensitive handling. Neither the research nor the interested reader is entitled to search for the relationship of truth and reality in life stories. If this is the case, what can the collection of such stories achieve?

"When one gets old", according to Golo Mann, "it is completely different from when one is young, yet it is memory that holds life together." (Mann 1964: 13) Memory therefore fulfills a creative function. In this context, it seems to me that the concept of "tradition", a word heavily used in the field of story research, and the connection of "tradition" and "story" provide an important point of departure which helps to clarify the relation of research to autobiographical concerns. The Heidelberg philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer once explained that "tradition as such is not an organic occurrence; instead it is based on the conscious effort to preserve the past." (Gadamer 1989: 43) In my opinion, "ordinary" stories, those about daily life, qualify as "conscious effort", even when neither the effort nor the consciousness of the storytellers is written in their faces. For my children, my father's memories of being a soldier and my mother's recollections of her childhood established the initial conceptual groundwork for their understanding of war (arduous marches, hunger, the filth and fear of the trenches, but also comradeship) as well as of childhood sixty years ago. This early knowledge is a standard against which all new information and perspectives about these periods will be compared. In this manner, memories of the past will be made useable for the present. Remembering has nothing to do with the access to a canned "past reality" but instead constructs a new reality. Memories conserve nothing. The update of the experiences of earlier times establish connections between those events and interpret and typify them. Remembering is a constructive process of selection, adaptation, and acquisition, as well as rejection and suppression, mediated by perception. "Memory is a contemporary product of mental processes combined with now recognized or invented behavioral necessities." (Schmidt 1991: 386) Behind this is hidden the "conscious effort" of which Gadamer wrote.

There is no more effective means of transmitting human experiences than stories. "Telling stories belongs to the oldest mental techniques of humankind," claims Michael Neumann in his anthropological studies of stories. (Neumann 2000: 280) Proceeding from the resource material and body of knowledge, stories make the past comprehensible and accessible, insofar as they pass down that knowledge which people consider delightful, significant, and valuable. This censorship makes selections from the superabundance of material and then sifts, analyzes, judges, sorts, and creates connections. Storytelling is a cultural technique that everyone can utilize in order to share personal knowledge and hard-won insights, as well as conviction and self-awareness. The connection between storytelling and identity counts as one of the most interesting questions that is being considered by cultural scholars today. The telling of personal life stories is motivated partly by a need to share ideas and to converse and partly by a need to relay

parables or to preserve past experiences. Storytelling is one of the basic methods through which knowledge is transmitted, and it also serves as a means of self-representation whereby people process and cope with ordinary occurrences. Over the past twenty years, the multi-functionality of storytelling – the permanent presence of narratives in our daily lives – has resulted in collaborative work between historians, sociologists, and psychologists, in addition to literary scholars, cultural anthropologists, folklorists, and ethnographers, all of whom consistently point to the connection between storytelling and the formation of identity. Jan and Aleida Assmann have made "collective memory", a phrase coined in 1950 by Maurice Halbwachs, usable for these interdisciplinary discussions: "Memory is the source and foundation of culture" is their credo. "Culture owes much to memory for the ability to establish a sensory world beyond the varying nature of daily life. This is accomplished through the remembering of important things and the forgetting of contingencies and inconsistencies. This world is accessble to individuals and to the community through contemplation." (Assmann 1983: 267)

Memory constructs personal identity in the same way that "collective memory" forms the identity of a community. It is well-known that in Greek mythology, Mnemosyne, the goddess of thought and memory, occupied a unique position. She was the mother of the nine Muses who covered the entire philosophical spectrum of their day through individual fields of responsibility: Clio "The Famous" was the Muse of history, Calliope – the Muse of epic poetry and science, Urania – the Muse of astronomy, Erato – the Muse of love poetry, Thalia – the Muse of comedy, Melpomene – the Muse of tragedy, Terpsichore – the Muse of dance, Euterpe – the Muse of flute music and song, and Polyhymnia – the Muse of music. Hesiod, whom we must thank for this information, believed that he had been kissed by the Muses which thus legitimized his profession as a story-writer. He celebrated the mountain nymphs as omniscient beings who were capable of lying but who were more likely to reveal the truth. (See Kerényi 1951) We are to understand this as a clear indication of the closeness of poetry and truth, which exists as a feature of our entire historico-cultural knowledge. Umberto Eco made this proximity into a method when he said: "The one who does not find a reading from Real History convincing can find solace in fiction." (Eco 1989: book cover)

The secret of that "varnish of fiction" which transforms the incomplete memory of reality into a story has long prevented the statistics-based fields of history and the social sciences with their orientation on "objective witnesses" from intensively pursuing oral tradition research. On the other hand, fiction provides the scholarly substance for the folkloric study of stories.[6] This research discipline seizes this subject matter as documentation of the human condition by which is meant "historical documentation" and not the attempt at psychological interpretation. Stories – fairy tales as well as personal narratives – are interpretations of reality, which place the individual and the supra-individual experience into a broader context. These interpretations present themselves in front of a background of previously acquired, culturally determined general history. While they provide a view into the ways of life and perceptive abilities of people about which written documentation reveals little, they provide a means of differentiating the responsibilities and strategies associated with various milieus (social, regional, ethnic,

[6] The fact that "vernacular" stories destroyed the traditional genre canon – fairy tales, legends, farce, etc. – was more problematic than the need to deal with subjective research material.

religious, gender-specific, and others). Under the canopy of the social sciences, story research helps to illuminate the historic uniqueness of subcultures as opposed to the dominant colonizing culture (see Jeggle 1991).

Through several excerpts from the personal experiences I recorded, I will describe the place of "work" in the memories of women. Already during the interviews, I became aware that "work" meant far more than "career" or "source of income" to these women. Instead the complex connection between social affiliation, age, and what women understand as "work" became clear. While farm workers differentiated little between career, housework, and motherhood, women in other fields divided their days into segments and shared episodes out of the various responsibilities associated with these "layers". Their stories establish a link to the anticipatory attitudes of the younger mothers, whose children are currently in kindergarten and elementary school. And lastly there are also differences between the stories of mothers in eastern Germany and those of mothers in western Germany, which sufficiently prove how much the former dominant ideology had affected the conception of motherhood. Nonetheless the contrast of experiences in the East against those in the West should not stand at the center of the discussion; instead it is most effective as a trigger release for this study and conveys additional dynamism to the selected examples. The fact that interviewees themselves drew attention to the East-West difference underlines the usefulness of this comparison as a proven method of establishing self-identity. The self-image of each group is reflected in the negative example of the other, and thus each assumes its characteristics from the other. Memory and storytelling work through the means of classification and the laying of boundaries. In the clash of cultures, which is all too visible in the inner-German discourse, stories thus play an integral role in the formation, preservation, and transmission of identity.

4. Motherhood in the GDR

At a meeting of non-university folklore institutions, a fellow folklorist from Westphalia and I from eastern Saxony discovered that, independently from each other, we had almost concurrently started researching the same topic. The following subjects interested both of us: motherhood as a phase in the life of a woman; its value in the female biography; the memories to which it is linked; and the "what" and "when" of the stories told. An early exchange of impressions about the joy and frustration of our field work and our research revealed similarities in the story structures and to a certain extent in the narrative content. For example, the stories about birth, the postnatal period, and nursing were similar among women of similar age. The expected differences between East and West first appeared in the stories about motherhood, which covered the initial seven to fourteen years in the children's lives. These differences were most evident among the women who had children in the 1950s and 1960s. They reflected the diverse experiences between being a housewife in the prosperous western society and the almost uninterrupted need to work brought about by the makeshift planning of the weaker economy in the GDR. Differences were also revealed in the enthusiasm with which the women conveyed their stories. One group withdrew with apologies, claiming that in contrast to their husbands, they had nothing interesting to report. Some even rejected my colleague's offer to engage them in discussion. On the other hand, I met a generation of women who were typically engaged in the workforce. As one of my interview-

ees explained: "They were clever enough to make you think that you were needed and that if you were not there you would be missed. When I was at work, I did not want to stay at home at all. I would think that I would miss something. … After I had the children, I was quite glad when the eight weeks were over, and I could go back to binding flax. I wanted to be back under the yoke, among other people, to speak with others, to hear about things, and to talk about things. This was totally different from what happened at home, where each day was like the next." (Waltraut Sch., *1940, tractor driver, two children)

In the GDR, there was a shortage of workers. The Law for the Protection of Mothers and Children (1950) granted women the right to pursue their profession whenever possible, even when that necessitated a geographical separation from their families. In the preamble, the following statement is made: "From now on each woman, as a conscious citizen, is expected to engage actively in the promotion of the well-being of the entire nation." Expressed negatively, only the working woman "as a conscious citizen [contributes] in an active manner in the promotion of the well-being of the entire nation." The 1966 Family Law bound both spouses to the equal rights that advanced the basic principles of socialist morality. Each partner must guarantee the other the opportunity to develop his or her personal and social potential. Both partners were made responsible for the raising of the children and the management of the household. However, this first became a reality in the next generation of parents and only truly functioned in an idealistic sense. With the increase in women's career involvement[7] came the establishment of day care centers which not only provided care for the children while their parents worked, but which also expanded family instruction through education in the "socialist collective" (see Deutsches Pädagogisches Zentralinstitut 1952 and Ministerium für Volksbildung 1986). The state kindergartens were operated in accordance with the education plan issued by the Ministry for Education, and they functioned as ideological controls which few parents actually understood (see Müller-Rieger 1997). According to the 1962 journal of the SED, the families which chose to avoid these controls and the mothers who decided to dedicate several years of their lives to raising their children at home, exposed themselves to the "danger of doting love and petty bourgeois thinking" (Schmidt-Kolmer/Schmidt 1962: 99). Against the background of an insufficient work force on one hand and of decreasing birth rates on the other, the mothers who worked full-time mainly in the shift system and who had at least two, preferably three or more, children, were depicted as the socio-politically desirable model. This image was corroborated for us by the memories of the women who viewed this as more or less normal. I will demonstrate this through the use of a another case study:

As the mother of three children, Margarethe K. (*1927) completed vocational training as a turner and worked for many years in this "masculine" career. She explained further: "The work was good for me. It made me grow up. I became self-confident during this period, and for the first time I noticed: 'Look at that, I can be successful and can even speak for others. I am completely different now.' That is when everything really started. My husband became jealous. He began to say, 'My wife is different now.' In all honesty we were trained to be like this by the system. I first noticed the difference between children from the East and those from the West when my brother

[7] In 1968 fifty percent of the work force in Bautzen was female. (Statistisches Jahrbuch 1969: 194)

and his family came to visit us from West Germany. My sister-in-law from over there always said: 'Your children are so independent and well-raised.' Of course! I had also noticed that. When the western children also came to visit, it was ‚Mama! Mama!' They acted like babies until the age of ten. The mothers from over there simply stayed at home with their children. I think it is good when the children are among other children. My children were in the kindergarten. … When I was at work, the little ones washed the dishes most of the time and did other chores. My daughter sometimes tells how she had to threaten the others to do their work right. She did the most. Otherwise? No, no, the boys also had to help."[8] When Mrs. K.'s oldest son became a father at the age of nineteen, she took the young family into her 65 m² apartment: "They lived with us. They did not need to pay anything and were thus able to save a little. We also split our daughter-in-law's work shifts. Whoever was responsible for the early shift took the child along in the crib. And then there were two more children. And I still had the child from my daughter. And so I sometimes had to get three children going at 4:15 or 4:30 in the morning. We had to be at work at 5:00."

Up to now, the sociological conditions in western Germany have limited the modern tripartite division of life, in which income-producing work is the central and most significant phase, to men, since women are not generally employed full-time. The increasing numbers of working women over the past few decades is interpreted as a narrowing of the gap between feminine and masculine career biographies. Martin Kohli (Kohli 1988: 42 f.) naturally based his assumptions on the research executed in West Germany. In contrast the stories recorded in the East show that the subject "career" also represents a significant aspect in the lives of women. Mrs. K. is proud of what she achieved in her career. The period of her employment stands at the center of her life's story. The accounts from her childhood and youth and from her vocational training function as preliminary phases to her working life. In addition the "well-earned retirement" associated with age is directly linked to career. Although the time was characterized by deprivation, cramped living conditions, and a very difficult marriage and despite the fact that besides her career she had to manage the household and child-rearing, Mrs. K. remembers this as a happy period. The increase in responsibility associated with her career, the acceptance from outside her family, and the financial independence, which among other things made it possible for her to cultivate her appearance (regular visits to the hairdresser, occasional new clothes), increased her self-image and self-confidence. Mrs. K. took an interest in the lives of her children, but she emphasized that she did not meddle in their affairs. Ultimately she raised them to be independent. The fact that in her seventies she still shows an active interest in everything from activities of the seniors' club to readings at the library and continues to maintain contact with her former co-workers is directly linked to her sense of self-worth that was shaped by positive experiences in the work place and to her early expressions of independence on which she focused because of continuing marital problems. Mrs. K. obviously does not know the meaning of "self-pity". On the topic of the unemployment of her son, daughter, and grandchildren, she comments: "They will not starve." She seems to be convinced that her example and her

[8] This passage echoes a children's song that belonged to the curricula of the kindergartens and elementary schools. It was very popular as a serenade on International Women's Day (March 8): "When Mommy goes to work early, I stay at home. / I put on an apron and sweep out the parlor. / I cannot cook the meals, for that I am still too young. / Yet I have already dusted. Mommy will surely be happy."

method of child-rearing with its emphasis on hard work and flexibility has left a mark on her children and their children.

Unlike the women engaged in agriculture, Mrs. K. understands "work" to be a career completely distinct from the home. She separated her work as a housewife and mother from her employment as a turner and reflected this changing self-understanding daily. After she delivered her children to the day care center before 5:00 am and boarded the company bus that took her to her workplace, she became a turner. When she returned in the afternoon and took the children shopping, she was again a mother, whose cares and work she described as "duty" and not as work. Her job provided access to a community beyond the circle of family, where she found "public" recognition and which, according to her, strengthened her self-confidence. Besides the earned income that eased the financial situation of her family, "work" supported her opinion concerning the role of the individual in society and his/her right to participate in that society. "Work together, fight together, govern together" was one of the most popular slogans of the socialist worker and farmer state. Such slogans buried themselves deep into the cultural consciousness. They seemed plausible since they presented a blending of the basic conditions for a communal life ("The one who does not cooperate should also not eat.") and state ideology. Slogans such as "Your job, your battleground for world peace" not only connected the responsibility of pursuing a career with political attitudes which were in no way a private issue in the GDR, but also elevated jobs to a level of moral authority. The mother and housewife who busied herself with the raising and care of her children until they reached school age and therefore had no officially recognized job was automatically labeled as apolitical or conservative. The danger of over-mothering, a practice that would reputedly result in dependent children, increasingly appeared as a cliché in the same way that the stereotype of the cruel mothers in the East, who ignored their children by going to work, existed in the West.

The value placed on "work" in the life stories of my interviewees struck me as sufficiently important to use as an example to demonstrate how individual experiences, memories, and stories are interconnected with outside cultural conditions. The economic and political system of the GDR shaped the memories related to motherhood such that less is made of motherhood itself as is made of the reconciliation of career and housework. The collective experience of mother and children is mainly reflected in their common work. Against the background of contemporary daily activities in which children do not need to perform even half of the chores of house and property as in years past, the division of housework takes on special meaning. Although officially proclaimed as a certain "natural", motherhood as a clearly delineated phase in the life of a woman, does not structure life to the same degree as a career which occupies the central place of importance.

5. The "female" Milieu

Autobiographical life stories touch one in the same way that Jürgen Matschie's large portraits captivate the viewer. They celebrate an attitude that is expressed with dignity. What causes the women to seem so well-balanced? Their memories do not give the impression that they felt discriminated against as women, an attitude that is especially pronounced by the women who worked in agriculture. The farm workers did not measure the success of their hard work by the actual money they earned, which was little

because of the contractual regulations of the LPGs[9]. Instead they judged themselves and their female co-workers on how well they fulfilled their tasks as women. In agricultural circles, this was measured in terms of quality more than quantity. The women were aware of their personal achievements from which the men could not detract, since they had their own distinct tasks to execute. The women thus describe their lives as "work", a state that reaches as far back as they can remember into their early childhoods and that continued unbroken to the present day. They do not clearly distinguish between career and housework, and motherhood also does not appear as an independent sphere of responsibility nor is it viewed as a specific phase of life, as is the case with the young mothers. Young mothers decide between professional life and familial personal spaces and feel pressured by the need to pick career or motherhood: "Everything is different today. If I want to pursue my career, I cannot say when exactly I will be home in the evening. No one is home when the older one comes home from school. And besides my little boy cannot sit around at kindergarten forever. So I only work half-days. Then it does not matter if I have my mind on other things when I worry about the children: the little one has a cough again, the older one has a math test tomorrow and is not ready for it, etc. Earlier when I was a child, one could always say: ‚Private matters go before the fall.' Today you either have success in a career or you have a family. And I wanted a family." (Petra L., *1971, trained salesperson, two children)

For women today, motherhood is a private matter for or against which she alone must decide. She stands before an "either-or" decision that seems to exclude either children or career. Mothers complain about their exclusion from public culture and about their loneliness which at the same time makes them receptive to advice books of all kinds and to the ideology of intensive mothering popularized by the media. The current image of a "good" mother describes a women who spends much time comparing all of the theories related to pregnancy, birth, and child-rearing, who nourishes her child according to proven scientific health principles, who is continuously near her child and supplies him/her with dry diapers, who makes possible baby swimming lessons and child massage sessions, who provides age-appropriate didactic toys, and who always procures the best for the spiritual and physical development of her child, including his/her particular talents.[10] In contrast when asked about the qualities of a "good" mother, the older women spoke of women who reprimanded with a well-timed word and who needed neither long discussions nor the rod. The older women did not feel troubled by the choice between children or career, at least none of them indicated such in their life memories. In their time, marriage and children secured a woman's prestige; these led to increased power and new social contacts.[11] With her first pregnancy, a

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[9] Abbreviation for "Landwirtschaftliche Produktionsgenossenschaft" (= collective farm).

[10] At the Children's Museum in Manhattan, small placards are hung at eye level of adults. These inform parents as to how they can "correctly" deal with their children and therefore offering them a childhood free of fear and stress.

[11] Today it is still common in certain Catholic villages in Lusatia for a young woman to invite the women of her community over for coffee and cake the Monday or Tuesday after her wedding. She is greeted by her married neighbors with, "Witaj w našich kruhach" [="Welcome to our circle"]. It is also said that traditionally the female neighbors were also invited over on the Monday following a baptism or a first communion. This indicates the existence of a "female milieu."

woman entered the group of mothers who enjoyed recognition within the community. Thus motherhood meant a gain, not a loss, in status.

The secret of the portraits – the artistic as well as the interviewed ones – apparently hinges on a balance which those depicted believe to be counterweighted by themselves and the world. Naturally this is more noticeable among the older interviewees then in those who are still "works-in-progress." Whereas the latter speak of *what is still to be achieved* and are still forming ideas about their future, above all about their career, the older women speak of *what they have achieved* without viewing this as something extraordinary or special. One can certainly finds points of contention in the individual stories, such as whether one husband or another could have eased his wife's life. However it is undisputed that these life memories make us aware of the existence of a separate "female milieu"[12]. The division of agricultural labor assigned work to each gender. Despite the strenuous demand of daily labor, the women looked back on the fulfillment of their tasks with pride. During the first years of the GDR, the collectivization of agriculture did not alter the division of labor. The women continued to work under the changed ownership conditions and in the existing or new women's collectives: "And then when the LPG was founded, everything was a commune. It was not difficult for me back then. It was easy for me. I was working with other women again. And everyone was together in the collective – how can I explain – one woman next to another. Jokes were thrown all around." (Marie Sch., *1919, farm worker, five children) Those who had worked along in stall and field prior to the founding of the LPGs emphasized the collective work as a positive experience: "Well, everywhere there were those for the LPG and those against it. This was the case in all the villages. But the majority – and that included most women – found it to be a relief and did not see working in a collective as a bad thing, as it is so often represented. The women still come together, they still celebrate together. Memories and anecdotes are exchanged at such times. There were companies composed solely of women. At that time, the modern district of the town Hoyerswerda already existed – 1956. The fields were gone. The family farms had shrunk from nine hectares to three. Then they said: ‚We can no longer live from this.' Thus, the men went to work in the concrete factories or the coal mines. The women hardly earned anything. Until about 1970 very little was earned in the LPG. An eight-hour work day earned 4.50 Marks. You must think about that; today it is hard to imagine. That is what the women earned for their work. The men earned significantly more in the concrete factories. They brought home 900 Marks or so in a month. And despite

[12] The word "milieu" indicates a connection between the individual development of a person and his societal context. Folk groups who have common or similar socio-cultural characteristics and are in the same social situation can be classified as having a particular milieu. Membership in one milieu does not preclude membership in others. Therefore the "female" milieu refers to the gender-specific knowledge passed on by women which comprises a part of their means of communication. Naturally this milieu cannot be separated from the corresponding economic and socio-historical conditions or from the influence of contemporaneous discourse about the "correct", that is "modern", way of being a man or a woman. The playing of proscribed roles also belongs to this discourse. In addition the recognition of a "female" milieu immediately gives rise to questions regarding the existence of a "masculine milieu" and the differences that arise within a particular milieu. At this point, the following simple conclusion must be made: There is obviously a world full of specific female knowledge and female activities. The degree of this world's exclusivity or permeability still needs to be examined.

that the women continued to work in the LPG. We were all in it together." (Mrs. K., *1934, LPG manager) It was the sense of community that they did not want to give up and to which they repeatedly returned as soon as a baby got older and could be given over to another person or institution for rearing.

While motherhood is experienced as a social event within the "female sphere" in rural communities, there is no such individual cultural space in industrialized society. Here motherhood is perceived as one of the physical and mental achievements of a woman, which removes her for a certain amount of time from her career and its communication network. Although the demands on mothers has increased greatly, children in industrialized societies are seen as losses in terms of both income and prestige. The mothers miss the dominance of the "female" milieu and its supremacy in certain life issues to which the current and influential cliché of the young, career-oriented woman does not correspond. Since the way a career is pursued is still programmed for men as it was in the past and the success of women is measured by their willingness to adapt to the masculine career stereotype, specific female knowledge is perceived as outdated, suspicious, and foreign. The younger men and women still remember the "rule" of the mother and grandmother in all household issues, but this is expressed as something special and long gone, from a time that one does not necessarily want to repeat: "Otherwise the work was always divided: Mother was in the cow and pig stalls. And Father had the horse. Of course, he also helped in the cow stall, but not with the pigs ever. That was a woman's job. And in the cow stall, milking was a woman's chore and feeding was done by men. On those small farms, women did not have it easy. They had to do everything. They had to help with the feeding, they had to help in the field, they had to care for the children when the grandmother was not around, they had to cook, etc., etc. How they managed to take care of everything is still a mystery to me. Most of the time there were two women – the grandmother and the mother – on one farm. They shared the work. Of course, everything had to be done quickly. On the weekends, everything had to be cleaned. Anyway, in such a family there were certain clear areas in which only women had a say. For example, men did not have a role in bread baking. Well, the men did have to help bring the flour in and had to keep the oven in working order, etc. But otherwise it was solely a women's thing. It was the same with cake baking. The men did not mess with that. The female neighbors came together for such an event. And when there was a wedding to prepare for, the men stayed out of the women's way. When the women in their big skirts came by in waves, the men had nothing to say." (Hannes K., *1931, teacher)

The "women in their big skirts" – meaning the traditional dress of the Sorbian women around the town of Hoyerswerda – have lived out their fates and seem to have accepted that. Their life and work memories are so strongly interwoven that no genre-specific division, of which researchers are so fond, is possible any more. Their work was their life. Work was the source of their feelings of self-worth. With this work, they bind their life memories, ones in which they see themselves positively reflected.

6. Literature

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